

# RIGHT TO FOOD CAMPAIGN

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The committee under the chairpersonship of Dr. Rangarajan set up by the Prime Minister to examine the proposals of the NAC for the National Food Security Bill has submitted its report. Although the entire report has not yet been made public, from recent newspaper reports its main recommendations are quite clear. While the NAC's proposals themselves were minimalistic; the Rangarajan committee proposes a complete dilution in entitlements guaranteed through the Bill. The NAC had recommended entitlements for two groups ('Priority' and 'General') with the richest 25% of the population (10% in rural areas and 50% in urban areas) being excluded). This was disappointing as the current experience with the targeted PDS shows that about half the individuals below the poverty line are left out as even being identified as poor. Along with large exclusion errors in targeting, the high levels of malnutrition in the country and large proportion of the population living in the margins of the poverty; there can be no alternative to universalising the PDS. Even the NAC in its initial press release had stated that universalisation is desirable, although it later proposed a system with differential entitlements presumably because it felt that there were fiscal and foodgrain constraints which could not be overcome.

The Rangarajan committee has gone a further step backward and recommended that the legal guarantee be restricted ONLY to the 'priority' groups; with the rest getting foodgrains depending on availability. This is almost the same as the Planning Commission proposal that was formulated just after the NAC was formed (further, while Planning Commission suggested APL prices at 75% of MSP, the Rangarajan committee seems to say that APL prices should be same as the MSPs). In fact, it is also not very different from the proposal contained in the initial Bill by the Food Ministry that was presented to the Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM). The EGoM bill also was only about the PDS, with entitlements being restricted to only the BPL population. The only difference is that while the EGoM recommended 25kgs of foodgrains per household per month (which is even less than what Supreme Court orders provide), the Rangarajan committee seems to agree with provision of 35kgs for 'priority' households. Following widespread criticism to its draft Bill, the decision of the EGoM was deferred and the drafting of the framework of the Bill taken up by the newly formed NAC. It is shocking that after six months, we are back to where we began.

The Rangarajan Committee's main argument against the NAC proposals seems to be that much higher than current levels of procurement would be required and raising of procurement levels would in turn "lead to a lower availability of foodgrain for the open market, pushing up prices". This argument however is misleading. If all the grain that is procured is distributed then there is no question of prices rising. In fact, when the government becomes a hoarder, as it is now, holding large stocks of foodgrain without distributing them, that's when it contributes to food

inflation. But if the enhanced procurement is indeed used for expanded distribution, there is no need to worry about the effect on prices. Currently, about 30% of the production is procured and this can definitely be increased. Further there is no reason to assume that production will not increase thereby making more foodgrains available for procurement. Moreover, expanding the PDS net to include millets would also to some extent address the issue of availability of foodgrains for procurement.

It only seems that the government is trying its best to weaken the entire PDS system so that alternatives such as providing direct cash transfers can be put in place. The Committee's recommendations for the use of Smart Cards for the transfer of food subsidy directly to the beneficiaries which would enable them to purchase subsidized food from "any store" indicates that the motive is to dismantle the PDS system. While it is true that major steps need to be taken to reform the PDS and the current level of leakages is unacceptable, there is no reason to believe that it is impossible to make the PDS work. Examples of reforms in states such as Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu have shown that the PDS can be made to work with minimal leakages. Some of the reforms undertaken for this have been expanding coverage, introducing transparency mechanisms, end-to-end computerisation, de-privatisation of FPS dealers, putting in place a grievance redressal system and so on.

It is also disappointing that the entire focus of the Food Security Bill still seems to be only on the PDS. In spite of the NAC recommendations including maternal and child entitlements, and interventions for the destitute, the committee does not seem to have taken any of these into consideration.

The campaign would like to reiterate its demand for a comprehensive food security act with a universal PDS (with affirmative action), addressing issues of production, procurement and distribution and with special entitlements for vulnerable groups such as children, women, urban homeless and the destitute. The food security bill must be expanded to ensure 'nutrition' security by including pulses and oils in the PDS, providing universal mid day meals and anganwadi services, maternity entitlements and social security pensions.

We are,

The Steering group of the Right to Food Campaign,

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