

# No food security without ecological and livelihood security

Providing food for the poor is important, says **Ashish Kothari**, but the Food Security Bill must also create the conditions under which people can provide food for themselves, or have the means to buy it



The most interesting part of the National Food Security Bill 2011 is in an annex that is not operationalised 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 realise” these steps.... A euphemism to continue ignoring them?

Of course the operational parts of the Bill, in particular the proactive provision of affordable and good-quality food to the huge sections of India’s population that don’t have access to it, are important. 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 subsidised foodgrain supply), urgent measures are certainly needed to provide them food.

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. Without this, 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 centralised bureaucracies, not to mention 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. Such self-provisioning of food requires productive lands, forests and waters. Around 70% of the Indian population depends 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 threatened. Historically, there has been the massive takeover of the ‘commons’ (forests, pastures, wetlands, marine/coastal areas, other lands) by the state during colonial times, and its continuation after Independence. More recently, misdirected policies and programmes have exacerbated the alienation of communities from the commons they depend on.

Between 1990-91 and 2005-06 the cultivated area under foodgrains (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). From 1980-81 to mid-2011, nearly 12 lakh hectares of forest land were diverted for non-forest use. More than two-thirds of this has been conversion for industries, mines, dams, roads, defence projects, and the like, which represents a complete loss of access to forest-based foods and livelihoods for forest-dwellers. In the case of wetlands, crucial to the food security of fishing communities as also farmers dependent on their water, thousands have been drained out or badly polluted.

Amongst the worst-affected are nomadic pastoralists, their migration pathways criss-crossed by obstacles like canals and expressways and cities, their access to grazing grounds denied where they are now part of national parks and sanctuaries, and their tenurial security never having been established. Even the Forest Rights Act, which is supposed to provide such security, has so far been denied to them.

How many millions of people affected by such ecological degradation or loss of access to the commons, 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 is the uncertainty and impact 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).

### **Government policies vs food security**

A brief word is necessary here on some of the root causes of the above-described situation. Tenurial insecurity of communities is one; another is our model of 'development' which treats nature as raw material and siphons it off for the enrichment of a few. Policies of agriculture have made farmers dependent on heavy inputs from outside, which, while increasing productivity in the short run, has rendered soils unproductive, poisoned water and crops, and forced farmers onto an economic treadmill in which 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 short-sightedness of such policies and strategies.

The current period of economic 'globalisation' 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.

Import of cheaper agricultural goods from other countries has 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**

Given this context, it is clear that ensuring food security requires addressing the above issues. Some such steps are contained in Schedule III of the Food Security Bill, which is why I started this article by lamenting its relegation to an unoperationalised annex. Putting the availability of adequate and healthy food on a long-term, secure footing, would require the following measures.

1. **Ensuring secure tenure and decentralised governance over land, water, and natural resources**, especially for marginal sections of society, including women. The Forest Rights Act 2006 makes a beginning towards this, by recognising 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 former Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh, was stillborn due to objections by other ministers. The Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 mandated decentralised governance over natural resources for adivasi communities, but has almost nowhere been implemented by a political system that fears community empowerment. The Bill aims to involve "local authorities", which include 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) (1).

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 "prohibiting unwarranted diversion of land and water from food production"; but the predominant trend of such diversion takes its 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. 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. **Localised production or availability of 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 revitalising 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 will not change this.
4. **Integration of crop, livestock, fodder, and/or fish production, and of forest conservation and use**, to optimise 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. 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.
5. **Financial, material, or technological assistance to farmers to switch from chemical-dependent to organic farming**, including by converting current fertiliser 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 (eg see <http://www.wassan.org/>; [http://www.csa-india.org/downloads/AP\\_ORGANIC\\_FARMING.pdf](http://www.csa-india.org/downloads/AP_ORGANIC_FARMING.pdf); <http://www.serp.ap.gov.in/CMSA>). 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 fertilisation, but unless subsidisation 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 grain 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 ([www.ddsindia.com](http://www.ddsindia.com)). The Bill does mandate the central and state governments to "progressively realise" 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 grainbanks (Section 18). And Schedule III contains decentralised procurement, including of "coarse grains" (2), and decentralised 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 centralised procurement and storage, and do not include any of the above in the functions assigned to state governments.
7. **Building on local agricultural, forestry, pasture and aquatic produce to generate additional livelihoods through village-based manufacturing and industry**, prioritising 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, 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 decentralised, renewable energy sources. Civil society groups in several states like Bihar, Karnataka and Gujarat have shown that such sources 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 communities secure tenure over waterbodies, with some state governments even moving to lease them out to private corporations.

10. **Encouraging decentralised 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.

While it is not realistic to expect one legislation to deal with all the above, some, such as that of decentralised PDS, could certainly have been operationalised through the Food Security Bill. 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 (eg for equitable access to water), and of course, programmes and schemes related to these.

### Conclusion

If the Food Security Bill goes through as it is (or substantially unchanged), it will hopefully meet 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.

### Endnotes

- (1) The draft bill submitted by the National Advisory Council (NAC) did emphasise the functions and roles of the gram sabha.
- (2) 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. See also [www.milletindia.org](http://www.milletindia.org).

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*This is a modified version of a longer piece written for Wada na Todo Abhiyan.*

### Infochange News & Features, May 2012