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Shaping the Right to Food A Dialogue on the National

Food Security Bill

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FOOD SECURITY REQUIRES ECOLOGICAL & LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

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The most interesting part of the National Food Security Bill 2011 is in an annex that is not operationalized by the Bill. Schedule III, which contains steps necessary to ensure the *conditions* under which food security can become a meaningful, long-term right of people, is relegated to the status of an intention. The central government is only supposed to "strive to progressively realize" these steps.... a euphemism to continue ignoring them?

This is not to say that the operational parts of the Bill, in particular the pro-active provision of affordable and good quality food to the huge sections of India's population that don't have access to it, are in themselves unimportant. In a situation where at least 75% of rural and 50% of urban households appear to have difficulties in obtaining adequate food (the Bill targets this section for subsidized food grain supply), urgent measures to provide them food, are needed. To the extent this can be made an entitlement or a right, as the Bill attempts, well and good.

But even while doing so, equally urgent measures are needed to create the conditions under which such people can provide food for themselves, or have the means to buy it, without having to rely on perpetual government doles. This requires a look at the ecological,

social, and economic crises in which much of India's population finds itself, and to adopt policies, laws, and programmes that tackle these crises. It needs a fundamental review of India's current macro-economic, agricultural, forestry, water and other related policies.

Without the above, the Food Security Bill is merely a recipe for making most of India's population hopelessly dependent on the government, thereby also continuing the enormous power of centralized bureaucracies, not to mention the opportunities for graft and corruption.

Natural Resources and Food Security

Most of India's population continues to *try to directly* provide food for itself, whether through cultivation, animal husbandry, fisheries, or forest produce, and local exchanges related to these. Of course they do not necessarily succeed, for a variety of reasons, and therefore become dependent on governments or outside traders and markets to fulfill what they cannot through their own efforts. But it is the remarkable attempt at self-provisioning, and the factors that often defeat it, that should have been the starting point of a food security policy.

Self-provisioning of food by these hundreds of millions of people requires productive lands, forests, and waters. Around 70% of the Indian population depend on land-based occupations, forests, wetlands and marine habitats and are thus directly dependent on local ecosystems for their basic subsistence requirements with regard to water, food, fuel, housing, fodder and medicine. 275 million people are dependent on non-timber forest produce alone.

Increasingly, though, such self-provisioning is being seriously jeopardized. One need not go here into historical reasons, including the massive take-over of the 'commons' (forests, pastures, wetlands, marine/ coastal areas, other lands) by the state during colonial times and its continuation after Independence. It is a history that is well-known, as are its results, of which the most important for our purposes here is the increasingly difficult access of communities to the natural resources and ecosystems that provided them with food, or the means to obtain it.

Unfortunately, there has been little attempt to break away from this history by reviving community access and control over the commons, except the very recent Forest Rights Act (more on that later). Rather, this centralization of control has led to, or has been otherwise exacerbated by, the rapid destruction or degradation of forests, pastures, wetlands and marine fisheries, resulting from misdirected policies and mismanagement by both bureaucracies and communities. Add to this the more recent handing over of vast lands to private sector corporations, and the picture of dispossession of communities from their sources of food security gets worse.

If statistics are needed to back up what is pretty obvious for any observant citizen of India, here are some. Between 1990-91 and 2005-06 the cultivated area under food grains (cereals and pulses) fell 5% from 127.8 to 121.6 million hectares, with jowar falling 40% from 14.4 to 8.7 million hectares. This decline is substantially (though not only) attributable to displacement by non-food cash crops (including those for export). Or take forests: from 1980-81 to mid-2011, nearly 12 lakh ha. of forest land were diverted for non-forest use. 3.7 lakh ha of these were actually regularization of 'encroachments', and presumably a substantial portion were for extending cultivation, so there may not have been a net loss of food security,

perhaps even a gain (though this is complicated by the biodiversity and water security loss that deforestation entails). But the rest is conversion for industries, mines, dams, roads, defense projects, and the like, which represents a complete loss of access to forest-based foods and livelihoods for forest-dwellers. Or take wetlands, which have been crucial to the food security of fishing communities as also farmers dependent on their water: thousands of these, small and big, have been drained out or so badly polluted that they have lost most of their productivity.

This is not yet the complete story. There is then the severe over-exploitation of natural resources by and industrial economy, and by growing populations, resulting in the loss of the regenerative capacity of nature. Forests, wetlands, pastures, and marine areas can all absorb a certain amount of exploitation and removal of plants and animals, with nature replenishing what is removed. Beyond this point, however, replenishment rates are not adequate, and reproduction of species itself is affected, both contributing to declining productivity.

This is widespread in forest areas, where both communities and scientists report the decline of several useful species (e.g. over 100 species of medicinal plants are threatened, and villagers give dozens of examples of tubers, berries, other fruits, and wild vegetables that were once part of the standard diet of forest-dwelling communities but are now hard to find). Amongst the most visible examples is of thousands of families who used bamboo for their household needs and for livelihoods; with massive areas of bamboo forest having been auctioned or cordoned off for paper mills and other industries, they have been forced to buy bamboo at exorbitant prices from the market, or to switch to other occupations. Not only did bamboo once provide food in the form of shoots, but its products earned them exchange value for food, or income to buy food.

Declining productivity or access is also widespread in the case of fisheries; in marine areas, small-scale fisherpersons report the twin problems of declining stocks, and declining access as more powerful commercial fishing interests take over fishing grounds.

Amongst the worst affected are nomadic pastoralists. Once completely self-reliant for food, such communities are everywhere in severe distress. Their

migration pathways are crisscrossed by obstacles (often insurmountable) like canals and expressways and cities, their access to grazing grounds is denied where they are now part of national parks and sanctuaries, and virtually nothing has been done to ensure their tenurial security over the lands they are dependent on. Even the Forest Rights Act, which is supposed to provide such security, has been so far denied to them (as of the end of 2011, not a single nomadic community had obtained rights to pastures). In many states they have been forcibly settled, or been compelled to do so ('voluntarily', it will be reported) as no other options are available; and are now dependent on government or civil society doles.

Then there are those who have been dealt even more severe blows: direct physical displacement from their traditional homelands. It is estimated that about 60 million people have been uprooted and forced to relocate, by dams, mines, highways, ports, industries, power stations, and other such 'development' projects. Such displacement entails a loss of the foodprovisioning capacity these communities had, from the farmlands or natural ecosystems that they lived amidst. In most cases these conditions are not reproduced in the place they relocate to, many are forced to adapt to new occupations; invariably, communities that were self-provisioning for food are forced to become dependent on outsiders. This is especially the case with forest-dwelling adivasis, or small fishers (the Planning Commission estimates that up to 40% of those displaced may be adivasis, even though they comprise only about 8% of our population).

Many more examples and factors could be enumerated here, but hopefully the point has been sufficiently made: government policies and programmes, demographic changes, and other such factors, have caused loss of food security amongst a very large section of India's population. How many millions of people affected by such ecological degradation have joined the ranks of the food-insecure? No one knows, because it is not a statistic that is on anyone's radar.

Added to all this the uncertainties and impacts of climate change, which is affecting production systems across India (and the world) in ways that communities are finding difficult to adapt to. Thus far, the government has done precious little to help people prepare for what may happen (or is already happening).

The National Action Plan on Climate Change is an arena where effective action on this front could take place, but there are not as yet too many hopeful signs.

Government Policies vs. Food Security

A brief word is necessary here on some of the root causes of the above-described situation. As already mentioned, one of these is undoubtedly the tenurial insecurity caused by the state's take-over of the commons. But another is an even harder nut to crack: our path of 'development'. In the name of this holy cow, macro-economic policies have treated nature as simply a source of raw material or a sink for wastes, and more and more in the last few decades, the demands of industry and cities has been allowed to take priority over the needs of villagers.

Policies of agriculture too have created, at least in the long run, greater insecurity. Green revolution strategies have made farmers dependent on heavy inputs from outside, including artificial fertilizers and pesticides, irrigation from far away, corporate or government agency seeds, and so on. While these have increased productivity, the long-term impacts are often devastating, as is becoming clear with the declining productivity of soil, poisoning of water and the crops themselves, and an economic treadmill effect in which the farmer's incomes are not keeping pace with increasing costs. The horrifying rates of suicide in many parts of India, including in the heart of Green Revolution regions, are witness to the shortsightedness of such policies and strategies. This has been exacerbated by the large-scale conversion of foodgrowing lands into non-food cash crops, as mentioned above; and the sad neglect of dryland farming.

The current period of economic 'globalization' has considerably enhanced this trend. It has (a) forced the opening up of the commons to more accelerated takeover for industrial and urban needs; (b) allowed the entry of the world's most powerful corporate entities who demand access to natural resources including land; (c) replaced a focus on self-reliance by one on an import-export drive economy; and (d) forced the relaxation of environmental regulations, or allowed their easier violation.

For instance, take the case of forests. Diversion of forest land for non-forest uses was supposed to be strictly

regulated by the 1980 Forest Conservation Act, which centralized all clearances for such diversion. However, the rate of diversion has only been increasing in the last couple of decades of globalization, with about 25% of all diversion in the last 30 years having taken place in the 5 years since 2007! In the case of forest land diversion for mining, this figure is even worse, at 30%. Or take fisheries: since 1991, export of marine products has increased five-fold, with serious impacts on both coastal ecosystems (especially in intense shrimp-producing areas) and near-shore marine waters (with evidence of declining fish catch in many parts). States like Gujarat have been amongst the worst, with the government favoring big commercial trawling, and productivity decline beginning in the late 1990s. Across India, small-scale, traditional fishers and coastal farmers are particularly hard-hit by these trends.

Imports of cheaper agricultural goods from other countries have affected local producers of many items, such as pepper, tea, coconuts, and coffee. Simultaneously, a growing export market for fisheries, or other natural resource produce, is depriving small-scale producers who cannot compete with export-oriented commercial producers, not to mention driving up the prices so that the poor cannot any longer buy what was previously affordable.

Towards Food Security: Ecology and Livelihoods at the Core

If the above analysis is valid, the direction that policies and programmes must take to address food security, become clear. Some of these are contained in Schedule III of the Food Security Bill, which is why I started this article by lamenting its relegation to an unoperationalized annex. Of course all such actions cannot be contained in one Bill, but as I will point out below, several could have been, and a more decisive push towards others could have been given either by the Bill itself or by a Policy on Food Security.

Putting the availability of adequate and healthy food on a long-term, secure footing, would require the following measures, amongst others, in the case of the various food-production systems¹. Where the Bill does have something to say about these measures, a comment is made in italics.

- Ensuring secure tenure and decentralized governance over land, water, and natural resources, especially for marginal sections of society, including women. The Forest Rights Act 2006 makes a beginning in this, by recognizing community tenure over forests and forest land on which there is traditional dependence, but unfortunately bureaucratic inefficiency and resistance has so far rendered these provisions a non-starter in most parts of India. A similar legislation aimed at coastal fishing communities, proposed by the former Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh, was stillborn due to objections by other ministers. The Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 mandated decentralized governance over natural resources for adivasi communities, but has almost nowhere been implemented by a political system that fears community empowerment. Communities dependent on ecosystems therefore remain without any focused legislation or meaningful implementation providing tenurial security and decentralized governance. The Bill aims to involve "local authorities", which includes panchayat institutions, but only through functions that state governments assign to them. The Bill in no way empowers such institutions to govern aspects of food production, procurement, distribution, etc (see also no. 6 below). And it does not even mention gram sabhas or village assemblies that include all members of the village, not only elected representatives².
- 2. Ensuring that food-producing lands/waters are not diverted for other purposes. Such areas, and the communities that depend on them, remain vulnerable to dispossession and displacement by 'development' projects. *Schedule III of the Bill lists*

¹ I have borrowed and adapted here from the following sources, which focused on agriculture:

D. Sharma, 2009, 'Reviving agiculture', Seminar 595, March; A. Kothari, 1999, 'Agro-biodiversity: The future of India's agriculture', in Pillai, G.M., Challenges of Agriculture in the 21st Century, Maharashtra Council of Agricultural Education and Research, Pune; and Memorandum of Agri-Vision Coalition of several dozen civil society organizations, to the Prime Minister of India, on 'Holistic Ecological Agriculture Agenda for India's Eleventh Plan, and the National Development Council Meeting on Agriculture', 28 May 2007. http://www.petitiononline.com/agvision/petition.html

² The draft Bill submitted by the National Advisory Council (NAC) did emphasize the functions and roles of the gram sabha.

"prohibiting unwarranted diversion of land and water from food production"; but the predominant trend of such diversion takes it cue from the macro-economics of globalised growth, and there is nothing to suggest that the government will reverse this any time in the near future. With growth being a holy mantra, anyway, all diversion can continue to be justified as "warranted"! And Schedule III says nothing about the diversion of forest lands or pastures, which may not be considered as strictly 'food producing' areas though they are crucial to community food security.

- 3. Localized production or availability of the basic inputs, including seeds/livestock/fingerlings, manure, water, fodder, technologies, knowledge, and affordable credit (from institutional sources). This would require a focus on production systems that are in tune with local agro-ecological conditions, especially soil types, climate, and water availability. Schedule III of the Bill talks of revitalizing agriculture in particular focusing on small and marginal farmers, including through provision of some of the above inputs; unfortunately dominant agricultural policy and programmes are running contrary to this, and mere intentions, which is what Schedule III is currently, will not change this.
- 4. Integration of crop, livestock, fodder, and/or fish production, and of forest conservation and use, to optimize production from a given landscape; this necessitates greater coordination amongst communities and amongst various government departments, and in many places ecological restoration through watershed management, regeneration of forests, and other approaches. Not only would this enhance food security, but also generate substantial livelihoods, e.g. in the regeneration of tens of millions of hectares of degraded lands. The Kerala Government's 2008 organic farming policy includes integrated production systems. An explicit and widespread focus of NREGA could be on enhancing food security through such measures (some of which is indeed happening in parts of India).
- 5. Financial, material, or technological assistance to farmers to switch from chemical-dependent to organic farming, including by converting current fertilizer subsidies into credit for organic farming. A number of state governments are beginning to put into place policies and programmes promoting organic/sustainable farming, with a strong thrust

- in Kerala and notable reported success in Andhra Pradesh (see Box); but there is as yet no national level policy or focus to this. The Approach Paper to the 12th Plan does talk of aspects like ecological fertilization, but unless subsidization of artificial chemical inputs is transformed, this will remain a marginal focus.
- 6. Linking the Public Distribution System, and other food security schemes such as mid-day meals, and food for work, to locally produced food, rather than obtaining grains from hundreds or thousands of kilometers away; this may necessitate building relations amongst clusters of villages since a single village may not have adequate production to supply. Initiatives such as the sustainable dryland farming practiced by women farmers of Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh, dramatically demonstrate the viability of such an approach (see Box). This is one aspect on which the Bill has many things to say. The Central and State Governments are to "progressively realize" reforms in the Targeted PDS through measures such as diversification of commodities procured, licensing of fair price shops to local institutions, and encouragement to local models of distribution and grain banks (Section 18). And Schedule III contains decentralized procurement, including of "coarse grains"³, and decentralized storage. Unfortunately, these measures are likely to remain noble intentions, because there is no timeframe or compulsory steps mandated in the Bill; the operational steps on the PDS (Sections 30 to 32) focus on centralized procurement and storage, and do not include any of the above in the functions assigned to state governments. This is an aspect that could have easily been an operational part of this Bill.
- 7. Building on local agricultural, forestry, pasture and aquatic produce to generate additional livelihoods through village-based manufacturing and industry, prioritizing local markets and collective enterprise over external companies and markets. This requires review and dovetailing of a number of rural development and industry, tribal welfare, and other departments and programmes,

³ Interestingly the draft Food Security Bill presented to government by the National Advisory Council (NAC) used the terms 'millets and other nutritious grains', which the official Bill has replaced by the term 'coarse grains', which many in the food security movement consider to be insulting.

- with those dealing with natural resources, and with gram sabhas at the centre.
- 8. Feeding the energy needs of communities, in particular their food-producing systems (including cultivation/collection/catch, storage, processing, etc), through decentralized, renewable energy sources. Unfortunately India's energy policies and strategies are very far from this; though there is increasing stress on renewables like solar (with an ambitious solar mission as part of the National Action Plan on Climate Change), these are still predominantly centralized, and will not necessarily reach the most need families in each village. Civil society groups in several states like Bihar, Karnataka and Gujarat have however shown that decentralized energy can achieve wonders for rural livelihood security.
- 9. Ensuring equitable access to water, irrespective of current access to land and other property. People's movements such as Pani Panchayat in Maharashtra have shown how this can be achieved. There has also been a long-standing demand for more community control over water sources, coupled with regulations to check over-use and misuse. Schedule III lists "access to safe and adequate drinking water"; but dominant policies and programmes are actually running counter to providing community secure tenure over water bodies, with some state governments even moving to lease them out to private corporations.
- 10. Encouraging decentralized R&D in the form of joint, on-field programmes by farmers/pastoralists/

- fishers/forest-dwellers, and modern scientists, with priorities defined by the former. India is yet to take any substantial steps on this, though there are scattered examples such as the Krishi Vigyan Kendra run by Deccan Development Society.
- 11. Facilitating direct producer-consumer links, amongst villages and between villages and cities, with programmes that create awareness of each other's needs, and build networks of trust that would take up the task of local 'certification' of organic, healthy produce (through, for instance, the Participatory Guarantee Scheme, see http://www.pgsorganic.in/).
- 12. Encouraging urban food production, including rooftop and backyard farming or fisheries, and community plots (especially in low-income colonies), to meet basic household needs. India is yet to take any substantial steps on this, though it is quite popular in many countries.

As mentioned above, it is not realistic to expect one legislation to deal with all the above. Some aspects, such as that of decentralized PDS, could certainly have been operationalized through the Food Security Bill, even if in a time-bound, phased-out manner. Other measures would have needed a clear Food Security Policy which made it mandatory for government to ensure them through other existing legislation (as they are or with amendments, such as with NREGA), or new legislation where needed (e.g. for equitable access to water), and of course, programmes and schemes related to these.

Food security through agricultural sustainability

There are very many grassroots initiatives at organic, biologically diverse, holistic farming that dot various regions of India, which a Food Security Policy and Bill could learn from and encourage the spread of.

In the low-rainfall region of Zaheerabad, Andhra Pradesh, Dalit women have brought about an agricultural revolution in 75 villages. Mobilized under the banner of the Deccan Development Society, women's *sanghas* (assemblies) have used a mix of strategies to achieve food security, economic independence, and social transformation. Organic farming and pastoralism, with a diversity of seeds and livestock, is one fulcrum of their work. Others include economical water-use, community grain reserves, celebration of biodiversity as part of cultural events and festivals, and outreach through locally generated media. One of the most innovative moves is the creation of an Alternative Public Distribution System (PDS), using organic, diverse local food grains from local farmers, offering consumers a healthy choice. An organic food restaurant, Café Ethnic, caters to urban consumers in Zaheerabad. All this has helped transform a situation of chronic food shortage, unemployment, and dependence on government, particularly amongst Dalit women and other under privileged sections, into one of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, dignity, and control over their own lives. But DDS has not restricted itself to local transformation, it has connected the women farmers to regional, national and international networks of solidarity and resistance, challenging several elements of globalization (www.ddsindia.com; Kumbamu 2009).

In Karnataka, the NGO Green Foundation works with dryland farmers in over 60 villages to sustain or revive organic practices that maintain soil fertility while producing healthy crops (http://www.greenconserve.com/). It too reports a range of positive impacts in situations where farmers, once sold to the use of chemicals, switch to organic cultivation.

About 4000 villages are reported to be taking part in the Jaiv Panchayat initiative of Navdanya, pledging to conserve their traditional seed diversity, promote organic farming and local water management, and participate in larger movements against bio-piracy (http://www.navdanya.org/campaigns/jaiv-panchayat).

In Andhra Pradesh, the state government, having developed a draft Policy on Organic Farming, is supporting possibly the country's biggest sustainable agriculture programme. Under the sponsorship of its Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (set up by the state Rural Development department), the Sustainable Agriculture Network of NGOs is spreading community-based sustainable agriculture (CMSA). Between 2004 and 2009, over 318,000 farmers have adopted it, covering 1.36 million acres of farmland (5.1 per cent of the net cropped area in the state). The reduction in pesticide and fertilizer use has so far led to a cost saving of over US\$38 million. Also in Andhra Pradesh, the Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN) works towards "a new paradigm for the development of rain-fed areas that is founded on the principles of diversity of livelihoods, secure farming systems, low-external inputs and inclusive growth." Programmes include promoting non-pesticide farming, improving pastoral livelihoods, tank-based fisheries, reviving the commons, redefining irrigation, enhancing soil fertility, diversifying crop systems, and providing seed support systems, processing and marketing. Watershed Development is the backbone of the process of revival of rain-fed areas. (http://www.wassan. org/; http://www.csa-india.org/downloads/AP_ORGANIC_FARMING.pdf; http://www.serp.ap.gov.in/CMSA; Vijay Kumar et al 2009) Starting from one tribal village in Dewas district, after almost two decades of work, during which villagers have become equal decisionmakers in the initiative, Samaj Pragati Sahyog has covered over 45,000 acres in 34 villages under watershed management, providing drinking water and irrigation, increasing rabi crop production by 50-60%. These and a number of other initiatives now cover about 220 villages and towns; these include sustainable agriculture (using no chemical fertilizers, moving towards phasing out pesticides), livestock improvement, panchayat and women's empowerment, micro-finance, renewable energy, low-cost shelter, sanitation, and others. Overall, outgoing migration has reduced by 80%, and many families have even come back to their villages. The experience has been used to influence state and national policies, including advocacy for the right to food and a better Public Distribution System, inputs to the framing of guidelines for watershed management (www.dorabijtatatrust.org/NGO profiles/pdf/18%20SPS.pdf; www. samprag.org; Chhotray undated).

Source: A. Shrivastava and A. Kothari, in press, Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India, Viking/Penguin India, Delhi.

Conclusion

If the Food Security Bill goes through as it is (or substantially unchanged), it will most certainly meet a the long-standing demand for citizens' entitlement to food. But it will also be a missed opportunity to put on a secure, long-term footing, the *conditions* under which food security can be guaranteed. This needs measures to enhance self-provisioning by communities dependent on land, water, and natural resources for their day to day existence, through direct production or through exchanges that are in their control. It needs measures that eliminate ongoing alienation and dispossession of communities from their means of self-provisioning. And it needs measures that ensure fair relations between food producers and consumers, where the two are not the same.

It is for the above reasons that many activists have been calling for food sovereignty, not only food security. The measures given above are necessary if this objective is to be achieved.
