

“Find a purpose to serve, not a lifestyle to live.” Criss Jami

INTERNATIONAL & BILATERAL

HUNGER AROUND THE WORLD IS RISING AGAIN

The recent ‘The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018’ (SOFI 2018) report estimates that in 2017, 10.9% of the world’s population was undernourished, that is, around 821 million people, which is same to that of 2010 levels.

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World is an annual flagship report jointly prepared by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO to inform on progress towards ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition. It also provide in-depth analysis on key challenges for achieving this goal in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In South-Asia number of undernourished have declined in India, China and Nepal and increased in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

According to latest estimates India is home to more than 50% of world’s wasted children and 30% of world’s stunted children. One in every 5 undernourished people in the world belongs to India.

Reasons Attributed to rising Hunger:

- Due to increase in income inequality, overall wealth and ability to access food of certain people have decreased.
- Also worsening climate and economic conditions have increased undernourished people in some regions.
- Increased climate related disasters have doubled since early 1990s with the average 213 of these events occurring every year between 1990 – 2016.
- Also changes in monsoon have impacted agricultural productivity.

NATIONAL

CIC WANTS BREAK-UP OF HOW MPLADS FUNDS ARE UTILISED

CIC (Central Information Commissioner) recommends legal framework to ensure MP’s accountability for utilization of MPLADS (Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme) fund.

Each MP is given Rs 5 crore annually to be spent on projects of choice in his or her constituency.

The scheme is funded and administered through Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). However, there are no details of how these funds are used.

Projects are recommended and implemented by district level administration under MPLADS scheme.

CIC order came in the wake of report by MoSPI that Rs 12,000 crore funds of MPLADS have remained unspent.

CIC recommendations:

- The offices of the Lok Sabha (LS) Speaker and the Rajya Sabha (RS) Chairman to make “legal framework” to ensure transparency under MPLADS.
- Every MP will have to submit a comprehensive report on MPLADS works after completion of his/her term to the Chairman of RS or the Speaker of LS.
- District administrations must provide regular information — work-wise, MP-wise, and year-wise details on progress — which are to be compiled by the MoSPI and made available to the public.
- The provisions for the secretarial staff of Parliament and the National Informatics Centre to aid and assist parliamentary parties in meeting transparency obligation.
- The ministry to make necessary changes to publish MP-wise, constituency-wise and work-wise details to ensure its voluntary disclosure under Section 4 of the RTI Act.

- Liabilities for any breach of duties should also be imposed, said the order. Further, the framework should prohibit and prevent MPs using the funds for their private works, or diverting them to private trusts or to their own relatives.

THE SC EMPHASISED THAT LAW MUST FIND WAYS TO DEAL WITH ONLINE ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Physical violence against children is not the only type of abuse, but psychological violence through online sources is also forms of abuse and violence against children.

In past two years there has been 1,575 incidents involving children in online abuse (involved pornography, cyber bullying, or online games like Blue Whale)

The direct and indirect economic costs are larger because such abuse undermines the long-term potential of victims and societies.

- In 2016 report by UNICEF India said, the issue has received very little attention and is not included in National Crime Records Bureau statistics as a separate category.
- No separate law to curb, it is being administered by POCSO Act, 2012 and Juvenile Justice (care and protection of children) Act, 2015
- There is not enough forensic capacity to investigate online offences and inadequate cooperation by India for investigating international offences.

Steps being taken

Google has announced that it is employing a new Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to combat online spreading of content involving child sexual abuse.

All the stakeholders need to make a collective effort, including service providers, content providers, civil society and regulatory authorities, family and schools to help redress the online abuse and protect young lives.

GOVT PROPOSES TO MERGE DENA BANK, VIJAYA BANK AND BANK OF BARODA

The Centre has proposed the amalgamation of state-owned Bank of Baroda, Dena Bank and

Vijaya Bank to create India's third largest bank as parts of reforms in the public sector banking segment.

The proposal will now need the approval of the boards of these individual banks. The banks' boards will shortly meet and take up the decision.

The merger of these **three state-owned banks is a part of the government's agenda of consolidation of public sector banks**. The consolidation was proposed by the Alternative Mechanism.

The Union Cabinet in August 2017 approved amalgamation of Public Sector Banks through **Alternative Mechanism (AM)** with an aim to facilitate consolidation among the Nationalised Banks to create strong and competitive banks.

Benefits of merger:

- The merger benefits include getting economies of scale and reduction in the cost of doing business.
- Technical inefficiency is one of the main factors responsible for banking crisis. The scale of inefficiency is more in case of small banks. Hence, merger would be good.
- Mergers help small banks to gear up to international standards with innovative products and services with the accepted level of efficiency.
- Mergers help many PSBs, which are geographically concentrated, to expand their coverage beyond their outreach.
- A better and optimum size of the organization would help PSBs offer more and more products and services and help in integrated growth of the sector.
- The size of each business entity after merger is expected to add strength to the Indian Banking System in general and Public Sector Banks in particular.
- This will also end the unhealthy and intense competition going on even among public sector banks as of now. In the global market, the Indian banks will gain greater recognition and higher rating.

- The volume of inter-bank transactions will come down, resulting in saving of considerable time in clearing and reconciliation of accounts.
- The burden on the central government to recapitalize the public sector banks again and again will come down substantially. This will also help in meeting more stringent norms under BASEL III, especially capital adequacy ratio.
- A great number of posts of CMD, ED, GM and Zonal Managers will be abolished, resulting in savings of crores of Rupee. This will also reduce unnecessary interference by board members in day to day affairs of the banks.
- After mergers, bargaining strength of bank staff will become more and visible. Bank staff may look forward to better wages and service conditions in future. The wide disparities between the staff of various banks in their service conditions and monetary benefits will narrow down.
- Customers will have access to fewer banks offering them wider range of products at a lower cost. From regulatory perspective, monitoring and control of less number of banks will be easier after mergers. This is at the macro level.

Concerns associated with merger:

- Immediate negative impact would be from pension liability provisions (due to different employee benefit structures) and harmonisation of accounting policies for bad loans recognition.
- There are many problems to adjust top leadership in institutions and the unions.
- Mergers will result in shifting/closure of many ATMs, Branches and controlling offices, as it is not prudent and economical to keep so many banks concentrated in several pockets, notably in urban and metropolitan centres.
- Mergers will result in immediate job losses on account of large number of people taking VRS on one side and slow down or stoppage of further recruitment on the

other. This will worsen the unemployment situation further and may create law and order problems and social disturbances.

- The weaknesses of the small banks may get transferred to the bigger bank also. New power centres will emerge in the changed environment. Mergers will result in clash of different organizational cultures. Conflicts will arise in the area of systems and processes too.
- When a big bank books huge loss or crumbles, there will be a big jolt in the entire banking industry. Its repercussions will be felt everywhere.
- Also, India right now needs more banking competition rather than more banking consolidation. In other words, it needs more banks rather than fewer banks. This does not mean that there should be a fetish about small-scale lending operations, but to know that large banks are not necessarily better banks.

Way ahead:

Merger is a good idea. However, this should be carried out with right banks for the right reasons. Merger is also tricky given the huge challenges banks face, including the bad loan problem that has plunged many public sector banks in an unprecedented crisis. Since mergers are also about people, a huge amount of planning would be required to make the consolidation process smoother. Piecemeal consolidation will not provide a lasting solution and what is required is an integrated approach from all stakeholders including the government.

'SMART FENCE' PILOT PROJECT

India's first 'smart fence' pilot project has been launched along the India-Pakistan International Border in Ploura, Jammu and Kashmir.

The pilot project involves deploying of laser-activated fences and technology-enabled barriers to plug vulnerable gaps along the frontiers.

The smart fencing uses a number of devices for surveillance, communication and data storage.

The innovative system provides for round-the-clock surveillance on the border, even in different weather conditions be it dust storm, fog or rain.

It also reportedly comprises automated surveillance technology and alarm detection systems.

Significance:

The smart fence pilot project is expected to be a massive boon for monitoring security situations in border areas. It is a technological solution devised to make the security system at the borders more strong and effective. The system will virtually make it impossible for terrorists to infiltrate into the Indian side of the border.
