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Chapter 3

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 a tortuous task. In an economy that has just recovered from a global slowdown, and with a government that wants to keep spending in check, it's little wonder it's a controversial move.

The Indian government is now debating a proposal in which the poorest of the poor and Below Poverty Line (priority) house-

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holds would be entitled to 35 kilograms (about 75 lbs.) of grain per month; general households would get 20 kilograms of grain per month. Prices of 3 rupees (about 7 U.S. cents) per kilogram for rice, 2 rupees per kilo for wheat and 1 rupee per kilo for millet are less than half of what the government pays to buy grain from farmers.

The recent proposal to make an immediate allocation of 2.5 million metric tons of grain for six months 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.



Farmers harvest wheat in Rajasthan state, India.

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 implementation 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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