# Foreword

It is a rare privilege indeed to be invited to introduce this remarkable series of essays on food justice in India. I am grateful to the Institute of Development Studies and to Oxfam India for this opportunity. The lessons that emerge are important and timely for India and beyond. This is a country with a GDP growth rate that has oscillated between 6 and 10 per cent over the past ten years. It is also a country which has significantly increased its production of major cereals since the early 1960s, thanks to technological advances that other regions now are seeking to replicate. Yet it is also a country with one of the highest rates of stunting in the world – at 43 per cent, the clearest indication of chronic undernutrition.

What went wrong? There is no simple answer. But some lessons may be drawn from the Indian experience, and from other countries that are facing a similar predicament.

A first lesson is that food security is not only about improving agricultural production. It is also about who benefits from the development paths that are chosen; it is about the bargaining position of smallholders, and about the spread between the farmgate prices received by farmers and the retail prices paid by consumers; it is about the evolution of the price of basic food commodities relative to wages; and it is about rights. For the rural poor, who depend on producing food for their livelihoods, a rights-based approach means that they have access to grievance mechanisms when they do not benefit from the services or the support that they should in principle receive; that they should be protected from eviction from their land; and that the food systems must be reshaped in order to accommodate the particular situation of the poorest and most marginal producers. For the poor in general, especially the net food buyers, it means that social protection programmes must not simply address basic needs: they must invest people with rights they can claim.

By transforming a range of social programmes, eight in total, that governments are now prohibited from reversing, the Supreme Court of India established a link between the constitutionally recognised right to life and specific measures that were not initially seen as implementing a constitutional mandate. In doing so it also significantly strengthened the effectiveness of the programmes concerned. Indeed, social protection schemes that are human rights-based are grounded in an adequate legal and institutional framework: they take the form of legally binding and enforceable rights and obligations. This provides legal certainty and reduces the risk that political changes may jeopardise existing social protection programmes. Grounding social protection schemes on human rights also ensures transparency and access to information, both of which are essential to accountability: in order for complaints mechanisms to effectively address corruption, political clientelism, or discrimination, individuals need to be able to recognise and understand eligibility criteria, the benefits to be received and the remedies they can use.

Human rights-based social programmes present other characteristics that the current debate on the National Food Security Bill served, in part, to highlight. They are schemes that fit into comprehensive, cross-sectoral policies, that take into account the fact that poor nutritional outcomes are not just a matter of prices of staples or of calorie intake, but also of diversity in diets, of adequate health and of education in sound nutritional practices. They are schemes that respect the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination, including the adoption of special measures to protect the most marginalised and disadvantaged segments of society as a matter of priority, while moving progressively towards universal protection. They are schemes that are based on the active and meaningful participation of the intended

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beneficiaries, in the design, implementation and evaluation of the programmes concerned: this improves the quality of the programmes, it strengthens their legitimacy, and it reduces the risk of under-inclusion.

A second lesson is that sometimes the programmes that work best are not those that are imposed from the top down. The poor in fact are very inventive. They often know, better than any technocrat, what they need to overcome the obstacles they face. In India, women have formed self-help groups in which they join their efforts to address their problems collectively, train to achieve a sufficient degree of functional literacy, learn how to use new technologies, or set up rural distribution networks to facilitate access to markets for small food producers. These are searchers, not planners. While India has established some remarkable social programmes, that are envied and copied in many parts of the developing world, it is important that we remain modest, that we also provide avenues for these groups to share their experiences, identify problems they encounter, and co-design ways to overcome them. Empowerment also contributes to collective learning and to accelerating the capacity of public and private organisations to improve the kind of support they can provide.

A third lesson is that the fight against discrimination and the focus on the most vulnerable is vital in the realisation of the right to food for all. Women, who provide 32 per cent of the workforce in the agricultural sector in India, still face widespread discrimination in access to resources and to services, limiting their opportunities. Yet, by helping them, we help everyone: when women improve their access to income and their bargaining position within the household, this leads to immediate and significant improvements in nutritional outcomes for the family, and in the children's health and education. Scheduled tribes and *Adavasis* are also under particular threat. They are among the main victims of the increased pressure on natural resources that results from competition for the use of land and water between food production, the production of cash crops (including energy crops), large-scale development projects such as special economic zones and urbanisation. It is therefore particularly welcome that a number of contributions to this special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* focus on these groups.

The right to food case filed over ten years ago before the Supreme Court, and now the launch of a national debate on the National Food Security Bill, have created considerable expectations. These events, that have a worldwide resonance far beyond India, have served as a rallying point for a dynamic and extraordinarily large food justice movement in the country. The failure to act is even less excusable now. Because of the urgency. Because our understanding of what needs to be done has significantly improved over the past few years. And also because alliances now have become possible, to unite different food movements and different groups which were traditionally seen as having divergent, or even opposed interests. The urban poor were seen as having an interest in cheap food, at the expense of the rural areas who were taxed and cheated to satisfy the needs of cities: we have come to realise now that both groups have the same interest in local food systems that can at the same time increase farmers' incomes, and ensure the provision of nutritious and adequate food at affordable prices to the urban consumers. The interests of 'the West' were seen as opposed to the interests of 'the rest', as high levels of protection and subsidies in rich countries were denounced as obstacles to the growth of agriculture in the global South. We understand now that what matters is to allow each country or each region to feed itself, without destroying the ability of other countries or regions to do the same by food dumping practices, and that small farmers from all regions have a common interest in being protected from competition by large agrifood companies in their domestic markets. We thought the interest of plantation workers was opposed to those of independent small farmers, because each of these groups depends on a different type of farming. We see now that alliances between them are both possible and desirable, based on their common interest in ensuring an adequate regulation of large commodity buyers and landowners, and in a taxation and subsidies system that obliges plantation owners to internalise the social and environmental costs of their ways of producing food. We were in a situation in which the State was seen as a monolith, to which the rural workers were necessarily opposed. We now have many examples of parliamentarians and local governments playing an important role in encouraging a shift towards another food system, and in holding the government to account.

The earlier barriers are falling. New alliances are forged – between the urban and the rural and within the rural world between farmworkers and independent small food producers, between farmers from the North and farmers from the South, and between actors in the food system who have been traditionally repressed and elements of the State who have often been absent from the formulation of policies. This unique collection of essays, by the best commentators on the situation of food security and the right to food in India, provides us with an indispensable tool to understand the challenges that these movements now have a responsibility to address.

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