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Swaraj Against Hunger

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi said swaraj "means complete freedom of opinion and action without interference with another's right to equal freedom of opinion and action." It is a form of independence. It implies active decision-making and action, as opposed to passivity.

Swaraj should be distinguished from swadeshi, which means meeting one's needs through one's own production. Gandhi called on people to spin their own cloth in order to avoid dependence on foreign cloth. Swadeshi, or self-sufficiency, limits the potential for exploitation by outsiders by detaching from them.

Swadeshi is a means for protecting one's freedom of action. However, carried too far, it requires foregoing the benefits of interaction, and it can undermine community. Self-sufficiency should not be carried to excess.

When applied to food and nutrition issues, Gandhi's call for swaraj can be seen as a precursor of the modern call for food sovereignty. These principles say that, to the extent feasible, decisions regarding how people should be nourished should be made locally, not by distant government agencies or corporations. Given the opportunity, together with appropriate information and advice, strong communities will make sound decisions in the interest of local people. In strong communities, people rarely go hungry.

As Gandhi's talisman suggests, hunger should be addressed not by feeding the poor, but by making sure that the poor have increasing control over their own destinies.

Just as the top-down interventionist approach to dealing with malnutrition has not worked well globally, it has not worked well in India. Swaraj is based on the recognition that in strong communities people do not exploit, but instead support each other. Thus there is a direct link between swaraj and community-based nutrition security. Swaraj in strong communities might be the best means available for ending hunger in India and in the world.

I will give you a talisman.

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Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Then you will find your doubt and your self melting away. - *Mohandas K. Gandhi*

INDIA'S APPROACH TO dealing with its massive problems of poverty and malnutrition has been dominated by the view of government-as-provider. People ask the government to meet their needs as if it were their father. They are articulate about what government should do for them, but have little to say about what they could do for themselves, either individually or in community with others. There is a need for a change in mindset, to one foreshadowed by Gandhi one hundred years ago when he penned his famous book, *Hind Swaraj*. The book served then as the basis for building self-reliance, and thus resisting the British raj. It could now serve as the basis for resisting the rule of hunger in India.

SWARAJ AND SWADESHI

For many years the website of the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C. has described India's agriculture and rural development as "a saga of success." It boasts, "From a nation dependent on food imports to feed its population, India today is not only self-sufficient in grain production, but also has a substantial reserve."¹

It is true that the country now produces enough food to feed all its people, but millions are not fed adequately. Despite India's growing wealth and its agricultural successes, India still has a huge number of malnourished people, more than any other country. What is there to celebrate in this supposed self-sufficiency? What does it mean?

Many people concerned with nutrition issues are preoccupied with the idea of food self-sufficiency, meaning local production for local consumption. Some focus on self-sufficiency at the national level, while others pursue self-sufficiency at more local levels. For example, some people are concerned that the city of London "imports" more than eighty percent of its food,² and for that reason they support urban agriculture. Some want self-sufficiency even at the family level, and promote household food production.

Gandhi clarified the meaning of *swaraj* "by introducing a distinction between *swaraj* as self-government or the quest for home rule or the good state, and *swaraj* as self-rule or the quest for self-improvement."⁶ Thus, the concept can be meaningfully applied to governments or to individual people. It may be compared to the concepts of development or empowerment, understood as the increasing capacity of individuals or groups to define, analyze, and act on their own problems. This is a much richer understanding than the suggestion that the development of nations is nothing more than growth in aggregate income.

Swaraj emphasizes increasing power over oneself, as distinguished from power over others. As Gandhi put it, "It is *Swaraj* when we learn to rule ourselves."⁷

Some people take *swadeshi* to mean owning land.⁸ Their idea is that families should have small plots of land so they can provide for themselves. Its broader meaning is meeting one's needs through one's own production, self-sufficiency. Gandhi placed great emphasis on the importance of spinning one's own cloth in order to avoid dependence on foreign cloth. It symbolized the boycott of British imports. However, focusing narrowly on subsistence farming and making one's own clothes, and ignoring other possible ways of providing for oneself, could be a way of ensuring perpetual poverty for all.

The website of the Embassy of India says that, "Agriculture is the means of livelihood of about two-thirds of the work force in the country."⁹ Is this something to boast about, or is it rather an indication of the lack of other opportunities? Could it be that the pursuit of family self-sufficiency on the land has gone to excess, and has led to widespread insufficiency?

Having every family isolated on its own plot of land, producing mainly for itself, can weaken community ties. Instead of suggesting that every family and every community should live in the same bare-bones lifestyle, we should welcome having each of them make carefully considered decisions about what to accept and what to reject from the outside. They should be encouraged to seek or to create greater opportunities for themselves. And they should live in strong communities, acting with concern for one another's well-being.

Swaraj and *swadeshi* might seem similar, but the difference is important, especially for India today. Each term has several concepts that are at least roughly equivalent. *Self-reliance* emphasizes local control, but allows for exchange with outsiders. *Self-sufficiency* refers to local production to meet local needs. *Self-reliance* is about *autonomy* or self-rule, or what Gandhi called *swaraj*. *Self-sufficiency* is about *autarky* or economic independence, *swadeshi*.

Swaraj	Swadeshi
Self-rule	Economic independence
Self-reliance	Self-sufficiency
Autonomy	Autarky
Trade when beneficial	Minimum trade
Local control	Local production to meet local needs

The pursuit of self-reliance calls for mindful attention to possibilities for working out good relationships with others. The pursuit of self-sufficiency suggests maintaining independence of others, even if it means foregoing potential benefits.

The major objective should be self-reliance in the sense of local control over policy (*swaraj*), not self-sufficiency in the sense of localizing production (*swadeshi*). Self-sufficiency means little if it allows people to go hungry. Importing and exporting food and other commodities is fine so long as local people have made a fair and informed judgment about what serves their interests. They must find the right balance. Going thoughtlessly to one extreme or the other is never the right balance.

To be more precise, decisions should be made locally *provided* there is a reasonably democratic decision-making procedure and a sense of community that ensures that the interests of all are served. Where local politics are undemocratic, local self-reliance does not make much sense.¹⁰ For example, when the Rajasthan government agreed to devote local pasture lands to produce biofuel, displacing the Gujjar tribe whose livelihood depended on those pastures, it certainly was not acting in their interest.¹¹

How far should one go in pursuing economic independence, whether at the level of the individual, the community, or the nation? The answer comes from understanding that *swadeshi* is important as a *means* to *swaraj*, and not as an end in itself. Thus, *swadeshi* should not be carried too far. One should limit one's dependence on others, but this does not mean one must cut off all relationships. Whether communities produce their own things or buy products from outside is up to them, but this is an issue that should be addressed thoughtfully, with regard for the impacts on oneself, others, and the environment, currently and in the future.

Outsiders should not be allowed to come in to plunder one's

markets and local resources under the guise of free trade. One should not be ruled by mindless rulers. The powerful are the strongest advocates of so-called free trade simply because they are most capable of taking advantage of unconstrained opportunities to reach into others' markets.

Self-sufficiency in some degree can protect a family or a community from exploitative outsiders and from unpredictable changes in weather, prices, and other external conditions over which one has little control. However, there are always local risks as well, such as crop failures. It is best to assure food security by diversifying one's sources, and not depending on any one source. Also, pushing self-sufficiency too far can mean depriving oneself. There is no reason for families or communities to produce all their own food, shoes, televisions, and surgeons. As Vandana Shiva put it, "Localization does not imply isolation from the larger world, but self-determination with interdependence".¹²

When applied to food and nutrition issues, *swaraj* foreshadowed the modern call for *food sovereignty*. According to the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty, a nongovernmental organization:

Food Sovereignty is the RIGHT of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.¹³

Shifting from a policy of exporting and importing food and other essential goods, and instead aiming at total self-sufficiency would exchange one set of vulnerabilities for another. In a world of many shifting uncertainties, there is a need for resilience. This means drawing on multiple sources for fulfilling needs, and having the agility to shift from bad sources to good sources as the need arises. It is decision-making that needs to be localized, not food production. The fact that McDonald's may draw from local food suppliers is less important than the fact that the business is controlled by outsiders. The need to build decentralized resilience is becoming increasingly clear, not only with regard to nutrition, but with regard to all kinds of security issues.¹⁴

Localized decision-making is essential to *swaraj*. Thus, it meshes nicely with the principle of subsidiarity, "the principle that each social and political group should help smaller or more local ones accomplish

their respective ends without, however, arrogating those tasks to itself".¹⁵ This principle was enshrined in the Treaty of Amsterdam, establishing the European Community, and is retained in the successor Treaty of Lisbon. The task is to work out an appropriate division of responsibilities, with the localities taking the leading role. The principle of subsidiarity could be used as the basis for the central role of local self-reliance in ending hunger worldwide.

FACILITATING VS. PROVIDING

In the global human rights system, the right to adequate food was mentioned briefly in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and it took binding form in article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which came into force in 1976. The most authoritative interpretation of that global right is in a UN document described as General Comment Twelve.¹⁶

The obligations of states in relation to the human right to adequate food fall into three main categories, *respect*, *protect*, and *fulfill*. In turn, *fulfill* is divided into two categories, *fulfill* in the sense of *facilitate*, and *fulfill* in the sense of *provide*. Paragraph 15 of General Comment 12 interprets *facilitate* and *provide* as follows:

- The obligation to *fulfil (facilitate)* means the State must pro-actively engage in activities intended to strengthen people's access to and utilization of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food security.
- Whenever an individual or group is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to enjoy the right to adequate food by the means at their disposal, States have the obligation to *fulfil (provide)* that right directly. This obligation also applies for persons who are victims of natural or other disasters."¹⁷

The major obligation of government with regard to the human right to adequate food is the obligation to *facilitate*, which means that governments must establish enabling conditions under which people can provide for themselves.¹⁸ This means they are obligated to support self-reliance, *swaraj*. It is only when that proves inadequate that governments should *provide* food directly. Thus, the importance of self-reliance is implicitly recognized in the human right to adequate food as it is understood globally.

This has important implications for social service programmes of all kinds, including nutrition programmes. They can be either empowering or disempowering for their clients. It is important to make this distinction, and to make sure that the programmes help their people to grow and blossom, building their self-reliance, rather

than keeping people dependent and weak. Micro-loan programmes, for example, generally are empowering because they help people to start up small businesses and eventually become self-reliant. In contrast, programmes that provide free food without end can keep people down and lead to dependence on the programmes. As Ivan Illich put it, people need to provide for themselves because "people die when they are fed."¹⁹ Dignity comes from providing for oneself, not from being fed.

This is the approach that China has emphasized, especially through its development of manufacturing enterprises along its eastern seaboard and its huge advances in aquaculture production. The new jobs created in China may not look like good ones to outsiders, but judging from the vigour with which people seek them, they clearly provide new opportunities that are better than those that people had faced earlier. This approach makes China's people stronger, and at the same time it makes the government stronger. As a result, China has been reducing its once-massive hunger problem at a rapid rate.

Governments should feed people directly only when they cannot provide for themselves for reasons beyond their control. Instead, governments should emphasize facilitation, helping people to become self-reliant. The primary obligation of government is to make sure that people have decent opportunities to provide for themselves.

India's right to food movement does not make a strong distinction between the obligation of government to facilitate people in providing for themselves and the obligation to provide food directly. Right to food advocates in India generally take the right to food to mean free or heavily subsidized food. This is unfortunate. Free food is sometimes needed to help people through a difficult time, but when it is sustained it weakens people and makes them dependent and submissive.

In India the widespread tendency to view government as a kind of father-figure provider keeps people in a child-like state, dependent on government provisions throughout their lives. It is sad that millions of Indians' greatest aspiration is to be categorized as Below the Poverty Line so that they might be allowed to purchase heavily subsidized rice and obtain other benefits from government. Indeed, it has been estimated that forty percent of those holding BPL cards really are not qualified for them.²⁰

Maturity requires finding ways to provide for oneself. The social service schemes should be reviewed in terms of their capacity to help build *swaraj*, self-reliance. For the long term, the most effective programmes are likely to be those designed to reinforce and reward the climb out of poverty, not poverty itself. These programmes should empower, not disempower.

Consider India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Without question, it helps people who have limited options. However, while giving people opportunities to earn small amounts of money by doing simple physical work may help to nourish the body, it does little to nourish the mind or nurture human dignity. Imagine what might happen if the money the government spends to give a person one hundred days work in building roads was instead used to provide fifty days training in carpentry or whatever other skills might be in demand locally. Chances are that that person would not come back for more work on the roads. Similarly, some of the funds now used to provide food directly to the poor could instead be used to create employment opportunities for them, or to show them how to produce food for themselves.

These programmes could be modified so that beneficiaries are more actively engaged in their operations. For example, rather than being treated as passive beneficiaries, families in the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) could be given more of a role in determining what services are provided and how they are delivered. They could become more involved in designing the programme, implementing it, and ensuring that they get what they are supposed to get under the programme.

Similarly, both parents and children could be more involved in shaping the Mid Day Meals programme. The programme also could be used to help build school children's self-reliance. As children mature, they could be given increasingly active roles in organizing the meals. Food production at the schools could be encouraged.

It was at least partly to press for increased self-reliance among the poor that the United States did a radical overhaul of its welfare programmes in 1996. Many people judge the changes to be a great success.²¹ Some changes were quite simple, such as limiting the time people could stay in particular programmes. Surely the schemes in India could do more to help people and communities help themselves. All of the government schemes in India could be reviewed in relationship to *swaraj*, and modified as needed to ensure that they help to liberate, not trap, their clients.

SWARAJ AND ACCOUNTABILITY

One way in which mothers could be more actively engaged in ICDS would be to let them know exactly what their children are entitled to under the programme, and let them know what they could do if they don't get it. They could also be invited to participate in evaluating the services. Where there are no good arrangements for receiving complaints about the quality of services, means for doing that could

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be created. A good start could be made by creating committees of a few parents to articulate the concerns of all of them.

Similarly, in the Mid Day Meals programme, both students and parents could be involved in assessing the meals to determine whether they meet the standards set by the government. Schools that are not aided by the government programme could set up their own standards, and students and parents could be involved in ensuring that those standards are met. Schools could set up committees, including children, to oversee the implementation of the Mid Day Meals programme. These committees could inform themselves, the teachers, and the students about the standards that are supposed to be met, and they could take complaints about the programme under guidelines that they set up.

In any well-developed rights system there are three major roles to be fulfilled: the *rights holders*, the *duty bearers*, and the *agents of accountability*. The task of the agents of accountability is to make sure that those who have the duties carry out their obligations to those who have the rights. Thus, to describe a rights system, we need to know:

- A. The nature of the *rights holders* and their rights;
- B. The nature of the *duty bearers* and their obligations (duties) corresponding to the rights of the rights holders; and
- C. The nature of the *agents of accountability*, and the procedures through which they ensure that the duty bearers meet their obligations to the rights holders. The accountability mechanisms include, in particular, the remedies available to the rights holders themselves.

Rights imply entitlements, which are claims to specific goods or services. Rights are—or are supposed to be—*enforceable* claims. Enforceability means that the duty bearers, those who are to fulfil rights/entitlements, must be obligated to do so, and they must be held accountable for their performance through suitable administrative or judicial procedures

Where there are no effective remedies, there are no effective rights. While there can be many different mechanisms of accountability, the most fundamental is that available to the rights holders themselves. Thus, rights should be enforceable not only by lawyers, government officials, and organizations of various kinds, but also by the rights holders themselves, through means that are appropriately designed and readily available to them. Rights holders must know their rights, and they must have appropriate institutional arrangements available to them for ensuring their realization. They must have a role in shaping the world in which they live.

At the request of India's Planning Commission, plans for improving the Integrated Child Development Services programme were presented in *Strategies for Children Under Six*.²² The document offers a number of excellent recommendations on how the Integrated Child Development Services and related programmes could be improved. However, while there is a call for entitlements regarding food, but not with regard to childcare or health services. The term *entitlement* is used, but its significance is not explained. The study could have explained that entitlements should be enforceable through administrative or judicial procedures established for the rights holders.

There are some accountability mechanisms in place. For example, the government has established School Meal Monitoring Committees for the Mid Day Meal programme at national, state, district, and block levels.²³ The Commissioners to the Supreme Court of India regularly write letters to the Supreme Court on the violations of the food and employment schemes, and they submit detailed reports to the Court. The Commissioners also visit the states to assess compliance, and when necessary they convene a Joint Commission of Inquiry.

Having recourse mechanisms available to high-level officials such as Commissioners to the Supreme Court of India is very different from having such mechanisms available directly to the rights holders for voicing their complaints. Rights holders should fully understand their entitlements, and they should have safe and effective mechanisms through which they can complain if they do not get what they are supposed to get.

Children and their parents should know what they are entitled to, and they should be assisted in making their own clear judgments about whether they have in fact received it. They also need to have some place to take their complaints. This is the key missing piece in India's social service programmes.²⁴

Providing suitable recourse mechanisms and encouraging people to stand up for their rights can be a means for building self-reliance, *swaraj*. Such systems can be instituted locally, on a small scale. To illustrate, to monitor the performance of the Mid Day Meals programme at a particular school, one parent or teacher could be appointed as the meals ombudsman, responsible for taking complaints and passing them on to appropriate authorities. Or a small committee could be formed in the school to take complaints. The committee could be formed of, say, one student from each grade level, and one or two teachers.

Asking students to assess even a few aspects of their Mid Day Meals, and letting them know that their views matter, could have a substantial impact. It would help to ensure that the Mid Day Meals

programme works well, and it would enhance the participating students' education. The educational value would lie in their obtaining new information about nutrition and about their rights, but more importantly, it would empower them, helping them to understand what rights mean and how they can be used.

Engaging students in this way would make them more capable of standing up for their rights. *Swaraj* grows out of this sort of standing up and speaking out. *Swaraj* grows with practice.

COMMUNITY-BASED NUTRITION SECURITY

In India and worldwide, efforts to deal with problems of malnutrition generally are conceived in terms of intervention from the outside.²⁵ This is a top-down approach, based on the medical model. It is based on the assumption that there is some sort of deficiency in those who are malnourished, not a deficiency in the social system in which they are embedded. Hunger is viewed as mainly a technical problem, not a political problem.

Just as this top-down approach to dealing with malnutrition has not worked well globally, it has not worked well in India. Endless stories demonstrate that people do not get their due from India's social service programmes.²⁶

India's poor suffer being treated by bureaucrats in a way that echoes their ancestors' maltreatment under the British Raj. Gandhi said, "If I have the power, I should resist the tyranny of Indian princes just as much as that of the English".²⁷ Surely, he would resist Indian bureaucrats as well. Now, as then, top-down thinking should be replaced with a decisive community-based approach. *Swaraj* is as important now as it was then.

Local communities can make policy mistakes, just like central governments and international agencies. The advantage of localizing decision-making is that it ensures that local interests are the highest priority, and people are protected from outsiders who always have other interests.

In India, advocates for the right to food call for more funding from the national government, but have little to say about what local communities might do for themselves. Unquestionably, interventions by outsiders sometimes are needed, but why start with that? Why not begin by asking what people could do for themselves, with their own resources?

Where there are calls for assistance from outside, they should be for assistance that is enabling, empowering, capacity-building, and not assistance that is disempowering and demoralizing. Where local people do not have the capacity to solve nutrition problems themselves,

the task is to build that capacity.

There is convincing evidence for the effectiveness of community-based efforts in dealing with nutrition and other health issues. For example,

UNICEF is collaborating with the Indian government to increase the effectiveness of ICDS by demonstrating low-cost, community-based solutions to improve health care delivery. The specific interventions supported include strengthening the management and supervision system, improving the knowledge and skills of anganwadi workers and increasing the time and attention they give to infants, improving community involvement through joint village situation analysis, identifying village volunteers and providing them with basic training in infant care, and increasing the number of home visits made by anganwadi workers and volunteers in order to increase the caring behaviour of parents and improve the outreach of health services.²⁸

The approach has proven effective in the six states in which it was tested: "In Rajasthan, for instance, it was found that early initiation of breastfeeding was higher and the prevalence of stunting significantly lower in intervention villages than in control villages."

However, UNICEF's community-based efforts emphasized engaging local people only in the implementation of programmes, while the basic decision-making and design of the programmes come from outside the states and the villages. Similarly, to some agencies community-based therapy for children suffering from severe acute malnutrition means only that they are to be treated at home rather than in hospitals and clinics.²⁹

Some people think of heavy reliance on home gardens as a basis for community-based food security, but if the people do not connect with one another, this would be community-based only in a geographic sense. As understood here, a community is not simply a cluster of people who happen to live at the same spot on the map. In strong communities, people have special concern for, and act to improve, one another's well-being, and they are involved together in active decision-making at the community level. In this view, a programme that is managed mainly by outsiders with little guidance from local people should not be viewed as genuinely community-based.

The Hunger Project (THP), a nongovernmental organization, provides an example of a true community-based programme because it is based on local planning and control. THP defines the three pillars of its work as:

1. Mobilizing people at the grassroots level to build self-reliance;

2. Empowering women as key change agents;
3. Forging partnerships with local government.

The organization has designed a specific methodology for building self-reliance, based on conducting village-level workshops in which people create their own vision for the future, commit to achieving it, and outline the actions that are needed to succeed.

THP is active in India, as illustrated by its work in Karnataka. It has launched a federation of 5,000 elected women leaders there who "will now have a unified platform from which to speak, and the strength and support that comes from that solidarity." Thus, THP's orientation is based on building *swaraj*, even if it does not use that term.

Our overview here confirms Gandhi's insight regarding the importance of *swaraj*, not only for his time, but also for ours. Recalling its historical roots, India needs to build self-reliance for its people, for its communities, and for the country as a whole. The social service schemes should be modified so that they systematically build self-reliance. In the long run, people do not need to be fed; they need decent opportunities to provide for themselves.

Globally, hunger cannot be explained simply as a problem of poverty. The world is not poor. Where many people are malnourished and that pattern persists over time, there is something radically wrong with the social structure. We need to recognize that in many social relationships, people exploit one another, improving their own situations at the expense of others. Even if people do not exploit others, they may show massive indifference to others' well-being, which also leads to dire consequences. However, there are also many situations where people do treat each other well, especially in small communities. This is demonstrated in examples such as the state of Kerala, which does so well on most social indicators, and the various experiments with *sarvodaya* in Sri Lanka, India, and elsewhere. Few people have recognized the potential of strengthening communities as a means for addressing serious malnutrition.

People need to have the capacity to say *no* to those who would exploit them, and join with those who would support them. Strong communities can be defined as those whose people have an especially high level of concern for one another's well-being. In strong communities, people do not allow their neighbours to go hungry.

Where powerful groups treat weak groups badly, those who are weak would be well advised to withdraw from the relationship as quickly as possible. They need to reduce their dependence on the strong. Strategies of self-sufficiency, *swadeshi*, would serve them well.

How far should they go? They should persist until they can build up their strength enough so that they can resume relationships with others on a more equal basis. At the global level, we see a good example of this in China's withdrawal from the world for many decades, and then its resumption of its contacts from a position of strength in the late twentieth century.

The strategy of self-sufficiency can serve as a foundation for home rule, *swaraj*. Rather than having to accept terms of engagement dictated by foreigners, the newly emergent China became capable of standing up and saying *no* to foreigners. It learned to formulate and press for its own clear demands. It has not gotten its own way all the time, and should not expect that, but like other countries, it has become able to negotiate from a position of equality rather than a position of servitude.

The same principles apply at the village level. If the local poor find that owners of large farms offer only meagre wages, they need to find alternative means of livelihood, and break their dependence on those farms. Dependence means vulnerability to exploitation. As Vandana Shiva says, "We need to build the levels and kinds of relationships that allow communities to feel as one".³⁰ People who are not in strong communities should work to strengthen them or, if necessary, move to them, or create them.

Increasing local self-reliance with respect to nutrition is just one part of the much broader challenge of achieving real development based on local empowerment. Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai spoke about this in relation to Africa:

At both the top and the bottom, all Africans must believe in themselves again; that they are capable of walking their own path and forging their own identity, that they have a right to be governed with justice, accountability and transparency, that they can honor and practice their cultures and make them relevant to today's needs, and that they no longer need to be indebted-financially, intellectually, and spiritually-to those who once governed them. They must rise up and walk.³¹

This message is meaningful for all people who have been living in poverty and hunger. In any community, genuine development, the increasing capacity to define, analyze and act on one's own problems, is about building self-reliance, *swaraj*.

To exercise *swaraj* there is a need for clearly identifiable local bodies that study and advise on issues based on local interests. Imagine that every community created a specialized council to look after the nutrition status of all its people. These Nutrition Policy Councils could serve as the locus of food sovereignty, exercising *swaraj* at the community level.

In this approach the major function of higher levels of governance would be to provide support to the local councils, based on the principle of subsidiarity. Local councils could be advised by nutrition councils at higher levels of governance. For example, state-level nutrition councils could advise on how to monitor nutrition status, and they could offer a variety of resources, including information, advice, and services. This multi-level system of nutrition councils could be established through appropriate legislation. If each community had decent opportunities to address its own nutrition problems, had reasonable resources to support the work, and was encouraged to take responsibility, probably most would address the issue with great vigour.

Given decent opportunities to do so, who among us would not feed our children well? People need the opportunity, and a bit of guidance, and in time their capacity to manage malnutrition will grow. Nutrition programmes need to be designed to build that competence, building *swaraj* at family, community, and national levels. As Gandhi's talisman suggests, hunger should be addressed not by feeding the poor, but by making sure that they have increasing control over their own destinies.

Serious problems of malnutrition should be owned by the local community, and not taken away from them by corporations or by higher levels of governance. Higher levels may help and may serve as backup in case of local failures, but they should not take away that responsibility. We should not steal people's problems from them.

Just as strong communities would not allow any of their people to go hungry, strong nations would not allow any of their communities to be so weak as to allow hunger to persist. A well-governed world would support all of its nations in supporting all of their communities in ensuring that no one anywhere goes hungry, ever.

In strong communities, where people are especially concerned for one another's well-being, people don't go hungry. However, we have to acknowledge that in India, as in other countries, many communities are divided, and people do not treat each other well. That problem needs to be faced or the hunger issue will never be solved.

What does it take to build strong communities? What could they do for themselves? And what could higher levels of governance do to support them? These are fundamental questions that should be addressed as India formulates its new Right to Food Act.³² Strong communities based on *swaraj* might provide the breakthrough that is needed. This might be the best means available for ending hunger in India and in the world.

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