

Issues in India's Food Security Programmes

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Introduction:

In aggregate, over fifth India's population suffers from chronic hunger. 2011 Global Hunger Index (GHI) report ranked India at 15th position amongst leading countries with hunger situation and in recent 2013 Global Hunger Index India is ranked 16th in the list of countries having serious hunger situation. Arjun Sengupta committee identified 77 % of the country's population being vulnerable since they live on less than Rs. 20 per day. It is well known that half the children in the country are malnourished. 70 % of women are anemic and hunger and starvation-related deaths continue to occur in different part of the country.

According to the UN, "a household is food secure when it has access to the food needed for a healthy life for all its members, adequate in terms of quality and quantity and culturally acceptable." A household is food secure if it is able to ensure a healthy life for all its members at all times. In August, 2013 Food Security Act (NFSA) was passed by voice vote in both houses of Parliament. NFSA seek to make the right to food a legal entitlement for nearly two third of the population through public distribution system. The food subsidy cost of implementing the amended NFSB is estimated at Rs. 1,24,502 crore for 2013-14. The calculation assumes to total coverage of 75 % of the rural population and 50 % of urban population. Planning Commission resolves to end of the hunger to the mere distribution of 25 kg foodgrains (wheat and rice) a month to the 37.2 % of the country's population considered below the poverty line (BPL). Instead the National Food Security Act 2013, 5 kg of foodgrain per month at Rs. 3 per kg for rice, Rs. 2 per kg for wheat and Rs. 1 per kg for coarse grains and poorest to poor household to get 35 kg per month. This distribution will be done through existing public distribution system, food security allowances by cash transfer in case of non-supply of food grains. It means that FSA basic objective behind food subsidy is to help the poor class of society to avail food grains at low cost compare to the market rates.

WTO and India's Food Security:

The Geneva text on public stock holding programmes for food security was not acceptable to India & Pakistan for different reasons. India is not agreeing to the WTO trade facilitation agreement because of the 10 % cap on subsidies which are not possible for India to follow. Adding to the woes is the fact the 10 % cap is calculated based on 1986-88 prices when the prices of food grain were much lower. So the cap has to be updated taking into account the present prices of foodgrains. A second reason is that even for providing subsidized food, India will have to open up its own stockpiling to international monitoring. It will not be able to add protein heavy grains like say, lentils, if it wants to, due to riders in the peace clause. Third, it might seem unfair to developing countries to not crack down on farm subsidies that the United States provides to its farmers to the tune of more than \$ 20 billion per year. While the WTO is banding the developing countries to protocols, the issue of subsidies by developed giants like US seems to be off the table.

Failure of PDS to meet Food Security:

In late 1940s India launched PDS scheme as general entitlement then it was revamped to target poor households since 2000. Central Government lunched Antyodaya Anna Yojana to target the

poorest of poor. In October 2010 the National Advisory Council (NAC) drafted a National Food Security Bill, proposing legal entitlement for about 75 percent of the population. In January 2011, an expert committee set up by the prime minister under the chairmanship of Dr. C. Rangarajan examined the bill and made several recommendations, including reducing the proportion of the population entitled to benefits and computerizing PDS. A draft bill was circulated by the ministry of food, consumer affairs and public distribution for public feedback in September 2011. The bill was then introduced in the parliament in December 2011 and finally in 2013 the Act to provide legal right to food to the poor came into existence.

According to the Gujarati et. al. (2014), leakages in the PDS are 24 % Gualti et. al. (2012) leakages in PDS are 40 %. According to the Hitesh Mishra (2013), there is political pressure to expand the size of those classified as covered to include those misclassified under the current BPL system and she says that 25 % misclassification has BPL classification. Another PDS leakage of foodgrains is during transportation to the ration shop and from the ration shop itself into the open market. Planning Commission found 36 % leakage of PDS rice and wheat at the all-India level.

National Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) has become part of the larger National Food Security programme in the Bihar, where children lost their lives after they consumed a government provided school meal containing organophosphate pesticides, we must demand of the state a far greater commitment to administering larger scale programmes that are meant to improve not destroy the life of citizens. Antyodaya Anna Yojana includes one provision of an additional 5 kg of grain per month to pregnant women and new mothers and free mid-day meals in the school for children in age group of 2-16 years through PDS. But studies have found many malpractices in these schemes including low quality of food.

Future of India's Food Security:

The food security act should be preserved to end hunger in our country and to ensure that citizens obtain the right to a dignified life and food security. Provision of cash transfer in NFSA gives rise to many problems in India. Cash transfer schemes are difficult to follow because of various problems in implementation, which are identification errors, difficulties in bank account system, cash does not guarantee purchasing the food. Since cash transfer includes the transfer of money directly to the beneficiary, poor access to banks and post offices in some areas many reduce their effectiveness and cash transfers many expose recipients to price fluctuation, if they are not frequently adjusted for inflation.

According to Sinha D. (2013) the cost of implementing NFSB will be unaffordable for a country. Many state governments have already been spending a lot of additional funds from their own budget to expand the PDS budget. NFSB does not include any specific provisions for decentralized procurement, delivery mechanisms and accountability measures which need to be put in place.

According to Upadhyay R.P and Palanivel C. (2011) the causes of existing food insecurity in India is due to unavailability of food and poor purchasing capacity, illiteracy, unemployment, over crowding, poor environmental conditions, gender bias, lack of political will, poorly monitored nutritional programmes and inadequate public food distribution system. To achieve food security priority has to be assigned to agriculture and rural development along with

promoting women empowerment ensuring sustainable employment and improving environment conditions (water, sanitation & hygiene).

As regards other possible concerns contributing to leakages and corruption in PDS, steps need to be taken to make it corruption free, efficient and accountable through provision of better infrastructure, fixing accountability on key functionaries. Systemic reforms are required in PDS for its effective implementation to meet the food security of India.

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