

“We Need Right to Food Act and more”: Amartya Sen

Addressing a packed audience at the Press Club of India today, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen welcomed the proposed Right to Food Act and argued for wide-ranging legal entitlements.

Professor Sen began by recalling the magnitude of hunger and malnutrition in India, calling this a “shocking situation”. He pointed out, for instance, that malnutrition levels are much higher in India than in most African countries. In this context, he stressed that the idea of the Right to Food Act was “extremely important”.

Professor Sen said that there were many reasons for this situation, including poverty, unemployment, lack of health care, and gender inequality, among others. Accordingly, he argued, there is a need for a range of interventions, to address different aspects of the problem. Programmes such as NREGA, ICDS and the Public Distribution System (PDS) have much to contribute, but no single programme will suffice – “we need them all,” he said.

Further, Professor Sen highlighted the complementarity between different interventions, and the close links between malnutrition, poor health, illiteracy, and other deprivations. He gave the example of the mid-day meal scheme, an “almost magical way of intervening” on different fronts at the same time.

Coming back to the Right to Food Act, Professor Sen said that the first step was to defend what already exists, as programmes of this kind are “attacked all the time”. The next step is to expand the scope of these programmes and develop a comprehensive system of food entitlements and nutrition interventions.

Professor Sen also spoke at length about maternal undernourishment, as a neglected aspect of food deprivation in India. Recent research has brought out the close links between women’s undernutrition, maternal undernutrition, low birthweight and child undernutrition. India is a “copybook case” of this vicious sequence of deprivations, he said.

Among other neglected aspects of the nutrition situation, Professor Sen highlighted the lack of health care. He strongly criticized India’s “ghastly premature privatization” of health care.

Asked about his views on “targeting versus universalization” of the PDS, Professor Sen said that there were strong arguments for universalization. For instance, a universal system is less divisive, and helps to create a strong public demand for quality services. A targeted system, on the other hand, always involves exclusion errors. These arguments for universalization are “not dismissible”, he said, but may need to be weighed against the possible costs.

There were also other presentations on this occasion. Kavita Srivastava (convenor of the steering group of the Right to Food Campaign) presented the campaign’s “essential demands” for the Right to Food Act. Harsh Mander, Supreme Court Commissioner, highlighted the role of the Act in eliminating hunger and vulnerability. Jean Drèze, Allahabad University, presented a possible framework for the Act, on behalf of a larger working group.

Professor Sen welcomed these ideas and expressed his strong support for this initiative. “At least we have a proposal,” he said. He said that the proposal was particularly timely, as rapid economic growth has made it possible to undertake ambitious social programmes.

(Prepared by Reetika Khara based on minutes of the event. For further details, please contact Chandni Mehta, 9899323965.)