Lessons from India's food security response

Government measures to tackle the food crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic were effective



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With a reduction in COVID-19 infections as the second wave weakens in India, it is important to focus on the pandemic's disruptive impact on the food security and livelihoods of the poor and marginalised.

The deadly virus has been around for two years and it is not clear as to how and when it will end. However, we do have enough in terms of a hindsight analysis of policies and interventions that promise food and livelihood security, along with the strengthening of health support, for millions facing the wrath of the pandemic.

It is imperative to also note an alarming escalation in the global hunger that is unfolding right now. There was a 'dramatic worsening' of world hunger in 2020, much of it likely related to the fallout of COVID-19. While the pandemic's impact has yet to be fully mapped, a multi-agency report, 'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World', estimates that around a tenth of the global population - up to 81.1 crore persons - were undernourished last year.

India has made enormous progress in food production over the years, with an inspiring journey towards self-sufficiency in food production marked by the Green Revolution. In 2020, India produced over 30 crore tonnes of cereals and had built up a food stock of 10 crore tonnes. The country has registered record harvests over the last few years. India exported a record 1.98 crore tonnes of rice and wheat in FY21.

Pivoting safety nets

Coming to the impact of COVID-19's fallout, vulnerable and marginalised families in India continued to be buffered against the food crisis by its robust Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS).

Key measures initiated by the Union government included allowing the States to lift their allocations for six months in one go, in anticipation of a surge in demand for foodgrains through the public distribution system. As data shows, there was an unprecedented spike in the uptake of subsidised and free foodgrains during the lockdown. The public distribution system became a lifeline for millions hit by the pandemic.

Increase entitlements

A dynamic analysis of the food security scenario and feedback from different stakeholders allowed the Government of India to increase entitlements given to National Food Safety Act (NFSA) beneficiaries in 2020. For instance, under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), 81.3 crore NFSA beneficiaries received an additional 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month and 1 kg of pulses per family per month, free of cost, for eight months from April to November 2020. Under the Atmanirbhar Bharat package, 8 crore migrants were provided 5 kg of foodgrains per month, free of cost.

The government also allowed NGOs/civil society organisations to buy rice and wheat at subsidised prices directly from nearby Food Corporation of India (FCI) warehouses. Rice was sold at ₹22 per kg (market price is ₹35 per kg) and wheat at ₹21 per kg (market price is ₹27 per kg) last year.

The PMGKAY was introduced in 2020 for eight months to provide relief to 80 crore beneficiaries covered under NFSA from COVID-induced economic hardships. The scheme was reintroduced this year for the third phase implementation for two months till June, and later extended till November under the fourth phase.

During the third phase of PMGKAY, about 89% of the allocated foodgrains were distributed to beneficiaries. The distribution reached 94% in May. Implemented for eight months last year and for seven months this year, the PMGKAY outlay will add up to a total expenditure of ₹2,28,000 crore over 15 months.

Addressing challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again drawn attention to addressing the aspects of access and portability of food entitlements. It is critical to leave no one behind in times such as these and crucial for states to find solutions so that no one goes hungry.

Ensuring that food support focuses on at-risk groups, including persons with disabilities, the elderly, single women-led households, transgender persons, HIV-affected persons, displaced persons, refugees and orphan children, is at the heart of 'Leave No One Behind'.

The scale of India's public food distribution systems is immense and has gone through constant navigation and improvement, which is commendable. But more needs to still be done to improve access and inclusion among the missing vulnerable population.

Way ahead

First, the introduction of the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme is an innovation that can be a game changer, allowing beneficiaries to access their food entitlements from anywhere in the country. This is especially important for a country like India with a massive mobile population and migration between States. The scheme takes the massive digitisation of the supply chain, distribution and access to the next step, ensuring anyone benefits from anywhere in India.

Second, climate change will continue to affect agriculture and food security, and the impact on the poor and vulnerable can be devastating. Massive efforts are needed towards programmes that focus on building resilient agriculture that is adaptive to changing weather and needs through the introduction of newer varieties of crops, efficient irrigation systems, and the promotion of crops as per the agro-climate zones.

Thirdly, a third of all food produced is wasted. There should be enhanced efforts to prevent losses. Lost or wasted energy used for food production accounts for about 10% of the world's total energy consumption, and annual greenhouse gas emissions associated with food losses and food waste reaches to around 3.5 gigatonnes of the CO_2 equivalent.

Finally, 2021 offers a unique opportunity for advancing food security and nutrition through transforming food systems with the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit, the Nutrition for Growth Summit and the COP26 on climate change. The outcomes of these events will certainly shape the actions of the second half of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition. India has a central role to play in this transformation and offering experiences and solutions to address the thought processes and models for a resilient, equitable, and food-secure world.

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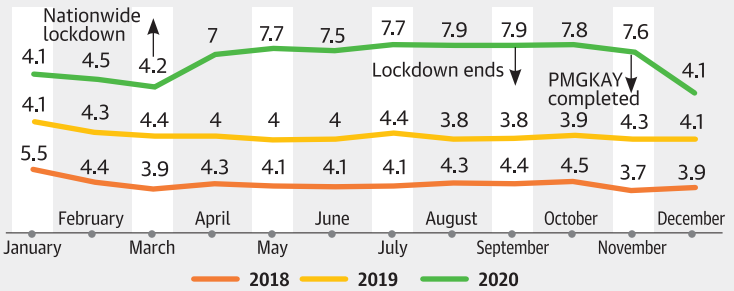
Food for all

In light of the impact of COVID-19, vulnerable families in India continued to be buffered against the food crisis by its robust Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). The graphic shows the monthly distribution of grains* under the system

*in million metric tonnes



Heavy load: Two women carrying a bag of rice as others wait in queue for ration in Guwahati, Assam.



SOURCE: ANALYSIS OF TPDS IN RESPONSE TO COVID IN INDIA, WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME