

To,
Dr. Manmohan Singh
Prime Minister
Government of India

26 November 2009

Right to Food

Dear Dr. Manmohan Singh,

We seek your support for the Right to Food Campaign's demands related to the legislating the food entitlements act, as well as immediate intervention in the context of the severe drought that has hit the country.

A rally and public meeting with more than 5000 participants representing 18 states in the country was held today in Delhi. The participants included grassroots workers, activists, representatives of gram panchayats, farmers, members of agriculture workers' unions, trade unions and academicians.

The meeting concluded that it was imperative that the UPA government lives up to its promise of guaranteeing food security for all. The Right to Food campaign demands an Act that deals with at least some of the causes of hunger and provides each and every resident of this country with food entitlements. Through this Act, the government must put in place policy interventions to ensure that no man, woman or child sleeps hungry or is malnourished. The policies must also ensure that the invasion of corporate interests in agricultural production and in food and nutrition policy is stopped immediately. Further, the government must follow a consultative process in the formulation of this Act.

The meeting also demanded that immediate action be taken to alleviate hunger and suffering in the, 278, drought and cyclone affected districts. In this context, we would also like to draw your attention to the present apathy of the Central Government to the suffering of the people in the face of spiraling prices, drought and other natural calamities. State demands for relief funds have met with meager allotments (for example, the Rajasthan Government has been given only 8% of the funds they had demanded from the Central Government). Wages under the NREGA have remained frozen, in spite of repeated requests for upward revision by State Governments. As a result in some states (e.g. West Bengal) workers continue to receive less than the statutory minimum wage.

The demands that were unanimously articulated in the meeting are as follows:

1. Enact a Food Entitlements Act: Drought should not be used as an excuse to put on hold the process of enactment of a comprehensive Food Entitlements Act that ensures long term

food security for all. This process must include a transparent and thorough national consultative process on the Act.³³

2. Follow a “Food First” policy: Incentivize domestic food production and consumption and revitalise agriculture

- a) There should be an immediate ban on export of food until malnutrition is ended in the country.
- b) Domestic needs should be met by domestic production rather than through imports. Protect farmers from “dumping” of unfairly subsidized imports. Food should be imported only temporarily and through public institutions in times of scarcity.
- c) The first call on all natural resources, including land and water, must be for food. No forcible diversion of land, water and forest resources away from food production.
- d) Stop corporatisation of agriculture and control of food by agribusiness corporations.
- e) There must be an immediate moratorium on genetically modified (GM) seeds, GM food imports, and use of GM food in government food schemes.
- f) The Government must incentivise farming of nutritious millets rather than just wheat and rice., as well as other vital dryland crops like pulses and oilseeds.
- g) The Government must fix remunerative minimum support prices for all food crops so that farmers find it viable to produce food. These prices must be strictly enforced as the minimum prices in all mandis.
- h) While calculating such support prices, levels of wages of farmers and agricultural workers used must ensure a decent, living wage for them.
- i) All speculation and futures trading in food items should be banned.
- j) Government must eliminate the entry of corporate interests (including contract farming) and private contractors in food production, the food market, regulatory bodies and nutrition-related schemes.
- k) Governments must not enter into any partnerships with the private sector where there is a conflict of interests.
- l) Procurement, storage and distribution of food items must be decentralized.
- m) Government must ensure access to safe drinking water and sanitation for all.

3. Universalize the Public Distribution System

- a) Every resident of this country must be covered by the Public Distribution System (PDS).
- b) Each adult must be entitled to 14 kgs of cereals per month, along with 1.5 kg of pulses and 800 grams of cooking oil.
- c) Cereals must include nutritious millets and be priced at Rs.2 per kg, pulses at Rs.20 and cooking oil at Rs 35.
- d) Procurement should be undertaken from all districts so as to boost food production across the whole country. Storage godowns must be established in every block. Distribution should be done from locally procured food except in case of shortfalls.
- e) Grain banks must be set up in every Gram Panchayat.
- f) All food related documents, including ration cards must be issued in the name of women
- g) The Act must provide for mandatory reforms such as de-privatisation of PDS shops, preferably to women’s groups, with sufficient capital and commissions for new owners; direct door step delivery of food items to the PDS shop; and computerisation, along with other measures for transparency.

4. Affirmative action including pensions, Antoydaya Cards and cooked meals towards people who are socially discriminated; special protection for excluded and vulnerable groups

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- a) Special protection must be extended to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled, ailing people, single women headed or child headed households, destitute people, bonded labourers, “primitive” tribe groups, de-notified tribes, urban homeless and street children etc.
- b) All such persons and households must receive Antodaya cards and PDS items at half the prices of the general population.
- c) All such persons and households must get additional entitlements such as access to cooked meals, admission for children to residential schools, double quota of all entitlements, 1 quintal of free food grains etc.
- d) Pensions at half the statutory minimum wages for the elderly, single women and disabled (ie at an average of around Rs1300 per month at the current rate).
- e) Government must evolve special policies for the food security of migrant workers and urban destitute, particularly the right to obtain food from ration shops any where in the country.
- f) At least 50% of jobs for cooks and helpers must be for Dalits, Adivasis and minority communities.
- g) Priority must be given for the location of Anganwadis and ration shops in hamlets of Dalits, Adivasis and minority communities.

5. Special measures in disasters and in cases of starvation deaths and acute hunger

- a) Government must take special measures in all emergencies and disasters (natural and man made) and in starvation and acute hunger. Collectors should visit the place where reported. The protocol prepared by Supreme Court Commissioners for assuring rehabilitation of such families should be adopted by the Government.

6. Put in place an effective grievance redressal system.

- a) The grievance redressal system must include fines and penalties for wrong doers and compensation for the wronged.
- b) It must include both criminal and civil action, and Gram Nyayalayas must also have jurisdiction over violations of the Act.
- c) It must give the powers to file complaints to the Ward/Gram Sabhas and to similar bodies of local self governance.
- d) Independent Commissioners at the National and State level must be appointed along with grievance redressal officers at block and district level.
- e) All food entitlement programmes must have strong in-built transparency mechanisms, and mandatory requirements of social audit, with accountability being fixed at all levels.
- f) The Act must ensure a decent living wage for all functionaries under the schemes in this Act.

7. No dilution of Supreme Court orders

Since India has one of the highest rates of child malnutrition, the Food Entitlements Act must ensure that legal entitlement and other enabling orders of the Supreme Court relating to Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) and National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) are not diluted in any way. Similarly orders relating to Family Pension Scheme (FPS), Old Age Pension Schemes, Disability Pension Scheme and Widows Pension Schemes are enhanced as stated earlier.

8. Immediate action

To meet the food security challenges in this period of scarcity and drought:

- a) Every adult should get employment on demand. NREGA works should be implemented in drought stricken regions without a cap on the number of days. After the commencement of NREGA, public

works need to be converged with NREGA, rather than creating a separate machinery and set of rules for relief works.

- b) Wages should be increased by 20 % of minimum wage and the wage freeze must be removed.
- c) Task overall should be reduced keeping in mind the old, infirm, etc.
- d) Artisans should get work other than manual work.
- e) Expansion of AAY to all PTGs, disabled, aged, and other vulnerable groups. Total coverage should be ensured.
- f) Entitlement of PDS should be raised by 50%.
- g) Double entitlements in MDMS and ICDS. Children in ICDS centres should be given two meals.
- h) Emergency feeding centres for old and disabled, destitute as in Tamil Nadu.
- i) Out of school children should get MDM.
- j) MDM should continue during vacations.
- k) In cases of reported starvation death, Collectors should visit the place, and enforce the protocol prepared by the Supreme Court commissioners.
- l) Drinking water should reach by tankers to all hamlets, particularly those of Dalits and Adivasis. Water storage containers should also be provided.
- m) Fodder through depots and camps should be provided to all cattle and livestock (including goats and camels).
- n) Food stocks should be available in every Gram Panchayat to give free food to the hungry and those who cannot buy.
- o) The same drill be repeated in floods, cyclone affected areas and chronic pockets of severe malnutrition.
- p) **Redressal** - All complaints relating to non-compliance of schemes be taken up within 48 hours of them being filed and responsibilities be fixed at block and panchayat levels.

9. No excuses for not meeting our demands

Whenever we demand adequate guarantees of food and work, the government tells us that there are not enough funds to meet our demands. However, the government has no hesitation in subsidizing corporate profits with our public funds. Just the last year, Rs 4,18,096 crores worth of taxes were waived for the rich, while every year there is tax default of about Rs1 lakh crores. Compared to this, only Rs 39,100 crores has been allocated to NREGA and only Rs 55,000 crores has been allocated to the food subsidy. Several lakh crores are lying in Swiss Bank accounts while more crores are squandered on frivolous schemes like the Commonwealth Games, while the poor starve.

We urge you to intervene and ensure that all the required interventions for addressing the situation of drought are put in place and we soon move towards a comprehensive Food Entitlements Act that guarantees food and nutrition security for all. We are also enclosing a draft of the Food Entitlements Act, 2009 which emerged out of consultations with over 1200 unions, organisations, networks representing special interest groups of agricultural labourers, workers, tribals, dalits, single women, children, positive people's networks, coastal communities, farmers, academics and concerned citizens from across the country.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the Right to Food Campaign