

Lip Service to Food Security

The National Food Security Bill is an absurd text under which nobody will know who is entitled to what.

The Union Ministry of Food's version of the National Food Security Bill that has been approved by the Empowered Group of Ministers (EGOM) is a giant step backwards in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. While the National Advisory Council's (NAC) version of the bill was seriously lacking in some important aspects, the government's draft bill is a non-serious and reluctant attempt without any honourable intentions. In fact, the objective seems to be to use this bill to further weaken the public distribution system (PDS). If this bill is actually passed by Parliament, it would represent a failure to ensure food security for all.

The biggest problem with both the NAC and EGOM versions of the bill is that the proposed PDS entitlements are based on the faulty below the poverty line (BPL) census. The flaw of a BPL approach that is linked to poverty ratios is now well known. Studies have repeatedly shown that targeting errors in identifying BPL households are high, with most of the poor being left out of the BPL population. What was expected from the bill was a step towards ensuring food security for all in a rights' framework, but the latest version of the bill has even given up the pretence of providing a "right" to food, by defining "food security" as "supply of entitled quantity of foodgrains and cooked meals". The bill lays out the targeted approach providing legal sanction to the BPL list.

The bill states that there will be two categories of people – priority and general – under which 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population will be entitled to subsidised foodgrains and the rest will be excluded. While the government's bill has retained the monthly entitlement of the priority group of 7 kg per person as laid down in the NAC draft, it has further reduced the monthly entitlement of the general households from 4 kg per person to 3 kg per person.

It goes on to say that the central government will determine the number of priority households in each state based on state-wise poverty ratios to be updated from "time to time". It is not even clear which poverty ratios will be used once the Act is passed – whether it will be based on the 2004-05 ratios as suggested by the NAC or the even lower poverty ratios that one expects the recent round of the NSS survey (2009-10) to throw up. It is possible that by using the updated poverty ratios, the number of beneficiaries in the priority category will come down by almost 60 million even before the bill is placed in Parliament. Anyway, whichever ratio is used, it is clear that, over time, the number of people eligible for benefits will only keep falling.

The government's bill seems to be aimed not at improving access to food but at minimising its own obligations. It is supposed to be an Act which will guarantee a legal entitlement to food, but in its present form it does not make clear who is entitled to what. With the entitlements hinging on the complicated and failed system of using central government-determined identification criteria in a manner such that the number of beneficiaries meet the poverty "caps", no individual or household can ever know for sure whether they are entitled or not and to what. It is absurd to have a legal guarantee which cannot be demanded as a right because nobody knows who the right-holder is.

In all other aspects as well, the bill is halfhearted. It provides for entitlements of children to mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition (but with no minimum guarantee of quality or quantity). Other nutrition-related services such as maternity entitlements, nutrition counselling, breastfeeding support and treatment of severe malnutrition are not even mentioned. Destitute feeding and community kitchens are provided for, but with no clear entitlements. The provisions for redress of grievances, accountability and transparency have all been diluted, with no real powers to independent monitoring agencies. In all these cases, there are broad statements of intent with the details, including the cost share to be borne by the states, being left to rules and central government guidelines. As we well know, the devil lies in the details!

Even with regard to reforming the PDS, the bill does not say much. While the NAC had detailed proposals related to the management of fair price shops, procurement, transport, storage, transparency and accountability, the EGOM bill is again lacking in this regard. Moreover, instead of providing safeguards against weakening the PDS, the bill provides a backdoor entry to cash transfers by stating that, "In case of failure to supply the entitled persons, they will be entitled to receive (a) food security allowance from the state government in a manner prescribed by the central government". And among other "provisions for advancing food security", it further lists "introducing (a) scheme of cash transfer in lieu of entitlements" as part of what the government is supposed to "strive for". This again goes against the grain of what people really want. A recent survey on the PDS and cash transfers in nine states across the country found that more than two-thirds of people said that they preferred food over cash. Further, more than 90% of households preferred food over cash in states where the PDS is functioning well.

