



The Role of Grama Sabha/Gram Panchayath in Food security

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Abstract

The emerging food scenario underlines the role of gram Sabha—the most powerful constitutional apparatus of democracy at the grass root level. The Gram Sabha can act efficiently to allow the needy to exercise right to food.

Keywords: Grama Sabha, Gram Panchayath, food security, public distribution system, democracy, constitution.

Introduction

India deserves commendation for realizing the food requirement of its swelling¹ population. The farm sector has ably responded to the food security issue. Today India has achieved self-sufficiency in food grain production and is able to export the surplus. In spite of great strides in production of food grain, food insecurity and inequitable distribution of food continue to plague² the Country. The problem is not the production but impaired access to the food specifically by the most vulnerable groups.

India has witnessed green revolution and is readying for the second round of green revolution with newer farm technologies and innovations³ in farming systems. The farming community has demonstrated its coping capacity without letting down their performance despite a quite high frequency of crises in agriculture sector. Yet, many go hungry every day. Malnourishment among children keeps going high. What has gone wrong then? A close examination of persisting⁴ food security scenario underlines three major issues related to food security—Availability, Affordability and Access. These are inter-related. If food is available, can it be afforded by the needy families? If affordable, can it be easily accessed? The most important question is that who is not getting food and why? Of course the poor who are either geographically away from the food distribution points or do not have enough money to afford it.

India ranks 65 among Countries according to Global Hunger Index 2013 released by the International Food Policy Research Institute. The Index has been developed on three main criteria – calorie deficiency, child malnutrition and child mortality. Over 200 million people in India have been reported to unsure about accessing daily bread. The incidence of poverty amongst tribal communities persists⁵ challengingly. It simply means that either system has not reached out the or it is not working properly.

Problems and Limitations of PDS (public distribution system)

The ultra poor families requiring access to food live in remote rural areas. Why should they live without food only because

they live far away from distribution systems or mechanisms. The Targeted Public Distribution System is perhaps one of the biggest food distribution networks in the world considering geographical vastness. The State Governments have strived to improve the functioning of PDS but leakages continue for want of community ownership. Now the Centre is going to enact National food Security Act. Again a radical step it is when seen in the background of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The National food security Act will ensure availability while facilitating affordability to the families devoid of resources, assets and deprived⁶ of opportunities. The PDS network will contribute greatly to effective implementation of the National Food Security Act. The limitation of the PDS is that it works mechanically. Those left in the process of targeting are not addressed. Many deserving families remain without ration card.

Gram Sabha and Food Security

The emerging food scenario underlines the role of Gram Sabha—the most powerful constitutional apparatus⁷ of democracy at the grassroots level. The Gram Sabha can act efficiently to allow the needy to exercise right to food. The most important aspect is that the Gram Sabha draws powers from the constitution. Its decisions are unchallenged. The food security issue can be efficiently addressed by active and empowered Gram Sabha, which is expected to be in a leading role in implementation mechanisms of the proposed National Food Security Act.

There are a number of reasons how and why Gram Sabha could bring about food security in the needy households. The scrutiny of Below Poverty Line (BPL) families by the Gram Sabha and review the BPL list is the responsibility of Gram Sabha. The monitoring of functioning of fair price shops and making them accountable to the people are the two major tasks Gram Sabha can easily do. Besides, the needy can be helped to exercise their rights to food. The malfunctioning of fair price shops has often been reported. The Gram Sabha can keep a strict vigil⁸ over the fair price shops. The Right to Information is another tool to bring about transparency⁹ in stocks.

Conclusion

Although, the Government of India has prescribed a system to involve Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat in food distribution system but educating the Gram Sabha about responsibilities, rights and duties need to be taken up on a war footing¹⁰. Verification of ration cards by the Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat is possible with basic trainings, either by voluntary sector or directly through state-sponsored training sessions.

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