

Kitchen gardens in schools can improve nutritional levels

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The Union human resource development (MHRD) ministry recently asked all schools (rural and urban) in the country to set up kitchen gardens. The gardens, the ministry added, will have to be managed by the students, with the help of staff and teachers. The ministry said that seeds, saplings, organic manure, training and technical assistance can be obtained from Krishi Vigyan Kendras, department of agriculture/horticulture, food and nutrition boards, agriculture universities and the forest department.

There has been a strong argument in favour of having kitchen gardens in school backyards for quite some time because this can have several positive spin-offs. A garden can provide a context to students for understanding seasonality and life cycles of food; it can provide an opportunity to work cooperatively on real tasks; students can learn about where food comes from; and they can observe all of the principles of ecology in practice. Even though the central directive has been issued recently, states such as Karnataka had put this in practice for some time now. In fact, some schools in the state are producing not just enough for themselves, but also for other nearby schools.

Earlier this month, the 2019 Global Hunger Index measured hunger in 117 countries that provided data on four indicators — underweight and undernourished children, mortality rate of children, and stunted children under five years. India, the report showed, has serious levels of hunger. In this context, initiatives such as kitchen gardens in schools can go a long way in tackling the problem of hunger and malnutrition by adding variety to the plate of what is currently available in the various midday meal schemes in the country. The children of India deserve not just food, but quality, nutritious food. The lack of this can have a debilitating effect on not just the growth of a child, and her cognitive abilities and health, but also affect the nation's economic and social well-being because only a healthy population can ensure robust growth.