VIEWS | OPINION

How Food Systems Approach is the way forward

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By **Pooja Yadav** | July 5, 2021



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Food is an integral part of our life and thus there has always been an exclusive focus on what we eat. Unless the food we eat is safe, we become vulnerable to food borne illnesses, which in turn reduces our ability to absorb nutrients, fight infections thereby, impacting our overall health. Therefore, it becomes extremely critical to ensure food safety for optimum health and well-being of people.

To address public health issues related to food safety and nutrition holistically, there is a need to look beyond a specific area of focus and understand the bigger picture i.e., aggregating the entire range of stakeholders and their interlinked value-adding activities, originating from agriculture, manufacturing, processing, distribution and retailing together on a level-playing field with a focus on broader economic, societal and sustainable development. This approach is called the ‘Food Systems Approach’.

The Food Systems encompass various stages of the food value chain ranging from production, storage, processing and manufacturing, to distribution, retail, and consumption. This is a highly interconnected approach which involves a shared responsibility between governments, producers, food businesses along with consumers. Here, everyone has a role to play from farm to table to ensure that the food we consume is safe, nourishing and sustainable to both people and the planet.

With market and trade globalisation, people in both developed and developing nations have been experiencing many changes in their way of living as well as eating habits. Within the supply chain which is increasingly becoming more and more complex in the globalized market, adulteration (unintentional or intentional) is the key food safety issue. Regulatory bodies are challenged with major food safety and public health issues resulting from changes in the food production and supply along with environmental changes, leading to contamination of food with new and emerging bacteria, toxins, and antibiotic resistance and consumer preferences and habits leading to increase in imported foods. Increase in imports of food/processed food items due to cost concerns, consumer demand for diverse food products also provide chances for food contamination/adulteration. At this juncture, what should be the effective strategies to address the emerging challenges to provide safe, healthy, nutritious and sustainable produced food to the world’s population? The answer lies in the food systems approach. The world needs to rethink the ways in which food is produced, processed and consumed.

SDG - 2030

This year’s Food Systems Summit, scheduled to take place in the month of September in New York, envisions a common platform for ambitious actions, innovative solutions, and strategies to transform the world’s food systems, as part of the Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDG) by 2030.

Guided by the five Action Tracks mentioned below, the Summit 2021 envisions bringing together key players and drawing on the expertise of actors from the worlds of science, business, policy, healthcare and academia, as well as farmers, indigenous people, youth organisations, consumer groups, environmental activists, and other key stakeholders –

- Ensure safe and nutritious food,
- Shift sustainable consumption patterns,
- Boost nature-positive production,
- Advance equitable livelihoods, and
- Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress

Convened by the United Nations Secretary General, the first ever UN Food Systems Summit's fundamental commitment is inclusivity. This is truly a people's Summit, and everyone everywhere is encouraged to contribute – from small farmers and research scientists, to indigenous leaders and corporate executives, to youth organizers and environmental activists, to supermarket cashiers and avid home cooks. There are many ways to get involved in the Food Systems Summit, from becoming a Food Systems Hero, helping to raise awareness of food systems on social media, to hosting or joining a Dialogue. This will help bring about tangible, positive changes to the world's food systems.

Sahi Bhojan, Behtar Jeevan

Today, India needs a new paradigm where the food systems approach becomes more holistic with policy coherence across all sectors like agriculture, food, health, trade and environment to name a few. To narrow down the gap, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), an apex food regulator in the country, has embarked on a large-scale effort to transform the country's food systems in order to ensure safe, healthy and sustainable food for all Indians through the 'Eat Right India' movement. The tagline - 'Sahi Bhojan, Behtar Jeevan', thus, forms the foundation of this movement.

The Eat Right India movement envisions safe and nourishing food for all Indians produced in environmentally sustainable systems. This has led the movement to gain a lot of national and

international recognition. Recently, the Eat Right India movement was declared as one of the Top Visionaries for the Food Systems Vision Prize 2050. This Prize was instituted by the US-based Rockefeller Foundation in association with SecondMuse and Open Ideo. The ten finalists shortlisted among over 1300 applicants were announced as Top Visionaries.

Based on the key themes of Eat Safe, Eat Healthy, and Eat Sustainable, the Eat Right India movement adopts a judicious mix of regulatory, capacity building, collaborative and empowerment approaches to ensure that our food is good both for the people and the planet. Further, it builds on the collective action of all stakeholders - the government, food businesses, civil society organisations, experts and professionals, development agencies and citizens at large. The action plan of the movement includes a bouquet of initiatives to promote demand for, and supply of, safe and healthy food in a sustainable way. While the supply-side interventions are primarily aimed at building the capacity of food businesses to promote self-compliance, the demand-side initiatives work towards motivating consumers to demand safe and healthy food, by encouraging good food practices and habits.

Eat Right India has devised Five Key Actions to achieve its vision-

The first action is to formulate new regulations to promote healthy eating. FSSAI has come up with regulations on labelling, elimination of trans-fats, mandatory fortification of milk, oil and rice, and strengthening food testing.

The second is to train and build capacity of various stakeholders in the food ecosystems such as food handlers, administrators, frontline health workers, etc. to help food businesses succeed, ensure compliance of food safety measures and serve safe food to the public at large.

The third is to certify various food businesses from clusters of street food vendors to restaurants, schools and campuses based on benchmarks for food safety and hygiene. So far, 28 Street Food Hubs have been certified, thereby raising the confidence of consumers in consuming food from local street food hubs; and over 100 campuses are now certified as Eat Right Campus.

The fourth is to nudge food businesses by encouraging them to reformulate packaged foods into healthier options and to use safe and sustainable packaging materials; reduce usage of fat,

sugar and salt in food; donate food under one of our initiatives – Save Food Share Food.

The final action point is to ignite large-scale social and behavioural change among the people of India towards safe, healthy and sustainable eating habits through initiatives such as Eat Right Fairs, mobile food testing vans called “Food Safety on Wheels”, and awareness campaigns on electronic and social media platforms.

Eat Right India is also aligned with various Government flagship programmes like POSHAN Abhiyaan, Anemia Mukt Bharat, Ayushman Bharat and Swacch Bharat Abhiyaan. To institutionalize the Eat Right India, an inter-ministerial Steering Committee has been set up with representatives from all related Ministries and Departments such as Women and Child Development, Environment, Science and Technology, Agriculture, Food Processing, Food and Public Distribution etc. This also includes members from our training and audit community, development partners and industry representatives through associations. This would ensure continuity, scale up and real time monitoring of various initiatives and programmes under Eat Right India.

Eat Right India’s ’Whole Government’ Approach

Eat Right India brings together diverse stakeholders from various institutions like government departments, consumer organisations, development partners, industry associations, academia, professional associations etc., working closely on the food systems identified from pre-existing multi-stakeholder platforms or coalitions working on various food-related issues. The movement adopts a ’whole of government’ approach, bringing together all food-related mandates from ministries of agriculture, health, environment and others.

Furthermore, since foodborne illnesses and various diet-related diseases cut across all age groups and all sections of the society, Eat Right India also adopts a ‘whole of society’ approach, bringing all society groups together on a common platform.

The food systems being complex in nature invites a more holistic and coordinated approach. The "whole of government" and "whole of society" approaches adopted by FSSAI underpin its role as "enabler and reformer" (as well as "implementer") to build a positive, collaborative and inclusive environment to foster a sustainable food system in India.

Although the country does not yet have a holistic policy to promote sustainable and healthy food systems yet, the Eat Right India movement is promoting several programmes working in this direction at various levels, across the food value chain from pre-harvest to consumption. Now, we definitely need to accelerate the progress towards attaining more robust and healthy food systems in order to enhance the health of our citizens as well as the health of our environment and economy.

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