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Administering food security

Madhya Pradesh model offers a way forward

The delay in the National Advisory Council (NAC) finalising its proposals for food security legislation seems to stem from the realisation that legislation is easy, execution is difficult. Once a right to food law is in place, the governments at the Centre and in the states will be expected to deliver, failing which there could be serious political backlash. Identifying the beneficiary is one problem, delivering food to the beneficiary is the second and bigger problem. It is now clear that the unique identity card developed by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) would form the basis for choosing the beneficiaries of the right to food law. The main objective of doing so, evidently, is to distinguish between genuine and bogus beneficiaries of both the public distribution system (PDS) and the food security law. The number of fake ration cards in existence today is shockingly large. Going by official reckoning, while the total number of households falling in the below poverty line (BPL) category is reckoned at 65.2 million, as many as 110.8 million ration cards had been issued by the state governments till March 2009. This is despite leaving a sizeable proportion of deserving households out of the PDS network. These fake cards, coupled with corruption at the ration shop level, constitute the major source of leakage of highly subsidised foodgrain. Such swindling ought not to be allowed to go on.

Issuing of UID-linked smart cards and computerisation of PDS operations are generally viewed as effective means of eliminating bogus cards and preventing diversion of subsidised foodgrain. It was chiefly with this end in

view that pilot projects were launched in Andhra Pradesh and Chandigarh to try out the effectiveness of smart cards. Interestingly, while definitive conclusions from these pilot projects are still awaited, the Madhya Pradesh government has come out with the claim that it has, on its own, conducted such trials and has found the smart-card model unsuccessful. It has, therefore, improved upon this system by conceiving another model involving UID-linked biometric cards for identification of beneficiaries and separate food coupons for disbursement of grains. The problem with the use of smart cards as virtual ration cards is that it requires ration shop owners to use machines for deciphering biometric cards which they are generally reluctant to do. Besides, and perhaps more importantly, the lack of written and easily readable information on the smart card about the precise entitlement of the customer for different commodities leaves the scope for cheating by the shopkeepers. Thus, this system served only a limited purpose of keeping the fake beneficiaries at bay, without effectively plugging other malpractices. Under the Madhya Pradesh model, on the other hand, food coupons will have the entitlement clearly spelt out on them and biometric verification will be done only once a year at the time of distributing the coupons to the beneficiaries. Prima facie, this system seems simpler and consumer-friendly, as consumers would be aware of the ration due to them. A shopkeeper would only have to take the coupons and deliver the goods mentioned therein. There is merit in adopting this model nationwide, for a targeted PDS, extending it later to grain delivery for food security.