

Comment

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Less on our plate

The meltdown has aggravated another humanitarian crisis

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IF THERE'S one positive result of the world economic crisis, it is probably this: richer countries have realised what it means to be on the other side of the divide. Though this realisation has come a tad too late, anti-hunger campaigners like Josette Sheeran hope that this will be a wake-up call for everyone and that hunger will no longer be seen as a "soft issue".

"The food crisis was only a dress rehearsal. Now, thanks to the downturn, millions more have been left vulnerable. Countries that have a remittance-based economy will be hit hard. We estimate that nearly 98 million will have to be provided food in 2009 and the figure does not even include all those who have been affected by the financial crisis. This means that with the same amount of money at our disposal, we have more mouths to feed," says Sheeran, Executive Director of the world's largest humanitarian agency, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). She has been urging countries to allocate to urgent hunger needs a fraction of what is proposed for financial rescue packages to address the downturn. "With only 25 cents a day per person, we can provide fortified food to the needy," she adds.

In fact, the financial crisis has set the clock back in more ways than one: in December, the Food and Agriculture Organisation said the food and financial crises, which followed each other, have wiped out nearly 30 years of progress on reducing hunger and the number of hungry rose to 963 million in 2008. In other words, 17 per cent of the world's population is going hungry, something last seen in the 1990s. Comparative studies have shown that there are more hungry people in the world today than there were in 1948, when governments first

declared food a fundamental human right. This despite the fact that the world is seven times richer today than it was then.

India, no doubt, will be hit hard because even before the meltdown, the country had a staggering 230 million undernourished people, the highest number for any one country in the world. It is estimated that 43 per cent of Indian children under five years in India are underweight and malnutrition is believed to account for nearly half of all child deaths in this country.

In fact, the WFP's rural food security atlas, which will be released very shortly, shows where we stand and which are the vulnerable regions. "India is a mixed picture. While overcoming famine situations is a huge accomplishment, there are areas in India that are really food scarce," says Sheeran. On the composite index of food insecurity of rural India, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are found in the 'very high' level, followed by Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Gujarat.



The better performers include Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Punjab, and Jammu and Kashmir. That the agrarian crisis has dealt a severe blow to the country is exemplified by the fact that even developed states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are in the high food insecurity category.

Hunger should not be treated as a soft issue because it is linked to peace and security. Increased levels of malnutrition mean higher levels of disease and ill-health and lower economic growth of a society. Sheeran says that India has developed low-cost solutions, which include new supplementary feeding products, to battle hunger and this expertise could be harnessed. But as always, the challenge remains to be effective, efficient and scalable.

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