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Intent, design and compatibility pivotal

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Ashok Kotwal, Bharat Ramaswami & Milind Murugkar Notwithstanding our recent growth spurt, India is still a country with lots of poor people. Hunger and destitution is still very much with us. The staggering fact is that nearly half of our children less than age three are not adequately nourished.

Early childhood under-nutrition has long-term consequences for health and capabilities. The poor health status of young adult women is both a consequence and an explanation for under-weight and stunting in children.

So clearly there is a lot to be done. Food security and health are two sides of the same coin and this has to be taken into account in targeting interventions at young children and at women who are either pregnant or are nursing infants. For others, food security would primarily ensure adequate and a diversified diet. The poor are not, in fact, very different from the rich in the amount of rice, wheat or other cereals that are consumed.

However, the poor are unable to afford adequate consumption of milk, vegetables and fruits – foods that are rich in micro-nutrients. This is where the diets of the non-poor are vastly different from the poor.

Food security initiatives have to be judged on how well they are designed to address the challenges mentioned above. One aspect of design is intent. For instance, a food security system that has nothing special to offer to children is clearly not good enough. However, another aspect of design is compatibility. Measures that are proposed have to be such that they can be implemented within our institutional structures. Implementation cannot be an after-thought but should be actively anticipated in the design.

The NAC food security bill scores high on intent. But it scores poorly on compatibility. This is unfortunate and can ultimately lead to a food security act that is low on both intent and compatibility. In other words, we would end up with an Act that by its very design cannot make deep inroads into food insecurity of poor households.

It is important to remember that the food security act will cost a lot of money – in the range of 1-2% of GDP. By comparison, government spending (by the Centre and all states) on health is just about 1% of GDP. Public expenditure on education is in the range of 3-4% of GDP. Therefore, in relation to government spending on other worthwhile social sector programmes, the expenditure on food subsidies will be significant. So a NAC type of bill that is design-deficient will have lots of critics and it may be easier for these critics to tone down and dilute the intent of the bill rather than modify its institutional design.

The intent of the NAC bill is to be comprehensive – to take care of food requirements from life in the womb to old age – the so called life-cycle approach. It proposes special programmes for pregnant and nursing women, young children, older school going children, destitute and migrants and an expanded public distribution system (PDS) for the population at large.

All of these programmes would be endowed as rights and so the NAC bill also devotes attention to their enforcement. Here the NAC bill proposes food commissions at the Centre and the States which would have the autonomy and the power to enforce food rights, investigate infringements, impose fines on offenders (primarily government officials), recommend criminal prosecution and advise governments on food schemes.

Being comprehensive is normally a good thing but not if it leads to over-reach. Although the elaborate provisions regarding the powers of the food commissions indicate a profound mistrust of government machinery, the Bill itself posits an elaborate and parallel bureaucracy with judicial powers of a civil court.

The idea is that a few good women and men will do the trick. It is worth pointing out that community level vigilance committees have been part of the PDS for many years. Not only have the outcomes been disappointing, these committees have also been actively corrupted. This is not to say that all initiatives here are necessarily doomed – it is just that the NAC takes it as self-evident that all it needs to correct an indifferent bureaucracy is another unelected piece of state machinery.

Implementation hurdles
This is particularly troublesome because the bill is drafted to allow for numerous points of intervention by the food commissions. For instance, the bill says that the government shall progressively endeavour to prohibit unnecessary and unwarranted diversion of land and water from food production, to pay special attention to women and youth farmers, provide residential schools to children in care and so on.

The NAC bill is the vision of a few people on that advisory body. The vision of special entitlements for children and young women and an expanded food subsidy system is fundamentally correct. However, the bill closes its eyes to implementation.

The PDS does not function well in many states. Much of the grain and hence the subsidy is looted by black-marketers. Various inefficiencies plague the government system of procurement and distribution that push up costs and absorb subsidies. Expanding procurement by another 25 million tons (to meet the vision of an expanded food subsidy system) has potentially fearful consequences for the grain economy.

The NAC mantra of mandating PDS reforms and decentralised procurement is just that. More importantly, the NAC totally dismisses alternative mechanisms such as indexed cash transfers as ways of achieving its goals.

Ultimately the bill will have to wend its way through the political process at the Centre and the States. It would be tragic if the design deficiencies of the NAC bill were to erode the intent and vision of the bill.

Footing the bill

SUBSIDY	NAC		EAC SCENARIO I		EAC SCENARIO II	
	PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 1	PHASE 2
Priority HH	54449	57652	61636	63093	64880	66414
General HH	17388	22279	17598	21799	20704	25646
Total subsidy required	71837	79931	79234	84892	85584	92060
Current	15670	56700	56700	56700	56700	56700
Additional	56167	23231	22534	28192	28884	35360

* The subsidy burden based on two scenarios will be higher if we account for total logistics of providing these grains. (All the figures in Rs crores.)

(Kotwal is a Professor of Economics at the University of British Columbia, Murugkar is a policy analyst with Pragati Abhiyan, Nasik and Ramaswami is a Professor at the Planning Unit of the Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi.)

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