
Report - Analysis

Food Security Bill 2013 of India – A Retrospective Analysis

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Abstract

Food Security means that all people at all times have physical and economic access to adequate amounts of nutritious, safe, and culturally appropriate food, which are produced in an environmentally sustainable and socially just manner, and that people are able to make informed decisions about their food choices. Food Security also means that the people who produce our food are able to earn a decent, living wage growing, catching, producing, processing, transporting, retailing, and serving food. At the core of food security is access to healthy food and optimal nutrition for all. Food access is closely linked to food supply, so food security is dependent on a healthy and sustainable food system. A food system includes the production, processing, distribution, marketing, acquisition, and consumption of food. This article examines the Food Security Bill 2013 of India and reports its benefits and also possible changes that can be taken into account to enable more food and nutritional security for people living in poverty and below poverty conditions in the country.

Keywords: *Food Security; Food Security Bill India; Nutritional Security*

Introduction

The struggle to ensure that all people have access to adequate food in order to lead active and healthy lives has existed throughout time. Events in the early 21st century clearly demonstrate that providing sufficient food to all people continues to be an urgent problem situated at the centre of society, nature and technology. Rising food prices in recent years have been the cause for unrest in many parts of the world and the number of people who do not receive sufficient nutrition has increased.

Agricultural and food production activities have been recognised as key drivers of environmental and climate changes, at the same time that studies have revealed that food production could face significant and widespread impacts from these changes in coming decades. National and international food safety incidents have raised awareness of the continued international peril that food systems can transmit health threats among human populations (McDonald: 2010).

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Encompassing a variety of ecological, social, economic and political issues, the notion of food security seeks to determine whether people have the food they need. Conducted at multiple levels, these examinations include the individual, household and community at the national, international and global levels. Lack of adequate safe and nutritious food has significant effects on health, well-being and livelihoods of people living in the world (McDonald: 2010).

Availability of food does not ensure food security if people do not have the power to buy them for their consumption. It is the responsibility of governments to devise ways and means to enable people to buy it. This means that policies or legislations made by the government in this regard need to bring in effective employment generation schemes which need to be included in development programmes. Such schemes should also take into account people who are too old, expectant mothers and children as those belonging to these categories are most vulnerable as their capacity for physical exertion is severely limited. In this context, the concept of food security implies implementing policies for supplementing food and nutritional requirements of these groups. Nutrition is an essential aspect, because food as such is not enough; food of right quality and content providing necessary nutrition is what is really required, for keeping the body in proper health. In this aspect, all food items, including, milk, fruits, vegetables, and processed and fortified foods, etc., are included. Productivity is directly related to the health of the people and this gives nutrition the paramount place in the philosophy of food security (Acharya: 1983).

Food Security in India

Food security in India should be of great importance as one-third of the total population in the country is estimated to be poor and more than one half of all children malnourished in one way or the other. The issue of food security in India has a number of dimensions that extend beyond production, availability and demand for food.

There has been a paradigmatic shift in the concept of food security, from food availability and stability to household food insecurity, and from assessment of input measures like energy intake to output indicators such as anthropometric measures and clinical signs of malnutrition. Food security at the national level refers mainly to availability in the country of sufficient stocks of food to meet domestic demand either through domestic supply or through imports. Attainment of self-sufficiency in food grains at the national level is one of the country's major achievements in the post-independence period. After remaining a food deficit country for about two decades after independence, India became largely self-sufficient in food grain production at the macro level. There have been hardly any food grain imports after the mid 1970s. Food grain production in the country increased about 50 million tonnes to around 233.9 million tonnes in 2008-09. The growth rate of food grains has been around 2.5 percent per annum between 1951 and 2006-07. The production of oil seeds, cotton, sugarcane, fruits, vegetables and milk has also increased appreciably (Dev & Sharma: 2010).

Despite its astonishing economic growth during the last 20 years, India still suffers from extended food insecurity. It's the country with the majority of hungry people, accounting for about a quarter of the hungry population in the

world. Per capita availability as well as consumption of food grains in India has declined since 1996; the percentage of underweight children has remained stagnant between 1998 and 2006; and calorie consumption of the bottom half of the population has been declining since 1987 (Garbuglia: 2009). Though India was successful in achieving self-sufficiency by increasing its food production and also improved its capacity to cope with year-to-year fluctuations in food production, it could not solve the problem of chronic household food insecurity. This necessitated a change in approach and as a result, food energy intake at household level is now given prominence in assessing food security. It has become a common practice to estimate the number of food insecure households by comparing their calorie intake with required norms. However, the widely accepted norms of the level of calorie intake required for overcoming under-nutrition have been questioned. Nutritionists argue that the energy intake is a poor measure of nutritional status, which depends not only on the nutrient intake but also on non-nutrient food attributes, privately and publicly inputs and statuses (Martorell & Ho: 1984).

India is one of the few countries which have experimented with a broad spectrum of programmes for improving food security. It has already made substantial progress in terms of overcoming transient food insecurity by giving priority to self-sufficiency in food grains and through procurement and public distribution of food grains, employment programmes, etc. However, despite a significant reduction in the incidence of poverty chronic food insecurity persists in a large proportion of India's population. At the national level the problem of food insecurity has been solved which is reflected in

mounting buffer stocks. Yet there are millions of food insecure and under-nourished people in India. The limitation is not food supply but food distribution. Careful consideration of food security requires moving beyond food availability and recognising low incomes of the poor (Radhakrishna: 2002).

The biggest food based intervention in India is the system of public distribution of food, a programme that aims to provide access to cheap food to households throughout the country. The Public Distribution System (PDS) is a rationing mechanism that entitles households to specified quantities of selected commodities at subsidised prices. In most parts of the country, upto 1997, the PDS was universal and all households, rural and urban with a registered residential address were entitled to rations. Eligible households were given a ration card that entitled them to buy food of selected commodities. The exact entitlement (quantity, range of commodities and prices) varies across states. The PDS was institutionalised in the country in the 60s to achieve multiple objectives including ensuring stability of prices, rationing of essential commodities in case of deficit in supplies, ensuring availability of basic commodities to the poor and needy and to check the practice of hoarding and black marketing (Swaminathan: 2000). Food subsidisation has a very long tradition in India. For most of the last three decades, it has accounted for more than two percent of total government expenditure, and its cost peaked in 1993-94 at 55 billion Rupees (roughly 1.8 Billion US\$), almost fifty percent of total expenditure allocated to poverty alleviation programmes, and approximately 0.8 percent of Gross Domestic Product. The bulk of these sums sustain the PDS which is one of the

oldest and largest poverty alleviation programmes in the world. The programme mainly supplies rice, wheat, edible oils, sugar and kerosene at subsidized prices through a network of retail outlets known as fair prices shop (Radhakrishna, et. al.: 1997).

In India the stock of food grains available with the governmental agencies as on mid 2001 was 61.96 million tonnes, which constituted 22.75 millions of rice and 38.92 million tonnes of wheat. This level of stock was well above the buffer stock norms prescribed by the government. Thus the problem today on the food front is not one of scarcity but that of managing the surplus. The country is today concerned that in spite of the fact that the Food Corporation of India godowns are overflowing with adequate food grains which is not being consumed by the vulnerable sections of society. One is the issue of having enough purchasing power or income to buy food and the other is the access of food (physical availability of food). Though the overall generation of jobs is closely connected to efficient economic growth, there are some special aspects that must be kept in mind. Thus in remote, inaccessible rural areas both job opportunities and access to food may be constrained. In such situations, food-for-work and related schemes are necessary. They may need to be supplemented by more innovative schemes like grain banks. Community grain banks can be setup in such areas wherefrom the needy can borrow grain in times of need and repay the grain after the emergency is over. Natural disasters such as earthquakes also create conditions in which emergency assistance must be provided by the government and the administration has to be alert to such spurts in hunger. Finally, a minimal amount of social security must be provided to those who are old, sick or

disabled and cannot partake in work even if it is available (TYFP Working Group: 2001).

Food Security Bill 2013 of India

Extending throughout the country, the Food Security Bill of India, 2013 is a statement seeking to provide for food and nutritional security in the human life cycle by enabling sufficient quality and quantity of food at affordable rates to people in order to live healthy and hunger free lives and such other related issues.

Section two of the Bill puts forwards various forms of entitlements through the PDS. Entitlements are based on two categories (i) Priority households and (ii) Antyodaya households (eligible households). Priority households are entitled to receive five kilograms of food grains per person every month and 35 kilograms for Antyodaya households per month. Priority and Antyodaya households shall extend to 75 percent of the rural population and 50 percent of the total population living in urban areas. However, the Bill does not specify the method of determining priority and Antyodaya households. Prices in the PDS are specified in Schedule I of the Bill where the cost of rice, wheat and millets are Rs. 3, 2 and 1 respectively.

The bill also specifies entitlements for children where those belonging to the age group of six months to six years will receive an age appropriate meal free of charge through Local Anganwadi centres.ⁱ Children belonging to the age group of six to fourteen years, will receive one free mid-day meal every day except on school holidays in all schools run by local bodies, government and aided schools upto class VII. For children below six months exclusive breastfeeding shall be promoted.

Pregnant and lactating mothers are entitled for a free meal at the local anganwadi centre during pregnancy and six months after child birth as well as maternity benefits of Rs. 6000 in installments.

The Bill enables states to create State Food Commissions and also specifies the constitution of members of the Commission including members belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The functions of the State Food Commission are to monitor, evaluate, inquire into violations of entitlements, hear appeals against orders of the District Grievance Redressal Officer (DGRO) and prepare annual reports to be presented before the state legislature. The Commission may also forward any case to a Magistrate having jurisdiction, who shall proceed if the case has been forwarded under section 346 of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973.

The Bill provides for a two-tier grievance redressal structure, involving the DGRO and State Food Commission. State governments must also put in place an internal grievance redressal mechanism which may include call centers, help lines, designation of nodal officers, or such other mechanisms as may be prescribed.

Mandatory transparency provisions include: (i) placing all PDS-related records in the public domain and keeping them open for inspection to the public (ii) conducting periodic social audits of the PDS and other welfare schemes, (iii) using information and communication technology in order to ensure transparent recording of transactions at all level and (iv) setting up vigilance committees at state, district, block and fair price shop levels to supervise all schemes under the act. Food Commissions have powers to impose penalties against violators and

can authorize any of its members as the adjudicating officer for the purpose.

The Bill has three schedules (these can be amended "by notification"). Schedule 1 prescribes issue prices for the PDS. Schedule 2 prescribes "nutritional standards" for midday meals, take-home rations and related entitlements. For instance, take-home rations for children aged 6 months to 3 years should provide at least 500 calories and 12-15 grams of protein. Schedule 3 lists various "provisions for advancing food security namely: (i) revitalization of agriculture, (ii) procurement, storage and movement of food grains, and (iii) other provisions (e.g. drinking water, sanitation, health care, and "adequate pensions" for "senior citizens, persons with disability and single women").

Conclusion

In conclusion the Food Security Bill 2013 seems like another welfare scheme over another existing social welfare programme which is part of the PDS scheme. Critics appear to be under the misconception that the government is making new financial and grain commitments under the NFSB. In fact, the NFSB does little more than turning the existing food security schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme, Midday Meal (MDM) Scheme, Public Distribution System (PDS) and maternity entitlements etc., into legal entitlements. The Bill seems to be inadequate in providing food in the fight against widespread malnutrition. The Bill appears to have delinked food security and nutritional security which stands contrary to the Rome Declaration on World Food Security 1996, signed by India. The Declaration reaffirmed "the right of everyone to have (physical and economic) access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental

right of everyone to be free from hunger.” Further Article 47 of the Constitution of India obliges states to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people.

The Bill does not specify any time frame in implementing the entitlements as stated in the provisions. It is for each state to determine when these entitlements may be implemented. A proper redressal mechanism is not found in the Bill. Redressal starts at the district level which ignores panchayat and at the village levels.

The proposed Bill creates confusion on implementation issues and assumes that there are no food programmes in different states. For example the state of Tamil Nadu has a food programme of its own through the PDS which has almost universal coverage. It also seems that

some of the states like Tamil Nadu want to be exempted from implementing the Bill due to the fact that they have a more effective and time tested programme

On the whole it seems that the Bill is a nationalised form of PDS with few modifications on the entitlements which fall short of clarity. It also seems arbitrary and irrational as it targets only 50% of the urban population whereas it is targeted towards 75% of the rural population. However, if people living in poverty and below poverty line are receiving food at the prices specified in the Bill, the initiative is good.

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ⁱ **Anganwadi** is a government sponsored child-care and mother-care center in India. It caters to children in the 0-6 age group. The word means "courtyard shelter" in Hindi. They were started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services programme to combat child hunger and malnutrition. There are an estimated 1.053 million anganwadi centres employing 1.8 million mostly-female workers and helpers across the country. They provide outreach services to poor families in need of immunisation, healthy food, clean water, clean toilets and a learning environment for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers. They also provide similar services for expectant and nursing mothers. According to government figures, anganwadis reach about 58.1 million children and 10.23 million pregnant or lactating women. Anganwadis are India's primary tool against the scourges of child malnourishment, infant mortality and curbing preventable diseases such as polio.