RIGHT TO FOOD UNDER RULE OF LAW

Right to food is a basic human right. But the question is whether all the South Asian countries today have the legal binding with appropriate law to make sure that every household is getting enough food and at affordable price. In other words there should be law which will hold the government responsible for death and miseries that a person may face from procuring enough food for a minimum living. Another issue slowly hitting the mind of the regional civil society leaders is whether the Food Bank should be an emergency stock or it should be broad based to trade off food grains among member states who buy rice, wheat or such other essentials from countries located at the other parts of the world like Australia, Ukraine or the USA.

SAARC FOOD BANK/ FOOD SECURITY RESERVES

The SAARC Food Bank was established initially to provide emergency supply to a nation facing crisis resulting from production shortfall or a natural calamity like cyclone, floods, draught, earthquake and such other factors. The 14th SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2007 approved the move to adopt a common approach to collective food security of the region and since then the institutional progress and policy guidelines have much walked ahead to give a functional character. SAARC Food Bank is now operational and the question is now how to make it broad based and responsive to taking challenges of disaster mitigation that a nation may suffer from any of the calamities.

It seems to be working this time, albeit at slow pace. The shocking experience of the failure of the SAARC Food Security Reserve which was set up in 1988 has not revisited the Food Bank initiative this time. And much of the credit for this should go to the regional leaders who have heard the voices of the civil society organizations in all those countries which are working relentlessly to unite the people of the region under a common goal for future.

The earlier SAARC Food Reserves failed much more from the lack of political good will, especially of the big partner within the group. This time it moved positively, although much of the bureaucratic impediments are yet to be overcome to prove its worth and expand the base of the regional stock. In the bitter backdrop of the earlier experiences, SAARC leaders in 2008 reaffirmed their commitment again to create a common “regional and sub-regional collective self-reliance with respect to food security as a means of combating the adverse effect of natural and man made calamities.” This is what the preamble of the Food Bank agreement said as the most coveted goal of the initiative. But the goal is not always adhered to with all seriousness. For example the board of governors of the SAARC Food Bank is yet to meet at the annual meeting at Thimpu, capital of Bhutan although the summit is in sight next month and why it is yet to meet or whether the meeting will take place at all still remain unclear and a big question.

FAILURE OF AFGHAN RATIFICATION

Moreover the joining of Afghanistan to the Food Bank still remains uncertain. This is because the Afghan parliament is yet to ratify the agreement of the country’s participation to the common stock. This failure is putting many snags to put the Food Bank on quick track as the SAARC charter said all decisions must have a consensus view and the absence of Afghan ratification is all but unexpected. Why it is taking so much time is a big suspect when the country has taken a seat on the group. Is it for the pre-occupation of the Afghan government to an endless war or one may wonder whether any third party influence is working behind it.

Critics say, the SAARC system may call for a new thinking to salvage it from the need for compulsory ratification of agreements as a precondition to adaptation of a decision. In certain cases relating to
purely food and humanitarian issues, the mandatory ratification rule may be relaxed; they say to pave the way to allowing moves such as the Food Bank to function without handicaps.

**FOOD BANK FOR THE SOUTH ASIAN HUNGRY**

A collective food security for South Asian nations has a great implication for ordinary people, especially for the hungry people living under the poverty line. They are the people who get hard hit as soon as any natural calamity hits the nation or part of their region. They are also the people who become easy target once a country faces repeated crop failure due to draught, flood or such other impacts resulting from global climatic changes. SAARC Food Bank has therefore made two distinctly defined goals. It will bring in emergency supply to strengthen national effort to beef up local stock in time of an emergency or a deep national supply shortage.

“A food emergency shall mean a state or condition in which a member state, having suffered a severe and unexpected natural or man-made calamity, is unable to cope with such a state of condition by using its national reserve.” Moreover, “a food shortage shall mean a state or condition in which a member country has suffered a production shortfall and/or storage shortfall and find it difficult to cope with such a state or condition by using its national reserve.” The production shortfall to justify emergency supply from the Food Bank has been further defined as a situation in which “production of food grains in the current year is lower than the average of the production of the previous three years by 8.0 percent.” However, a member country may also “initiate a request on seasonal basis considering the impact of such seasonal shortfall in annual production.”

The board of governors of the SAARC Food Bank annually review and recommend new steps to relax, if necessary, the minimum qualifying standards or some other qualifying criteria to bring adjustment to rules of business to the stock compatible with the reality in the ground.

PEOPLE’S FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

It has therefore two distinct objectives: (a) to work as a regional reserve for food security during emergency and (b) to develop a common response under joint initiative to combat food shortfall in a member country. The idea behind the stock build up must work to give the people a sense of easy access to supply at times of emergency, meaning a sovereign right to get the food supply from the market. It should be unimpeded and no artificial crisis can overtake it resulting from hoarding or such other manipulations. And secondly it must be low cost and affordable to the poor to which the concept of national food security has a direct bearing. For food sovereignty therefore, enough domestic production must be in hand, in addition to expansion and diversification of agriculture. The nation must produce enough to give the cover of food sovereignty to people without depending others. Any large scale import of food grains or speaking otherwise, import dependence can’t promote food sovereignty. Keeping these objectives in view, all member states should therefore prepare their agricultural and food production strategy and plan of action to produce enough food domestically and make it available to other members as and when it is so required.

Ensuring food security to people also require efficient distributive network, besides putting in place extensive safety-net programs for the poor. It must include distribution of low cost rice and wheat and such other food to the poor at affordable price and before a vulnerable group or community get severely hurt from food shortage.

**FOOD SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

Food production depends on climatic condition. It affects weather, soil condition, humidity, floods, draughts and so on. Devastating cyclones may wash away crops, floods may destroy it in the field, tidal bore can destroy human habitation and means of their livelihood. So relating food production and seasonal pattern of cropping cycles with changing climate condition is important. Experts say alone in the Bay of Bengal a total of 54 cyclonic storms originate annually, mostly in the Manson season. They die in the high sea but if ever anyone of it hits the coastline, the scale of devastation in huge. Cyclone Sidr or Nargis reminds us how it disastrous they may turn to the people in terms of killing human being, destroying houses, animals and crops. So augmenting food production is not only important to give food...
security to people, collective efforts are also required to fight back climatic challenges. The need for mitigation and adaptation measures, its strategic planning and also plan of action both regionally and in country specific situation should therefore be developed from a common platform.

**PRESENT CAPACITY OF SAARC FOOD BANK**

Initially, SAARC Food Bank has a dedicated stock of 2,41,580 metric tones under the agreement. Out of it, India were to contribute 1,53,200 metric tones, Bangladesh and Pakistan 40,000 tones each, Nepal and Sri Lanka 4,000 tones each and Afghanistan, Maldives and Bhutan 1420 tones, 200 tones and 180 tones respectively. The stock has been doubled now to 4,82,000 metric tones and the contribution of each country has been doubled accordingly. It is a welcome development but political observers believe that the stock must be upgraded to at least one million tones with proportionate rise in individual country’s contributions.

In fact SAARC countries should commit to dedicate their entire stock to facing emergency or production shortages in one country or the other under a joint food security umbrella for the entire population of the region. It should be a holistic umbrella to support efforts within a nation and across the border. This is what a hunger free South Asia looks forward and people expect it from their leadership. In the context of the global price and supply fluctuations the ASEAN group is now setting up a highly sustainable Food Bank for its member states. The South Asian nation may try to follow it where it may suits its purpose to improve the stock build up, price fixation, marketing, delivery system and so on.

**GLOBAL COMMODITY MARKET**

To ensure food security to the nation, the Bangladesh government imported 5.4 million metric tones of food grains in the fiscal 2010-11 and the volume of import showed how this nation can keep on hunting the supply source. Meanwhile, rice and wheat prices increased by 24 percent and 84 percent respectively between July 2010 and March 2011 in the global market. Diminished production in major exporting countries resulting from draughts in Russia and floods in Canada, China, Pakistan, Thailand and Australia contributed to this price hike. The soaring prices of food grains in 2008 remained the most devastating example of how import dependent nations like Bangladesh got into the trap. Supply shortfall and surging prices hit the poor all the more. Prices of food grains are again on the rise and the question how SAARC as a group can work to overcome the situation is assuming a bigger dimension.

South Asia has several rice producing nations close to its border like Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam or Cambodia. But buying of stock from them is not always an easy task conditioned by bulk order and forward booking of harvest by big parties like China. In such situation demand for exorbitant prices make the buying nation a hostage to the supplier nation or to the multinational oligarchs who behold the stock. Most devastating experience in this case is the Indian government ban on export of rice or spices even to its closest neighbor like Bangladesh. It happened after Cyclone Sidr hit the country, despite the sale announcement from the highest level of the Indian government of a 5.0 lakh tones of rice and wheat to Bangladesh. Its shipment never reached the country. Now Bangladesh has signed agreements with Ukraine for supply of wheat and Vietnam for procurement of rice. Here the question comes time and again how the region can be able to support each other reducing dependence on distant suppliers which is both time consuming and expensive.

**SAARC AGRICULTURE**

Here the policy outlook may not be limited to creating a common stock but to diversify food production in all eight countries with high yielding varieties of rice and such other crops. Moreover, the region should take steps to stop switching of land to non-food cash crop including fuel production. SAARC agricultural extension must take a new impetus with exchange of research, technology and other seasonal adjustment targets. The ministerial level committee which SAARC has set up should therefore meet regularly to evolve new strategy of cooperation and exchange to bring benefit of new breakthrough in agriculture to the entire region as a food producing and sustaining nation.
LOCATION OF SAARC FOOD STOCK

Critics say SAARC Food Bank delivery mechanism and inter-governmental contact procedure should be restructured so that stock can be quickly transferred to the aggrieved nation from a closer distance and at an economic cost. Member states have therefore the responsibility to earmark the stock and notify the storage in closer locations across the border from where supply can be quickly delivered to the country hit by an emergency.

Under the existing arrangement Bangladesh is maintaining its stocks in several locations at Khulna, Chittagong and at godowns in the Dinajpur districts. So also India, Pakistan and other member states are maintaining their dedicated stocks in convenient locations and routinely notifying it to one another through the SAARC Secretariat and through the nodal points which is authorized by every government to deal with Food Bank related matters.

NEED FOR POLITICAL WILL

SAARC Food Bank’s functioning is quite vulnerable to several procedural issues; although it has already traveled quite a long distance. Lack of political will remains the biggest impediment coupled with a negative attitude of bureaucracy, especially from Indian bureaucracy to quick execute decisions at a time when a member state may be looking for emergency supply. These are the identified problems that every one understands and talked about but its remedy however rests on slow recovery from the parochial mindset of those people at the top.

Though the SAARC Food Security Reserve was established in 1988 it never came to the rescue of an aggrieved nation. Bangladesh has several devastating floods and calamities in the meantime, but regional food security umbrella had never delivered the goods. The country experienced a severe flood in 1988, a devastating cyclone in 1999 and yet another severe flood 1998 when the SAARC Food Security Reserve was formally in place but practically out of context. Very recently Bangladesh suffered from cyclone *Sidr* in 2008 and *Aila* in 2009 but the SAARC Food Bank did not lend a helping hand. Meanwhile, Pakistan suffered from a flood it had never seen before in 2010 but SAARC Food Bank was visible nowhere abound, at least symbolically.

PROCEDURAL FLAW

This organization has as many procedural flaws that need to be resolved quickly. One such problem is deciding on supply intervention, when and how quickly. The second problem relates to price fixation. People believe that the price fixation for food grains under the SAARC Food Bank should be further rationalized. It can be seen that a member state in need of quick supply can’t buy food grains from the open market of a member country which is cheaper than price offered at official negotiation. The Food Bank concept should not be based on market price or even higher than that. It should be reasonable from international market price. But reality is that country like India adds its system loss at stocks and transportation to cost to selling price victimizing the buyer, be t from the next door.

PRICE FORMULA TO BE RATIONALIZED

So the SAARC Food Bank should agree to a price mechanism which would offer reasonable, humane and concessional price, closer to open market price without passing the overhead cost of economic inefficiencies on the buyers. Harmonization of quality is also a big challenge. Another problem may create impediment relating to food statistics. For instance, the government in many countries manipulates statistical data to show a steadily higher food grains production every year over the previous year as part of the success story of the party in power. These manipulated figures are posted in printing materials and maintained in official dossiers.

Now if the country suffers a production setback in a particular year, its statistics of the earlier two years may not be able to corroborate the fact it has suffered from production loss. Such things must be avoided from now, experts say.


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