

Food Security

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Given the persistence of poverty, hunger and malnutrition in the country, it is commendable that the Union Cabinet approved promulgation of an ordinance to implement the National Food Security Bill and it has been signed by the President of India. The country's performance in reducing the number of people afflicted by malnutrition and hunger has been dismal both at the household and individual levels; the National Food Security Ordinance 2013 is meant to address some of these serious concerns. This important measure by the Union Government can prove to be a substantive step towards making the country hunger free by enabling its citizens to access foodgrains at nominal prices.

The history of the Food Security Legislation in India dates back to 1942 when the Public Distribution System (PDS) was evolved, owing to shortage of foodgrains during World War II. The then government had started distributing foodgrains through the PDS and the intervention had been continued in major cities and certain food deficient regions. However, the policy on PDS has witnessed major changes, with a universal approach at times and a targeted approach in certain phases, after Independence. The Seventh Five Year Plan assigned the PDS a crucial role by bringing the entire population into its ambit, and, over the years, it evolved as an important government intervention towards ensuring availability of foodgrains to the public at affordable prices as well as for tackling poverty. However, a Targeted PDS (TPDS) for foodgrains has been in place since 1997. Under the TPDS, the quantum of provisioning of foodgrains varies across Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL) households with different prices.

The National Food Security Ordinance guarantees provisioning of subsidised foodgrains to almost two-third of the country's population, which would include 50 percent of the urban population and 75 percent of people living in rural areas. It requires the government to provide 5 kg of foodgrains (cereals) per person per month – at prices of Rs. 3 per kg of rice, Rs. 2 per kg of wheat, and Rs. 1 per kg of millets – for a period of three years from the date of commencement of the ordinance.

Further, the ordinance includes provisions, like, pregnant women and lactating mothers being entitled to free of cost meals through the local *Anganwadi* centres during pregnancy and for six months after child birth, and maternity benefits of not less than six thousand rupees. Also, every child within the age group of six months to six years shall receive appropriate meal free of cost, and, those in the age group of six to fourteen years will be provided Mid-day meals in all government schools on all days except on school holidays. Apart from these provisions, measures pertaining to women's empowerment, grievance redressal mechanisms, reforms in the PDS, food security allowances etc. are some of the other positive features in the said ordinance.

With regard to the Food Security legislation, some observers have been raising concerns about the cost implications for the government. The amount provided in the Union Budget every year as Food Subsidy is paid to the Food Corporation of India (FCI), which is based on the difference between the Economic Costs (EC) borne by the FCI for procuring foodgrains and the Central Issue Price (CIP) for foodgrains collected through the PDS. Earlier this year, the Union Budget 2013-14 had projected that the Food Subsidy to be provided by the Union Government this year would be to the tune of Rs. 90,000 crore. However, in order to implement the Food Security legislation, the financial resources required are now estimated to go up to the level of Rs. 1,25,000 crore (which would be about 1.25 percent of the country's GDP) this year; in addition to which, the existing budgetary provisions for the *Mid-*

Day Meal Scheme and the *Integrated Child Development Services Scheme* would also be utilized towards fulfilling some of the provisions of the legislation.

However, several observers and policy analysts have pointed out that the Food Security legislation should have been much more inclusive in terms of its coverage of population. For instance, had this legislation attempted to cover 80 percent of the total households in the country (i.e. with the exclusion of only the top 20 percent of the households) with a provision of 35 kg of foodgrains per household per month (i.e. 30 kg of rice / wheat and 5 kg of millets per household per month at prices of Rs. 3 per kg of rice / Rs. 2 per kg of wheat / Rs. 1 per kg of millets), at the existing levels of Economic Costs for procuring foodgrains, the Food Subsidy bill would have been Rs. 1,65,828 crore a year. Given the persistence of the problems of hunger and malnutrition in the country and the scope available for the Union Government to step up its tax revenue mobilization, there was indeed a strong case for the government to expand the coverage of the Food Security legislation. In fact, the Global Hunger Index Report, 2012 has pointed out that “India has lagged behind in improving its GHI score despite strong economic growth”; for rural India, it has been reported that around 50 percent children are undernourished and more than half of pregnant women suffer from anaemia.

Further, the ordinance is focusing only on distribution of cereals, which would address the problem of hunger but might not be very effective in reducing malnutrition. Provisioning of rice, wheat and millets through the PDS would offer calories to fight hunger, but a healthy diet requires cereals with pulses and higher amounts of vitamins and minerals. Similarly, the gaps in infrastructure (relating to storage of foodgrains and transportation etc.) need to be addressed to make the PDS a robust system. Also, a lot more effort would be required both from the Union Government and the State Governments for proper implementation of schemes like the MDM and ICDS.

Nonetheless, the National Food Security Ordinance does seem to have a lot of potential for addressing the serious challenges of hunger and malnutrition in the country, and it could produce the desired results with proactive measures by the Union and State Governments for strengthening the PDS across the country.

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