

The Pursuit of Food Security in India: Policies sans Concept and Commitment?

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Food security policy in India in recent years has lacked clarity and direction. It resembles a series of *ad hoc* measures without a clear evidence-based assessment to support them.

To reduce the fiscal deficit, the economic reform era began in 1991 with proposals to target the public food distribution system (PDS) on cost-efficiency considerations. Instead of reducing exclusion errors that leave needy poor people out of the PDS, the emphasis was on reducing the number of non-poor people receiving welfare support.

Targeting is based on the economic status of the household. If the household is below the poverty line (BPL), it is entitled to the benefits of a welfare programme. Such a scheme is implemented by BPL censuses of rural households every five years to identify, determine and update their eligibility for welfare benefits.

Despite such efforts, the new millennium dawned with a bleeding rural India and press reports of periodic farmer suicides and deaths due to starvation. Policy documents and academic papers published empirical findings of (a) a secular decline in cereal consumption and calorie intake rendering virtually the entire (around 90 per cent) population food insecure; and (b) a child population of which half is underweight.

Such a depressing scenario of multidimensional deprivation has called for a reform of conventional welfare programmes towards a rights-based approach providing for, *inter alia*, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and direct cash transfers. The estimates of food insecurity have formed the basis of a case for a universal PDS and enactment of the National Food Security Bill.

The Bill seeks "to provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto."

The Bill marks a radical departure from the welfare approach to a rights-based approach. It would involve substantial expansion of the existing targeted PDS to meet the needs of virtually a billion people: about 68 per cent of the Indian population (75 per cent of the rural and 50 per cent of the urban population).

The beneficiaries would be legally entitled to specified quantities of food grains at highly subsidised prices. In addition, the Bill would confer "legal rights on women and children and other special groups such as destitute, homeless, disaster and emergency affected persons and persons living in starvation, to receive meal free of charge or at an affordable price, as the case may be." The targeted PDS would provide 5 kg per month of food grains per person in priority households, and 35 kg per month to households under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana—a scheme targeting the poorest people. The subsidised prices would be Rs3/kg for rice, Rs2 for wheat and Rs1 for coarse grains.

To implement the proposed legislation, the government would need at least 62 million tonnes of food grains. Its annual budget for 2013–14 has provided for a subsidy bill of Rs900 billion (\$16.6 billion), which includes Rs100 billion (\$1.84 billion) to implement the National Food Security Bill. The dimension of the task, costs involved and their macro-economic implications would really call for an evaluation of the Bill and its imperativeness.

The Bill is not based on an explicit concept of food security. Nor does it define any framework or parameter for profiling the magnitude of food insecurity in India. Estimates of food insecurity cited above are based on outdated calorie norms and, hence, are exaggerated (Suryanarayana, 2011). If such norms were really valid and binding, the observed trend reduction in energy intake should have led to a health disaster. This has not happened. Indeed, about 99 per cent of rural and urban households report having two square meals a day throughout the year.

In the context of rising incomes, improved sanitation and standard of living, technology, transportation and infrastructure, calorie needs must have declined, calling for a downward revision in cereal and calorie norms. Behavioural evidence from the National Sample Surveys (NSS) shows (i) a secular decline in per capita cereal consumption and calorie intake of the upper five or six decile groups; and (ii) a stable/marginal increase in those of the bottom decile groups of population in rural and urban India, which converge at a lower norm. Still, if there is any evidence on under-nutrition and anaemia, it could be due to malnutrition.

The Bill would at best ensure energy security only. Such monotonous energy-dense diets might not ensure adequate micronutrients; hence, this would only ensure malnutrition. What is needed in India today is dietary diversity.

Of course, nearly half of the child population is underweight. An important reason for this is the limited focus on health care during the first 1000 days of pregnancy. Public policy interventions focus largely on children after two years of age. In addition, there are other factors such as poor feeding practices, hygiene and gender status that explain the 'Asian Enigma' (Ramalingaswami et al., 1996).

A food security strategy should consider (a) availability; (b) access; (c) stability of food supply and access; and (d) safe and healthy food use subject to some norms. Policy issues differ across these dimensions. Ideally an effective food security programme would call for an integrated approach to address the disconnect between different dimensions of food security.

References:

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Thanks are due to Fabio Veras and V.M. Rao for comments and suggestions.