India and food (in)security

India, poised to become the most populous nation and the third-largest economy in the near future, faces major food security risks. In response, the country has sought to formulate a food security policy that also addresses climate change and the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine, while supporting its aspirations to be a major player in a multipolar world. Both the agricultural and farming issues India faces and the laws it adopts are relevant for global food security. India-EU relations, including in trade, also address food, climate and agricultural issues.

Strengths and challenges; neutral stance on Russia's war against Ukraine

Home to some 1.41 billion inhabitants in 2022, India is the world's second most populous country after China, which it is projected to surpass by 2023. Yet, India remains confronted by food insecurity. Despite India's spectacular progress in food grain production since 2015 and its success in reducing malnutrition rates, the April 2022 country briefing of the World Food Programme reveals that the country continues to suffer from food and nutrition insecurity, ranking 101st out of 116 countries in the 2021 Global Hunger Index. Some 35.5% of children aged 6-59 months suffer from chronic malnutrition. Even if a more prudent estimate of 6% were to be adopted as the average medium-term growth rate – compared to the 8.2% IMF April 2022 growth forecast for 2022 – India is expected to become the world's third-largest economy by the mid-2030s, and Indian demand for resources would then drive commodity prices. India is the world's largest rice producer and a major importer of agricultural inputs, such as energy, fertilisers and sunflower-seed oil. Indian energy consumption is set to grow faster than that of any other major economy, yet the country is dependent on energy imports, including for food production. This explains its interest in purchasing cheap Russian oil and coal affected by Western sanctions imposed in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. India obtains a large part of its fertilisers from Ukraine and Russia. India is also the world's top importer of Ukrainian sunflower-seed oil, with imports accounting for 86% of its domestic market supply. India, which imports most of its arms from Russia and remains the largest importer of Russian arms globally, has not condemned Russia's war on Ukraine. Some analysts see India's neutral stance as a sign of the victory, in terms of Indian geo-strategic thinking, of 'plurilateralism' over Nehru-style non-alignment. According to this view, it is exactly this multi-polar approach that allows India to play one side against another in order to maximise its own interests. Others describe India's reluctance to take sides in the conflict as 'proactive neutrality'.

Climate; initiatives to ensure access to food and employment in agriculture

India is among the countries that were worst affected by climate change: in 2019, it ranked seventh in this respect in the Global Climate Risk Index 2021. At COP-26 in Glasgow in November 2021, India (together with China and the island nations) successfully changed the text of the Glasgow Climate Pact, which now calls for 'phasing down' rather than 'phasing out' the use of coal power. The risks posed by flooding, rising temperatures, heatwaves and declining rainfall make India's agricultural sector vulnerable, and affect the country's food security. According to the India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for about 58% of India's population.

The 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act introduced one of the most ambitious public anti-poverty programmes in the world, targeting rural poverty in particular. It guarantees 100 days of work a year to every rural household, thus trying to fulfil the constitution's commitment to ensuring citizens' right to work. According to experts, this act provided employment to 30% of rural Indian households on average from 2008 to 2014, and to 26% from 2014 to 2020, and was most beneficial to women and marginalised communities. Experts recommend urgently expanding the programme, yet observe that since 2014, the government has reduced the act's coverage compared to the first implementation phase. The 2013 Right to Food Security Act grants rice or wheat rations to most citizens. It is believed to have strongly contributed to alleviating hunger in the poorest households, but its potential effects have been limited, among other things, by executive orders that undermine citizens' entitlements under the act.
In 2014 and 2015, the Indian government made a fresh set of changes to its food system. In 2015, India became a limited net exporter of agricultural products. In its implementation of the National Food Security Mission (NFSM), India focused on deficit crops: pulses, nutria cereals and oilseeds. The NFSM worked on increasing yields of food grains (cereals and pulses), while also making crop diversification possible. The government also set up pension schemes for workers in unorganised sectors, including labourers, and introduced a Price Stabilisation Fund (PSF) to secure onion, potato and pulse consumption in India. In addition, India launched an array of initiatives on climate change and agriculture, including the NFSM and the National Mission of Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA), which provides a sustainable development pathway.

Effects of climate change and Russia’s war on Ukraine on Indian food security

India is now a major exporter of food commodities, notably wheat (world’s ninth exporter) and rice (world’s top exporter). The June 2022 Un Food and Agriculture Organization food outlook report shows that unseasonably high temperatures in India in the spring of 2022 (the country registered its hottest month of March since 1901) and the ban on Indian wheat exports – placed in May because of lower domestic production – might contribute to lower global wheat availability and rising prices. This is on top of shortages resulting from the diminished wheat exports from Ukraine due to the Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports. Interestingly, India has exempted Egypt from its ban on wheat exports, to support that country’s food security needs. Previous contractual commitments and government-to-government sales have also been cited as possible reasons behind the exemptions from the May 2022 ban. The 12th World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference (MC12), held in Geneva in June 2022, addressed the divisive issues of export restrictions and public stockholding for food security; India is a regular user of both. The MC12 declaration on the emergency response to food insecurity does not forbid export restrictions but limits their use: they should, among other things, minimise trade distortions and be temporary and targeted. Ahead of MC12, India requested the exemption of stockholding for food security from WTO rules; the next MC, scheduled for December 2023, is expected to decide on the fate of public stockholding.

EU-India relations

India and the EU, the first and second largest democracies in the world, have been strategic partners since 2004. As a country with more than 1% of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP), India has not been eligible for the EU’s bilateral development cooperation since 2014. However, India can still receive some funding under the EU’s Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe – (NDICI-GE), adopted in 2021. India is eligible for funds from the NDICI-GE’s Asia-Pacific regional programme, its thematic programmes, its rapid response pillar and its priorities cushion. At the 15th EU-India summit, held in July 2020, the EU and India endorsed the ‘EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025’, covering, among other things, cooperation on climate change and green energy. At the May 2021 leaders’ meeting, the EU and India agreed to strengthen cooperation, notably on green growth (including the decarbonisation of civil aviation), inclusive growth through trade, connectivity and technology, as well as on food, nutrition and agriculture, including sustainable food systems. The EU and India also agreed to resume negotiations, frozen since 2013, on a balanced, ambitious, comprehensive and mutually beneficial trade agreement – which was formally relaunched on 17 June 2022 – and to start negotiations – also launched on 17 June – on two separate agreements, on investment protection and geographical indications. The first round of talks on these three tracks took place from 27 June to 1 July 2022 in Delhi. The EU is India’s third largest trade partner in goods, after China and the US, accounting for 11% of Indian trade in 2021, while India is the EU’s 10th largest trading partner (accounting for 2.1% of EU trade in 2021). India is a beneficiary of the EU generalised scheme of preferences (GSP). The EU is, after Singapore and Mauritius, the third largest investor in India, accounting for 16% of total investments in 2015-2020. At a meeting in Delhi on 25 April 2022, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, and the Indian Prime Minister, Nahendra Modi, agreed to launch the EU-India Trade and Technology Council.

On 5 July 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on future EU-India trade and investment cooperation, which stressed the need for the two parties to cooperate in order to address the repercussions that Russia’s war on Ukraine has had on food security. On 6 July 2022, the Parliament adopted a resolution on addressing food security in developing countries, which recalled that the right to food is a human right and that ‘the EU must ensure that the right to food for all is not a market commodity’.