India's Food
For All

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Is access to food a human right?
India debates this question

In a country that is home to nearly a third
of the planet's hungry people, a food-
for-the-poor program should have been a
no-brainer. But putting India's proposed
food security law in place is proving to be
tortuous task. In an economy that has
just recovered from a global slowdown,
the country's beleaguered infrastructure.
The recent proposal to make an immediate
allocation of 2.5 million metric tons of grain
for six months comes when the country
enjoys a buffer stock of 55 million metric
tons of grain, analysts say. The chief of the
Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPI-M),
Prakash Karat, has also said the current
recommendations would end up excluding
a vast majority of poor from the subsidized
food-grain program.

This is easily one of the largest food
procurement and distribution plans
proposed in recent global history. In fact,
the minister for food and agriculture,
Sharad Pawar, has raised doubts about
the government's ability to procure, stock
and supply the required grains to make the
system work, especially given stagnation
in agricultural output and productivity in
recent years.

But the fiscal implications of expanding the
food-grain program could be huge. The
Indian government traditionally subsidizes
food, fuel and fertilizers for the nation's
poor. International economists say this is a
waste of resources when the administration
could instead channel the money to boost
the country's beleaguered infrastructure.
Even as it dithers on food security, India
is drawing up plans to invest $1 trillion for
boosting its infrastructure. They argue for
a universalization of the public distribution
system of food and directed cash or voucher
assistance in place of the proposed food bill.

Skeptics say the plan to guarantee food
grain to three-fourths of the country's
population could increase the government's
food subsidy bill to more than 72 billion
rupees (around $17 billion in U.S. dollars).
Their argument is that India cannot afford
any substantial strain on its fiscal position,
especially when revenue-generating tax
reforms have not yet kicked in. Others point
out that the government funding would
crowd the private sector out of the food
market, sending food prices higher.

However, food activists are not impressed
with such arguments. They say the govern-
ment's offer of cheap grain is a mere
1.32 percent of its annual gross domestic
product. Food-security activist and eminent
economist Jean Dreze recently described the
proposed bill as "a minimalist proposal that
misses many important elements of food
security" and says it allows the government
"to appear to be doing something radical
for food security, but ... is actually more of the
same."

The fight for the bill is not really new. In
May 2001, a Rajasthan group submitted a
writ petition to the Indian Supreme Court
demanding that the country's gigantic food
stocks should be used without delay to
prevent hunger and starvation. But 9/11, the
2002 Gujarat riots, an attack on the Indian
parliament and the Mumbai attacks put
the matter on the back burner. However,
a series of recent Indian Supreme
Court interim orders on the moral duty of
government got the latter working.

India's attempt to ensure food for all
comes on the heels of 12 countries
having enacted similar legislation.
Success stories in Brazil and Mexico
even inspired the state of New
York to launch Opportunity NYC,
a poverty-alleviation initiative. But imple-
mentation in India is caught between two
warring factions. One argues that the draft
proposals need to be expanded to make
them meaningful, while the other says the
law will only end up bleeding the economy.
It sounds like the health-care debate in the
United States.

It remains to be seen how the Indian
government fulfills its moral obligations to
its people. One only hopes it doesn't go
back to imported food, taking the country
back to the disastrous 1950s "ship-to-
mouth" existence.

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