



FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA

Some General Concerns and the Covid Crisis

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Executive Summary

The National Food Security Act was enacted by the parliament of India and was signed into law in September 2013. It aims to provide food and nutritional security through the human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of food at affordable prices. The Act provides coverage of up to 75% of the rural population and up to 50% of the urban population for receiving subsidized foodgrains under Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), thus covering about two-thirds of the population. Besides the entitlement to food grains under the TPDS, it also has a special focus on the nutritional support to women and children. The Act is considered the biggest experiment in the world for food-based welfare schemes by any government. By ensuring that a majority of the Indian population has access to adequate quantity of food at affordable prices, it is seen as a vital instrument to address the persistent problems of food and nutritional security of the country's population. However, in spite of its ground breaking nature, over the years the many implementation bottlenecks have persisted.

This report seeks to highlight some of the key challenges for food security in India. It looks at some general concerns with NFSA implementation, as well as food security during the current Covid crisis. It is divided into six sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the NFSA. It summarizes the various programmes which are covered by the Act emphasizing its human life cycle approach.

The second section provides an assessment of the general implementation challenges of NFSA. It highlights the bottlenecks in all the programmes including the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the Mid Day Meal Scheme as well as the Maternity Entitlements as guaranteed by the Act. Some of the key issues covered in this section include the poor state of infrastructure, the issues with targeting, the problems in the use of technology and the budgetary constraints amongst others.

The third section looks at the problem of food security during the current pandemic and the systemic gaps that have been exposed due to the lockdown. It has highlighted the problems of inadequacy of the current relief package, the large scale exclusions from the PDS, the problems with non-portability of ration cards, the bottlenecks in food supply chain leading to price hike and the overarching problem of low agricultural budget, all of which have contributed and amplified food insecurity amongst the most vulnerable sections of our society.

Following from the issues highlighted in the third section, the fourth section tries to argue for the importance of universalization of the PDS for the next six months in providing a support system for the poor and alleviating some of the aforementioned concerns. The fifth section looks at the way forward and provides some recommendations in dealing with the current crisis as well as some long term recommendations to improve implementation of NFSA post Covid. The report finally concludes by emphasizing the possibility of such events occurring in the future due to climate change, and the importance of over hauling and aligning the country's agricultural policies to deal with such future uncertainties.





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1. NFSA 2013: Overview

The National Food Security Act, 2013 was notified on 10th September, 2013 with the objective to provide food and nutritional security through the human life cycle approach¹, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of food at affordable prices. The Act provides coverage of up to 75% of the rural population and up to 50% of the urban population for receiving subsidized foodgrains under Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), thus covering about two-thirds of the population. Besides the entitlement to food grains under the TPDS, the Act also has a special focus on the nutritional support to women and children. This includes meals to pregnant women and lactating mothers during pregnancy and six months after the child birth. Such women are also entitled to receive maternity benefit of not less than Rs. 6,000². Children up to 14 years of age are entitled to nutritious meals as per the prescribed nutritional standards under the integrated child development services (ICDS) and mid-day meal (MDM) schemes. In case of non-supply of entitled foodgrains or meals, the beneficiaries are supposed to receive a food security allowance. The Act also contains provisions for setting up of grievance redressal mechanism at the District and State levels. Separate provisions have also been made in the Act for ensuring transparency and accountability.

Based on population coverage and the distribution commitment, TPDS forms the largest component of the NFSA. There are two types of TPDS beneficiaries under NFSA – namely Antyodaya (AAY or the poorest-of-poor) and priority – who are entitled to 35 kg/family/month and to 5 kg/person/month of grain respectively³. Rice, wheat and coarse cereals are to be distributed at the central issue prices (CIPs) of Rs 3/2/1 per kg respectively. State-wise number of NFSA beneficiaries are determined and communicated to states by the Centre.

The Act is considered the biggest experiment in the world for food-based welfare schemes by any government⁴. By ensuring that a majority of the Indian population has access to adequate quantity of food at affordable prices, the Act is seen as a vital instrument to address the persistent problems of food and nutritional security of the country's population. The following section highlights some of the major implementation concerns that have persisted before the onset of the Covid crisis.

¹ NFSA 2013

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ https://www.zef.de/fileadmin/webfiles/downloads/projects/volatility/downloads/Chap_13_Gulati_Saini_National_Food_Security_Act__2_.pdf

2. Major Issues in Implementation

2.1 Targeted Public Distribution System

- i. **Leakages in TPDS:** Leakages continue to impact the system efficiency. As per 2004-05 data leakages at all India level was at 55%⁵. This came down by 2007-08 to 44% and in 2011 it was at 46.7%⁶. The 2015 CAG report had noted both inclusion and exclusion errors in the beneficiary list⁷. Targeting has not resulted in reduction of leakages and some have suggested that it has become worse⁸. The dual pricing through TPDS has created an incentive to divert grains to the open market.
- ii. **Problems in Targeting:** Under targeted PDS BPL and APL households were differentiated. BPL households were identified via household income, but households with any assets (such as televisions, fans, two or four wheeled vehicles, or land) were considered APL. These APL households despite having ownership of assets were food insecure, and the removal of rations added to their insecurity⁹. The problem of targeting is also compounded by the lack of reliable data. There are no official estimates of the actual income of households and many BPL households are excluded from BPL cards¹⁰. Targeting has also exacerbated the existence of illegal cards¹¹. In 2015 the CAG noted that many states had not completed the process of identifying beneficiaries, and 49% of the beneficiaries were yet to be identified¹². In February 2017, under NFSA, the use of Aadhaar as proof of identification became mandatory. The goal was to remove bogus ration cards, check leakages and ensure better delivery of food grains. As of January 2017, 100% ration cards had been digitized and the seeding of cards with Aadhaar was at 73%¹³.
- iii. **Problems in One Nation One Ration:** The ONOR scheme aims to enable portability of ration cards by linking it with Aadhaar. But linking Aadhaar with the ration cards has previously run into many problems¹⁴. There have been instances of people being denied food due to absence of Aadhaar card or malfunctioning of the Biometric authentic system. Experts argue the same could happen with the new scheme. The pilot for ONOR was started in Odisha on 1st September 2019 for its intrastate migrants. But out of 32 million beneficiaries, 1.8 million (6%) could not get their Aadhaar linked with their ration card before the deadline of September 15¹⁵. A survey conducted in October 2019 in Odisha found that 35% of households did not have Aadhaar-seeded ration cards. Further, up to 12.42% individuals did not have an Aadhaar number while 19% submitted it but could not get it linked to their ration card. Similarly in Gujarat tribal communities have reported not being able to get ration due to poor internet connectivity in their villages. Another concern is that the seasonal migrants are not tracked. The 2011 Census shows that the exact number

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6747310/>

⁶ http://164.100.47.193/lssccommittee/Food,%20Consumer%20Affairs%20&%20Public%20Distribution/16_Food_Consumer_Affairs_And_Public_Distribution_3.pdf

⁷ https://cag.gov.in/sites/default/files/audit_report_files/Union_Civil_National_Food_Security_Report_54_of_2015.pdf

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6747310/>
9,10,11,13,14 Ibid

¹² <https://www.prsindia.org/theprsblog/food-security-india>

¹⁵ <https://thenewleam.com/2019/11/one-nation-one-ration-programme-faces-many-challenges-experts/>

of migrant workers within India is not easy to measure, especially at state level. This makes it a challenging task to reach a majority of beneficiaries in the country. The availability of Electronic PoS machines in the ration shops is also crucial. But data shows by February 2019, only 72% of fair price shops across the country had installed electronic PoS machines¹⁶. Bihar, which has the second highest immigrants after UP, had the least number of devices installed.

- iv. **Inadequate Storage Capacity:** The total storage capacity in India by 2017 was 788 lakh tones. 354 tones capacity was with the Food Corporation of India and 424 lakh tons was with state agencies¹⁷. The 2015 CAG report found that the available storage capacity in states was inadequate for the allocated quantity of food grains¹⁸. It highlighted the example of Maharashtra where of the 233 godowns sanctioned for construction, only 93 had been completed as of 2015. The report also observed that in between 2010-15 for 4 years the stock of food grains with the Centre was higher than the storage capacity with the Food Corporation of India.
- v. **Poor Quality Food Grains:** A 2011 survey observed that the quality of food grains received under PDS was of poor quality and adulterated, and had to be mixed with other grains to make it edible¹⁹. While this is an old survey the problem seems to have persisted. Poor quality of grains can not only have an adverse health affect but can also lead to reluctance to buy food from fair price shops. While State Food Safety Officers undertake regular surveillance, monitoring, inspection and random sampling of all food items, separate data for food grains provided through PDS is unavailable²⁰. The absence of data makes it difficult to ascertain whether the quality meets the prescribed standard.

2.2 Integrated Child Development Services

- i. **Poor Infrastructure of Anganwadi Centers:** The infrastructure of ICDS centers is very poor, which prevents them from delivering essential services. A 2016 study²¹ of 36 AWCs in the state of Odisha found that more than 85% did not have a designated building for daily functioning. The centers also had a severe lack of water, toilet, and electricity facilities, as well as very little play materials. Consequently, there was a lack of faith among about its benefits in the rural community.
- ii. **Low Pay for Anganwadi Workers:** Anganwadi workers have been fighting for better pay for many years. They are given a fixed amount as honorarium per month under the scheme, which varies in each state. Many states have seen an increase in the honorarium in recent years following protests. Currently, in Madhya Pradesh the workers and helpers earn Rs 10,000 and Rs 5,000 a month respectively, Karnataka gives Rs 8,000 to the workers and Rs 4,000 to the helpers, Telangana gives its workers

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ <https://www.prsindia.org/theprsblog/food-security-india>

¹⁸ https://cag.gov.in/sites/default/files/audit_report_files/Union_Civil_National_Food_Security_Report_54_of_2015.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.epw.in/journal/2011/44-45/special-articles/revival-public-distribution-system-evidence-and-explanations>

²⁰ <http://164.100.47.190/loksabhaquestions/annex/10/AU2124.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5296463/>

and helpers Rs 10,500 and Rs 7,000 respectively and Haryana gives Rs 11,429 to its workers, twice the amount that is given to helpers²². However, AWWs feel this is inadequate and are demanding 18,000 per month²³.

- iii. **Poor Work Conditions:** Under the ICDS scheme, anganwadi workers are seen as voluntary social workers and not government employees²⁴. Consequently, their work not being regularised and deprives them of essential benefits like Provident Fund, pension and ESI (Employees' State Insurance) cards. Most of the anganwadi workers also complain about being overburdened with other tasks such as BLO (Booth Level Officer) duties, surveys etc.²⁵
- iv. **Inadequate Budget:** Under the umbrella Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, in 2019-20, the government allotted Rs 23,234 crore which was 2,283 crore more than the budgetary expenditure in FY 2018-19 (Rs 20,951)²⁶. The latest 2020-21 budget has allocated Rs. 27,057 crore which is a 3.7% increase over the previous year²⁷. However, the overall share of ICDS has continued to decline as a proportion of total budgetary expenditure since 2014 and remains well under 1%²⁸.

2.3 Mid Day Meal Scheme

- i. **Poor Quality of Food:** According to the 2015 CAG report²⁹, the quality of food served in schools under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme was of poor quality across the country. The report highlighted cases of cooking poor quality meals in unhygienic conditions, inadequate and poor quality infrastructure in kitchen sheds etc., which was exposing children to health hazards. According to the report, the prescribed nutrition was not provided in schools of at least nine states, including the national capital. In Delhi, samples of cooked food of the 37 service providers during the period 2010-14 were tested by the Sri Ram Institute of Industrial Research. Out of the 2,102 samples, 1,876 (89 percent) failed to meet the prescribed nutrition standard. The media has also reported several cases of death due to poor quality meals³⁰. In August 2018 in Jharkhand an upper primary student had died and more than 60 were hospitalized allegedly after having the school meal. In July 2018, 30 students suffered food poisoning after having the mid-day meal in Delhi. In October 2018, 45 children in Goa were hospitalized after having the mid-day meal. At least, 23 children had died in Bihar in 2013 after consuming contaminated mid-day meal.
- ii. **Lack of Monitoring:** The scheme has provisions for regular social audit, field visits and inspections but these are rarely carried out³¹. Field visit reports not available after FY14 and monitoring institutions' reports not available after FY15. Studies used to be conducted by institutions such as the IITs and TISS every year in several schools in every district. But, contracts with these institutes not renewed after 2015. The

²² <https://thewire.in/labour/anganwadi-icds-child-development-ministry>

²³ https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/federation-of-anganwadi-workers-and-helpers-demands-monthly-wage-of-rs-18000-118091101061_1.html

²⁴ <https://thewire.in/labour/anganwadi-icds-child-development-ministry>

²⁵ *Ibid* | ²⁶ <https://www.newsclick.in/budget-2019-20-govt-schemes-poor-neglected-again>

²⁷ <http://www.cbgaIndia.org/blog/malnutrition-rages-nutrition-related-schemes-get-19-less-funding/>

²⁸ <https://www.newsclick.in/budget-2019-20-govt-schemes-poor-neglected-again>

²⁹ https://cag.gov.in/sites/default/files/audit_report_files/Union_Performance_Civil_Mid_Day_Meal_Report_36_2015_2.pdf

³⁰ <https://www.livemint.com/politics/policy/govt-set-to-review-mid-day-meal-scheme-amid-row-over-food-quality-1568055948575.html>

³¹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/whats-ailing-indias-midday-meal-scheme/articleshow/72918265.cms>

2015 CAG³² report had also observed that the checks to ensure quality of meals and adequacy of nutritional value remained only on paper. The inadequate monitoring of the scheme by the human resource ministry and the states was a major concern. The funds earmarked for monitoring and evaluation had also been grossly underutilized.

iii. Caste Discrimination: A 2014 study by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh found that Dalit children were being given less food compared to upper caste children³³. In 2015, a Dalit student of a government secondary high school in Jodhpur was beaten for touching plates used to serve midday meals to upper caste children³⁴. In some schools, Dalit children were asked to bring their own plates from home, were served last and were not allowed to drink from the tap used by upper caste children. There have also been instances of upper caste teachers and cooks throwing food into the plates of Dalit children from a distance to avoid touching them. In 2013, Parliamentary Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes released a report, condemning the practice of untouchability under the scheme. Following this, the Union government created task forces to investigate the matter. The MHRD identified 144 poorly performing districts with regards to the practice of untouchability and caste-based discrimination³⁵.

iv. Corruption: The 2015 CAG report³⁶ discovered states having indulged in diversion of funds to the tune of Rs. 123.29 crore meant for the Mid Day Meal scheme. The report also highlighted the case of ISKCON in Bellary district Karnataka, which supplied Mid Day meals to children of 304 schools and used 1.04 lakh kg less rice than the prescribed norms in preparing MDM. As per the report under this scheme food supplies are being diverted, supplies are being halved and there is also a lot of wastage. According to a 2019 MHRD report, in the last three years the government has received 52 complaints on corruption in the mid-day meal scheme³⁷. Amongst the states UP has recorded the maximum number of complaints at 14, followed by Bihar at 7.

v. Inadequate Funding: The MDM scheme has been suffering from inadequate funding since 2014³⁸. The share of MDM against total expenditure has come down to 0.39% (Rs 11,000 crore allotted) in FY2019-20 from 0.63% in FY2014-15. The Budgetary Estimate for 2020-21 remains the same as last year at Rs. 11,000 crore³⁹.

2.4 Maternity Entitlements

i. Exclusions in Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY): The PMMVY was announced on December 31, 2016, in accordance with NFSA 2013. The NFSA had made it mandatory for the government to provide Rs 6,000 to every pregnant

³² https://cag.gov.in/sites/default/files/audit_report_files/Union_Performance_Civil_Mid_Day_Meal_Report_36_2015_2.pdf

³³ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/how-caste-is-marring-mid-day-meals-60898>

^{34, 35} Ibid

³⁶ https://cag.gov.in/sites/default/files/audit_report_files/Union_Performance_Civil_Mid_Day_Meal_Report_36_2015_2.pdf

³⁷ <https://www.news18.com/news/india/the-dal-roti-way-hrd-ministry-confirms-up-has-highest-number-of-corruption-cases-in-midday-meal-scheme-2399811.html>

³⁸ <https://www.newsclick.in/budget-2019-20-govt-schemes-poor-neglected-again>

³⁹ <https://www.newsclick.in/Budget-Fails-Indian-Children-Again>

and lactating mother to ensure nutritional support. But the PMMVY has arbitrarily changed this to Rs. 5000. Even the form of PMMVY has many aspects which are contrary to the spirit of NFSA and results in the exclusion of many pregnant women.

- **Exclusion Due to Limitation of Scheme to First Birth:** The scheme has been limited only to the first live birth. As per the Sample Registration System (SRS) 2014, 43 per cent of children born every year in India are firstborns. This limitation therefore excludes 57% of cases⁴⁰. Also, according to SRS 2015, the fertility rate in rural India is 2.5 and the figure for urban India is 1.8. Therefore, the scheme also excludes more women from rural areas. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015-16, states that women in the lowest wealth quintile have 1.6 more children than women in the highest quintile. Consequently, the poor also face greater exclusion.
- **Exclusion of Under Age Mothers:** Only women over 19 years are eligible under this scheme. This is a problem because a large number of women in India have no control over when they get married. According to Census 2011, 30 per cent of women are married before they turn 18⁴¹. These women would be excluded from the scheme if they became pregnant before turning 19.
- **Exclusion of Non Institutional Births:** The scheme is only applicable to institutional deliveries. As per NFHS 2015-16 data, 80 per cent deliveries in the country do not take place in hospitals⁴². These women, who do not come to hospitals, do so for monetary reasons. But the scheme excludes such women who are most in need of monetary help.

ii. Payment Not Received and Payment Delays: A June 2019 survey in Jharkhand revealed that 76% of eligible women had not received any benefit under the PMMVY⁴³. Further, only around 20% had received just the 1st installment of Rs. 1000. The scheme also suffers from frequent payment delays, and due to the centralised payment architecture the local functionaries are unable to understand the reasons for delay⁴⁴. The non-payment of benefits and frequent delays is resulting in a disincentive to register future beneficiaries and furthering exclusion.

iii. Inadequate Budget: In December 2018, experts had written to the then Finance Minister Mr. Arun Jaitley, suggesting a figure of Rs. 8000 crore for PMMVY to ensure the right to maternity benefits of all women defined as per the NFSA⁴⁵. This estimate was based on the crude birth rate of 19 per thousand and the 60:40 PMMVY fund share ratio between the Central and state government. However, the 2019-20 budget allocated only Rs 2,500 crore for the PMMVY. This is an increase over the previous year but remains inadequate. In 2018-19 the budgetary estimate for PMMVY was Rs. 2400 crore, but this was revised downwards to Rs. 1200 crore due to underutilization.

⁴⁰ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/mothers-of-57-newborns-not-entitled-to-maternity-benefits-61737>

^{41, 42, 45} Ibid

⁴³ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/government-violates-nfsa-thousands-of-women-deprived-of-maternity-benefits-reveals-survey/articleshow/70982184.cms>

⁴⁴ <https://thewire.in/women/pmmvy-maternity-benefits-budget-allocation>

3. Food Security Amidst the Covid Crisis

The arrival of the Sars-Cov2 coronavirus has triggered not just a health crisis in India but also a social one. As a response to the Covid emergency the government of India announced the largest lockdown in history, with 1.3 billion people ordered to stay inside starting 25th march. While the lockdown was integral to ensure the slowing down of the disease progression, implementing a lockdown in a country such as India has had a disproportionate impact on the poor and has brought to the forefront the deep class divide present in the country. An inadequate safety net has left many from economically weaker sections without food security and access to basic services. Many media reports have shown how migrant workers in cities have found themselves without a daily wage, street food suppliers and even a home, since they could no longer pay rent, and this has led to a large scale reverse migration⁴⁶, with desperate migrants leaving cities amid lockdown and walking hundreds of miles towards their home villages.

The biggest concern during the current crisis is in ensuring food security particularly for the vulnerable sections. With this in mind the government on the 26th March announced a 1.7 lakh crore relief package with a major food component, and the PDS is supposed to be playing a key role in disbursing government support⁴⁷. However, according to a recent government survey despite the government making efforts to reach people with relief and supplies, access has not been universal and only 31 percent have reported receiving relief in either cash or kind⁴⁸. Thus, the Covid crisis has brought to the fore the many gaps within the system and implementing food security has become a huge challenge.

3.1 Key Implementation Challenges

i. Inadequate Relief Package

The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana was announced by the government on 26 March. The package was for Rs 1.7 lakh crore and included an itinerary of measures. However, as per a number of experts the package in itself lacked the reach to address the needs of the most vulnerable sections.

Firstly, the single-most important announcement in the financial package of the central government was that of doubling of rations for the next three months for entitled beneficiaries⁴⁹. The package has set forth a provision of an extra five kilograms of rice/wheat per person per month, in addition to the existing 5 kilograms, along with one-kilogram pulse per household for a period of three months. Claiming to benefit 80 crore individuals, this measure relies on the existing Targeted Public Distribution System or TPDS framework. In addition, the government has also announced free LPG cylinders to women beneficiaries of the Ujjwala Scheme⁵⁰. However, these set of measures come to no avail when applied to the most vulnerable sections of the society that comprises

⁴⁶ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/reverse-migration-during-covid-19-lockdown-exposes-chinks-in-pds/article31263564.ece>

⁴⁷ <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/finance-minister-nirmala-sitharaman-live-economic-relief-package-coronavirus-slowdown-subsidy-cash-transfer-daily-needs/1909878/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/food-insecure-indians-eating-less-skipping-meal-govt-study-76900>

⁴⁹ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1608345>

⁵⁰ Ibid

landless agricultural workers and migrant workers in cities. Data shows that the current TPDS suffers from huge exclusion errors as highlighted in the next section.

The second announcement was that of direct cash transfer of Rs 1000 to all senior citizens⁵¹, widows and differently-abled citizens from marginal communities in two equal instalments within the next three months, is also seen as too little to deal with a crisis of this magnitude. A number of states, like Delhi⁵², which are already providing more to pensioners under direct benefit cash transfer have doubled this amount. This was to put some cash in the hands of people to buy food and other living supplements.

The third announcement was that under PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana, an instalment of Rs 2,000 was to be paid to 8.69 crore farmers by the first week of April⁵³. However, as per the government's own data the scheme has enlisted 12.50 crore beneficiaries for the year 2018-19⁵⁴. This means that the fund only accounts for 70% of the beneficiaries, leaving behind 3.81 crore beneficiaries.

Fourthly, it was announced that the per-day wage of the beneficiaries of the MGNREGS would be raised from Rs 182 to Rs 202, seeking to benefit 5 crore people⁵⁵. However, the figure has been criticized by MGNREGA activists for being too low an amount. Further, the official data shows that the number of workers under MGNREGS has been on a rise and has gone up from 7.22 crore individuals in 2015-16 to 7.65 crore individuals as per current figures⁵⁶. This also implies exclusion of a significant number of beneficiaries. The MGNREGA hike has also been announced at a time while hardly any public works are possible under the scheme owing to 'social distancing' norms.

Finally, the central government has also announced that it will take over the entire responsibility of paying three instalments of the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) on behalf of both, employees and employers. But, it is restricted to only those firms which have 100 or less employees, out of which at least 90% have a salary of Rs 15,000 or less⁵⁷. Data for the exact number of employees and employers who stand to benefit from this announcement is not known.

On comparing with relief packages of other countries, economies smaller than India have announced much larger relief measures. There is no doubt that government spending in India will have to be increased substantially, both in the short and long term. The careful planning and execution of fiscal measures directed towards protecting the most vulnerable sections of the population and eventually kick-starting economic activity is of extreme importance. If the government adheres to its prevailing notion of fiscal austerity it will only make the crisis worse.

⁵¹ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseSelfFramePage.aspx?PRID=1608345>

⁵² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/free-ration-double-pension-in-delhi/article31132091.ece>

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/government-notifies-extension-of-pm-kisan-scheme-to-all-farmers/articleshow/69702953.cms>

⁵⁵ <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/coronavirus-relief-aid-who-gets-how-much-direct-cash-transfer/story/399330.html>

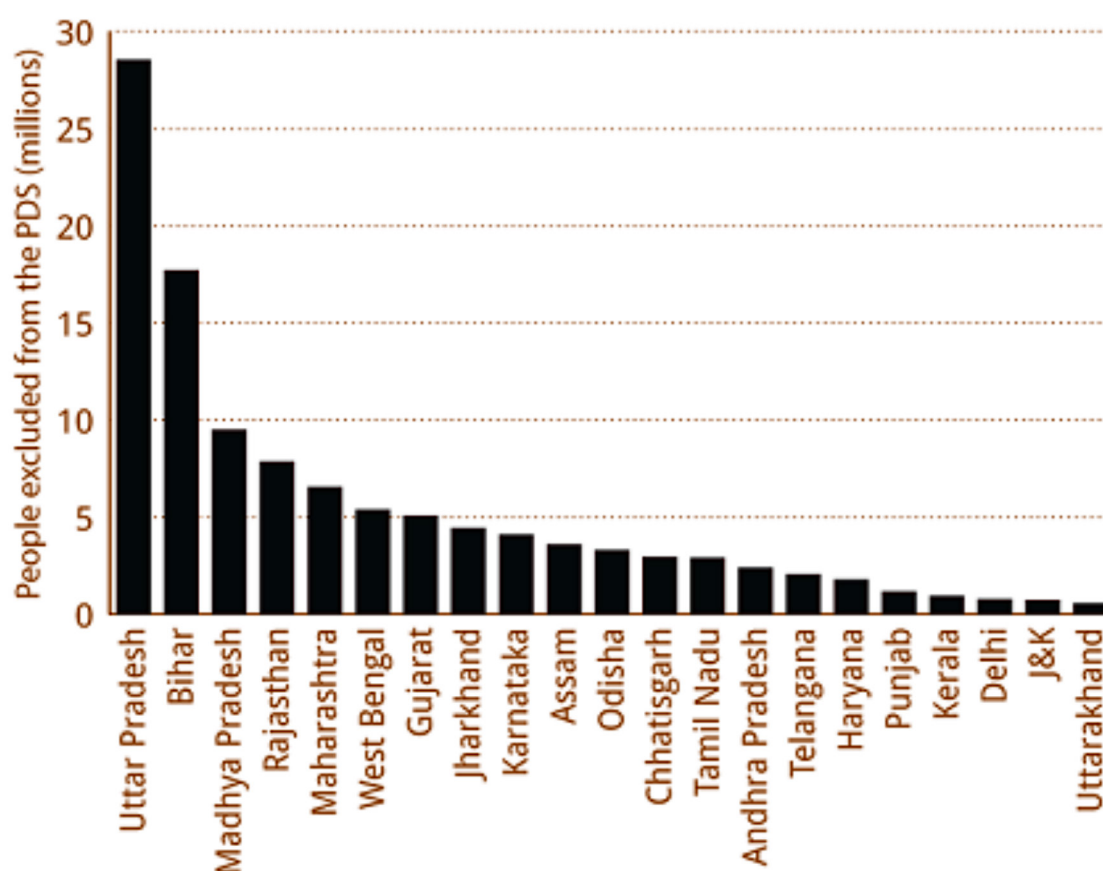
⁵⁶ http://mnregaweb4.nic.in/netnrega/all_lv_details_dashboard_new.aspx

⁵⁷ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseSelfFramePage.aspx?PRID=1608345>

ii. Exclusion from the PDS

According to a study by Jean Dreze, Reetika Khera and Meghana Mungikar due to use of outdated 2011 census data to calculate state wise PDS coverage currently around 100 million people have been excluded from receiving rations from the PDS⁵⁸. Under the NFSA, the PDS is supposed to cover 75% of the population in rural areas and 50% of the population in urban areas, which works out to 67% of the total population, using the rural-urban population ratio in 2011. India's population was about 1.21 billion in 2011 and so PDS covered approximately 800 million people. However, applying the 67% ratio to a projected population of 1.37 billion for 2020, PDS coverage today should be around 920 million⁵⁹. Even taking into account growing urbanization, the shortfall would be around 100 million. The estimates are based on 2016 state-wise estimates of birth and death rates. According to the economists if the central government used updated numbers, it would have enabled state governments to issue new ration cards over time. Instead, the number of persons to be covered in each state has remained static perpetuating this exclusion error. Table 1 and figure 1 shows the estimates of state wise under coverage of PDS.

Fig. 1: State wise PDS under Coverage



Source: Scroll.in (100 million Indians fall through gaps in food safety net, economists urge rethink on Covid-19 relief)

⁵⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/outdated-census-data-deprives-over-10-crore-of-pds-economists/article31350648.ece>

⁵⁹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/outdated-census-data-deprives-over-10-crore-of-pds-economists/article31350648.ece>

Table 1: State Wise PDS under Coverage

States	Population 2011 (millions)	Projected Population 2020 (millions)	NFSA coverage ratios (%)	Absolute coverage based on 2011 population (millions) (A)	Absolute coverage based on 2020 population (millions) (B)	Estimated PDS under-coverage (millions) (B-A)
All India	1210.3	1371.7	0.67	813.5	921.9	108.4*
AP	49.4	53.8	0.54	26.8	29.2	2.4
Assam	31.2	35.6	0.81	25.2	28.8	3.6
Bihar	103.8	124.9	0.84	87.1	104.8	17.7
Chhattisgarh	25.5	29.3	0.79	20.1	23.0	3.0
Delhi	16.8	18.6	0.43	7.3	8.1	0.8
Gujarat	60.4	68.4	0.63	38.3	43.4	5.1
Haryana	25.4	28.9	0.50	12.6	14.4	1.8
J&K	12.5	13.8	0.59	7.4	8.2	0.7
Jharkhand	33.0	38.5	0.80	26.4	30.9	4.4
Karnataka	61.1	67.4	0.66	40.2	44.3	4.1
Kerala	33.4	35.5	0.46	15.5	16.4	1.0
MP	72.6	85.2	0.75	54.6	64.2	9.5
Maharashtra	112.4	122.9	0.62	70.0	76.6	6.6
Odisha	41.9	46.2	0.78	32.6	35.9	3.3
Punjab	27.7	30.0	0.51	14.1	15.3	1.2
Rajasthan	68.6	80.7	0.65	44.7	52.5	7.9
Tamil Nadu	72.1	77.9	0.51	36.5	39.4	2.9
Telangana	35.3	39.1	0.54	19.2	21.2	2.1
UP	199.6	237.0	0.76	152.1	180.6	28.5
Uttarakhand	10.1	11.1	0.61	6.2	6.8	0.6
West Bengal	91.3	99.6	0.66	60.2	65.6	5.4

Source: Scroll.in (100 million Indians fall through gaps in food safety net, economists urge rethink on Covid-19 relief)

As shown in table 1 and figure 1, the biggest gaps are in Uttar Pradesh, where 28 million people may have been left out, and Bihar, which would have had almost 18 million people excluded from the NFSA. With the 2021 census process being delayed due to the current crisis any proposed revisions in coverage will now be delayed by a few years. Meanwhile, this exclusion has meant millions are facing grave and immediate hunger.

iii. Non Portability of Ration Cards

As a result of the lockdown, many PDS users are currently stranded away from their regions of residence. A survey of migrant workers found that four out of 10 labourers did not have ration left even for one day and 90 per cent had lost their only source of income over the past three weeks due to the lockdown⁶⁰. This makes it essential to introduce portability, meaning users' ability to access the system from each ration shop in the country.

Currently, PDS ration cards are neither portable across locations nor can rations be divided, allowing family members to pick up portions at different locations, making them potentially useless for seasonal migrant laborers⁶¹. The One Nation One Ration scheme launched last year has also run into a number of problems as noted earlier. And even if the ONOR programme is implemented, it has no provision for divisibility. This has raised serious concerns for last mile delivery of ration especially for seasonal migrants.

The ongoing crisis requires a reshuffling of priorities: with the lockdown and its serious impact on the poor, the PDS has become an even more fundamental resource for subsistence. The incorporation of biometrics in it has been designed to improve targeting, but the emergency implies that ensuring supplies to the needy is more important than taking measures to combat inclusion errors.

iv. Impact on Supply Chain and Price Rise

The effect of the lockdown has hit the agricultural sector hard. A lack of transport, market shutdowns, labour shortages, strict action by police on transport and the stringent imposition of lockdown by local authorities have put enormous strain on India's food supply. Millions of farmers across the country have been dumping their perishable produce⁶². And even when farmers are managing to take their produce to the markets, there are fewer wholesale buyers. Large quantities of food are now stuck at the production level of the supply chain in villages.

The impact on supply chains has inevitably affected the prices. The prices of key staples, barring cereals, have surged nearly three times since February according to official data⁶³. There are 3 main factors are driving food prices higher, according to data from the consumer affairs ministry⁶⁴. One, the reduction in supply of farm commodities by almost 60% between February and March. Two, land transportation costs have seen a sharp increase due to the difficulty faced by truckers to cross interstate boundaries, in spite of being exempted from the lockdown. And three, restrictions have triggered a shortage in labour supply affecting the loading and unloading of commodities.

⁶⁰ <https://www.news18.com/news/india/impatient-starving-angry-as-india-battles-pandemic-stranded-migrant-workers-emerge-as-crisis-in-the-making-2578109.html>

⁶¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/still-lacking-scale-e-pds-missed-migrants/story-lowBmqM32Pi8L1dgHcwgnN.html>

⁶² <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/why-do-farmers-resort-to-dumping-produce/article31365453.ece>

⁶³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/food-prices-surge-3-times-as-supply-chain-takes-a-hit/story-QRqfvQpEnJJOdbwWzsCi4N.html>

⁶⁴ Ibid

v. Insufficient Agricultural Budget

One of the most critical challenges that the current coronavirus pandemic has highlighted is the ability of the agricultural sector to effectively cope with crisis situation. Agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy which employs more than 50 percent of the workforce and contributes around 16.5 percent of the country's GVA⁶⁵. However, this is also one sector that has been the most ignored for policymakers.

The current crisis of food security is contingent upon agriculture. However, in terms of the budget allocation of 2020-21, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmer's Welfare was allocated Rs 1,42,762 crore which accounted for a mere 5 percent of the total budget⁶⁶. While the percentage of allocation to agriculture has steadily increased over the years in relative terms, it has not exceeded the 5 percent mark in the last decade. A token allotment of 4-5 percent of expenditure for a sector which contributes around 16 percent to the country's GDP is bound to face critical challenges that directly impact millions during the current crisis.

⁶⁵ <https://www.prsindia.org/report-summaries/economic-survey-2019-20>

⁶⁶ <https://www.prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/budgets/demand-grants-2020-21-analysis-agriculture-and-farmers%E2%80%99-welfare>

4. The Case for Universalization of PDS

Given the current crisis due to the pandemic, the PDS as it stands has a number of exclusions. Firstly, as noted in the previous section on the exclusion from PDS, around 100 million people are excluded due to the use of outdated data. This is about 8% of India's population. Secondly, amongst those not covered under PDS many would now become food insecure due to the current crisis. As noted by a 2018 study by Azim Premji University, about 82% males and 92% females in the workforce in India earn less than Rs. 10,000 a month, and 42% males and 71% females earn less than Rs. 5000 a month⁶⁷. Given the lockdown most of these workers would have lost their income and many would be food insecure. A recent report by the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN)⁶⁸ has noted, 50% of the 11,000 workers they had interviewed had rations left for less than a day. The report also added that 96% of the workers had not received rations from the government and 70% had not received any cooked food. Further, 89% of them had not been paid by their employers during the lockdown period.

A third category of people left out of the PDS is the inter-state migrants. According to some estimates⁶⁹, India may have around 120 million internal migrants who work in cities as domestic help, construction workers, in brick kilns and in the transport sector, among others. They are now made extremely vulnerable as their sources of incomes have dried up and most would be in cities where they do not have ration cards or a safety net.

The government's relief package announced on the 26th of March did not contain anything on food security of those left out of the PDS net. The 5 kilogram of additional grain and 1 kilogram of pulses that was announced will not reach many from the vulnerable sections mentioned above. Given the extent of exclusions, many notable economists such as Nobel laureates Amartya Sen and Abhijit Banerjee, as well as Raghuram Rajan, the solution lies in universalising PDS for at least the next six months⁷⁰. They believe the cost of excluding many who are in dire need far exceeds the social cost of inclusion errors. Currently India has 77 million tons of wheat and rice stocks which is more than three times the required buffer stock⁷¹. After the Rabi harvest this is expected to go up by another 40 million tones. Given the excess of grains lying in the godowns universalization becomes completely feasible.

A recent article⁷² by Jayati Ghosh, Prabhat Patnaik and Harsh Mander in the Indian Express, has estimated the cost of universalization. According to the article, free universal provisioning of 10 kg of grain (wheat or rice) per person per month is likely to be availed of by at most around 80 per cent of the population. With an estimated population of 1.3 billion, providing this for six months would require 62.4 million tons of grain which is much less than what the FCI is currently holding. And if the Rabi harvest goes as expected even after distributing 62.4 million tones, 54.5 million tones would still remain.

⁶⁷ https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/State_of_Working_India_2018-1.pdf

⁶⁸ https://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/article31442220.ece/binary/Lockdown-and-Distress_Report-by-Stranded-Workers-Action-Network.pdf

⁶⁹ <http://www.aajeevika.org/labour-and-migration.php>

⁷⁰ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/coronavirus-india-lockdown-economy-amartya-sen-raghuram-rajan-abhijit-banerjee-6364521/>

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-india-lockdown-food-relief-for-poor-mass-exodus-essential-commodities-supply-6380515/>

Further, they argue, the current costs of storage are estimated to be Rs 5.60 per kilograms per year or Rs 2.80 for six months. This means that by releasing 62.4 million tons to feed the hungry of India over the next six months, the FCI would actually be saving Rs 17,472 crore, assuming that these stocks would remain idle⁷³. And even if they were sold the cost would be the lost revenue, which, based on the government's estimates for six months and 80% of the population, would come to a maximum of Rs 1,17,000 crore⁷⁴. The article also notes that in addition to cereals, it is important to provide some pulses, cooking oil, salt, etc., but these would add relatively small amounts to the total expenditure. According to food many right to food activists, if the universal food transfers are not ensured, there would be widespread hunger and destitution, and millions could face starvation.

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Ibid

5. Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for the Covid Crisis

- i. In these dire circumstances, it is essential for the state to directly provide the basic means of survival to anyone who needs it. For food provision, PDS needs to be universalized for the next 6 months, and should also include pulses, cooking oil and salt. The period can be extended depending on how the situation unfolds.
- ii. With more and more states now recognising the problem of access to food for those who do not have ration cards, the delivery mechanism should be simple and easy to access. Any identity card such as voter ID or Aadhaar card of any member of the household should be allowed to get a temporary ration card. However, the experience so far has been that these states such as Delhi are putting in place very bureaucratic systems to issue temporary ration cards or e-coupons. This will also lead to exclusion and needs to be avoided. As has been suggested by the Right to Food campaign, indelible ink that is used during elections can also be used.
- iii. CBOs and NGOs need to continue to play an active role in identifying anyone in need of food provisions and act as a conduit between the government and the citizens.
- iv. The government needs to ensure cooked food to address the needs of migrant, unorganised sector workers, and the homeless and destitute populations. Therefore, in addition to universalising PDS, the government also needs to ensure that community kitchens are set up and function in urban areas.
- v. In addition to food, direct cash transfer also needs to be provided for a period of 3 months with the possibility of further extension depending on the situation. The right to food campaign has argued for an amount of Rs. 7000 per month per household, covering 80% of the population.
- vi. Considering the food provisions for 80% of the population the total cost comes to Rs. 1,17,000 crore. In addition, cash transfer of Rs. 7000 per month per household for 80% of the population comes to a cost of Rs. 4,36,800 crore. The total of both components comes to Rs. 5,53,800 crores, which 2.9% of the current estimated GDP. The Right to Food Campaign has argued for increasing the relief package amount to about 6 lakh crore to reflect this figure.
- vii. At the moment fiscal austerity should not be a constraint and deficit financing should be considered. Adherence to the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act needs to be deferred. The current fiscal deficit is at around 3.8% of GDP, which is 0.8% more than the cap imposed by the Act. While the actual total fiscal deficit

including that of states and public organisations stands at around 9%. A 2-3% increase over six months, in phases, should be manageable and would help to alleviate the struggle of the vulnerable sections.

- viii. The government should ensure markets keep functioning, especially by safeguarding against price gouging. It is also imperative that the food supply chain continues to function seamlessly.

5.2 Some General Recommendations (Post Covid)

- i. Emphasis should be given to strengthen basic infrastructure of AWCs. Steps should be taken to improve the overall ambience of centers to ensure optimal utilization of services by beneficiaries.
- ii. Ensuring job satisfaction by regularizing employment and increasing honorarium of AWWs is necessary to ensure higher quality of service delivery.
- iii. Regular and stringent monitoring of ICDS needs to be ensured.
- iv. Adequate funding for ICDS and proper utilization of funds needs to be ensured. There needs to be a road map for meeting the funding requirements.
- v. Need for stringent monitoring of quality of food provided during mid day meals by SMC. The responsibility of cooking, cleaning utensils etc. needs to be given to local women's groups and self help groups, school should play a supervisory role.
- vi. Independent social audits need to be regularized. There needs to be proper utilization of monitoring and evaluation funds.
- vii. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 needs to be amended to include new forms of discrimination within the Mid Day Meal Scheme.
- viii. It is imperative that the teachers and serving staff be sensitised to the ill-effects of caste discrimination on children as well as the society. Guidelines that prohibit such discrimination need to be followed by all persons involved in the scheme. Building more schools in Dalit dominated regions and employing more Dalit cooks and servers can also help further this objective.
- ix. Need for stringent action against any case of corruption in the Mid Day Meal scheme.
- x. Adequate funding for MDM scheme needs to be ensured at the earliest.
- xi. The PMMVY scheme needs to be universalized to ensure all cases of pregnancies are covered.

- xii. Cash entitlement under PMMVY should be revised to Rs. 6000. Timely payment to all beneficiaries needs to be ensured.
- xiii. Funding for PMMVY needs to increase and there needs to be a roadmap to meet the funding requirement as given by experts.
- xiv. Better use of Information Technology right from the time of purchase of food grains till its distribution will help minimize leakages. There should be seamless flow of information online between the FCI and State. The exact information about how much food grain has been procured from which mandi, which warehouse it is stored in and for how long and when it has been released for distribution needs to be available.
- xv. Targeting has lead to inclusion and exclusion errors. Dual pricing has also contributed to leakages. In the long run there needs to be a road map to move to a universal PDS with self exclusion.
- xvi. Storage capacity of states needs to be expanded. All sanctioned godowns need to be constructed at the earliest.
- xvii. Information about the quality of food grains at the time of purchase, storage conditions in the warehouse, when it is given to PDS shops and when the shops have distributed it to the beneficiaries etc. should be made available. Need regular quality monitoring of food grains under PDS scheme.
- xviii. There is a need for a proper study of migration patterns across the country. Information on the inflow and outflow of migrants is vital for the allocation of the ration cards under ONOR.
- xix. Aadhaar seeding of ration cards should happen as soon as possible. Poor internet connectivity is a larger infrastructure issue that needs to be resolved.
- xx. All ration shops need to install ePOS machines at the earliest.

6. Conclusion

COVID-19 is an unprecedented challenge for India; its large population and the economy's dependence on informal labor has made the lockdown hugely disruptive. The lockdown has exposed major gaps in the social protection systems, especially with regard to access to food, social security and adequate housing. As the country has moved into its third phase of lockdown, there is an urgent need to ensure distribution of essential food items and other necessities. The administration needs to step up its food security initiatives by universalizing the PDS, and injecting more money into universal cash grants for the poor on an urgent basis. Central and state governments must financially support migrant workers, who form the backbone of the food labour and supply chains and need to introduce new and improved relief packages for farmers. In the long term, it is essential that agricultural policy becomes more centered around the impending climate emergency as such crisis are likely to increase and will continue to affect the most vulnerable sections of our society.



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