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NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY BILL: BUILDING FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA

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Abstract: Despite ensuring ample availability of food, food insecurity still exists at the micro-level in the country and had remained a formidable challenge in India. The central pivot of the Bill is large-scale subsidized grain distribution to almost two-thirds of the country's population. National Food Security Bill (NFSB) aims to eradicate hunger and malnutrition from India in the shortest possible time. The proposed legislation marks a paradigm shift in addressing the problem of food security—from the current welfare approach to a 'right' based approach. It is therefore important to get it right, not just in terms of making it a legal entitlement under the "rights approach" but making it a success on the ground. NFSB also aims at improving the nutritional status of the population especially of women and children. Female education, access to clean drinking water, availability of hygienic sanitation facilities are the prime prerequisites for improved nutrition. It needs to be recognised that malnutrition is a multi-dimensional problem and needs a multi-pronged strategy. Thus, present paper focuses on the overview of NFSB, highlighting various challenges and issues in its implementation.

Keyword: *Food, Food Security, Accessibility, Absorption, Food Security Bill, Malnutrition*

INTRODUCTION

Food security is an issue of great importance for a country like India where more than one-third of the population is estimated to be absolutely poor and one-half of all children malnourished in one way or another. It is well known that food security has multiple dimensions that extend beyond the production, availability and demand for food. There has been a typical 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.

According to **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**, food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food security has three components, viz., availability, access, and absorption (nutrition). The three are interconnected. Many studies have shown that improvement in

nutrition is important, even for increase in productivity of workers. Thus, food security has intrinsic (for its own sake) as well as instrumental (for increasing productivity) value.

Availability, accessibility and absorption of food:

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.

At **the Individual level**, food security means that all members of the society have access to the food they need, either from their own production, from the market or from the government's transfer mechanism.

In order to achieve food security, it is also important that the poor have sufficient means to purchase food. Poor people cannot afford to purchase the food they need at market prices, and therefore, social protection programmes are needed. Adequate purchasing power for the poor to buy food can be ensured in two

ways. One is to have an **employment intensive pattern of growth** which can provide remunerative work to the poor and enhance their power to purchase food. Another way is to **increase incomes and subsidize** food. Food security requires the poor to have adequate purchasing power apart from physical access to the required food. Very often the poor cannot afford to obtain the available food due to the high level of market prices thus; various social protection programmes are needed to ensure access. Adequate availability and access to food does not necessarily mean that the food would be absorbed to ensure higher levels of nutrition. Food absorption by the human body is a major problem particularly in rural areas and urban slums. According to researchers the “capacity to be nourished (for the body to absorb food) depends crucially to other characteristics of a person that are influenced by non-food factors such as medical attention, health services, basic education, sanitary arrangements, provision of clean water, eradication of infectious epidemics and so on”. This inability to absorb the food intake or where the body is incapable of absorbing the nutrients from the food consumed can be termed **absorption food insecurity**.

Researches have confirmed that three aspects i.e. availability, access and absorption are interrelated. Availability and accessibility increase the intake of nutrition at household level.

Nutritional Intake Assessment and Nutritional Status Assessment are two possible ways to assess the adequacy of food and nutrition and to detect the presence of inadequate intake among individuals and population groups.

The three main drivers of under-nutrition in developing countries are: (i) household food insecurity (the outcome of low food availability and access to food); (ii) poor maternal and childcare practices; and (iii) inadequate access to drinking water, sanitation and health services. Gender inequality is another important factor that determines malnutrition levels. A distinction can be made between direct or immediate or indirect but substantive and institutional factors responsible for under-nutrition. For example, food intake, micro nutrients, diet diversification, health, water, and sanitation are direct determinants while women’s empowerment, agriculture, rural non-far sector etc. are indirect determinants of under-nutrition.

Programmes targeting to achieve Nutrition Security in India:

India has government programmes such as TPDS (Targeted Public Distribution System) including AAY, nutrition programmes like mid-day meals, ICDS, etc. to improve food and nutrition security. NREGS and self-employment programmes can also increase access to food and nutrition. Social protection programmes in India have helped in improving incomes as well as providing protection to the population, especially to the poor, from shocks in the economy. However, there are lots of gaps and inefficiencies in the social protection programmes.

Under National Food Security Law, the government wants to provide 25 kilograms of rice and wheat at Rs.3/Kg to BPL families. This is too narrow an approach for Right to Food. The Right to Food Campaign has specified several other points, apart from universal PDS, to be included under the Food Entitlements Act.

National Food security Bill, 2013

The central pivot of the Bill is large-scale subsidized grain distribution to almost two-thirds of the country's population of 1.2 billion. It implies a massive procurement of food grains and a very large distribution network entailing huge financial expenditure. The long-term feasibility of the envisaged strategy under NFSB needs to be carefully analysed and debated in the national interest. It is imperative that a holistic approach is adopted while analysing the entire system of food production, food procurement and distribution of food for achieving food security on sustainable basis.

The intent of the National Food Security Bill is stated in the [Lok Sabha](#) committee report. The, which states, "Food security means availability of sufficient food grains to meet the domestic demand as well as access, at the individual level, to adequate quantities of food at affordable prices." About two thirds (approx. 67%) of the population will be entitled to receive subsidized food grains under Targeted [Public Distribution System](#). In a country where almost 40% of children are undernourished the importance of the scheme increases significantly."

Salient features of National Food Security Bill:

- 75% of rural population and 50% of the urban population are entitled for three years, from enactment, to 5 kilograms food grains per month at Rs. 3, 2, and 1 per kg for rice, wheat and coarse grains (millet), respectively.
- The states will be responsible for determining eligibility criteria;
- Pregnant women and lactating mothers are entitled to a nutritious "take home ration" of 600 Calories and a maternity benefit of at least Rs 6,000 for six months;
- Children 6 months to 14 years of age are to receive free hot meals or "take home rations";
- The central government will provide funds to states in case of short supplies of food grains;
- The current food grain allocation of the states will be protected by the central government for at least six months;
- The state government will provide a food security allowance to the beneficiaries in case of non-supply of food grains; The Public Distribution System is to be reformed;
- The eldest woman in the household, 18 years or above, is the head of the household for the issuance of the ration card;
- There will be state- and district-level redress mechanisms; and
- State Food Commissions will be formed for implementation and monitoring of the provisions of the Act. The cost of the implementation is estimated to be \$22 billion (1.25 lac crore), approximately 1.5% of GDP.
- The poorest that are covered under the Antodaya yojna will remain entitled to the 35 kilograms of grains allotted to them under the mentioned scheme.

View point in favor of Food Security Bill:

- **Right to food to become a legal right**– The proposed bill aims to provide legal right over subsidized food grains to 67 per cent of the population.

- The bill provides **uniform allocation** of 5 kg foodgrains (per person) at fixed rate of Rs. 3 (rice), Rs. 2 (wheat) and Rs. 1 (coarse grains) per kg to 75 per cent of the rural population and 50 per cent of the poor in urban India – about 800 million people.
- **Continuance of Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)** – Protection to 2.43 crore poorest of poor families under the Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) to supply of 35 Kg foodgrains per month per family would continue.
- **Nutritional support** to pregnant women without limitation is among other changes proposed in the bill. The bill will extend subsidized food to pregnant women and children under the age of 16. It is positive that it is including those who really need nutritious food The Bill proposes meal entitlements to specific groups. These include pregnant women and lactating mothers, children between the ages of six months and 14 years, malnourished children, disaster affected persons, and destitute, homeless and starving persons.
- For children in the age group of 6 months to 6 years, the Bill guarantees an age-appropriate meal, free of charge, through the *local anganwadi*. For children aged 6-14 years, one free mid-day meal shall be provided every day (except on school holidays) in all schools run by local bodies, government and government aided schools, up to Class VIII. For children below six months, “exclusive breastfeeding shall be promoted”.
- **Endeavors to empower woman**- The eldest woman in the household shall be entitled to secure food from the PDS for the entire household.
- **Bill seeks to utilize already existing infrastructures like PDS and anganwadis**. This will prevent further wastage of money to develop the infrastructures.

View point: Against Food Security Bill:

- **Credibility of PDS system**- The government intends to use the Public Distribution System for delivering subsidies to the poor. The PDS is already used to deliver food subsidies to the poor but around 51% of the food delivered that way is currently lost to leakages. It is sold on the open market for a higher price.

- The government is also considering using **direct cash transfers**. In cases where the government is not able to make food available in the PDS then they will give cash payments to be used for food directly into people's bank accounts. It may be possible that bill is deviating from its purpose. Bill is to provide access to food not money in lieu of food.
- The cost of food grains is rising globally then how would government be able to provide subsidized food to 70% Indian population? This is big and tough question in accessing food to all 70% Indian population.
- **Effect on farmers and producers-** The very low prices of the subsidized food will distort the market and farmers who can't sell to the government-assured program will lose out on the open market because prices will be forced down. Hence the people who are not poor at present but will become poor in days to come.
- **How to be implemented?** Things are not very clear how it will be initiated. Every district will have a grievance officer who will deal with complaints about implementation at the local level. There is lack of awareness that how that will function. Still the commission under this bill is yet to be set.
- **Failure to define the beneficiaries** is some of the shortcomings of the bill. Also, the scheme does not define the beneficiaries properly. The bill says that States will provide the list of the beneficiaries but they have no such records. So, whether it will reach the right persons is hypothetical.
- Division among three groups – priority, general and excluded – and adopting a complex, impractical and politically contentious 'inclusive' criteria that too to be provided at later stage.
- **Not enough resources-** Moreover, to implement this scheme, the total estimated annual food grains requirements will be 61.23 million tones and is likely to cost Rs.1,24,724 crore. Given the rising costs of the scheme and rising population, its sustainability is under question. This is a mega program and will require a huge food subsidy. The cost of it will go up from

0.8% of Gross Domestic Product to around 1.1% of GDP. This is a serious increase in a situation where the government does not have enough resources as it is.

- **Based on schemes which are itself in trial stages-** It will be linked to the Aadhar scheme which provides every citizen with a unique identification number that's linked to a database that includes the biometrics of all cardholders. Aadhar scheme and direct cash transfer both are in their trial stages. So, burdening a still developing programme will lead to total failure.
- Implementing this bill could **widen the already swollen budget deficit**, increasing the risk to its coveted investment-grade status.
- Critics argue that eradication of malnutrition needs more than just removal of hunger. Food security is necessary but not sufficient for nutrition security.

CONCLUSION:

Nutrition improvement should combine a rights-based approach and nutrition education. It may be noted that one can speak about rights but they can be distinguished from legal rights, since rights approach does not mean only legal rights. For example, for implementation of measures such as breast feeding, intra-household distribution, diversification of diet, etc. Nutrition education is more important than legal rights. All human rights need not necessarily be legal rights.

India has many policies and programmes. However, food insecurity and malnutrition continue to be high. The problem is with both design and implementation of the programmes. The focus of reforms can now be shifted to more efficient delivery systems of public services. It has been recognized that better governance is very important for effective functioning of food-based programmes. Social mobilization, community participation and decentralized approach are necessary in this context. It may, however, be noted that governance has to be contextualized in relation to the socio-economic environment. Appropriate institutions are needed for better implementation of policies and programmes. For example, rural institutions in areas like land, water, marketing of agricultural and non-agricultural products, credit, technology and infrastructure are needed for better governance. Similarly, people-centric programmes and institutions are needed for better

implementation of social protection schemes. A self-help group approach for livelihoods is relatively successful. For example, small and marginal farmers can get better services if they are organized through collectives like self-help groups or cooperatives. Finally, the 'rights approach' plays an important role in improving implementation of development programmes.

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