

Right to Food Campaign

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Statement of the Right to Food Campaign On Estimating and Identifying Poverty in India

The debate on whether the Public Distribution System (PDS) should be universalised or targeted has once again been brought to the forefront of national debate in the context of the announcement by the present government that it will introduce a National Food Security Bill in the Parliament, the extreme drought seen last year and the recent reports on poverty line and identification of below poverty line families (of the Tendulkar Committee¹ and Saxena Committee²).

The Right to Food Campaign views the present discussion on the PDS and BPL based on the belief that basic services such as food, education, health, work and social security must be universally available for all. In relation to the PDS, the Right to Food campaign demands that ALL residents of the country must be covered and that the PDS should play the role of ensuring food security for all. While arguing for universal services, we also understand that these schemes cannot be uniform in nature and further affirmative action is required for those who are socially excluded.

The current system of setting ‘caps’ on the number of ‘below poverty line’ (BPL) families eligible for subsidised food grains at “BPL” and “AAY” prices based on the estimates of poverty by the Planning Commission, using consumption expenditure data of the NSS, is widely recognised as being deeply flawed. It has led to the exclusion of many deserving people. Most state governments have had to expand the PDS to cover a higher number of families, as the official poverty ratios turned out to be gross underestimates of the actual number of families in need of subsidised food grains. It has been argued that the current official poverty line is no more than a ‘destitution’ line. The Tendulkar Committee has revised the poverty line upward, thereby increasing the rural poverty ratio from 28.3% to 41.8%, by using the urban poverty line as the base and correcting for discrepancies in the price indices. However even with such upward revisions, the average calorie consumption at

¹ The ‘Expert Group to Review the Methodology for Estimation of Poverty’ chaired by Prof. S.D. Tendulkar submitted its report (‘Tendulkar committee report’) to the Planning Commission in December 2009. This report is available on the Planning Commission website, <http://planningcommission.nic.in>

² The ‘Expert Group on the Methodology for the BPL Census 2009’ chaired by Dr. N. C. Saxena submitted its report (‘Saxena committee report’) to the Ministry of Rural Development in September 2009. This report is available on the website of the Ministry of Rural Development, <http://rural.nic.in>

the revised poverty line is 1775 calories per person per day, which is way below the ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) norms for the average person in India (i.e. 2400 Kcal in rural areas and 2100 calories in urban areas). This line is therefore bound to be faulty if it is used to set 'caps' for any benefits through any public schemes related to nutrition, as it will lead to the exclusion of many who are hungry. The process of identifying the poor for any targeted scheme must be disassociated from any such externally calculated poverty line.

On the other hand, the 13-point method used in the BPL Census 2002 for identifying the poor has also received criticism from most quarters. It was seen that this was a complicated and non-transparent system of identifying the poor, resulting in both inclusion and exclusion errors, with a large number of deserving poor being left out of the BPL net. Each of the criteria used in this system of identification such as whether there is a toilet in the house and whether there are any school going children have also been criticised as being against what other government programmes themselves aim to do. There has therefore been a demand that any criteria to identify the poor should be simple, transparent and easily verifiable. Further as the identification of poor was restricted by the numbers set by the Planning Commission, the cut-off line using this 13 point criteria was set in an arbitrary manner in each state and district so that the number of people below the cut-off were the same as the number of poor as estimated by official statistics. Therefore different persons with the same points by this criteria but living in two different states could be identified as poor in one and not being poor in the other.

The Saxena Committee presents an improvement over this previous method of identification of the poor by arguing for the automatic inclusion of the socially excluded groups (without any 'caps') and automatic exclusion of those who are relatively well-off. For all those in between a scoring method is recommended with scores based on occupation, caste and religion. The Saxena Committee report therefore provides more verifiable and simple criteria for the identification of the poor. However, this method is still based on the 'caps' being set by some other methodology and therefore has the same problems related to this as the earlier method. On the other hand, the Saxena Committee also states that *"Food for all, health for all, education for all, work for all – these should be taken as the bottom line. The BPL identification exercise should under no circumstances be used to dilute these entitlements. In no way should it be used to exclude people from their basic rights and needs"*.

While stating that basic public services must have universal coverage, the Right to Food campaign demands that any method of identification of the poor for schemes other than basic services must be arrived at on the basis of wide consultations with all sections and after rigorous pilot testing is done. Any such method should also include within its design provisions for local participation, transparency and accountability.

As far as the PDS is concerned, the campaign demands for a universal Public Distribution System providing at least 14 kgs of grain per adult per month as well as 1.5 kgs of pulses and 800 gms of oil. Related issues such as promotion of sustainable and equitable food

production, adequacy of domestic food grain procurement, agrarian and land use policies should be suitably reviewed in light of ensuring a universal PDS³.

We

are,

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Read all the developments towards Right to Food Act, 2009 here
:http://www.righttofoodindia.org/right_to_food_act.html
