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Rotting Foodgrains in Asia: The Case of India and the Philippines

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Synopsis

A common incidence of rotting food grains has been reported in India and the Philippines even as millions are starving. The problem has to be tackled with dexterity at both the domestic and regional levels to curb this alarming wastage of food that contributes to food insecurity at large.

Commentary

RECENT NEWS reports from the Philippines and India interestingly surfaced with one common problem -- rotting food grains in both countries, even as millions of people struggle to garner one square meal a day. This has grave implications for their respective domestic food security, especially for the poor vulnerable groups in the two societies. The intensity and impact of the problem is grave in both countries alike.

In the Philippines, most of the state-owned 480 warehouses were reported to be packed with rice due to alleged over-enthusiastic imports by the past regime, the problem in India is slightly different. The Food Corporation of India, set up with the objective of distributing food grains and maintaining satisfactory stocks of food for domestic food security, is allegedly at fault in the rotting of those very food grains. It is purported that food grains worth nearly 30 lakhs or 3 million tonnes has rotted in many parts of the country.

The magnitude of the problem is such that according to economist and Right to Food campaigner Jean Dreze, if food grains hoarded by the FCI were to be lined up, they would "Stretch for a million kilometres..." A second part of the problem according to an analyst in the Hindustan Times apparently also arose from a decision by India's Empowered Group of Ministers not to permit the release of some of these food grains at Above Poverty Line prices as proposed by the FCI and food ministry (thereby enabling its consumption) on the plea that it would mean an additional sum of money for subsidy.

The Problem

It is an anomaly that the problem of rotting food grains in India came to the fore in newspaper reports at a time when the government is trying to pass the National Food Security Bill which has the twin aims of ensuring that food is available to everyone. Yet, families below the poverty line are provided with 25 kilograms of wheat or rice at INR 3 per kilograms. Rotting food grains were reported from several parts of the country – ranging from Madhya Pradesh to the state of Punjab. Madhya Pradesh is rated at the lowermost rung of the India State Hunger Index (extremely alarming) while Punjab is placed at the topmost rank with the severity of hunger

earmarked as 'serious' based on the same terms as the Global Hunger Index cutoffs. The problem is severe considering India has over 200 million food-insecure people.

The situation is equally serious in the Philippines – the world's largest importer of staple food - rice. A New York Times report noted during the 2008 food crisis, that the Philippines not just resorted to importing rice, but had to use police force and soldiers to distribute subsidised food amongst the poor. The criticality of rice is such that the problem has permeated to the level of local retailers. According to a report in the Manila Bulletin, rice retailers in Baguio City complained that their supplies routed from the National Food Authority (NFA) had bad odour and was fungus-infected.

There are different reasons behind the problem of rotting food grains in both countries. In the Philippines, the quandary seems to have arisen from an aggressive import drive by the former administration led by Gloria Arroyo. The chief of the Philippines NFA Lito Banayo is said to have attributed this to corruption and incompetence, noting that the country was "swimming in rice".

The problem in India has a number of facets: One is corruption. A newspaper reported that officials allegedly go for storage of foodgrain in the open spaces since it affords them the opportunity to earn kickbacks for buying things like wooden crates and gunny bags to preserve the grain. Godown owners also complain about unequal payments made for rental purposes, leading many of them to demolish their facility. Another problem stems from bad transport facilities and gross negligence. NDTV recently reported from the most food-insecure state Madhya Pradesh where FCI was reportedly transporting four wagons containing about 1,100 quintals of wheat for distribution in the state. One wagon with 85 quintals – enough to feed nearly 250 below-poverty line families for about a month -- went missing and was traced six months later completely rotten.

The Response

These problems in India and the Philippines have to be handled at two levels. At the domestic level, governments and related institutions have to be alert and held accountable for such mishaps. Corruption has to be dealt with an iron fist. In India, the Supreme Court came down heavily on the government directing it to "give it to the hungry poor instead of it going down the drain". The Court also told the government to ensure construction of suitable storage facilities at district and state levels and computerise the public distribution system.

The Philippine government itself has taken remedial measures by announcing distribution of surplus grains to children - one million sacks of 50 kilograms each to be used at day care centres run by the Social Welfare Department. The Indian government could take a leaf from the Philippine government and do something similar.

At the regional level, this also paves the way for cooperation. ASEAN has been trying to handle food security issues through initiatives like the ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework and the Strategic Plan of Action on Food Security in the ASEAN region. The South Asian regional grouping SAARC should pursue similar cooperation and leave political bickering aside. Once intra-regional cooperation is in place, inter-regional coordination such as that between ASEAN and SAARC can be envisaged.

Common institutions like the Asian Disaster Reduction Centre could also be used as a platform. Regional countries should learn from their successful counterparts in areas like safe storage, transport and distribution mechanisms. The crux of the issue is that food wastage only contributes to food insecurity, and dampens worldwide efforts to ensure provision of adequate nutritious food to all. Any wastage is irreverent to human security and should be effectively and consciously avoided.

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