



Public Lecture
On
Food Security Bill

Date: 5th August 2011
Time: 6:30 pm
India International Center

With the much debated National 'Food Security Bill' Draft ready to be tabled in the Parliament's monsoon session, it became imperative to discuss the issues and concerns surrounding it. Toxics Link in collaboration with Indian International Center organized a public lecture on 5, August 2011 on 'Food Security Bill', the several anomalies, issues and concerns surrounding it, at the Indian International Center, New Delhi. Mr. Satish Sinha (Associate Director Toxics Link) inaugurated the sessions by welcoming the Panelist and the audience. The panelist included eminent speakers like, Mr. Biraj Patnaik, Principal Adviser to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court, Ms. Dipa Sinha, and Right to Food Campaign, Mr. Nitin Sethi Assistant Editor, The Times of India.

Mr. Biraj touched on the history and the background of the Food Security Bill and its moral and political imperatives. He elaborated on the broad set of expectations the Civil Society had from the bill and how it came crashing down. He threw light on the Nutritional emergency the country faces despite the robust economic growth, be it Hunger, high Nutritional emergency, malnourishment, high infant mortality rates that the country faces. He said that a country that aspires to be one of the superpower is unable to carry child malnutrition burden. He also talked on the role of the Supreme Court in documenting this kind of social programme and how these programmes are controlled and monitored by the Supreme Court. However in case of Food Security Bill the legislature thought of ceasing from the courts, what is traditionally their role and one way of doing it was in the form of a bill. Thus in his view the government was heading towards a confrontation with the Supreme Court with such a Bill as it violates the many of the existing orders of the court.

He then elaborated on the political imperative of the Bill by pointing out how the politics of food and food schemes have dominated the country in particular South India, which is now set to dominate North India. He pointed towards some of the worrying features of the draft; one being, the issue of entitlement. The government was promising in the manifesto i.e. 25 kilos of food to

every household is much less than the current entitlements. The other foreboding issue is the fact that the Food Security was being linked only to the Public Distribution System and only subsidized food.

On the Civil Society perspective Mr. Biraj, outlined the expectations of the civil society from the Bill that collapsed. Some of the broad expectations he enumerated are as follows:

- a) The civil Society hoped the bill to look beyond food and include the aspect of nutrition, as food is necessary but not a sufficient condition. Nutrition is contingent to drinking water, sanitation, quality health care something not touched upon by the government.
- b) The Civil Society expected that the draft on Food Security Bill would outreach those entitlements that the Supreme Court of India recognizes as legal Entitlements like mid- day meals, Integrated Child Development Schemes, PDS, Direct Cash Transfers, Old age pension, widow pension.
- c) It also anticipated that the draft would seek to address the issue of agrarian crisis as agriculture in India is in deep crisis with mounting farmer suicide cases. The Civil Society was awaiting a more comprehensive Bill and saw it as an opportunity that would give an impetus to stop land grabs, issues of water and agricultural policies.
- d) Major problem in India rests in implementation, although there are baskets full of social policies and schemes there are enormous loopholes in the delivery and implementation mechanism. Therefore there was an expectation for a just framework, where the bureaucracy could be made more accountable and loopholes be plugged.
- e) The Civil Society saw this as an opportunity that could be tapped on for redesigning existing programs like child malnourishment programs, maternity programs that have failed considerably.

However all these expectations came crashing down.

Further, Mr. Biraj threw light on the cardinal error made by the National Advisory Council. He said that the NAC produced the draft detail with the government, instead of presenting a vision that would have given an opportunity to NAC to critique what the government would have produced. He said that if the government passes the Bill in the present form, it would undo everything that the Supreme Court has done for more than a decade. He believed that a no deal was much better than such a deal which according to him is way too minimalist.

Ms Dipa, dealt into the background and the history of the Food Security Bill and the causes of the failure of the Bill to meet the various expectations that Mr. Biraj had pointed out.

She also threw light on the campaign draft that sought to serve as a middle ground and stressed on the universalization and expansion of the PDS coupled with decentralized procurement and storage system, that should be central to the Food Security Bill. She said that a major problem that has resulted in the failure of the various versions of Bill lay in linking the entire PDS and the entitlement system to the poverty line that is abysmally low and does not represent the extent of hunger and poverty in the country. Despite overwhelming evidence, showing failure of BPL approach the bill continues to make distinction between those above the poverty line and below it. She expressed deep discontent on government once again linking the entitlements to the poverty ratio.

Ms. Dipa, then took through the details of the Bill as to what was planned and what has emerged. Addressing the problem of agrarian crisis she said food security cannot be achieved without delving into the decline in the agriculture sector and with more than 65 million tones of food grains in FCI (Food Corporation of India) that is rotting, the government cannot use the excuse of unavailability of food grains for reforms in agriculture sector like universalization of the PDS.

She further said that despite the fact that the procurement is quiet low from many food surplus states like West Bengal and Bihar the bill ironically, nowhere in any of its versions mentions of reform in the procurement system that the campaign draft had sought to bring forth. Rather it only focuses on the distribution of rice and wheat to a target population. She said that the government is trying to bring forth other pet projects like the Aadhar and UDI, through the back door through the Bill rather than addressing the issue of Food and Nutritional Security.

She also pointed out how the government had made a mockery of the idea of Food Security for all by not touching upon any key provisions for malnourished children, starvation, death, pension, maternity entitlement, destitute feeding and food for adolescence. On the issue of Food Nutritional Security she said that the Bill Interprets Food Security only as Wheat and Rice, how much to be given to how many at what price and is silent on the distribution of pulses, millets or oil under the PDS. She also expressed her concern on how the current legal guarantee of 'hot cooked meals' for children has been diluted by providing option for 'ready to eat foods' in the draft.

She then elaborated on the issue of Implementation and justifiability framework that Mr. Biraj had dealt in great detail. she said that the government seeked to minimize its obligations and use this opportunity to do even less than what they are currently doing by, whittling out the Grievance Redressal Mechanism that the NAC had worked upon to a large extent, from the block level to the national level. Thus diluting most of the core principles of NAC's proposal. She said how the center has taken over the state in order to minimize their burden. While the NAC proposed to cover 90% of the rural population ,the government reduced it and the current Bill covers 75% of the rural population and that nobody that is excluded from the Central government guidelines can be included, making it worse for states that are doing reforms. In her view it is a Bill that is trying to do less and putting pressure on these who are doing anything to do even lesser.

While Mr. Nitin Sethi ended the discussion on an optimistic note and he touched on the larger rubric of where the Congress is going over the last couple of years, where it is supposed to go and within this framework where the bill fits in. He elaborated on the intellectual dishonesty within the government that has been the benchmark for the entire debate. He also shared why it is good for the government to be intellectually dishonest at this juncture. He gave a deep insight of the character of UPA and how it plays the politics be it in the case of NREGA or the Food Security Bill. Citing the example of the provisions meant to be provided to the Above the Poverty Line, he said that a proposal was mooted within the government saying that they should give it to the government but price it so high that the APL will never seek it thereafter lowering the subsidies.

He pointed out that presently the only big tickets scheme for the government is the Food Security Bill and that there is no other panorama that the country can afford to bring forth and show that they are doing something that nobody else is doing and for the Congress to be more populist it will have to do better.

Despite the overwhelming apprehensions surrounding the much contentious bill Mr. Nitin saw hope in it as the congress does not see a bright future in the coming year and will definitely need a big ticket to create a wave in its favor which the UPA will seek to do by tapping on the Social sectoral reforms, Food Security Bill being one of them. In his view this is when the Bill will come in handy; when the Congress will reign in this element, make it more promising and expansive.

Then there were question and answers session, where questions were raised on organized retail and micro finance and weather it will bring in efficiency. There were questions on the Delivery Mechanism and how are they different in this context? On the fine distinction between Right to Food and National Food Security Bill. Then there were questions on the use and role of National Food Commission and the State Food Commission and on how the delivery mechanism is doing differently in this case?
