



PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM AND COVID-19 : A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Dr. Pranchita Tiwari

Independent Researcher, MBA, India.

Dr. Swati Bachani*

Independent Researcher, MPH, India. *Corresponding Author

KEYWORDS : Covid-19, Public Distribution System, India, Pds, Food Security, Pandemic, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Without definite measures, the latest global health crisis COVID-19 can lead to a food security crisis. (Fan, 2020) World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed the spread of pandemic to 216 countries with over 10 million active cases. (WHO, 2020) With the massive rate of transmission, the disease has even indirectly infected the other realms of society as well. The global economy is already struck by the inevitable, lasting recession posing deeper social and political amendments. (Pathak et al., 2020) Governments imposing lockdowns constrained inter-state transport and international travel restrictions have disrupted the logistics and supply chain for the manufacturers, distributors, and consumers as well. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development presented a report claiming the automotive commerce (-47%), elementary material productions (-116%) and energy industry (-208%) are the hardest hit sector by COVID-19, cutting the global investment by 40%. (UNCTAD, 2020) Financial problems, downsizing, limiting access, increased job insecurity, reduced income localized price hikes, shortage of labors due to out-migration, and others are significant apprehensions. UN Department Economic and Social Affairs stated that at the worst extreme, the global economy could even condense by approximately 1% in 2020. (Press Trust of India, 2020) The crisis scenario can only be improved by harmonized decisions, international solidarity, innovative policymaking, and firm decisions by leading global economies.

The uncertainty of the catastrophe caused by the pandemic makes a precise evaluation of the situation more problematic. The scope and coverage of the disease, its spread, and the administrations' response is still specific to the real-time circumstances. This was further consolidated by Dr. Arif Hussain, The Chief Economist at the World Food Programme (WFP). Thus, the economic depression pertaining to the impacts of COVID-19 affects the developing and developed economies. India being an agricultural economy, the recession would certainly influence the existing dilemma of food insecurity and malnutrition. (World Food Programme, 2020)

International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasted global growth to be as low as -3% in 2020. (Ferroukhi et al., 2020) The purchasing power of the susceptible households is drastically reduced due to the macroeconomic shocks. After the extended lockdown by the Indian government from 25th March 2020 till 31st May 2020 with an attempt to deteriorate the spread of the disease. For the daily wagers, the necrosis protracted to the unavailability of everyday work and steady three-time meals on the regular household table.

This narrative review gauges the influence of COVID-19 and lockdown on food security and the prevention of food crisis. It also encompasses to weigh the different actions broadcasted by the Government of India.

INDIA'S MEASURES AGAINST COVID-19

While measuring for India, the Gini ratio, which statistically gauges the income or affluence distribution of a country, a value as high as 35.2 clearly defines the high rate of income inequality. (World Bank, 2016) According to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16 (NFHS-4), 21 percent of children are wasted, 36 percent are underweight and 38 percent of children under 5 years are stunted in growth. The survey even identifies 58 percent of 6 to 59 months old children affected by anaemia. Among the adult population, 23 percent of women and 20 percent of men were underweight while 53 percent of women and 23

percent of men suffer from anaemia. (NFHS, 2017) The National Food Security Act, 2013 strategizes to deal with food security through which the welfare approach is relocated to a right-based approach. Identification of entitled people to safeguard the effortless accessibility to food is one of the prime concerns in the public distribution system. With the schemes like Mid- Day Meal (MDM), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Pradhan Mantri Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), the public distribution system is further strengthened.

This distribution system provides 5 kg of food grains per member of priority household and 35 kg of food grains per member of Antyodaya Anna Yojana household through a nationally organized system of 5,00,000 fair price shops. With rice at 3 INR per kg, wheat at 2 INR per kg, and coarse grain at 1 INR per kg, the minimum prices provided by the central government hold coverage for approximately 800 million targeted population. (FCI, 2013) The proactive measures undertaken by the central and state government and proper general functioning of the PDS improved the food grain transportation, increased coverage, declined exclusion error, and raised purchasing power for the targeted population.

Currently as declared by the government on March 23, 2020, India has 646 lakh tons out of which 435 lakh tons are surplus food grains with rice equal to 272.19 lakh tons and wheat equal to 162.79 lakh ton. (The Economic Times, 2020a) The demand can easily be met by the supply in this case. The agricultural economy has saved the nation in terms of availability and food security. The government even promises to provide interminable and ceaseless food grain delivery with better availability to migrants and the entitled population. (The Economic Times, 2020b)

Multiple measures are undertaken by frontline workers including the central and state government, ministry of consumer affairs and food, and public distribution system which focusses on food security in times of these uncertainties. The pandemic and lockdown allied with it invited novel measures to accord with the same.

PM Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana scheme allows free distribution to 800 million targeted population for the subsequent 3 months with supplementary 5 kg food grains per person and 1 kg of pulses per household. The government can even boost the allowance of subsidised and financed food grains for 6 months further. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) further allowed the advance boosting for subsidized food grains in various States and Union territories' government.

States like Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Kerala have taken well-drawn steps to combat the hindrances to food security. Tamil Nadu ordered to distribute 1000INR per rice cardholder in addition to the free oil, sugar, rice and tur dal to every household in the month of April 2020. Taking care of physical distancing and prohibiting overcrowding, a token system was adopted by the administration. Migrants, daily wage workers, and day to day salaried workers were thoroughly identified and provided with the cash grant and free cooking oil, 1 kg dal, and 15 kgs rice.

Gujarat was another example of promoting food security in this time of disaster rehabilitation. Migrants, underprivileged and impoverished sections of the society were especially taken care of. Annapurna Yojana guaranteed the 17,000 FPSs to distribute 1 kg of sugar, pulses, and salt, 1.5 kg of rice, and 3.5 kg of wheat to each ration cardholders.

With 522 community kitchens, Uttar Pradesh administration is providing food for the disadvantaged. Apart from that, all the ration cardholders are given a free supply of ration to promote food safekeeping as well. Also, 26,298 manual carts and mobile vans are promoting the norms of lockdown and physical distancing by home delivery of fruits and vegetables.

Besides the 1.5fold free, increase in the ration dissemination for the households under PDS, the government of the capital of the nation, Delhi, provided cooked and prepared food to homeless people in the night shelters two times a day.

Kerala authorized the allocation of 30 kg of food grains and a kit of rice, sugar, wheat, spices, pulses, salt and edible oil to each entitled household. With a self-devised card system, the government prevents overcrowding at fair price shops.

GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY CHALLENGE

Food status and security rely on the dimensions of availability, accessibility, management, and stability. To ensure the nutritional status and development, all these dimensions are to be fulfilled, according to previous studies, a disaster like pandemic tend to influence diverse classes of the population distinctly and with varying intensities. The social and economic factors directly contribute to the impact of the disaster. (Silverstein, 2017)

The reverse migration forced by joblessness and food starvation instigated and propagated panic among the daily breadwinners. Exposing the real issues of the PDS, the reverse migration helped in the establishment of the scheme "one nation one ration card" by the government. This focussed on enhancing the portability and transferability of the public distribution system. It enables the cardholders to buy ration from any FPS in most of India for more than a year.

Due to the lockdown and inter-state travel restrictions, many underprivileged people are denied free services as they are stranded in a different place than the area of residence. As the census figures are based on the data collected in 2011, with millions of people still unregistered, they are unable to avail of the opportunities and subsidies provided by the public distribution system of the government. (Ray and Subramanian, 2020) The entitlement of the food grains even faces the hurdles due to the inaccessibility of assigned cardholders.

To social distance and diminish the human pattern of touching inanimate articles, the suspension of the electronic biometric verification system seemed like the best option but then it also surfaces complications like an increase in illegal outflows and extensive black marketing of grains in PDS. The same complications enforced the Bihar government to seal 50 PDS amid obligatory lockdown and transmission of COVID-19. (Khan, 2020)

The availability of yield directly depends upon the expanse of produce and the amount of procurement of the produce as well. Countrywide lockdown created another hassle for the government in terms of procurement of ripened crops and grains. Consequently, distressing the supply and availability of grains and the organization and operations of the PDS.

The ripened wheat was in the field for longer periods as there was no labor to undertake the necessary practices. For the already distributed wheat, the wheat grinder chakkis were further deemed inaccessible amidst the national lockdown. Eligible beneficiaries and cardholders are still denied of the large benefits due to the absenteeism of exhaustive and comprehensive operational directives.

CONCLUSION

According to the Rome Declaration on World Food Security, 1966, elaborated that food security is met when everyone, every time has full access to adequate, innocuous, and nourishing food to further satisfy the dietary needs and luxury preferences of an active and healthy lifestyle. (World Food Summit, 1996) While the pandemic situation is more focussed on mitigating the impairment caused by the same, the economic realm of the society would show a slower growth to reach the former standards. The policymakers, managers, administrators, and the law and enforcement should work in solidarity to sustain and rebuild the baseline workers, farmers, daily wage workers, and migrants as well.

The procurement of the produce is directly proportional to crop production and these two factors affect a safeguarded food supply and security. Nutrition goes hand in hand with the quality of water and sanitation. The establishment of local strategies and amplified regional production, effortless operations in logistics, and organized supply chain markets can additionally certify efficacious government facilitation.

Training and developing the technological background and implementation of the farmers with periodic and customized dissemination of information can supplement the administration of the disaster response. Along with the incentivized instructors and advancing the social networks with the incorporation of local community leaders, would speed up the governmental response to the pandemic, properly and promptly. (JPAL, 2020) Numerous apparatuses of the government machinery harmonize and aligns their services to bring out the superlative provision and channels of distribution to the entitled.

Reverse migration with the restriction on transport caused labour shortages for the distant future as well. Black Swan events like the COVID-19 pandemic even forced governments to additionally integrate extensive and inclusive plans to look after the marginalized populations, societies, and economies. Resource allocation plays an integral part in government strategies and implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Suggestions and recommendations for better provision and application of measures against the COVID-19 are as follows.

One nation, one ration card strategy may help in times of economic distress and moreover promoting food security. Increased productivity with efficient procurement of the crop production enlightens the path of sustainable usage of the grains stock. Free distribution or sale at nominal prices can be conducted to recuperate the services provided. (Dreze, 2020) Universalization of the Public Distribution System is the best way forward.

Self-help groups, community kitchens, and non-governmental organizations indefinitely play a significant and unrecognized role to meet the needs of the population and in the delivery of the requirements of social food security.

Government acting as a free distributor for the necessary cereals and pulses to the entitled population is already a leading example of administrative power put to full use of the public. (Deccan Herald, 2020) Proper norms of social distancing with guide markers, suitably trained, symptomless shop owners, and appropriate sanitization with foot-operated stations are to be followed to curb the transmission of the viral infection. Allowance to the farmers as soon as possible to start harvesting after the lockdown. (Hussain, 2020) Bare minimum but efficient measures by the government are certainly support the organization of the public distribution system.

Funding: No funding sources

Conflict of interest: None declared

Ethics approval: Not required

REFERENCES:

1. Deccan Herald, 2020. PDS beneficiaries' woes: Free wheat of no use when flour mills shut due to lockdown | Deccan Herald [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/national-politics/pds-beneficiaries-woes-free-wheat-of-no-use-when-flour-mills-shut-due-to-lockdown-819590.html> (accessed 7.12.20).
2. Dreze, J., 2020. Excess stocks of the Food Corporation of India must be released to the poor. Indian Express. URL <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-lockdown-food-for-poor-migrants-mass-exodus-jean-dreze-6353790/> (accessed 7.12.20).
3. Fan, S., 2020. Preventing global food security crisis under COVID-19 emergency | IFPRI: International Food Policy Research Institute [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/preventing-global-food-security-crisis-under-covid-19-emergency> (accessed 7.12.20).
4. FCI, 2013. Sales - Food Corporation of India [WWW Document]. URL <http://fci.gov.in/sales.php?view=42> (accessed 7.12.20).
5. Ferroukhi, R., Gielen, D., Press, Elizabeth, Renner, M., Hawila, D., Garcia-Casals, X., Taylor, M., Gorini, R., Jacobs, D., 2020. IRENA Post-COVID Recovery 2020.
6. Hussain, S., 2020. Covid-19 pandemic | India has little to fear about its food security - Moneycontrol.com [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/economy/covid-19-pandemic-india-has-little-to-fear-about-its-food-security-5065411.html> (accessed 7.12.20).
7. JPAL, 2020. The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab [WWW Document]. Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab J-PAL. URL <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/> (accessed 7.12.20).
8. Khan, M.I., 2020. COVID-19 lockdown: 50 PDS shops sealed in Bihar for illegal trade [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/covid-19-lockdown-50-pds-shops-sealed-in-bihar-for-illegal-trade-70274> (accessed 7.12.20).

- 7.12.20).
9. NFHS, 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-16: India.
 10. Pathak, P., Gope, T., Bader, N., 2020. Effect of COVID-19 on public distribution system in India. *Int. J. Community Med. Public Health* 7, 2411–2415. <https://doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20202508>
 11. Press Trust of India, 2020. Global economy could shrink by 1% in 2020 due to coronavirus pandemic: UN. *Bus. Stand. India*.
 12. Ray, D., Subramanian, S., 2020. India's Lockdown: An Interim Report (No. w27282). National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w27282>
 13. Silverstein, J., 2017. There's No Such Thing as a Purely Natural Disaster Anymore [WWW Document]. URL https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bjv4j5/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-purely-natural-disaster-anymore (accessed 7.12.20).
 14. The Economic Times, 2020a. States can lift PDS grains for three months on credit: Finance Minister - The Economic Times [WWW Document]. URL <https://economic-times.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/states-can-lift-pds-grains-for-three-months-on-credit-finance-minister/articleshow/74780184.cms> (accessed 7.12.20).
 15. The Economic Times, 2020b. FCI transports 6.71 lakh tonnes of food grains during lockdown - The Economic Times [WWW Document]. URL <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/fci-transports-6-71-lakh-tonnes-of-food-grains-during-lockdown/articleshow/74899204.cms> (accessed 7.12.20).
 16. UNCTAD, 2020. unctad.org | Coronavirus could cut global investment by 40%, new estimates show [WWW Document]. URL <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2313> (accessed 7.12.20).
 17. WHO, 2020. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – World Health Organization [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> (accessed 7.12.20).
 18. World Bank, 2016. Gini Coefficient By Country 2020 [WWW Document]. URL <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gini-coefficient-by-country> (accessed 7.12.20).
 19. World Food Programme, 2020. How to minimize the impact of Coronavirus on food security | by Simona Beltrami | World Food Programme Insight [WWW Document]. URL <https://insight.wfp.org/how-to-minimize-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-security-be2fa7885d7e> (accessed 7.12.20).
 20. World Food Summit, 1996. Rome Declaration and Plan of Action [WWW Document]. URL <http://www.fao.org/3/w3613e/w3613e00.htm> (accessed 7.12.20).