

Food as a human right

At present about 135 million people are living below the poverty line. Most of them live in the Asia Pacific region and Sub Saharan Africa. The recent food price hike along with the global financial crisis and economic recession lead to an increase of the number of hungry and un nourished people in the world. The research conducted by the International Food Policy and Research Institute (IFPRI) reveals that South Asia has the highest regional Global Hunger Index score (22.6) in 2011.



In Bangladesh, about 25% of the population is ultra poor and only about 7% of the population has access to social safety net programs. The Hunger map of FAO marks Bangladesh in high zone (with a proportion of undernourishment at 27%) and IFPRI marks it at alarming zone through GHI index analysis. Undoubtedly Bangladesh has made significant progress in boosting national food production over the last decades. The country has also introduced new initiatives such as “Input Distribution Card” to nine million holder farmers to obtain agricultural subsidies. However, a large portion of the population still lacks access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. A recent research done by Action Aid (‘On the Brink: Who’s Best Prepared for a Climate Change and Hunger Crisis?’) reveals that among 28 developing countries, Bangladesh has ranked fifth most vulnerable countries to climate change and hunger.

Right to food is a human right

The Universal Human Rights Declaration 25(1) states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lacks of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

The Right to Food is a Human Right. It was recognized in 1966 under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Right (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

UN Special Rapporteur Dr. Ziegler said, “Right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and free access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to food that is quantitatively adequate, corresponds to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and that ensures a physical and mental life, both individual and collective, that is fulfilling and dignified, free of fear”.

Though not as a fundamental right, the Bangladesh Constitution has recognized the state responsibility to citizen's right to food as state policy. Article 15(a) of the Constitution highlights the fundamental responsibility of the State to attain, through planned economic growth, a constant increase of productive forces and a steady improvement in the material and cultural standard of living of the people, with a view to securing to its citizens-the provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care.

Accountability of the state

The 'Right to Food' does not directly imply the "Right to be fed by the government". The state is responsible to create an enabling environment so that one can be fed by oneself. The responsibility of the State to ensure the right to food for all citizens covers three different aspects.

1. The obligation to Respect: The State is accountable to ensure access to food including access to natural resources which are means to food security and livelihood.
2. The obligation to Protect: The State is responsible to look after the marginalized community in particular through legal support so that their food security is not threatened or challenged by powerful community or business sector.
3. The obligation to Fulfill: The State is also responsible to promote access to resources and utilization of resources to increase capability of people so that their food security is ensured.

Our honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina signed the Millennium Declaration which sets a target to halve the proportion of people who suffers from hunger and malnutrition by 2015. We are proud and hopeful to observe the decreasing trend of poverty but hunger and malnutrition remains a big concern for us.

Need political commitment

The "Zero Hunger Policy" of Brazil is one of the best examples which shows that hunger and nutrition could be dealt with a well designed social safety net program to decrease the number of hungry people within a short period of time. In 2007, Brazil court introduced the ESC jurisprudence with an order to provide sufficient food for school children. Our neighboring country India introduced the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which allows the citizens to claim their right to work with a strong legal framework. The Supreme Court of Nepal in a landmark decision in 2008 issued order to ensure priority based food supply in the vulnerable areas and suggested the government to strengthen the food distribution system.

Bangladesh is well appreciated in the world for its commitment to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are also reflected in the election manifesto. We believe significant change will be possible, if the commitments are translated into policy and actions. We hope geographic coverage and resource of social safety net programs like Employment Generation Program and second phase of Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Program will be increased. Newly introduced school feeding program plans to cover about 73,000 urban working children which need to be sustained and coverage need to be expanded. But present notion of considering these as benevolent initiative to the poor people need to shifted to a right based perspective. Thus the National Human Rights Commission considers the Right to Food and other Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as fundamental rights. On the occasion of World Food Day and Poverty Eradication Day, the commission calls the government to recognize Right to Food and other ESC Rights as fundamental rights through inclusion in constitution and appropriate legislative framework and policies.

Source: National Human Rights Commission, Bangladesh.