



Bhaskar Vira



Bhaskar Vira



Bhaskar Vira



TRANSLATING KNOWLEDGE TO POLICY ON FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA



Problem: Amidst a plentiful agricultural yield, when the government warehouses were stocked with millions of tons of surplus grain, a number of deaths due to starvation were reported from various parts of India in 2000/2001. This paradox of 'hunger amidst plenty' became the subject of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL), filed in the Supreme Court of India by the People's Union for Civil Liberties, directed against the Union of India, all state governments, and the Food Corporation of India. The PIL demanded that the government must meet its responsibility of granting food to its citizens, by including the 'right to food' in the Indian constitution.

Response: In order to ensure that food reached the hungry, the Indian Supreme Court appointed Commissioners on Food Security, whose office gradually became a crucial platform for advocacy on the 'right to food'. The Commissioners' reports were the principal instrument through which research was translated into a direct output to be taken up by judicial proceedings. The effectiveness of the Commissioners' Office was considerably shaped by the background of its members, who had all been part of the Indian Administrative Service and were aware of the types and sources of evidence that would achieve maximum impact within the bureaucratic context.

Stakeholders and networks: Ease of access to published output, in terms of availability and costs, was an influential factor in determining which bits of research were most used in the process. The Commissioners were also supported by a team of academic advisors, who were further linked to the Right to Food Campaign, an informal network of researchers, non governmental organisations, and activists, who were pressuring the government for the implementation of a new policy on the 'right to food'. The Centre for Equity Studies, a Delhi-based think tank, conducted research into issues related to deprivation and access to food for the Commissioners, and was also an important partner in this network.

Research and knowledge: The Commissioners used various sources of evidence in making policy recommendations: reports written by non governmental organisations and individual advisors, internationally-funded research on specific dimensions of food security, editorials in national dailies and magazines, articles in easily accessible journals, such as the Economic and Political Weekly, research reports and conference presentations, proceedings on websites, such as those of the Department for International Development and the World Bank. The Commissioners also recorded their fieldwork observations, which were published as field reports.

Communication: Communication between researchers and policy makers was facilitated by the Right to Food Campaign and the Centre for Equity Studies. Researchers also used audio-visual and print media creatively for both shaping public opinion and public policy.

Impact: In September 2013, the Government of India enacted the Indian National Food Security Bill, enshrining the legal right to food in the Indian constitution.

Top tips

- A long-running campaign on the right to food used specific opportunities to pressurise the Government of India to enact new legislation.
- The ability of key actors to influence the official policy process was facilitated by the use of public interest litigation, and judicial intervention.
- The identity and previous experience of key actors was an important factor in achieving policy impact.
- Specific pieces of research were commissioned to generate evidence in support of the proposed legislation.
- The most influential research outputs were those that were easy to access, in terms of availability and costs.
- Researchers, activists and policy actors worked together to build a coalition of support for the new law.