Nutrition in India: facts and interpretations

Angus Deaton, Research Program in Development Studies and Center for Health and Wellbeing, Princeton University

Jean Drèze, Allahabad University

The Indian economy has recently grown at historically unprecedented rates and is now one of the fastest-growing economies in the world; real GDP per head grew at 3.95 percent a year from 1980 to 2005, and at 5.4 percent a year from 2000 to 2005. Measured at international prices, real per capita income in India, which was two-thirds of Kenya’s in 1950, and about the same as Nigeria’s, is now two and a half times as large as per capita income in both countries. Real per capita consumption has also grown rapidly, at 2.2 percent a year in the 1980s, at 2.5 percent a year in the 1990s, and at 3.9 percent a year from 2000 to 2005. Although the household survey data show much slower rates of per capita consumption growth than do these national accounts estimates, there has been sufficient growth to enable a slow but sustained decrease in poverty since the early 1980s. Yet the improvement in indicators of nutrition has been very slow. Furthermore, and in spite of the fact that nearly three quarters of the population lives in households whose per capita calorie consumption is less than 2,100 in urban areas, and 2,400 in rural areas, numbers that are often taken as the daily recommended allowances in India, per capita calorie intake is declining steadily, as is the intake of many other nutrients; indeed fats are the only major nutrient group whose per capita consumption is unambiguously increasing. Nor has there been any dramatic improvement in anthropometric measures. Although there has been a slow long term improvement in a number of indicators, levels of undernutrition in India are still among the highest in the world, higher even than most of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, even though those countries are currently much poorer than India, have grown much more slowly, and have much higher levels of infant and child mortality. This paper addresses the puzzle of why it should be the case that per capita calorie consumption should be falling in a rapidly growing but poor and malnourished economy.