Legislation on Right to Food

What is the issue?

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- India has framed various legislations regarding food security.
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- Such legislations in practice mismatches with international definitions
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What is India’s approach to food security?

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- In 1960’s India roped in green revolution approach to attain food security in quantitative terms by boosting food production.
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- India’s current understanding of food security includes the four dimensions of access, availability, utilisation and stability.
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- Supreme Court dramatically expanded the ambit of rights that citizens could claim against the state.
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- While no explicit ‘right to food’ could be made out, there was an increased mention of food as being among a cluster of basic rights integral to human dignity.
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- Later Supreme Court evolved a right to food and read it into the right to life provisions of the Constitution.
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- Based on which the 2013 National Food Security Act (NFSA), has been lauded for guaranteeing a quantitative “right to food” to all Indians.
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What are the concerns with India’s approach on food security?

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- **Green Revolution -** While green revolution approach achieved dramatic increases in rice and wheat production in some parts of the country, it left a devastating environmental impact on the society.
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- **Public distribution flaws -**The 1980s and 1990s saw an increasing acknowledgement that India's focus on increasing food supplies was falling short of actually ameliorating hunger.
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- Even as the data showed that India had transformed from a food deficit nation to a food surplus, hunger and food security were tied to the issue of access.
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- Which is in spite of ample quantities of grain, and a variety of government efforts such as the Public Distribution System, people were dying of starvation because they were unable to physically or financially (or both) reach this food.
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- **Pitfalls of NFSA -**The legislation suffers from serious lacunae in its drafting, which severely undermine its stated objective of giving legal form to the right to food in India.
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- The NFSA surprisingly does not guarantee a universal right to food. Instead, it limits the right to food to those identified on the basis of certain criteria.
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- It also specifies that a claim under the Act would not be available in times of "war, flood, drought, fire, cyclone or earthquake" (notably, it is within the Central government's remit to declare whether such an occasion has arisen).
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- NFSA is also largely silent on the issue of stability of food supplies a startling omission given India's vulnerability to climate change impacts, to name one impending threat to food security.
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What measures needs to be taken?

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- India needs to implement the global definitions of food security such as
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1. **World Food Conference, 1974** - It defined food security primarily in terms of production as the “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies.”
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2. **World Food Summit, 1996 definition** - It stated that food security was achieved “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food.”
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- There is a need to frame a “third generation” food security law and recognise and mainstream issues including increasing natural disasters and climate adaptation.
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- Such a framework would robustly address the challenges facing the country’s food security across all four dimensions and make a coordinated effort to resolve them instead of the piecemeal efforts that have characterised such attempts so far.
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- Policy makers need to address issues such as inequality, food diversity, indigenous rights and environmental justice while framing food security legislations.
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Source: The Hindu

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