

RIGHT TO FOOD – FROM WORDS TO ACTION

A nation-wide movement for the right to food is rapidly building up. You can be part of this movement, too. This leaflet introduces you to the Right to Food Campaign and explains how you can join it.

As drought sweeps across the country once again, millions of people are struggling with hunger and undernutrition. Even in ordinary years, undernutrition levels in India are among the highest in the world. About half of all Indian children are undernourished, and half of all adult women suffer from anaemia. In a drought year, hunger intensifies and threatens the very survival of poor families. Starvation deaths have already been reported in many areas, and the situation is likely to get worse during the next few months.

The persistence of widespread hunger in India is all the more absurd as public godowns are overflowing with grain. Today, more than 50 million tonnes of grain are lying idle with the Food Corporation of India. This represents more than one tonne of grain for each household below the poverty line. If all these sacks of grain were piled on top of one another, they would reach beyond the moon.

In this situation, it is imperative to remember and affirm that all citizens have a constitutional right to food. This means that arrangements have to be made to ensure that no-one goes hungry, or suffers from inadequate nutrition due to lack of food, clean water, health care or related necessities. The primary responsibility for protecting this right to food rests with the state. Our role as citizens is mainly to hold the state accountable to its duty.

One important means of asserting the right to food is legal action. In April 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (Rajasthan) submitted a writ petition in the Supreme Court, demanding that the country's massive food stocks should be used without delay to prevent hunger and starvation. Supreme Court hearings have been held at regular intervals, and some significant "interim orders" have been passed. For instance, an interim order dated 28 November 2001 directs all state governments to start cooked mid-day meals in primary schools within six months.

The Supreme Court orders can be obtained at very low cost anywhere in the country through the internet. They are available on the website of the right to food campaign: www.righttofood.com or <http://geocities.com/righttofood>. You can also obtain a printed copy (in English or Hindi) by writing to: Right to Food Support Group, c/o Centre for Equity Studies, C – 88, South Extension - II, New Delhi 110 049.

The Supreme Court hearings have helped to spread public awareness of the right to food. They have also forced the state governments to give much greater attention to food security programmes. However, the legal process is unlikely to go very far on its own. Public pressure is also needed to ensure that the Court's orders are implemented. Further, this public interest litigation does not cover all aspects of the right to food. Legal action needs to be combined with public action on the ground.

Many tools of public action can be used to assert the right to food. Field surveys are needed to highlight people's living conditions and the state of food-related programmes. Various communication techniques (posters, wall writing, street plays, media stories, etc.) can be used to make people aware of their entitlements and how to defend them. "Public hearings" can help to eradicate corruption in food-related programmes, or to expose violations of Supreme Court orders. Rallies, dharnas and other means of public pressure can be used to

hold the state accountable to its responsibilities. Public action is also needed to resist various threats to the right to food, such as involuntary displacement and environmental plunder. A wide range of institutions and organisations can participate in this process: political organisations, NGOs, women's groups, trade unions, the media, among others.

These efforts have already achieved important results. For instance, many states have introduced mid-day meals in primary schools in response to public pressure, reinforced by Supreme Court orders. Corruption in the public distribution system has been widely exposed. In states with an active right to food campaign, such as Rajasthan, there have been major improvements in food-related programmes (e.g. the public distribution system) during the last two years. Similarly, a major expansion of Antyodaya Anna Yojana (a programme of food-based social security for destitute households) is likely to happen in the near future as a result of sustained lobbying with the central government. Much more can be done at all levels, from remote villages to the national capital.

In many respects, the time is ripe to consolidate these efforts and put the right to food at the centre of the country's political agenda. Recent reports of starvation deaths have created a climate of widespread concern about hunger and starvation. Drought-affected people have a strong stake in the right to food. Public godowns are overflowing with grain. The Supreme Court is holding the government on its toes. And much groundwork has already been done towards building a national movement for the right to food.

You can participate in this movement by joining or initiating right to food activities in your own area. Even small groups can make a real difference. The need for action is all the more urgent as drought conditions threatens millions of people's livelihoods.

Asserting the right to food is important not only to eradicate hunger but also as a form of political action. The right to food is closely linked to other economic and social rights such as the right to work, the right to information, and the right to education. These rights reinforce each other and give disadvantaged people a voice in the democratic process. Asserting these rights could lead to radical change in the country's political priorities.

INTERESTED IN FURTHER INFORMATION? THERE ARE MANY OPTIONS: (1) Read the "Right to Food Campaign" booklet. (2) Visit the campaign website (www.righttofood.com). (3) Write to Right to Food Support Group, c/o Centre for Equity Studies, C - 88, South Extension - II, New Delhi 110 049. (4) If you wish to receive regular e-mail updates about the Right to Food Campaign, please send a line to right2food@yahoo.co.in

OUR "FOUNDATION STATEMENT"

The "Right to Food Campaign" is an informal network of organisations and individuals committed to the realisation of the right to food in India. We consider that everyone has a fundamental right to be free from hunger and undernutrition. Realising this right requires not only equitable and sustainable food systems, but also entitlements relating to livelihood security such as the right to work, land reform and social security. We consider that the primary responsibility for guaranteeing these entitlements rests with the state. Lack of financial resources cannot be accepted as an excuse for abdicating this responsibility. In the present context, where people's basic needs are not a political priority, state intervention itself depends on effective popular organisation. We are committed to fostering this process through all democratic means.