Expand food basket under PDS: Sowmya Swaminathan

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Soumya Swaminathan

To ensure that sufficient nutrition is available to people in lower socio-economic groups it is necessary to expand the food basket under the public distribution system, Chief Scientist of World Health Organisation Sowmya Swaminathan said on Tuesday.

"The current basket is taking care of food insecurity by providing only cereals. Nutritional security has a big gap in the current system. We need to fill it with millets, pulses, fruits, vegetables and animal proteins. We have to think about policy intervention, which can make these food baskets affordable to people. They can access which is currently sub-optimal."

At a session on Tuesday on "Needed: Policy Change for India and South Asia to Improve Nutritional Status of Children and Women" chaired by her, participants from India and Bangladesh, and officials from Food and Agriculture Organisation, shared their experiences.

The seminar was held on the final day of the three-day international consultation titled, "Ensuring Food and Nutrition Security in the Context of Climate Change and the COVID-19 Pandemic" organised by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation.

The participants included Gagandeep Kang, microbiology professor of Christian Medical College, Vellore; Renu Swarup, secretary, Biotechnology department; Vinod Paul, member of Niti Aayog; Kaosar Afsana, professor, BRAC University Bangladesh, Zitouni Ould-Dada, deputy director, Food and Agriculture Organisation, and Arjan De Wagt, chief of nutrition, UNICEF.

Dr. Swarup explained the work done by the DBT and gave a comprehensive overview of the Poshan Abhiyan. Science-driven approach was important to improve maternal health to prevent low weight births, she said, emphasising on maternal education related to child health and new approaches to feeding.

Dr. Kang recalled her research work from the 1960s and later in the early 21st Century with children to urge a scientific approach to feeding.

Dr. Paul, a paediatrician by training, called for intensive breastfeeding, kangaroo mother care and guidance to change behaviours of families towards providing optimum nutrition to children.

"We are still behind in providing diverse nutritious complementary food to babies. We need to improve quantity and quality of food to babies and the timing of providing these foods through behavioural change campaign," Dr. Paul said

The experts emphasised the need for communication tools to bring behavioural change among families and individuals and communities.