

National Food Security Act: Challenges in Implementation

By

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the great honour and privilege to welcome you here for a few precious hours to deliberate on food security issues that are more important than the physical security of many of us, because we are exposed to it much less often than we are to food insecurity. In a way, it is also more important than even national security, which is far less likely to be breached than food security.

The stated objective of this coming together of some of the most sincere and devoted souls among us, persons of extraordinary caliber and integrity, is to get some clarity on the implementation issues related to the National Food Security Act, prepared with the help of field activists. The UPA and its chairperson Soniaji must be thanked for bringing out such a powerful legislation with the help of people like you, who are deeply immersed into it.

As activists, volunteers and directly involved people like you are far more thoroughly familiar with implementation and delivery issues than many desk-bound people, I would rather confine myself to the broader perspective. For instance, if I am asked who decides our access to food, its quantity and quality, I would rather easily answer, “it is politics that decides who gets it, who does not, who will get nutritious, balanced food and who will get only carbohydrates, if it all”. Food is a matter of politics. And I am happy people like my friend Sanjay and his friends know it as they were part of the project that led to the important step of this legislation in the first place.

As the groundbreaking thesis of Amartya Sen showed, hunger, malnutrition and starvation deaths are caused not by the insufficient production of food, or famine, but because of lack of access to it and lack of purchasing power of the poor. Famine is not a natural, but man-made phenomenon. Even during worst famines there is enough food around, but the hungry have no purchasing power. The National Food Security Act and a number of policies have brought food to the poor. Policies like mid-day school meals, highly subsidized food for the poor sold through distribution networks, different versions of food-for-work programmes and an assured minimum income through programmes like MNREGA have eased the problem. However, reports of starvation from stressed areas in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and others still come in once in a while.

Food is also a gender issue in a basically misogynic society like ours. Our women still get less food than our men, as women are served food only after men have eaten in many homes, especially in north India. Many of us have seen a disturbing picture of a boy with his young sisters (published by *Manushi*, I think). The boy looked well-fed and looked after as the girls looked famished and neglected. This, in short, is our gender story.

In India, access to food is also dependent on one’s location and ethnicity. It is no coincidence that most starvation deaths come from relatively remote areas in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and

Andhra Pradesh. Most victims are tribals, Dalits, other weaker social groups. Weaker group in even relatively prosperous states, including Gujarat, the PM's model state, are vulnerable. Thus, it is also location and accident of birth in a vulnerable group that militate against one's food security. I am particularly interested in knowing from my friends how those vulnerable groups and less accessible areas fare today. We must not remove our focus from them.

Food security is also dependent on what kind of an agriculture policy the state enforces, what kind of farm wages are determined, what kind of access the farming groups have to agricultural inputs and at what terms. Are they subsidised? Is loan available at a rate of interest that the farmer can afford? Are the seeds procured from multinationals, which work for only one crop, costly and also gradually decrease the biodiversity with monoculture? All these go to form the larger picture.

The sheer number of suicide of farmers leaving behind families headed by child farmers who have to pay back their fathers' loans, get their young sisters married and still survive in the hope of prosper a decade or two later is staggering. This is a heartbreaking story that strikes at the root of our long-term food security. I want my friends to keep in view the larger policy-related issues of farm loans from banks, seeds from sharks like Monsanto and Cargil and a whole range of environmental sustainability issues around chemical fertilisers, organochlorine and organophosphate-based pesticides that can contaminate the entire environment leading to species execution, and irrigation practices that are going to deplete aquifers and make life impossible. Besides implementation and delivery issues, these policy issues too need your attention.

I want to end this on a positive note. Till around the time I was finishing college at the end of the sixties, food shortage was a recurring phenomenon. We got food as dole from the US under Public Law 480 every year, year after year, after year. After the Green Revolution began to take hold, the food scarcity ended. However, the access issues remained, which people like you have almost sorted out. Our best wishes to you in your efforts. Meanwhile, I would like to remind you that the Green Revolution gains have begun to level off. We need another revolution.

However, it still leaves the implementation issues out. For that I depend on enlightenment from people like you who have made all the food productivity gains meaningful. I wish you all the best and welcome everyone once again.

Note: This is the welcome address delivered by Dr. M. Manzoor Alam, Chairman, Institute of Objective Studies in a Consultation on "National Food Security Act: Challenges in Implementation" jointly organised by Institute of Objective Studies, FIAN and Child Trust on August 5, 2015 at Dy. Chairman Hall, Constitution Club of India, New Delhi.

The Consultation was participated by Mr. Bhakt Charan Das, former Union Minister, Government of India, Ms. Suman, Vice President, FIAN India and Director, Child Trust, Ms. Gauri Chaudhary, Action India, Prof. Arshi Khan, Deptt. of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Prof. MZH Nomani, Faculty of Law, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Dr. Krishna Bir Chaudhary, former Chairman, State Farms Corporation of India and Chairman, Bhartiya Krishak Samaj, Prof. Refaat Ali Khan, Vice-Chairman, Institute of Objective Studies, Mr. Sanjay K. Rai, Senior PS to Chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice besides representatives of FIAN from different Indian states, Action India and Child Trust.