

NFSA Survey and Public Hearings, 2016

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Eastern India, the world capital of malnutrition, has reached a make-or-break point in the battle against hunger. For the first time, the National Food Security Act (NFSA) makes it possible to ensure that no one sleeps on an empty stomach. Many people, however, are still struggling to secure their entitlements under the Act. By way of reality check, a careful survey of NFSA was recently completed by student volunteers in six of India's poorest states: Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. The survey concluded on 13-14 June with a series of public hearings in the six states, where the people concerned had a chance to speak for themselves.

The National Food Security Act

The NFSA creates three sets of entitlements: (1) subsidised food from the Public Distribution System (PDS); (2) nutritious midday meals for children at schools and *anganwadis* (child care and development centres); and (3) universal maternity entitlements (Rs. 6,000 per child). The survey and public hearings focused specifically on PDS entitlements: 5 kgs of foodgrains per person per month for "Priority" households and 35 kgs per month for "*Antyodaya*" (poorest of the poor) households, with a combined national coverage of 75% in rural areas (rising to 80-85% in the poorest states).

The NFSA was passed in 2013, but implementation has been tardy in many states. In five of the six survey states, the NFSA was rolled out sometime during the last two years. The sixth state, Chhattisgarh, enacted its own food security act in December 2012 and implemented it without delay.

Identification of eligible households

One of the biggest challenges in implementing the Act is the identification of "eligible" households (Priority and *Antyodaya*). This is the responsibility of state governments. Most of them use simple "exclusion criteria" and "inclusion criteria" for this purpose. Some state governments (for example, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal) have used the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) to identify households that meet the eligibility criteria. Others have used alternative methods, such as s

self-declaration (Odisha) and special surveys (Madhya Pradesh). The identification process has proved difficult in all states, but nevertheless far more reliable and transparent than the earlier BPL (Below Poverty Line) Census.

PDS reforms

Another challenge is to avoid corruption in the PDS – leakages used to be as high as 80-90% in some of the sample states. In the eastern region, Chhattisgarh was the first state to undertake wide-ranging PDS reforms (in the late 2000s), with remarkable success. Among the reforms that proved effective are: clear entitlements, de-privatisation of PDS shops, computerisation, separation of transport and distribution agencies (“doorstep delivery”), fixed delivery schedules, strong grievance redressal, and extensive transparency measures. The NFSA requires all state governments to undertake similar reforms. PDS reforms are in full swing in the six sample states and evidence of their impact has already emerged from earlier surveys, for example, in Odisha and Madhya Pradesh.

Role of electoral politics

PDS reforms and the rollout of NFSA have often accelerated in the run-up to Assembly elections. In Chhattisgarh, PDS reforms were initiated with an eye on possible electoral gains (Assembly elections were held in 2008). In Bihar, the implementation of NFSA accelerated sharply as the 2015 Assembly elections approached. The latest example is West Bengal, where the TMC (Trinamool Congress) went out of its way not only to implement the NFSA before the 2016 Assembly elections but also to universalise the PDS.

The survey

The survey mentioned earlier, NFSA Survey 2016, covered three randomly-selected villages in each of 12 sample Blocks (two Blocks per state, in different districts). In each sample village, the survey teams went from house to house to verify ration cards and collect basic data on PDS purchases. About 3,600 households were interviewed. The survey teams also made unannounced visits to PDS shops in the sample villages.

Judging from reports of the survey teams and some initial data analysis, the survey consolidates earlier evidence that Odisha and Madhya Pradesh have already gone a long way in emulating Chhattisgarh’s success with PDS reforms. In these three states, most of the sample households had a ration card and were able to secure their foodgrain entitlements at the correct price.

In Bihar and Jharkhand, the PDS is certainly more inclusive, effective and transparent than it used to be. However, exclusion errors and corruption persist, as do occasional gaps in the supply chain (especially in Bihar). Much work remains to be done, but recent progress suggests that nothing prevents these 'laggard' states from catching up with the trailblazers.

In West Bengal, the NFSA is a unique opportunity to put the PDS on a new track. Before NFSA, the system was ridden with exclusion errors, convoluted entitlements and massive leakages. The survey suggests a sea change as the PDS was universalised just before the Assembly elections earlier this year. As in Bihar and Jharkhand, however, the transition towards food security for all is far from complete.