"....an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in and contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political developments in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized." (UN Declaration on the Right to Development, 1986)

Within this conceptualization of the Rights to Development, the right to food, education and health are fundamental. While they are interdependent rights, the fulfilment of one enriches the fuller realization of the other. The right to food is, however, the most basic of these rights, as it has an important bearing on the realization of the right to health in particular and to the right to education, as adequate food and nutrition are prerequisites to health and capacities for education.

These rights have also been defined as progressive rights, where persons are able to enjoy progressively higher levels of these rights. Therefore, it is a dynamic concept and varied in time and place and one that implies a much higher and broader level of access to food.

The Right to Food

While the right to food is defined, as the right of everyone to access a minimum quantity of food required for maintaining oneself, this minimum quantity and the composition of the food basket would vary over time. It would increase in quantity as well as quality and composition.

Within this perspective what constitutes the right to food in Sri Lanka? Clearly and indisputably the right of everyone to access the minimum quantity of food required to maintain oneself by meeting their nutritional needs is a basic right. Around one third to one fourth of Sri Lanka's population appears to lack the capacity to obtain an adequate quantum of basic food requirements. Therefore, the priority in the achievement of the right to food must be to ensure their access to an adequate amount of food. This perspective, that all citizens must have the capacity to access the minimum amount of food needed means that the state has a responsibility to ensure it.

Since the right to food is conceived of as a progressive right, it is a right to a much higher and broader level of access to food. The concept of access to food cannot also be confined to only basic food needs for mere survival as conceived of in the past. The right to food includes a nutritionally adequate basket of foods. It must go beyond the provision of staples like rice and wheat and must include other essential foods like sugar, milk, dhal, and vegetables and, perhaps some minimal quantity of fish and meat.

Such a broadening of the concept of a right to food is a realistic one as most people in Sri Lanka expect a basic food basket to include a more varied and nutritional diet. Therefore, the attainment of food security requires that all households in the country have access to a quantity of food that is considered a basic minimum in terms of quantity and composition. At the present stage of economic development and social expectations, it would necessarily have to contain a more varied diet than mere staples.

Was the Right to Food Recognized in Sri Lanka?

The right to food is achieved when all citizens have access to a minimum quantity of food required for maintaining themselves at a nutritionally accepted level. If an individual is unable to access his or her minimum food needs, as defined by the right to food, such an individual has a right to demand it from the state.

From 1942 to 1979 constituted recognition of the right to food. There are elements of the policies that make it very controversial. Our issue is intended to use the experience as a means of eliciting fundamental issues relating to the implementation of a right to food.

Yet there are other aspects of the scheme that are counter arguments. First, the extent of the subsidy as well as the amount varied from time to time. Food as a right implies a minimum quantity of food that is needed for normal life.