

# IMPACT OF THE **LOCKDOWN** FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA



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## INTRODUCTION

Food is a fundamental necessity of human life. Even in the best of times, food security<sup>1</sup>, especially for the vulnerable, has been a key policy priority in India. In the times of the Covid-19 crisis and the resultant lockdown measures, the need for ensuring adequate supply of food remains a priority.

In simple textbook terms, food security can be understood **as availability, accessibility and affordability** of food for all at all times.<sup>i</sup> While availability refers to domestic production, imports and stored stock; accessibility is about food being within the reach of everyone. Affordability on the other hand is related with the correct price of the food and the means to buy sufficient and nutritious food in accordance with ones needs.

Food security systems are important for serving the need of the vulnerable i.e. the poor. It becomes especially significant in the times of calamities, disasters, crop failures etc. when even the non-poor may become food insecure.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF VULNERABILITY

The World Bank estimates put the number of Indians living in extreme poverty at 176 million.<sup>ii</sup> It also posits that poorer households are more exposed to the risk of COVID-19. These are also the people who are most likely to face food insecurity in these times.

On the higher end, one may refer to the numbers provided by the 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which pegs the number of poor in India at 369 million.<sup>iii</sup> Further understanding of the other aspects of food security challenges can be gained through sources such as the Global Hunger Index (GHI), where India ranks low especially on the parameters of child stunting and child wasting.<sup>iv</sup>

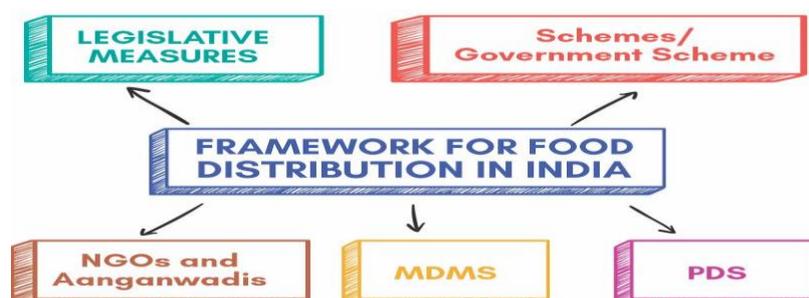
Similarly, at any given point, girl child and pregnant women are also identified as vulnerable to food insecurity. In the rural areas, landless labour and in the urban areas, the migrant labour need food security support. Furthermore, the nature of employment and level of wages may also create a category of people in need of support.

These numbers help one make sense of the magnitude of challenge a country like India faces even in non-emergency situations. In an unprecedented situation like the outbreak of COVID-19 the challenge becomes graver. In this context the prospects of livelihood loss for the self-employed and casual workers during the lockdown are significant factors.

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## THE FRAMEWORK OF FOOD SECURITY SYSTEM IN INDIA



<sup>1</sup> For the ease of discussion, the paper uses the term food security to include the concerns of food and nutrition both.

The framework of food security system in India comprises:

- Legislative measures such as the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA)
- Schemes such as Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), Below Poverty Line and Above Poverty Line cards, Annapurna scheme for the senior citizens
- Public Procurement and storage of food grains
- The Public Distribution System (PDS)
- The Mid day meal schemes
- The Aanganwadis
- Non-Governmental Organizations

Thus, the important actors in this chain are farms and farmers, the agencies such as the Food Corporation of India (FCI), facilities such as the PDS shops, Schools and Anganwadi Centres and the consumer.

## STATUS OF FOOD SECURITY SYSTEM IN INDIA

The PDS network in India ensures the regular supply of food grains and other essential commodities to 800 million through a network of Fair Price Shops.<sup>v</sup> With a network of more than five lakh Fair Price Shops, it is perhaps the largest such distribution network in the world. The total number of PDS Ration cards stood at 23,18,46,416 in May 2019 which is about 80 percent of the total households.<sup>vi</sup> The NFSA empowers states to decide the modality of delivering food subsidies –in cash or kind. However, till now food subsidy in India has remained mostly in kind and not cash.

At the beginning of March 2020 India had stock of nearly 77 million tonnes (mt) of rice and wheat and 2.25 mt of pulses in public storage.<sup>vii</sup> This is more than three times the buffer FCI is mandated to keep. In most districts of India, the FCI and state agencies have a storage capacity of more than the three months requirement of the public distribution system. The warehouses are spread across all the districts in every state.

On 26 March 2020, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman declared a relief package worth INR 1.7 lakh crore under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana for the poor to help them fight the battle against Corona Virus.<sup>viii</sup> It included provisions for:

- 80 crore poor people to get 5 kg wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses for free every month for the next three months
- 20 crore women Jan Dhan account holders to get Rs 500 per month for next three months
- Increase in MNREGA wage to Rs 202 a day from Rs 182 to benefit 13.62 crore families
- An ex-gratia of Rs 1,000 to 3 crore poor senior citizen, poor widows and poor disabled
- Government to front-load Rs 2,000 paid to farmers in first week of April under existing PM Kisan Yojana to benefit 8.7 crore farmers
- State Governments to use Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund to provide relief to Construction Workers

All of these measures are helpful in promoting availability, accessibility and affordability of food supplies. The swift implementation of the package is being continuously monitored by Central and State governments.

State governments announced their own measures. Kerala Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, announced that everyone in need — whether the below poverty line (BPL) or not — will get free rice.<sup>ix</sup> As anganwadis shut down, the state government ensured home delivery of mid-day meals. ASHA workers made sure that food reached its 26,000 children registered under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).

The Haryana Government decided to provide all BPL families their monthly ration for April free of cost. All government school children and those enrolled in anganwadis were to be given dry rations.

The Chhattisgarh Government issued an order to provide dry ration instead of hot-cooked meals to children aged between three and six years and who were registered with anganwadi centres.

Uttar Pradesh will provide free foodgrains for April and May to more than 8.38 million widows, aged and handicapped pensioners. It is providing 20 kg of wheat and 10 kg of rice per household to a list of beneficiaries, which includes 16.5 million construction workers and daily wage labourers. The state has also announced universalisation of PDS. This universalisation strategy for the interim period has been announced by Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Telangana as well.

The Delhi Government announced that people without ration cards could also get rations-It promised to provide 7.5 kilogram of free ration to its 7.2 million beneficiaries from March 30. The government also activated its Mid-Day Meal providers to provide cooked meals. It also tied up with non-profits for this purpose.

Bihar announced use of direct cash transfers (DCTs), depositing funds to the bank accounts of ration card holders (RCH). The Bihar government decided to give 5 kg rice and 1 kg pulses for three months as lockdown relief.

The Jharkhand government had announced double ration — 70 kg rice — for card holders and 10 kg of rice to 7 lakh people whose application for ration cards are pending.

The Tamil Nadu Government gave a nod to provide an incentive of Rs 2,500 each to salesmen and Rs. 2,000 each to packers at public distribution system (PDS) shops who have been working overtime and on holidays to ensure supply of essential commodities to 2.02 crore cardholders in the state during the lockdown. They will also give Rs. 1,000 to all ration card holders along with free rice, sugar and other essential commodities.

The Chandigarh Administration decided to provide 6670 registered construction workers an amount of Rs.3000/- as a special relief. This amount would be in addition to Rs.3000/- already sanctioned earlier out of Construction Labour Welfare Fund. The amount would be transferred to the accounts of the workers directly.

Pune Zilla Parishad decided to provide temporary ration cards to more than 80,000 undocumented people in the district. The scheme will use one-time Aadhar authentication. It will enable the home delivery of grains at the gram panchayat level. The scheme includes Primitive Tribes and the transgender community.

Also, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) issued state-wise guidelines for farmers to be followed during the lockdown period. The advisory mentions specific practices during harvest and threshing of various rabi (winter sown) crops as well as post-harvest, storage and marketing of the farm produce.

## CHALLENGES

The issues of **lack of updation** of the PDS beneficiaries as well as **lack of documentation** as hurdles to food security have also been highlighted in this period.<sup>x</sup> Also, another related issue is that of ration card divisibility. PDS ration cards are neither portable across locations nor can rations be divided, allowing family members to pick up portions at different locations.<sup>xi</sup> The government's new One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) program remains a work in progress and lacks the provision for divisibility.

According to an Indian Express report, hardly 19,496 ton out of the total monthly allocation of 1.95 lakh metric ton (LMT) pulses under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana (PMGKAY), had been issued by the states till April 22. Furthermore, the Delhi government had to stop the distribution of pulses owing to quality issues.<sup>xii</sup>

In other cases, even if a household gets wheat, if the local millers who convert it into flour are not working, the benefit might prove useless. Since the milling of wheat would be difficult due to the closure of flour mills, only rice can be provided at this stage.

There have also been concerns raised regarding the inadequacy of the relief measures. The government has provided Rs. 500 (\$6.60) per month to the bank accounts of 200 million women via the Jan Dhan financial inclusion program. However, many experts slate the relief package in itself to be inadequate.<sup>xiii</sup>



### Issues Related with Migrant Labourers

Apart from the general concerns for ensuring food security of the vulnerable and the functioning of the existing systems, onset of the lockdown threw new challenges. An immediate challenge was to address the concerns of the large number of migrant and casual labours in urban areas. It was evident from the initial days that large number of urban poor were in need of support especially for basic need such as food. The scenes of large-scale movement on foot of many from large cities like Delhi to their home states was reported widely in the media.<sup>xiv</sup> There are about 40-50 million seasonal migrant workers in India- their food needs required immediate attention.

A snippet of the issues on the ground may be glimpsed in the work of groups such as the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN). SWAN conducted a survey of 11,159 workers across the country.<sup>xv</sup> It reported that:

- 50% of workers had rations left for less than 1 day
- 96% had not received rations from the government and 70% had not received any cooked food
- 74% had less than half their daily wages remaining to survive for the rest of the lockdown period.
- 89% had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown
- 44% of the calls received were “SOS” with no money or rations left or had skipped previous meal
- Rate of hunger is exceeding the rate of relief. Percentage of people who said they have less than 1 day of rations increased from 36% to 50% in the third week of lockdown while the percentage of people who received government rations increased from 1% to only 4% in the third week of lockdown.
- The percentage of people who did not get cooked food from the government or any local organisation decreased from 80% to about 70% from the end of second week post lockdown to the end of third week post lockdown.

### Coordination and Logistics

Various researchers have pointed out issues in governance as well. For example, inter-state coordination has been negatively affecting the food distribution situation in the country- Agriculture is a state subject- Policies and programs vary from one State to the other. However, agricultural activities, being interconnected in neighboring regions, agri-sops or benefits may distort the market scenario.

Transportation, storage, and distribution of large volumes of food are susceptible to spoilage and contamination. With commodities prices expected to rise, and the small amounts assigned to pulses in the relief package, ensuring access to adequate diets is problematic.

Further, many warehouses are closed due to local law enforcement issues and the paucity of labour. There have been transportation issues as well. Interstate transport of goods faces many problems. At

many places, local police and administration are prohibiting the movement of trucks and carts carrying essential food items. Truck drivers are being frisked at lockdown checkpoints and casual laborers for loading and unloading are in short supply. As a result, perishables are not reaching mandis, processing units and households. It is imperative that food moves seamlessly across state borders, which can happen only if the states work together.

Many steps have been taken by various state governments. However, there is little clarity on the logistics of these measures. For instance, in Karnataka, the government initially announced that food will be provided free of cost to the poor through state-run 'Indira Canteens'. But after the lockdown was imposed, it closed all such canteens to avoid large gatherings. An alternate plan was not chalked out till March 25, 2020.

Chhattisgarh- There was little clarity on how dry ration would be provided for the stated 40 days (circular came out on the March, 24<sup>th</sup>)- whether it would be given at home or families would have to go to the PDS centre to get it. There was no mention of that in the order.

Delhi abandoned its plan to set up kitchens across the city and decided to provide food in night shelters. Migrant labourers are allowed to move between districts within the state but not inter-state (post April 20<sup>th</sup>)

In Madhya Pradesh, there were no measures for the labourers and migrants (who constitute almost 45% population). The state did allow people to take ration of three months in one go. But the ration included only rice and flour. What about other essential items like oil and pulses!

The Odisha government's decision to put 14 districts under lockdown till 29 March dealt a blow to the fishing sector in the state. Earlier fish was supplied to West Bengal and to the North East. But now, much is susceptible to wastage as most fishermen lack cold storage facilities.

The Indian Express covered a special case of Purulia District, West Bengal. Reports stated that people had been forced, out of poverty, to use their PDS ration cards as collateral for amounts that they borrowed years ago

In Jharkhand and Bihar- Complaints are coming in that ration dealers aren't giving the people the entire amount and are confiscating the ration cards of people. Almost a month into the lockdown, 865 PDS dealers find themselves in the dock in Jharkhand — 297 have had their licence suspended, nine have had their dealerships cancelled, 524 have been issued show-cause notices, and 44 face FIRs. The numbers are going up daily in the state which has 25,445 PDS dealers for 2.63 crore families. Bihar too received several complaints of dealers shortchanging PDS beneficiaries.

The public procurement system is weak in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh regarding rural biasedness in schemes<sup>xiv</sup>. Except for the increased allocation of subsidised rice, wheat, and pulses for the next three months, most of the other provisions of this special scheme cover either only the rural households or only the below poverty line households in both rural and urban areas. They leave out millions of urban families that will be pushed into transient poverty by the COVID-19 outbreak and the subsequent lockdown.

There are certain market challenges as well, which can disturb the food supply. High-value food commodities (HVCs), such as milk, fruits and vegetables, and meat, fish and eggs, account for 56% of the total value of output from agriculture and allied sectors (CSO 2018). Supply chain issues for these perishable products will be challenging.

The disruption in the value chain is further aggravated by instinctive hoarding.

Further, there is the issue of rotting of food grains. At the international level, it is estimated that nearly one third of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year gets lost or wasted<sup>xv</sup>. 40% of the fruits and vegetables, and 30% of cereals that are produced are lost due to inefficient supply chain management and do not reach the consumer markets. Significant levels of food losses occur upstream, at harvest and during post-harvest handling. A lot of food is lost or wasted during the

distribution and consumption stages. Some food is also wasted on the shelves and in the warehouses of food businesses either due to excess production, introduction of new products, labeling errors, or due to shorter remaining shelf life. During the lockdown period in India, rice mills are closed in Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. So are other processing units. There are reports that tonnes of fruits and vegetables are rotting in the Azadpurmandi—the largest produce market in India.

Further, making essential items available to consumers, both in rural and urban areas, is the most critical challenge for Government machinery during the lockdown period. The Sale of dairy products- such as fish; poultry, etc. has also been hit during the lockdown period as the uptake by the organized industry players has been affected due to shortage of workforce and transport issues.<sup>xvi</sup> Apart from all this, the weather has also been very erratic over past few months in many parts.

## LOOKING FORWARD

The need for expediting Rabi harvest has also been in consideration during this period. Government agencies have begun procuring the rabi crop. However, the process has been, understandably, slow. Maintaining social distancing being a priority, only few farmers are being allowed to come to the mandis every day.<sup>xvii</sup> They are being issued coupons or SMSs to bring quantities as low as 5-10 quintals.

Going forward, as the ongoing lockdown coincides with the rabi harvesting season, farmers across the country look up to the Government to ensure uninterrupted harvesting of the crops as well as smooth procurement operations. Also, migrant labourers are crucial for both harvesting operations and post-harvest handling of produce in storage and marketing centers.

Experts have suggested that the government should maintain its focus on<sup>xviii</sup>:

- Streamlining its procurement, storage and supply-chain management system to make sure food commodities are available at all locations, especially at potential hunger hotspots.
- Refining the delivery and distribution system so as not to deprive anyone of food who needs it at this time (for instance, sometimes not having a ration card or ID proof has barred households from accessing welfare measures).
- Allocating cash subsidies for families to be able to purchase other essential items.

The MDMS might also need a revamping. Mid-day meals were provided to children based on the assumption that the family is earning and getting food from other sources. Now, it can well be assumed that the whole family mustn't be having much to eat. Also, the government could step up the cash contributions made to families in need. There is a need to have a minimum of Rs.3000 (\$40) per month in cash transfers for the next three months.<sup>xix</sup>

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