

## COVID-19 calls for renewed focus on eating right and natural

Post-COVID-19 scenario offers a unique opportunity to seize the moment and repurpose policies towards a food system that is resilient and sustainable

# DownToEarth

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India has achieved significant [poverty reduction](#) in the last couple of years and the middle-class has burgeoned considerably.

A [World Economic Forum research and consumer survey](#) predicted that by 2030, India will no longer be an economy led by the bottom of the pyramid, but by the middle-class. It stated that 80 per cent of Indian households will be middle-income and will drive 75 per cent of consumer spending.

There is need to [boost our immune systems](#), especially in the wake of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Medicines can't fix our immune systems; our lifestyle and what we eat will only help. Several new initiatives such as Eat Right and Smart Food have enhanced demand for healthier and nutritious foods.

India is a nutri-basket of nutri-dense plant-based foods. We need to ensure these are safe, accessible and affordable to all.

Even before the present pandemic, demand for natural and organic products in India was on the rise. Availability of organic food stuff and products grown under natural systems (of agriculture) has increased manifold. This is manifested by very steep growth in market share of natural (and ayurvedic) products and a corresponding alignment to the trend by competing with multinational companies.

The general observation is that the aspirational consumers are going back to nature and [natural products](#) to live healthier and longer.

The prevalence of malnutrition in India as revealed from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and the latest Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) needs special attention from policymakers to address the complex challenge. Empirical [studies](#) indicate that malnutrition contributes to most of the country's child deaths, as well as disability in adults.

The CNNS data showed that overweight, obesity, and even early non-communicable diseases, are no longer confined to the adult population. Saving the productive populations of the future requires a serious focus on nutrition. The lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic has raised serious concerns on reduced access to nutritious foods by the vulnerable sections of the society.

The environmental [trade-offs](#) from agricultural intensification through green revolution technologies are now well-recognised. Depleting water resources; loss of biodiversity and soil degradation / desertification are immediate concerns in the food production systems.

With the climate change looming large, now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the government needs to reorient agriculture policies to make the food systems sustainable, while meeting the food security and nutrition challenges for a growing population.

What could drive such a change? How could public policies ensure that safe and nutritious foods are made available, accessible and affordable to the vulnerable sections of the society? How can public policies in unison ensure the farming of more nutritious and safe foods while also sustainably managing the environment's natural resources? What could be the pathways to incentivise this food systems transformation?

As mentioned earlier, post-COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity to seize the moment and [repurpose policies](#) towards a food system that is resilient and sustainable.

The growing consumer demand for healthier and nutritious food has to be intensified through consumer awareness programmes, respecting the culture, taste, food preference, etc. Food safety standards through food labelling and incentives have to be built in the government schemes and programmes. POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission); Eat Right India; Millet Mission and Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan are examples for convergence of relevant activities aimed at creating a mass movement towards good nutrition outcomes.

Businesses need to also be encouraged to make responsible investments to transform food systems.

Even though many staple and non-staple food crops are long known to be nutritious and good for growth of individuals, food and agriculture policies in many parts of the world are stuck in the 'Big3' staples (rice, wheat and maize).

In India, for decades, the Minimum Support Price and public procurement policies have ignored the diversity of crops and [skewed](#) in favour of staples such as rice and wheat. The enhanced production of these food crops might have taken care of the calorie requirements, but the [double-burden](#) of under-nutrition and micro-nutrient deficiency has risen further.

Crops such as sorghum, millets and pulses not only have less water demand in comparison to rice and wheat, they also have significant benefits owing to higher percentage of micro-nutrients and protein.

Moreover, millet grains have a low glycemic index, particularly compared to staples like refined rice, that makes them a good alternative staple for managing or preventing diabetes.



*A woman farmer carries sorghum.*

Richness of millets in micro-nutrients can be gauged from the fact that few of them could be natural substitutes to correct micro-nutrient deficiencies in an individual. For example, finger millet (*ragi*) has three times more calcium than milk; and pearl millet, another popular nutri-cereal, has highest amount of folate amongst cereals.

Similarly, *kodo* millet is high in dietary fibres — thrice as much as in wheat or maize and ten times than in rice. Additionally, sorghum and millets are gluten-free. They are often termed as smart food being “[good for you, the planet and the farmer](#)” and are fast becoming [food choices](#) for aspiring and health-conscious consumers.

Various kinds of *daal* have been the main source of protein intake in India besides fish and meat for the non-vegetarian segment of the population. Legumes are also an affordable protein source; however, many are not a complete protein source as they are low in one of the essential amino acids methionine.

A recent study showed that millets and legumes combined provide a complete protein, highly digestible and power-packed nutrients. The recent growth in production of major pulse crops is indeed a significant achievement and government must sustain this near self-sufficiency through specific policies and research breakthroughs.

Plant-based protein and meat alternatives are fast catching up in the [West](#). In India, too, consumption of fruits and vegetables and dairy products is growing, and this is a good indication on the nutrition sensitivity of Indian agriculture.

Bio-fortification of food crops is now employed to enrich the nutrient profile. Zinc- and protein-rich rice and high protein quality and vitamin-A rich maize varieties have been developed and released by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).

The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRSAT) has developed and released India’s first bio-fortified sorghum variety, [Parbhani Shakti](#) in Maharashtra. In Post-COVID-

19 scenario, [enhanced investments](#) on research and innovation in this sector could be an effective pathway to boost the health and immune systems of the citizens.

Research efforts in major crops including non-staples would prove very cost-effective and sustainable solution to address micro-nutrient deficiencies in the population. Government programs like PDS, MDM, and ICDS are the best possible delivery channels to leverage healthier and nutritious food products in India.

A recent scientific [study](#) has shown that mid-day-meals served with millet-based products found 50 per cent faster growth in children in comparison to those eating the usual rice-based meals.

Interestingly, as often referred to by economists in food and nutrition discourses, Bennett's law seems to be very much operating right now for most Indians — as proportion of starchy staples in their diets is going down while income levels are rising.

Post-COVID-19 pandemic is the right time to seize the opportunity and push policies that promote nutritious and sustainable food systems and value chains and create adequate demand for healthy, nutritious, qualitative, and safe food, through consumer behaviour change.

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***Views expressed are authors' own***

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