

## "Hunger impacts human potential across generations"

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By : Rahul Koul - December 12, 2018



***Equipped with nearly 30 years of experience in cross-cultural settings working with small, medium and large scale operations, Mr Dola Mahapatra is currently serving as Executive Director, Rise Against Hunger India (formerly Stop Hunger Now India). He is responsible for the launch and growth of the India Country programs of Rise against Hunger India, CSR partnerships with several corporate groups and establish India program.***

***In this exclusive interaction with the BioVoice, Mr Mohapatra talks about his organization's vision, current activities and various aspects of policymaking involving hunger reduction, nutrition, agricultural production, boosting farmers' income through various agricultural methods and much more. Read on:***



**Please share the deep objectives behind the RAH India's operations in the country? What are your high priority areas?**

**Dola Mahapatra: Our main objective is to end hunger by 2030 which is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 i.e. zero hunger by 2030.**

**Our programs in India are focused on creating an impact by addressing many factors. Among them is the fact that vulnerable populations have the capacity to be food source. It could be addressed by supporting meal, nutrients awareness and health program, facilitating sustainable agriculture development and promoting micro-enterprise and income generation.**

**Another fact is that the food system are equitable. It could be addressed by ensuring that agro-ecosystems are sustainably managed, inclusive market system are strengthened and civil society and local institutions have the capacity to support the food security.**

**The third one is that enabling policy environment promotes food security. RAHI volunteer base in engagement and International affiliates are engaged in policy advocacy in their countries.**

**In terms of activities, we focus on three key pillars: Providing immediate assistance (food and other items), Community Empowerment (sustainable agriculture, food system improvement, livelihood and income generation programs) and Crisis response (disaster relief).**



**Which parts of India are high on your agenda and why?**

**Dola Mahapatra: We are a Pan-India organization and as such our aim is to reach out to pockets that are highly stressed in terms of sustainable food security and sustainable livelihoods. Though these locations invariably fall mostly in northern and eastern part of India, a deep dive into socio-economic conditions reveal such pockets event in most prosperous states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Karnataka as well. In addition, vulnerable communities exposed to natural calamities – quick onset (floods, earthquakes, landslides etc.) or chronic (droughts, recurring crop failure conditions) – are also our priority areas.**

**Through our efforts and initiatives, we would like to ensure that there is safety-net for such families who are finding it hard to have at least 2 nutritious meals (equivalent of 2,100 calories per person per day). Even in cities like Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and many more this is a common phenomenon. Data says there are 190 million people in India who are suffering from hunger and do not get to have one proper meal in a day. These States and cities are high on our agenda so that we may reach out to those, hungry.**



## Where does India stand in terms of its hunger reduction programs globally? Please do mention few statistics and trends.

**Dola Mahapatra:** The Global Hunger Index 2017 ranks India at 100 out of 119 countries on the basis of three leading indicators — prevalence of wasting and stunting in children under 5 years, under 5 child mortality rates, and the proportion of undernourished in the population. As many as 38.4% of the children aged under five in India are stunted (too short for their age), while 21% suffer from wasting, meaning their weight is too low for their height. India's economic growth over the past two decades have not translated into a corresponding reduction in these trends – after significant reduction in the 1990s, the percentage people facing chronic malnutrition has remained more or less steady at around 14 to 15%. There have been different interpretations of the reasons behind this – the key ones being attributed to socio-cultural issues such as dietary behaviour, childhood nutrition and eating habits, use of safe water and sanitation etc.

Along with the Right to Food Bill and a strong PDS [Public Distribution System] in place, India does have sufficient programs to address hunger. All the programs aim at making certain quantities of cereals available to people, however, there is hardly any judicial action or penalties for those responsible for addressing the issue of hunger. Rather, there have been instances of underplaying issues or hunger, starvation or related issues by the public institutions, local governments and even media because it has political overtones.

South Africa, like India, has sought to explicitly guarantee a right to food, while Brazil has utilised its *Fome Zero programme* to provide three square meals to its people. This is backed by an institutional commitment, which has led to the consolidation of more than 31 food welfare programmes. Brazil has also allowed public prosecutors to take up the issue of hunger as a violation of human rights at the local level. Meanwhile, Uganda has sought to confer a legal responsibility for food security on the head of the household with penalties for malnutrition. It has combined this with urban centres which offer food for subsidised prices, and supplementary nutrition schemes have helped reduce hunger.



**What are the other related yet bigger challenges that India is facing? What are your activities in that direction?**

**Dola Mahapatra:** According to FAO estimates in 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2018' report, 195.9 million people are undernourished in India. By this measure 14.8% of the population is undernourished in India. Also, 51.4% of women in reproductive age between 15 to 49 years are anaemic. Malnourished children have a higher risk of death from common childhood illnesses such as diarrhoea, pneumonia, and malaria.

Hunger is both a cause and effect – and the solutions have to be multi-pronged. Obesity among Indian children is growing. In urban locations, it may be because of dietary practices while this can also be due to short supply of quality food among lower income groups. In the absence of balanced food that is becoming costlier, children tend to eat fast food and food with high sugar – both of which can lead to obesity.

Hunger impacts human potential across generations. A stunted or wasted child grows as an adult with sub-optimal capabilities and potential – and her/his children are born with the same wasting/stunting trends. Therefore, first 1000 days of a child's life is extremely critical – and ZERO HUNGER efforts must start from pregnancy to the 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday of a baby. Similarly, adolescent and young adults need healthy nutrition to overcome anaemia and other health issues.

In line with this thinking, Rise Against Hunger provides quality micronutrient-rich wholesome meals to young children. Nearly 65% of meals (dry, uncooked mix of rice, Dal, dehydrated vegetables and vitamins) support children and youth. In addition, we emphasize adopting a multipronged strategy that focuses on improving agricultural productivity, empowering women through support for maternal and child care practices and offer nutritional education and social protection programmes. We also have drought mitigation programs that help farmers cope with climate change issues (seed preservation, adoption of new technologies, diversifying crops, land and soil improvement programs etc.). All the planned activities are implemented through strong network of partners without any gaps.



**What are your views on the positives and negatives of Indian policymaking as far as making nutrition accessible to all is concerned? What is required for a change in status quo?**

**Dola Mahapatra:** The PDS is one of its kind and the largest scheme in the world. There is no match to it in terms of the volume and also the reach. There is no doubt on the wisdom of policy making in India, in terms of making nutrition accessible.

However, there is need for redefining some of the policy parameters. It has to start with changing the definition of how malnutrition is measured. Undernutrition must be defined broadly – from a set of definition that focus on minimal calorie intake as well as micronutrient deficiency to food-based diet patterns and overall health effects of the food supply. Second, Government should use a spectrum of policies ranging from voluntary to mandatory. Mandatory ones must come with penalties as was done by Brazil.



**How do you manage your funds? Have you collaborated with other NGOs, government agencies and even industry?**

**Dola Mahapatra:** Our program is mainly volunteer driven. We mobilize support through private corporate enterprises, civic organizations, universities and other groups who support our volunteer engagement activities by sponsoring meal packaging programs where people from any walk of life and of any age can participate. By engaging volunteers, we aim to create hunger champions who are able to take action at their personal level to adapt good food behaviour, reduce food waste, understand food chain and respect farmers, and be actively engaged in supporting others who do not have enough food. Hunger cannot be overcome unless it becomes a movement and we consider this volunteering as a means to growing the

We also understand that hunger cannot be eliminated by any single organization and it will take collective action from all quarters including field-based organizations, community groups, farmers' collectives, government agencies and other institutions to work concertedly. We have a network of around 130 partners spread across the country who are working on school feeding and other programs. We have been piloting some projects in a couple of places to promote sustainable agriculture.



**What is the future outlook of your organization?**

**Dola Mahapatra: We aim to build a volunteer base of 100,000 (hunger heroes, hunger-warriors, hunger champions) across the country by 2022. We are looking at providing sustainable food and life-changing aids to at least 50,000 vulnerable people – over 60 percent of them being children and adolescents.**

**We will build sustainable agriculture pilots and scale up such projects to at least 5 most vulnerable districts in the country. We will provide a minimum of 30 million healthy and nutritious meals to those who need food-assistance (while simultaneously working with communities for their livelihoods and economic sustainability)**

**We will accelerate and augment government's programs that focus on food availability, accessibility, nutrition, agriculture, water and sanitation etc. We will develop internal capabilities to respond effectively to natural disasters and be recognized as one of the leading agencies with disaster response expertise.**