

Community Operated Food Banks: an Analysis

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The concept of community operated food grain banks was suggested by Dr M S Swaminathan, Chairman of the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation as an alternative to the Public Distribution system (PDS). He has asked the union government to spare just five million tons from its 65 million ton buffer to trigger a national movement of "community grain banks" under the management control of a community grain bank society or council. The bank will have three major groups of members: entitlement group, ecology group and ethical group. A self-help group will manage each of these.

The entitlement group comprises families that are entitled to the benefits of government schemes like targeted public distribution system, *Antyodaya*, *Anna Yojana*, *Annapoorna*. The ecology group will consist those who wish to join the food for eco-development programme. The work undertaken will be related to wasteland and watershed development, social forestry. Grains will be used for greening the area. Members of the ethical group will be entitled to free access to foodgrain and other categories of available foods and will belong to groups like pregnant and nursing mothers, infants, school children, old and infirm persons.

The grain bank council can also be empowered to act in emergencies to provide immediate relief to people affected by natural calamities. It can also meet the challenge of seasonal slides in livelihood opportunities. It is estimated that about one ton of foodgrains would be sufficient for a family of five for a year. The suggestion is that, to begin with, grain banks, each with 200 tones of wheat or rice or other locally acceptable staples like *ragi* (finger millet), *jowar* (sorghum), *bajra* (pearl millet) and maize could be established in "hunger hot spot" villages.

Remote areas, with poor communication, like the desert areas of Rajasthan, and hill, tribal and drought-affected areas can be given priority in starting the grain bank movement. With five million tons of foodgrains supplied from the central stocks, in the first five months 25,000 grain banks can be established.

Dr Swaminathan sees Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh with their own schemes ideally suited to kick-start the grain bank movement. "These community grain banks can be the entry point to not only bridging the nutritional divide, but also for fostering social and gender equity, ecology and employment. They can be equipped to cater to emergencies like cyclones, floods, drought, earthquakes," he says.

The community grain banks can be sustained with locally procured grains, wherever feasible. They should be linked to the rural godowns' scheme. The banks could function under the overall umbrella of the gram sabha, and can be operated by local self-help groups of women and men. This will ensure their relevance to local conditions in addition to involving low transaction costs. The community grain banks could be used for initiating at the local level food-for-work, food-for-nutrition (i.e. distribution of food among pregnant and nursing mothers, infants and old and infirm persons), waste land and watershed development, ecological restoration of common property resources and for establishing community water banks. They can also be the vehicles for operating the targeted public distribution, *Antyodaya Anna Yojana* and other central and state government schemes. Thus, the

community grain banks can become instruments of eco-restoration, water harvesting and hunger elimination.

For the CFB (Community Food Bank) movement to succeed there is need for training managers of such food banks and for building the capacity of the Community Oversight Council to plan and monitor the different programmes. Training modules will have to be prepared for this purpose. Accounting and monitoring software will have to be developed and the members of the self-help groups will have to be trained in the use of the software and in managing computer-aided knowledge centres linked to CFBs. Four training modules relating to entitlements, eco-development, ethics and emergencies will have to be developed, so that each SHG (self-help group) is headed by a professionally trained person. A network of institutions which will provide the necessary managerial, technical and training support to managers of self-help groups and CFBs will have to be organised in every country where there is a strong political commitment to end the nutritional divide as soon as possible.

Operationalising the Scheme:

I. Guiding Principles

a) *Whole Life Cycle Approach*

There are several ongoing projects that pay attention to the following:

1. Pregnant Mothers
2. Nursing Mothers (support for breast feeding for six months)
3. Infants (0-2 years)
4. Pre-school children (2-6 years)
5. Youth (6-18 years)
 - a) School going
 - b) School push-outs (including adolescent girls)
6. Adults (18-60 years)
7. Old and infirm persons
8. Transient Hunger (during natural calamities)

It would be useful to prepare an integrated database on all the available schemes and identify the missing links.

b) *Develop an integrated Action Plan involving the following seven steps:*

1. Identification of the ultra poor, suffering from poverty induced protein-energy under-nutrition;
2. Issue of Household Entitlement Passbooks, indicating the schemes to which the family is entitled and give information on how to access the entitlements;
3. Fight calorie deficiency through the efficient operation of numerous ongoing schemes;
4. Eliminate hidden hunger caused by the deficiency of micro-nutrients;
5. Ensure access to safe drinking water, environmental hygiene and primary health care;
6. Strengthen livelihoods through market driven micro-enterprises operated by self-help groups supported by micro-credit;
7. Give special attention to pregnant and nursing mothers and infants in order to avoid the incidence of low birth weight (LBW) children and to prevent malnutrition induced impaired brain development.

For achieving such an integrated approach, suitable institutional structures like a local level Nutrition Security Council consisting of equal number of women and men may be set up under the guidance of the gram sabha/ panchayat.

II. Community Food/ Grain Bank as a decentralised, low transaction and transport cost mechanism for achieving Nutrition Security

a) Tribal Areas

The Government of India has already announced a scheme for establishing Grain Banks in tribal areas. These should be so designed as to make them become community centred and controlled instruments for local level food security. The design should be such that they become sustainable and replicable. The Community Grain Banks (CGBs) in tribal areas should concentrate on setting up:

- Field Gene Banks, to conserve local biodiversity through in-situ on-farm conservation
- Village Seed Banks, to preserve local food crops
- Water Banks, to conserve rain water and utilise it efficiently
- Eco-restoration and Wasteland development activity

Where feasible, the above activities can be undertaken by self-help groups under the guidance of the Tribal Councils. In addition to conservation and nutrition, food for health and education programmes can be initiated.

b) Non-tribal Areas

Here, the attempt has to be to use all the existing schemes, particularly the *Sampoorn Gramin Rozgar Yojana* and *Annapoorna*, in an effective manner. Wherever possible, Community Grain Banks could be established, which could then become the hubs of a local level food security system.

III. Storage and Administration

a) Training and Capacity Building

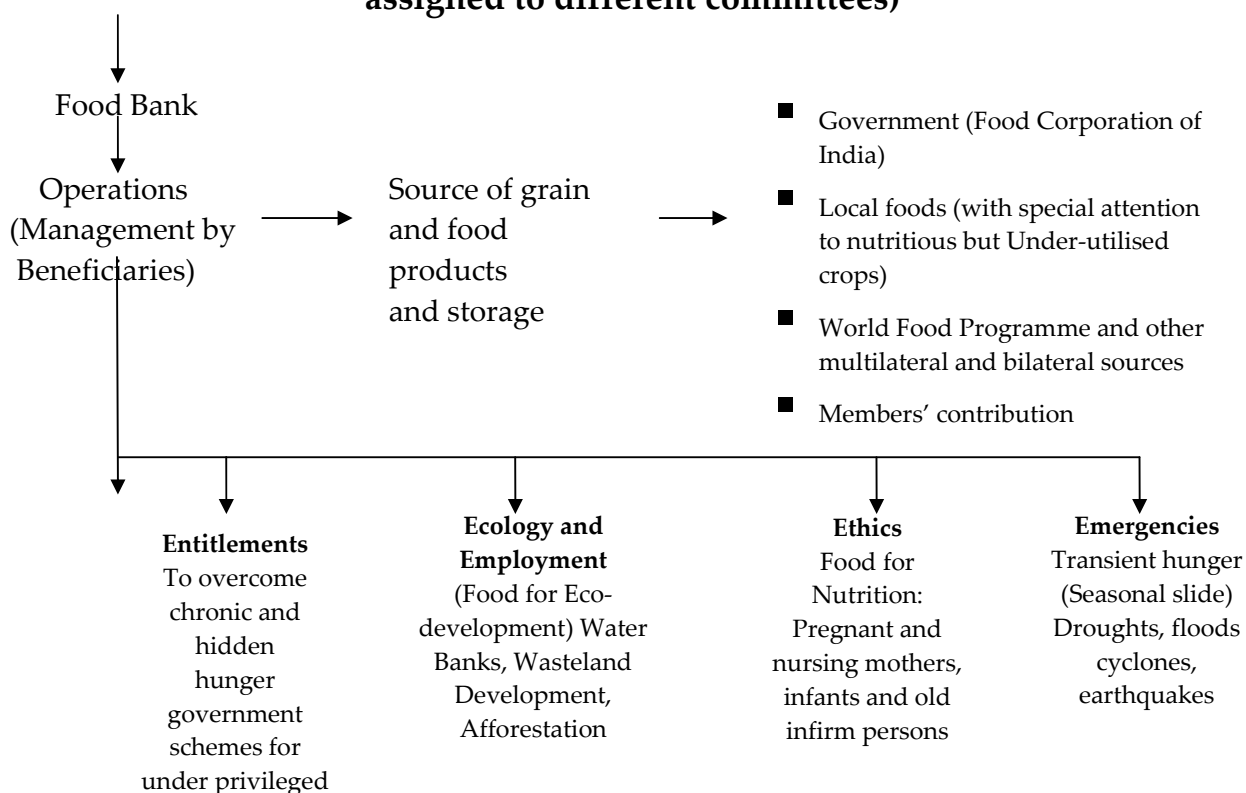
The Self Help Groups (SHGs) operating the system can be trained under the Government of India's Save Grain Programme and the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation–World Food Programme (MSSRF-WFP) Resource Centre for Community Food Banks at Chennai.

b) Storage Structures

The Rural Godown Scheme may be linked with the Community Food Bank programme. Other viable storage alternatives, the expertise of the Indian Grain Storage Management Research Institute, have to be explored. Private companies like Tata Steel also have expertise in this line. Different models can be tried according to the variety and volume of grains to be stored as well as local agro-climatic conditions.

Community Food Bank

(Managed by a Stakeholder Council, with different operations assigned to different committees)



Observations

- The system is not at all well defined. As can be seen from the above figure the role of the members is not at all well defined.
- The proposal talks of food grain banks which are not banks at all. They are more like a godown scheme and that's why there is continuous talk of integrating them with the rural warehousing scheme.
- The proposal talks of continuous government support and finance. Thus, leaving scope of corruption and inefficiency.
- This scheme is nothing else but a modified version of Public Distribution System and hence we have all reason to believe that it is not going to work.
- The operationalisation of the scheme includes a step where market driven micro-enterprises are proposed to be operated by self-help groups supported by micro-credit. However, the terms "micro enterprises" and "micro credit" are not distinguished. There is no clarity regarding who will comprise these groups.

- The operationalisation also talks of issuing Household Entitlement Passbooks. These Passbooks will be no different than the already existing Ration Cards, which as everybody knows have become more of a proof document than to be used for using Fair Price Shops.
- This scheme also leaves a lot of scope for double counting. What I mean by that is that many people below the poverty line who already fall under other food schemes will get included in this one also. There is no clear demarcation as to who can be member of this scheme.
- Also, since this scheme has all the elements of becoming a mini PDS it will only increase the costs to the government. The transportation costs and the storage costs are going to increase largely. Also, since once such schemes come into being they continue for a long period of time this cost will be recurring and not fixed.

Overall, according to my evaluation, this system has all the components of turning into a mini PDS. With corruption and wastage of resources rampant in our economy, this scheme will just add fuel to fire. As a famous economist has said that you have got a huge bureaucracy to acquire grains, why build another one to dispose it.