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## **[Pathway to food security for all](#)**

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*The proposed Food Security Bill should adopt a three-pronged strategy that constitutes a Universal Public Distribution System for all, low-cost foodgrains to the needy, and convergence in the delivery of nutrition safety net programmes.*

In his latest budget speech, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee announced: “We are now ready with the draft Food Security Bill which will be placed in the public domain very soon.” Although no official draft has been made available as yet, several organisations and individuals have questioned the adequacy of the steps proposed to be taken under the Act to achieve the goal of a hunger-free India. Based on Article 21 of the Constitution, the Supreme Court has regarded the right to food as a fundamental requirement for the right to life. Many steps have been taken since Independence to adopt Mahatma Gandhi’s advice for an antyodaya approach to hunger elimination. In spite of numerous measures and programmes, the number of undernourished persons has increased from about 210 million in 1990-92 to 252 million in 2004-06. India has about half the world’s under-nourished children. Also, there has been a general decline in per capita calorie consumption in recent decades. Grain mountains and hungry millions continue to co-exist.

Fortunately, we are moving away from a patronage-based to a rights-based approach in areas relating to human development and well-being. Acts relating to the Right to Information, Education, Land for Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwellers, and Rural Employment are examples. The Food Security Bill, when enacted, will become the most important step taken since 1947 in addressing poverty-induced endemic hunger in India. The impact of under-nutrition on health and productivity is well known.

Numerous programmes have been introduced by the Government of India from time to time to improve nutritional status. Under the Ministry of Women and Child Development these are Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the Kishori Shakti Yojana, the Nutrition Programme for Adolescent Girls, and the Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls. Under the Ministry of Human Resource Development come the Mid-day Meals Programme and the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has the National Rural Health Mission and the National Urban Health Mission. The Ministry of Agriculture has come forward with the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, the National Food Security Mission and the National Horticulture Mission. The Ministry of Rural Development has initiated the Rajiv Gandhi Drinking Water Mission, the Total Sanitation Campaign, the Swarna Jayanthi Gram Swarajgar Yojana, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme. The Ministry of Food has introduced the Targeted Public Distribution System, the Antyodaya Anna Yojana, and

Annapoorna.

In spite of such an impressive list, the situation in the field of child nutrition remains bleak. The percentage of children below five years of age who are underweight is now 42.5 per cent. The percentage of children below three years who are undernourished is 40 per cent.

To ensure food security for all, we should be clear about the definition of the problem, the precise index of measuring impact and the road map to achieve the goal. Today, the discussion mainly centres on the definition of poverty and methods to identify the poor. India has the most austere defined poverty line in the world and the official approach appears to be to restrict support to BPL families. The number of BPL families calculated (taking four persons as the average size of a family) varies from 9.25 crore (Suresh Tendulkar Committee) to 20 crore (Justice D.P. Wadhwa). Food security, as internationally understood, involves physical, economic and social access to a balanced diet, safe drinking water, environmental hygiene and primary health care. Such a definition will involve concurrent attention to the availability of food in the market, the ability to buy needed food and the capability to absorb and utilise the food in the body. Thus, food and non-food factors (that is, drinking water, environmental hygiene and primary health care) are involved in food security.

In addition to the Central government schemes dealing with nutrition support, drinking water, sanitation and health care, most State governments have schemes such as extending support to mothers to feed newborns with mothers' milk for at least the first six months. Tamil Nadu and Kerala have universal PDS. Unfortunately, the governance of the delivery of such programmes is fragmented; a “deliver as one” approach is missing. A life-cycle approach starting with pregnant women and ending with old and infirm persons is lacking in the development and delivery of nutrition-support programmes. India's unenviable status in the field of nutrition is largely because of the absence of a good governance system that can measure outlay and output in an unbiased manner. Therefore, more than new schemes the governance of existing schemes needs attention.

The National Food Security Bill should be so structured that it provides common and differentiated entitlements. The common entitlements should be available to everyone. These should include a universal public distribution system, clean drinking water, sanitation, hygienic toilets, and primary healthcare. The differentiated entitlements could be restricted to those who are economically or physically handicapped. Such families can be provided with wheat or rice in the quantity decided at Rs.3 a kg, as is being proposed. Even to BPL families, the availability of cheap staple grain will only help address the problem of access to food at an affordable price, but not economic access to a balanced diet. At the prevailing price of pulses, such families will not have access to protein-rich foods. Similarly, hidden hunger caused by the deficiency of micro-nutrients such as iron, iodine, zinc, vitamin A and Vitamin B12 will persist. The question then is: what do we want to achieve from the Food Security Bill? Should it enable every child, woman and man to have an opportunity for a healthy and productive life, or just have access to the calories required for existence? If the aim is the latter, the title “Food Security Bill” will be inappropriate.

Brazil's “Zero Hunger” programme takes a holistic view of food security. The measures include steps to enhance the productivity of small holdings and the consumption capacity of the poor. Our farmers will produce more if we are able to purchase more. Emphasis on agricultural production, particularly small-farm productivity, will as a single step make the

largest contribution to poverty eradication and hunger elimination. While universal PDS should be a legal entitlement, the other common entitlements could be indicated in the Bill for the purpose of monitoring and integrated delivery. This will help foster a “deliver as one” approach. The involvement of gram sabhas and nagarpalikas in monitoring delivery systems will improve efficiency and curb corruption.

What is desirable should also be implementable. The greatest challenge in implementing the common and differentiated food entitlements under the Bill will be the production of adequate quantities of staple grain. The untapped production reservoir, even with the technologies now on the shelf, is high in irrigated and rain-fed farming systems. Doubling the production of rice and wheat in eastern India and pulses and oilseeds in rain-fed areas is feasible in this decade. The 2010-11 budget indicates measures to initiate a “bridge the yield gap movement” in eastern India, and stimulate a pulses and oilseeds revolution through the organisation of 60,000 Pulses and Oilseed Villages. Here, concurrent attention will be given to conservation of soil and water, cultivation of the best available strains, consumption of local grain and commerce at prices that are fair to farmers. National and State efforts should be supported at the local body level to build a community food security system involving seed, grain and water banks.

The National Commission on Farmers (2006), in its recommendations on building a sustainable national nutrition security system, calculated that about 60 million tonnes of foodgrains will be needed to sustain a universal PDS. The differentiated entitlements for BPL families for foodgrains at low cost will involve only additional cash expenditure. In fact, food stocks with the government may touch 60 million tonnes by June 2010.

For the government to remain at the commanding heights of such a food security system combining universal and unique entitlements, the four-pronged strategy indicated in Mr. Mukherjee's budget speech should be implemented jointly by panchayats, State governments and Union Ministries speedily and earnestly. Just as the Golden Quadrilateral initiative of the Atal Behari Vajpayee government electrified the national road communication infrastructure, we need a “golden quadrilateral” in the development of a national grid of modern grain storages. Will Manmohan Singh, too, leave his footprints on the sands of time by taking steps to ensure the safe storage of foodgrains and perishable commodities as an essential requirement for food security?

India should not lose this historic opportunity to ensure that it takes to a development pathway which regard to the nutrition, health and well-being of every citizen as the primary purpose of a democratic system of governance.

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