

**East Zone Consultation on the National Food
Security Bill**

Patna (Bihar)

30th-31st January 2012

Jointly Organized by

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan

Oxfam India

Food and Water Security Coalition India

Background

Livelihood Thematic Action Group of Wada Na Todo Abhiyan along with Food and Water Security Coalition India and Oxfam India, are attempting to bring CSOs, various campaigns, academicians and experts on food related issues to hold in-depth discussions on the National Food Security Bill. In June 2009, the Government of India announced for a comprehensive legislation to be enacted as “The National Food Security Act” which will focus on the right to food. Currently the bill has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. The Bill has been drafted without any wider consultation with important stakeholders and suffers from a number of shortcomings including minimal reach, reduced entitlements, lack of commitment to vulnerable groups, and intends to do away with double subsidy provided on the TDPS by various states, to name a few. We feel that the pressing need of the hour is to present the concerns of various stakeholders in a comprehensive manner. We hope that the discussions will lead to a common understanding so that a collective civil society force can emerge for advocacy with government.

To take this process forward, multi-stakeholder Regional Consultations across five zones as well as one National Consultation (involving academics, scientists, political persons) in New Delhi is being organized. Each Regional consultation will be a day and a half long with a participation of 50-60 people and will be organized by local partner organizations of WNTA.

- East Zone: Patna (Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa and Chattisgarh) on 30th-31st January, 2012
- West Zone: Ahmedabad (Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra) on 7th-8th February, 2012
- South Zone: Anantpur (Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu) on 17th- 18th February , 2012
- North Zone: Dehradun (HP, J&K, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Uttarakhand) on 1st and 2nd March, 2012
- North East: Guwahati, (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Agartala, Nagaland) on 4th-5th March, 2012
- National Consultation- New Delhi on 20th-21st March 2012

Purpose of Consultations

The purpose of organizing these consultations is to get various actors from different backgrounds to discuss/critique the proposed Food Security Bill in detail, and to develop a Charter of Demand which will be used as an advocacy tool for the government and policy makers.

Objectives

- Educate, sensitize, motivate and mobilize people at large
- Develop and publish critiques of the food security bill The consultations will also have special sessions which will specially focus on the following chapters of the bill in order to ensure Last Mile Delivery and Citizens' Engagement:
 1. Chapter II: Provisions of Food Security
 2. Chapter IV: Persons Living in Starvation
 3. Chapter IX: Grievance Redressal Mechanisms and
 4. Chapter XIII: Transparency and Accountability
- Develop a Charter of Demands (have with sharp and prioritized recommendations)
- Advocacy with Government and other policy makers in the interest of common people

East Zone Consultation

First in the series of regional consultations being held across the country on the National Food Security Bill was held in Patna, Bihar on the 30th and 31st of January 2012 at the Bihar Industrial Association. The consultation sought to bring together various civil society voices- activists, grassroots workers, academics as well as political representatives in an attempt to hold in depth discussions on the provisions listed under the proposed National Food Security Bill, soon to be tabled in the parliament. By bringing together perspectives of various stakeholders - the Dalits, women, farmers and religious minorities, to name a few, the east zone consultation brought together NGOs, academics and other socially engaged individuals and groups from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Orissa and the host state of Bihar.



Divergent Perspectives- Voices of the Stakeholders

Day 1- 30th January, 2012

**Inaugural Plenary: Introduction to the proposed National Food Security Bill,
Chaired by Dr I C Kumar, Ex-Vice Chancellor, V K S University/Ex -Secretary, Food
(Govt. of Bihar)**

1. **Mr. Pramod Kumar Singh**, the state convener of Wada Na Todo Abhiyan as a member of the host organization of the consultation, welcomed all the participants to the meeting, while also providing a brief context of the National Food Security bill. He highlighted some of the key provisions listed in the proposed bill and the existing lacunae such as-

- Lack of emphasis on pulses, oil, sugar and other essential food supply under the Bill in its present form
- The prominence given to Aganwadis as food supplying units, specially for women and children, unmindful of the fact that in many places Aganwadis have failed to perform even their current roles well and many parts of the country still have limited access to these center.
- Though many promises have been made in the National Food Security bill but its operational structure is not well defined, thus leaving a large margin for misinterpretations once the bill comes to life.
- Provision of 7 kgs of food grains per month to an individual categorised under the 'Priority' households was an inadequate amount and needed to be revised.
- The fact that the National Food Security bill guarantees the right of a ration card holder to use his/her card anywhere in the country, irrespective of the original state of enlistment, was a big step forward for the migrant populations of the country.



2. **Shivanand Tiwari, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha)** from Junta Dal (United), the Chief Guest for the occasion in his key note address congratulated the efforts of civil society for having initiated an intensive discussion on such an important Bill. He felt that the quoting country's deteriorating GDP as an excuse for not universalizing the National Food Security Bill, was a fallacy. The current expenditure on the Public Distribution System was much more as compared to what the universal application of the National Food Security bill would entail. He felt that not even 0.3% of the GDP would actually be expended on the proposed National Food Security bill to make it universal, and thus the government's contrary claims in defense of a targeted approach were baseless. While on the one hand, the huge corporate subsidy in the country was never a matter for reconsideration for the

government, on the other hand, it was trying to wash its hand off its duty to ensure every man's right to good quality, nutritious food.

He noted that the National Food Security bill was too narrow in its approach. The Bill in its current form overlooked the diversity of food types and culinary cultures in India, giving preference to only one kind of food type- rice and wheat consumption. Safe, clean drinking water, sanitation and access to good quality health care, and creation of a conducive environment where there were equal opportunities for all, were also important corollaries to make the National Food Security bill a success in real terms.

3. Sociologist **Dr. Sachindra Narayan** felt that it was important to ask the pertinent question as to how far will the National Food Security Bill be able to improve a common man's status of living. The country has seen many other well- intentioned legislations in the past, similar in tone and tenor to the proposed Bill. However the wide gap between policy formulation and its implementation on ground has always remained a big challenge. He felt that the indigenous agricultural resources as well as the varied food intake patterns within India have been ignored in the proposed Bill. The Bill, though heavy on terminology, seemed to have overlooked the 'felt' needs of communities. Often, Bills of this nature were formulated on 'assessed' needs of people, blind to the existing ground realities. Cultural, ecological and regional variations in a vast country like India need to be given primacy if any legislation is to positively impact the nation. Most importantly, he felt that the 'quality' of food being distributed under the proposed National Food Security bill must be monitored closely for it to actually benefit the common man.
4. **A.V Sinha, Advisor to the State Planning Board, Bihar**, felt that it was important to look at the positives in the proposed Bill as well. He explained the organizational structure of the National and State Food Commissions respectively, in an attempt to clarify how these departments were committed to creating sustainable conditions for food security in the country. One must try and analyze the internal modifications that these stated departments might require to implement the Bill successfully in the future. He felt that the Bihar government had taken some positive steps in ensuring food security within the state over the years, and already about Rs. 3000 crores had been spent in this direction.
 
5. **Anil Singh of Sansad**, a New Delhi based NGO, brought to fore some of the main provisions of the National Food Security bill and points of critique that needed deliberation. About 70 crore people will be impacted by the National Food Security Bill, making it the largest social welfare scheme in the world. He felt that the Bill, though tangentially referring to provision of 'nutritious' food, adopted only a tokenistic approach to realizing this goal. Some of the key points of the Bill were-

- The Bill talked about covering 50% urban and 75% rural population, of which only 28% of urban and 46% of rural population would be considered as being 'Priority Households'. The rest would be classified as 'General Households'. Provision of 7 kgs of food grains per person for 'Priority Households' and 3 kgs for the 'General Households', was an amount that was inadequate to meet the nutritional needs of people.
- The positives in the proposed Bill were the provisions made for pregnant and lactating mothers; 'Special Groups' implying the homeless and destitute; guarantee of food during disaster or calamity and for starving populations (as identified by the State). The fact that the Bill also made it mandatory for women to be considered 'Head of Households' was a step towards women empowerment. Installation of Vigilant Committees and use of ICT to create transparency and accountability in the system were also appreciable. It's incumbent on the State to provide food allowance in case it is unable to procure food supply for its subjects.
- However, though the Bill hinted at the need to promote and safeguard the interests of the agricultural sector in the country, the intention is merely a part of an annexure in the Bill and thus not binding on the government in any way. A recent statement given by the Agricultural Minister, Sharad Pawar, that it was impossible to implement the National Food Security Bill was also worrying.
- The Bill must adopt a universal rather than a targeted approach to food security. However, currently the growth in population/per year is marginally more as compared to the growth in food grain production. Population of the country is growing at 1.76% per year as compared to food grain production which is increasing at 1.58% per year. Thus it is crucial for the government to pay more attention to increasing yield and introduce agrarian reforms if the rate of India's food grain production can be at par with its population growth.
- Cash transfers were also a point of concern as money could easily translate itself to wastage rather than food security.
- Government's claim of lack of finances to support a universal National Food Security Bill can also be refuted. As per CBGA's estimates, universalization or 100% coverage under the National Food Security Bill would cost the government rupees one lakh eighty four thousand crores. Currently, through its other schemes like the PDS, government is already spending rupees sixty three thousand crores on food security. Thus this additional gap that universal application of the Bill would amount to an extra investment of rupees one lakh twenty four thousand crores. Though this gap may seem too large to bridge, the fact was also that the government was unable to collect certain taxes such as customs duty, sales tax, excise duty etc, an amount costing more than five crore rupees annually. Thus, if the government was able to claim even 1/4th of what this amount, the gap in food security estimates could easily be addressed.



- It is crucial that at least 4% of the GDP is reserved for the agricultural sector for us to ensure long term food security of the country in the real sense of the word. .
- Malnourishment is a serious concern for the country where 48% children below the age of 5 are found to be undernourished. 42.5% children below 5 years were underweight; 70% children below 5 were anemic and 52% women also suffered from anemia. Thus it is important that the Bill also addresses the nutritional needs of people by including protein rich diets of pulses, meat, fish, milk, ghee and so on for it to be a holistic intervention
- Insuring good infrastructure for storage was also an important factor and one that must be recognized by the Bill. Currently, the states are able to lift only about 2/3rd of the grains from central godowns because of lack of adequate storage facilities. This must be rectified in the light of building sustainable efforts to ensure food security in the country.
- Grabbing fertile agricultural land for industries and other large development projects must be stopped. Only barren lands must be transferred for industrialization and other related activities.

Anil Singh felt that instead of the government focusing its resources on other activities like building roads (25 kms. of national highways is being built every day as per Central government's claim), attention needed to be given to constructing food grain godowns, improving the linkages between farmers and agricultural markets and overhauling the distribution system as well.

6. **Dr I C Kumar** wrapped up the session by concluding that much thought needs to be given to issues of food sovereignty, diversity, distribution and quality consumption. Issues like climate change are also a grim reality of our times and thus need to be kept in mind while framing a bill like the National Food Security Bill. There was also the need to increase agricultural storage facilities at the regional, state and national level as well. Ways of restructuring the exiting PDS also need to be thought through to ensure maximum reach and minimum corruption in the process. He felt that both corruption and malnutrition are two sides of the same coin, so while the current government is making tall claims of fighting corruption, it should also show its willingness to address issues of food security in a sincere manner.

7. Comments from the Open House

- Need to strengthen the role of village panchayats in food distribution process must be emphasised in the Bill
- Focus on the food sovereignty aspect of the Bill. The Bill must provide clear guidelines vise a vise procurement of grains from farmers, fixing of Minimum Support Prices in time and provide encouragement to agrarian reforms.
- Cultural and regional food diversity must be kept in mind in implementation of the Bill.

Session II: State Perspectives on Food Security, Chaired by Dr. Sachindra Narayan, Sociologist

1. **Jharkhand:** **A.K Singh**, Director, Leads India and **Madhukar**, a senior journalist with a Hindi Daily, Prabhat Khabar spoke about the need to focus on three key terms vis-a-vis food security in India- Food Availability (quantity/ quality of food), Food Accessibility (whether there is availability of food without violating any human rights) and Food Sovereignty (food as per our culture, region, etc and whether we hold the right to decide all factors related to food and its production). Malnourishment, as recently acknowledged by the Prime Minister Mr. Manmohan Singh himself, is a point of shame for the entire country, 63 years after its independence. And though the UPA government seems committed to making social welfare laws, these do little in the way of transforming the socio-economic condition of the poor in the country. A case in point is the state of MNREGA in Jharkhand, where, despite a lot of irrigation related work being undertaken, the area under irrigation has not increased beyond 9% of the total agricultural land. Therefore, the need of the hour is to think about the operational aspects of the National Food Security Bill.

Given the fact that the agricultural sector is one of the most neglected in the country and increasing number of farmers are rushing to the cities in search of paid employment, how will the proposed Bill ensure that the sector gets its long over-due respect and position of prominence in the country's development process? Equally crucial is to ensure that the tribal populations of states like Jharkhand are not left out of the fabric of the Bill. Currently, many primitive tribes, despite being extremely poor, are not enlisted in the Antodaya scheme. The National Food Security Bill needs to make special provisions to ensure that such marginal sections are not ignored again. It is also important to think about redefining the role of the Gram Sabhas and the Panchayats in execution of the Bill, where their role should be extended to include monitoring as well, and not just remain confined to being an implementing agent of the State.



2. **Chattisgarh:** **Rana Pratap Sing**, a social activist from the region brought to notice the difficult topography of the state which makes distribution of food a huge challenge for the agencies. Between the months of June to October, 20% of the areas in Chattisgarh like Dantewada, Sarbhujia and Bastar remain inaccessible because of the

weather conditions. Lack of proper storage facilities mean that institutions like government schools and village panchayats are forced to store food grains in times

of need. However, this is not possible beyond a maximum period of two months only. Consequently, the local people have to walk up to 10-15 kms in order to procure subsidized food grains from government channels. Though Chattisgarh government claims to have made the entire Public Distribution System transparent by putting related information online, there is still massive corruption in the process. An example of this is the fact that though in Sarbhujia district official records claim that 1700 Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been made in charge of the PDS in an attempt to fight corruption in the state, in reality only 3 SHGs are actually implementing the system. The Panchayats and gram sabhas thus should be strengthened so that regional and community specific needs of people are addressed in an appropriate manner.

3. **West Bengal:** Activists **Ashish Das and Anjan Sen Gupta** felt that one needs to also raise concern about issues of food sovereignty and whether the National Food Security Bill ensured that in spirit. Access and availability of food were serious concerns in the country and the proposed Bill seemed as if the common man was being made to 'beg for food', rather than claiming his fundamental right. The two speakers pointed out that it was important to reflect on why, despite having fertile land, so many farmers were committing suicide in Bengal? Or the fact that areas like the Sunderbans, replete with natural resources, marked the lowest figures in poverty and malnutrition today. The condition of farmers and privatization of natural resources were crucially linked to the fate of the Bill and how it would fare on ground. Till such time as there was no true democracy from below, no efforts to improve the condition of the poor could work. Creating employment opportunities for everyone, ensuring the access to Right to Education, resisting privatization of resources and working for the betterment of collective commons- these were key in making the Bill truly progressive.
4. **Bihar:** **Vinay Ohdar** of Action Aid and **Praveen** from OXFAM, Bihar, asserted the fact that as far as poverty indicators go, the state of Bihar was much worse than even a new state like Jharkhand. While many social welfare schemes existed on paper, the service delivery mechanisms were weak and soaked in corruption. Agricultural production had shown a steady decline in Bihar as a result of weak political will rather than contextual factors alone. One also needs to be wary that the National Food Security Bill does not cause corporatization of food production or procurement processes in any way. The grim reality was that food prices were on an increase, rising at an estimated 2%-3% rate every day, all over the world. Most of food production seemed to be linked with only one kind of cultivation, that of cash crops. In states like Bihar, productive land was being diverted to the industrial sector, leaving small farmers with little livelihood options. If the Bill was to be a success in real terms, then it must recognize and strengthen people's right to different kinds of food production. The Bill also needs to take cognizance of the fact that R&D in agriculture needs encouragement for production levels to increase at a sustainable pace. The speakers also felt that the provision of cash transfers would shift the focus from food items to non-food items, thus defeating the objectives of a bill like the National Food Security Bill. The role of the Panchayats seemed negligible

in the proposed Bill and this was one of its biggest weaknesses. The two speakers felt that the Bill enclosed too many contradictions, obfuscating its true import and value.

5. Comments from the Open House

- The Bill must be universal in spirit. The division of populations in to BPL/APL categories to have basic access to food was a limiting factor in the Bill.
- Participation of marginal populations must be strengthened in the panchayats as well. Redressal mechanisms must be localized so that communities can have easy access in airing their grievances.
- The Bill also needs to talk about significant issues related to food security, like water security for farmers.



Session III: Food Security and Question of Livelihoods, Chaired by Dr. Jagdish Prasad, Economist

1. **Food Security and Farmers: Vijay Ravidas**, a Dalit activist from Bihar stated that though it was easy to frame populist laws like the National Food Security Bill, it would amount to little if it was not executed through proper channels. As an example, he quoted other laws like the Anti-dowry law, which despite its best intentions, had not been able to uproot the custom completely yet. He felt that all governments, though high on security and defense budgets, never spared a thought for meaningful investment in the agricultural sector- the very backbone of the Indian economy. Diverting land for industries meant that even in peripheries of Patna, farmers were forced to give up their traditional livelihoods and look for other options. Indiscriminate corporatization of the agricultural sector had forced the farmers to buy manure and seeds at expensive prices, doubling the cost of agricultural production in the bargain. Given lack of appropriate and timely support prices, proper marketing and distribution networks and other social insurance schemes for the agricultural sector, farmers were being driven to the verge of suicide not just in Bihar, but all over the country. Thus it was important for farmers to assert their right over production for the governments to realize their true worth.

Adding on, **Anil K. Singh** spoke about the take-aways of the Green Revolution and the need to reflect on the fact that though it ensured increased agricultural yield, intensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides also led to contamination of water sources and the land becoming unproductive over a period of time. Thus innovations in agriculture also need to be thought about in a more sustainable manner. He felt that if there was a political will, it was possible to reap positive changes. Quoting the example of Thailand, he said that one must learn from this small country, today a chief exporter of rice all over the world. Unfortunately, he felt that India had adopted the American model of growth where less than 4% people were directly involved in agriculture and its allied activities. For India to solve its

present agricultural crisis, it is important that the government formulate policies that are pro-farmers like promoting organic farming instead of the inorganic, cash crop centric approach to agriculture. Organic farming implied less investment and better yields over a period of time and would thus prove beneficial to farmers who were today buried under huge debts.

2. Food Security and the condition of the Urban Poor: Prem Kumar of World Vision, Bihar pointed out that the massive rate of urbanization had put a lot of pressure on resources, adding to urban poverty and neglect. He said that the phenomenon of both in-migration and out-migration is a worrying fact, and one that is a challenge to address. In Patna alone, there were 80 notified and 60 non-notified slum clusters, numbers that are increasing by the day. The only way to address migration is to create employment opportunities in rural areas, not just within the agricultural sector itself but also its allied fields like horticulture, distribution and marketing and so on. It is important to ensure that the socio-economic capital of a common man increases with time, even a bill like the National Food Security Bill, would not yield effective results. The Bill is directly related to the level of malnutrition in the country. For the urban poor, the situation was even worse as they had no clean drinking water or proper sanitation facilities at hand. For the Bill to be impactful, it must espouse a rights-based, universal approach.

3. Comments from the Open House

- Given the current socio-economic climate in the country, there is a need to promote not only agriculture, but agriculture related employment activities like in the processing industries, horticulture etc.
- Storage facilities for food grains must be strengthened and given a priority under the Bill.
- Marketing and distribution channels also need attention as a way of incentivizing agrarian production and farmers, in the long run.
- Must encourage organic farming as a way of creating sustainable food security measures in the country.
- Attention must be given to procurement of seeds as well. Currently, with all the big multinational companies in the field, the farmer has become completely dependent on purchase of expensive seeds alone. The National Seeds Corporation's contributions have been declining over the years. This was a serious issue and we must work towards recreating self reliance among farming communities again.

Session IV: Food Security and Social Exclusion, Chaired by Madhukar, Journalist, Prabhat Khabar

1. Dalits: Putting forth the concerns of the Dalits, **Vijay Ravidas** felt that this section of population need special attention as far as food security issue is concerned. Biggest problem plaguing the Dalit communities was landlessness. Without land, most of them are forced into agricultural labour, having almost no livelihood guarantee or

assurance of fixed, steady income. Education, access to health facilities and issues of hygiene and sanitation were primary for welfare of the Dalit community and must be enlisted in the National Food Security Bill.

2. **Adivasis: Birendra Kumar Gond** of HFBC, Bihar and a part of Wada Na Todo Abhiyan in the state said that even though we know that India as a country is hugely dependent on the agricultural sector, very little is done to promote or preserve it through way of government policies and reforms. As far as the state of Adivasis was concerned, he stated that lack of education and awareness of one's rights and entitlements was a big hurdle in their development. Even though some social welfare schemes had brought benefits to them to an extent, this was not enough to improve their plight.

Madan Pandey from Chattisgarh felt that it was also important to acknowledge that the current economic policy of the government had spelled doom for the adivasis. Taking examples from Chattisgarh, he said that diversion of land to industries meant loss of agriculture for poor farmers. Bad distribution and myopic procurement processes also played a hand in destroying the indigenous adivasi food culture of communities. Thus along with ensuring food security for adivasis, the Bill must also proactively suggest ways of reviving the indigenous food of such marginal communities.

3. **Women: Shalini Samvedna**, a women's rights activist based in Ranchi focused on how the development graph of the country showed that the poor were only getting poorer, while the moneyed were getting richer. What India claimed as 'progress' and 'development' had only in reality, benefited a handful. A case in point was the condition of women in the country, which had not improved substantially despite many steps being taken in that direction. Women were still exhibited as if on display, and even though a few among them had reached heights of success, the condition of a regular, common woman in the country had not shown much progress. Even the presence of women in public life did not amount to much. For instance, despite heading village panchayats, women were rarely the actual decision makers, relying on their male counterpart for guidance. She concluded by saying that if the Bill was to be a success, it must genuinely seek participation of women in policy formulation, implementation and monitoring.

Sarita and **Chitrallekha**, both part of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan in Bihar, further highlighted the problem of single women and the need to have special entitlements for them in the Bill. They pointed to the fact that apart from claiming widow and old age pension from the government, no other social welfare schemes catered to the different kinds of single women in the country. Limited livelihood options, along with deep social stigma



made it very difficult for single women to look after themselves and their families. The Bill must therefore pay heed to their condition, as they too were a productive, contributing citizen of the country towards whom the government had social responsibilities.

- 4. Religious Minorities: Mukhtarull Hak** of Bachpan Bachao Andolan in Bihar highlighted the condition of the Muslims in the state where they comprised 17% of the total population. He felt that though in the pre-Independence India the Muslim community had strong links with agriculture given the prevalence of the zamindari system, currently this link had been severed as most Muslims were now moving to urban centers in search of regular employment. As was public knowledge, the Sacchar Committee Report pointed to the fact that the condition of Muslims was worse than Dalits in the country. The National Food Security Bill must therefore ensure that there is enough representation of the minority community in the provisions enlisted in it. The Bill must work towards a representative whole where the committees constituted for its execution, implementation and monitoring, draw from Muslim communities in a significant way.

Adding on, **Mohammad Israfil**, another social worker from West Bengal said that the condition of Muslims in Bengal, where they constituted 26-28% of the total population, was even worse. Areas of Muslim majority have remained on the margins of development- lack of schools, poor connectivity, bad roads and complete lack of comprehensive health and sanitation interventions. Many Muslim localities did not even have an Anganwadi center. Even getting basic entitlements like ration cards or birth certificates was a struggle. Given such a scenario, how could the proposed Bill ensure food security for these populations? He felt that these socio-economic realities of the community must be kept in mind while framing the Bill so that mechanisms to address these gaps can be worked out at this stage of conceptualization of the Bill.

- 5. Food Security and HIV/ AIDS:** Drawing from his field experience, Rana Pratap Singh spoke about the need to have special focus on people with HIV/AIDS under the National Food Security Bill. Social stigma and shame, coupled with negligible health care facilities added to their deteriorating condition, he felt. The Bill must make space for various marginal voices like the one of HIV/AIDS afflicted to people with disabilities for it to be a comprehensive tool of social legislation.

6. Comments from the Open House

- The Bill must make special provisions for disadvantaged populations like single women, Adivasis, people with disability and so on.
- Special focus on landless populations was also crucial to make this Bill a comprehensive intervention in the realm of food security.
- The Bill must have strong penalty clauses for defaulters/ corrupt agencies and individuals as constant leakages in the PDS system had rendered an effective scheme almost useless in many parts of the country. Thus the Bill

must propose strong measures to check the increasing corruption in the food process in its various stages.



DAY 2- 31st January, 2012

1. **Ram Kirpal Yadav, Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha)** from the Rashtriya Junta Dal, was the Guest of Honor for the second day of the consultation. He congratulated the efforts of civil society networks that were attempting to throw light on the exiting gaps in the National Food Security Bill. He felt that the policies and schemes of the Sate, over the years, had only led to widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The new economic policies were a threat to farmers and had led to creation of industrial monopolies in the agrarian sector. He expressed the need to focus on increasing agricultural production in the country, for only then could the proposed Bill have desirable, long lasting impact on the starving populations in India. It was important to review the condition of electricity, water and irrigation resources for the farmers and create policies that supported their interests. He promised that he would take the recommendations of this consultation and voice the stakeholders' concerns in the parliament.

Forest Rights Act (2006) & Food Security Bill: Discussion

2. The Forests Rights Act (FRA) delineates the relationship of forest dependent communities with land and natural resources and thus and is important point of engagement for the National Food Security Bill as well. **Pramod Kumar Singh** initiated the discussion by bringing to fore some of the current flaws in the Act. For instance, under the FRA, a forest dweller (mostly from Adivasi communities) can claim ownership of his/her land if he/she can prove that they had either been engaged in cultivation/ trade pertaining to the land/ or living on the said plot of land till December 13th 2005. In order to acquire a legal 'patta' of their land, the dweller must prove his connection with the land over three generations amounting to 75 years. According to Pramod Kumar Singh, this criterion for gaining the 'patta' was too harsh and should be fixed at 40 years rather than the present margin of 75 years. He also pointed out that though the official records in states like Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar showed impressive figures of land transfer, in reality only a few were actually able to procure their land in physical terms, despite been given the 'patta' on paper for it. Though the Act also talked about how village communities could lay legal claims on community land like charagahs etc, in reality very few of such claims were recognized by the officials.



Contributing to the issue, **Anjan Sen Gupta** spoke about the condition the FRA in West Bengal where despite tall promises by the previous Left government, very little transpired on the ground. A marginal amount of work had happened under the FRA in parts of North Bengal alone where some land transfers were made in an appropriate fashion. Most of the land with the Adivasi communities was being transferred to big industries, flouting the existing legal framework of land safeguards. Issues of food security and provisions enlisted in the FRA were important to reflect on. It was crucial to understand that on the one hand, the Adivasi communities who at one point were self reliant regarding their food needs, were now being made dependent on the state by

grabbing their land/forests from them. The speaker felt that the government was full of dichotomies- on the one hand they framed the FRA, while on the other, the Mining Act completely defeated the purpose of the former. Similarly, it was important to ensure that the Bill is well is in synthesis with legislations like the FRA for it to have a holistic impact.



Adding on, **Mahendra Roushan** from **Dalit Samanvaya**, expressed the need to have Adivasi representation in various committees comprised to monitor and implement the National Food Security Bill. Or, he felt, implementation of such a bill will be a daunting task, especially in the tribal belts which, along with other factors, also suffered a high rate of Maoist and Naxal led violence. The government agencies, he stated, though strong on building good data

base reflecting the success of various social welfare schemes, was very weak in effectively implementing programs on ground. Evoking a concentrated civil society action to ensure a fool-proof implementation of the Bill, he felt that it was equally important for socially active groups to commit to the agenda of food security in a serious manner for the problems of poverty, malnourishment and hunger to be addressed effectively.

3. Comments from the Open House

- Along with deliberating about the National Food Security Bill, the civil society should also debate the ramifications of the proposed National Seeds Bill as it threw up many points of concerns from the point of view of small and marginal farmers.
- Diversion of fertile land for industries must be stopped. Only unproductive land should be claimed for industrialization or other development purposes.
- Need to revisit the FRA as well to plug the corruption in its implementation.

4. Concluding Remarks: Pramod Kumar Singh thanked all the participants for lending their perspectives to what was a very important legislation in the making. Given India's present agrarian crisis and state of malnutrition in the country it is important to read the National Food Security Bill in a holistic manner so that India can adopt a sustainable, ecologically friendly approach to providing food security to its citizens.

Key Recommendations of East Zone Consultation

- Crucial to adopt a rights- based approach to the Right to Food Bill and thus frame its terminology accordingly, as that of a fundamental right of people of India.
- Emphasis the need to make the Bill universally applicable, covering all vulnerable sections of the population.
- Prioritize the need for agrarian reform and make it incumbent on the governments to focus/ invest on increasing/improving agricultural production, procurement and distribution networks. Currently government's intention vise a vise support/promotion of agriculture is merely encompassed in Schedule III of the Bill. One must ensure that the Schedule is made a part of the main body of the Bill so that governments can be made accountable to it, and it does not remain at the level of mere political 'intention'.
- Diversion of fertile land for industrialization and large development projects must be stopped. Only barren, unproductive land must be allocated for industrial and related projects. The Bill must specify this. Demand that at least 4% of the Gross Domestic Product must be reserved for agrarian reforms.
- Inclusion of pulses, oil, sugar and essential food items in the Bill, rather than merely rice, wheat and coarse grains.
- Ensure that in the implementation of the Bill, the most marginal and vulnerable groups like the disabled, sex workers etc. are also its beneficiaries. Therefore the need for a strong implementing model must be to be addressed in the Bill. Merely focusing on Aganwadis or other ICDS agencies as distribution networks might not be enough.
- The Bill must offer 100% coverage of primitive tribes as their condition is one of the worst in the country.
- The Bill must also clarify the kind of infrastructural apparatus that will be required to effectively execute it. Currently, the operational aspects of the Bill seem weak and must be elaborated upon in the main body of the Bill itself to avoid misreading of it at a later stage.
- States, which currently do not have any agricultural policy, must be encouraged to formulate pro-farmer policies so that agrarian reforms can be brought about in a systematic, sustainable manner. The Bill should make formulation of such an agricultural policy mandatory for all states.
- Awareness generation must be made an integral part of the Bill for people to understand its true import and implication.

Positive Outcome of the Consultation

- Apart from building a civil society consensus on a set of recommendations to improve the proposed National Food Security Bill, the participation of the two political representatives, **Ram Kirpal Yadav** and **Shivanand Tiwari**, was very

encouraging. The two Ministers of Parliament promised to take the recommendations forward and do their best in articulating the civil society's concerns regarding the Bill.

Press Coverage

