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EDITOR
VIRENDRA SHARMA

CO-EDITOR
DR. RAVINDRA TAILOR

E-mail : shodhshree@gmail.com

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Food Security Policy in India: Pros and Cons

Dr. G. L. Sharma

Dr. Y. K. Sharma

Food security is a current debating issue in new millennium especially in developing countries like India. In the process of neo-democratization politicians can manipulate the definition of poverty for sake of their vested interests but they cannot hide its symptoms. The 2010 Global Hunger Index ranks India at 67 out of 122 developing countries, reporting that "serious hunger" exists in all States. The position of BIMARU states is worst in respect of food safety and food security.

"India is home of 42 percent of the world's underweight children," according to the Hunger Index. In 2005, 46% of children in India aged fewer than 3 years were underweight. Any improvement in this indicator since 1990 has been far too slow to suggest that the MDG (Millennium Development Goals, UNO) target of 26.8% by 2015 can be achieved. The Tendulkar Committee's definition of the national poverty line makes allowance for individual food consumption of 1776 and 1999 calories per day, in urban and rural environments respectively. However, a heavy price has been paid in neglecting ecological sustainability. According to the government's State of Environment Report 2009, about 15% of agricultural land has been degraded through excessive application of subsidised chemicals. Many groundwater aquifers have been depleted to critical levels. The consequence is that the amount of daily food grain available per capita. Furthermore, the richer farmers have proved more adept at exploiting subsidies, to the detriment of almost 100 million households whose farms cover less than two hectares. The majority of these smallholdings are rain-fed, vulnerable to the droughts and flooding associated with the vagaries of a monsoon climate. This uneasy state of food security in India will be further stressed by a structural pincer movement over coming decades. The demands for alternative use of farmland from an industrialising economy will conflict with the human needs of a population projected to rise from 1.2 billion to 1.7 billion by 2050. Seemingly oblivious to the squeeze on land, the government announced at the end of 2009 a target to resource 20% of India's fuel consumption with bio-fuels by 2017.

Food security policy in India has for many years favoured extensive government intervention. Farmers are assisted by input subsidies and, if necessary, their harvests will be purchased at guaranteed minimum support prices. A safety net for the poor is provided by the long established Public Distribution System (PDS). This offers BPL families the opportunity to purchase heavily discounted food and cooking essentials through a vast network of 489,000 "fair price shops".

The persistence of hunger in India has finally persuaded the government that this strategy has failed. Corruption and fraud has ravaged the PDS to the extent that 70% of its resources may be misdirected. The government's food storage facilities have proved woefully inadequate. A new National Food Security bill currently under consideration would introduce radical reform. Recognising the right to food under international law, the bill would bypass the PDS structure by issuing credits for staple wheat and rice direct to eligible families. A new system of Universal Identification smart cards would fulfil the role of cash at the fair price shops.

There is much debate as to whether the new right to food should be universal rather than limited to BPL families. This would overcome the inherent unfairness between those families who are just above of the poverty line and those just below. With food, fuel and fertiliser subsidies already absorbing 12.5% of the national budget, it is no surprise that government finance departments are more cautious. There is also uncertainty whether the government could acquire sufficient food, despite the prospect of good harvests. These concerns have together delayed publication of the Food Security bill. The agriculture sector was favoured in the 2008 budget which introduced a loan waiver scheme writing off debts totalling \$14 billion for tens of millions of farmers. This was a response to the mounting tragedy of over 200,000 suicides since 1997, most of them believed to be related to crippling debts for farm inputs. Community and civil society organisations are piloting schemes for more sustainable and nutritious farming practices. Although the government expresses confidence in the vision of national food sufficiency, the reality is betrayed by its passive stance on controversial foreign land acquisition by Indian commercial interests. Purchases of agricultural land in Africa alone are believed to total over \$2 billion.

REPORT OF THE EXPERT COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY BILL :

Smt. Sonia Gandhi, the Chairperson of the National Advisory Council wrote to the Prime Minister on October 27, 2010 forwarding the basic framework of the proposed National Food Security Bill (NFSB). In another letter on November 16, 2010 to the PM, she suggested a close examination of the proposal of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) to replace the existing BPL survey with a socioeconomic census/ survey to be conducted by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India. The Prime Minister set up an Expert Committee under the chairmanship of Dr C.Rangarajan to examine the implications of the proposals of the NAC and MoRD and make suitable recommendations. The members of the Expert Committee include Member Secretary Planning Commission, Chief Economic Advisor, and the Secretaries of Departments of Agriculture & Cooperation, Expenditure and Food & Public Distribution. It has also been suggested that views of other

Secretaries and Registrar General of India and Census Commissioner may be obtained if required. The Expert Committee has been requested to submit its report within one month.

National Food Security Bill (proposed by NAC):

India's high economic growth rate in the past decade has not been fully reflected in the health status of its people, with 22 per cent of its population undernourished. According to the National Family Health Survey 2005-06, 40.4 per cent of children under the age of three are underweight, 33 per cent of women in the age group of 15-49 have a body mass index below normal and 78.9 per cent of children in the age group of 6-35 months are anaemic. These are disturbing statistics which point to nutritional deficiencies. The NAC proposal for a National Food Security Bill is perhaps the most important national effort yet to address these deficiencies in India.

It is at times assumed that the relationship between economic growth and health is unidirectional with improving economic conditions leading to better health. In reality, and as confirmed by recent research, the reverse is equally true and health is an 'economic engine.' That is, better health which is an important end in itself leads to and may, in certain cases, be a necessary prerequisite for economic development. Hence besides being an end in itself, the economic role of health and nutrition thus provides an additional and compelling rationale for public policy to support well targeted nutrition improving interventions in ways directly analogous to the support given for increasing other forms of capital investments.

The salient features of the NFSB proposed by the NAC are:

- Legal entitlement to subsidized food-grains to be extended to at least 75% of the country's population - 90% in rural areas and 50% in urban areas.
- The priority households (46% in rural areas and 28% in urban areas) to have a Monthly entitlement of 35 Kgs (equivalent to 7 Kgs per person) at a subsidized price of Rs. 1 per Kg for millets, Rs. 2 per Kg for wheat and Rs. 3 per Kg for rice.
- The general households (39% rural and 12% urban in phase 1 and 44% rural and 22% urban in final phase) to have a monthly entitlement of 20Kgs equivalent to 4 Kgs per person) at a price not exceeding 50% of the current Minimum Support Price for millets, wheat and rice.
- The minimum coverage, entitlement and price to remain unchanged until the end of the XII five year plan.
- Government of India to specify the criteria for categorization of population into priority and general households.

- In the first phase, food entitlement to be extended to 72 per cent of the population. In the final phase, to be completed before March 31, 2014, full
- Coverage of food entitlement (to 75 per cent of the population) to be ensured
- Legal entitlements for child and maternal nutrition, destitute and other vulnerable groups.
- Reform of the Public Distribution System.

IDENTIFYING THE MAJOR ISSUES:

The NFSB suggests near universal coverage of the population. The underlying logic of this, as understood by the EC, is the argument that typically the identification of beneficiaries in such an exercise is fraught with danger of severe under inclusion. Hence to ensure that the genuinely needy are not left out, universalization is the only way. The richer households will normally opt out of such schemes and hence with tight monitoring of off-take of grains, over time it would be possible to minimize leakage of food-grains. The Expert Committee understands the logic of this view but is also conscious of the fact that this implies a massive procurement of food grains and a very large distribution network entailing a substantial step up in subsidy. Since the coverage proposed by the NAC is also not 100% and there are differential categories of entitlement, the need for proper identification of beneficiaries still exists.

The approach of the Expert Committee in examining these recommendations has been to secure the wholly laudable underlying objectives in a way that is sustainable and administratively feasible. With this end in view the Expert Committee has identified the following major operational issues which need to be resolved to realize the goals of the proposed NFSB:

- Given the current trends of food-grain production and government procurement, and the likely improvements in these over time, will there be adequate availability of grain with the public authorities to implement the full entitlements for the priority and general category as proposed in the NFSB?
- What will be the impact of such large government food-grain procurement on the open market prices? This is relevant since both the priority and general category will be purchasing a part of their consumption needs from the open market.
- What are the subsidy implications for both the phases and can these levels be sustained in the future?
- Arriving at a clear definition of priority and general households and the methodology of identification of these households especially the feasibility of involving the Registrar General of India and Census Commissioner in this task.

- Given the inefficiencies and leakages in the current distribution system, identify the principal areas of reform of the PDS and the alternative mechanisms of reaching the food-grain/subsidy to the entitled households.

Conclusion :

Though the Right to food Bill 2011 has been passed in lower house of parliament (Lok- Sabha) yet it is still not unanimously. there may be some loop hole in the proposed draft but it has very good ends. The procedural draw backed can be managed and improved with the pace of time gradually. through this Bill we are going towards a right track in this modern era Right to Information, Right to Education, Right to food, Right to shelter etc... Honourable supreme Court declared these rights as fundamental Right given in our Indian Constitution. National Right to Food legislation will prace a tool for eradication of poverty and making society hunger free. This is a need of hour in India.

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