

# Policy Watch

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## India's Public Distribution System and the Pandemic – Revisiting Delhi's Beneficiaries

O. Grace Ngullie and Arib Ahmad Ansari



**THE HINDU CENTRE**

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Politics and Public Policy

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**Photo Caption:** Beneficiaries of India's Public Distribution System (PDS) wait outside a PDS outlet in East Delhi to collect free ration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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# India's Public Distribution System and the Pandemic – Revisiting Delhi's Beneficiaries

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## ABSTRACT

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**N**ever since the founding of the Indian republic have so many millions depended directly on India's government machineries for sustenance. One truth that the COVID-19 pandemic has driven home is that the welfare state cannot be replaced and needs to be strengthened. In addition to market failures, the inability of markets to operate under extraordinary circumstances – such as the ongoing pandemic – places the onus on governments to emerge as providers of the last resort. In this interview-based empirical study, O. Grace Ngullie and Arib Ahmad Ansari revisit beneficiaries who were respondents in a previous study by the first author on the Public Distribution System (PDS) in Delhi. (The names of all respondents have been changed to protect confidentiality.) While the earlier study focussed on the comparative benefits of cash transfers vis-à-vis provisioning of ration, the present exploratory study aims to find out the manner in which the PDS has worked for the poor in times of COVID-19 pandemic.

This preliminary inquiry finds that the pre-existing problems with the PDS persist, thereby worsening the woes of the vulnerable who have been promised food security during the pandemic. For instance, there were differences reported in the quantity or rations received and promised, the quality of the food grains, exclusion, and access.

The authors suggest a set of policy recommendations addressing each of the problems. The recommendations include utilising modern and emerging technologies to address supply chain issues, the creation of new cadre for monitoring, and upwardly revising the allocation.

*Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, India, Public Distribution System, Delhi, Food Security*

## I. REVISITING DELHI'S PDS BENEFICIARIES

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The severe and unprecedented economic distress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made millions of people lose their livelihoods and become helpless making them rely increasingly – in some instances entirely – on government welfare schemes for their basic needs. The purpose of this exploratory empirical study is to assess the efficacy and the resilience of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India as a provider of food security for the poor in times of debilitating emergencies of the nature of the COVID 19 pandemic. Though there has been plenty of good research<sup>1</sup> on the implementation of India's PDS over the years with social scientists suggesting many relevant interventions, which facilitated gradual improvement in the overall strength of the PDS; none of these envisioned a time when the PDS would assume such a central role in the Indian state's response to the extreme economic hardship brought about by this deadly pandemic.

In times like these the market economy loses its automatic resource allocation ability and the responsibility of saving a sinking economy falls squarely on the state. Under such circumstances, the steps that governments take hold the only promise of hope for the struggling millions. This makes government initiatives the most crucial cogs in the overall response to a pandemic. The viability and the success of such programs depend on how aligned they are with the needs and the problems faced by the most vulnerable section of the population.

### **Structure of the Delhi inquiry**

The importance of this study lies in getting first-hand evidence of the most acute problems faced by the people hit hardest by the pandemic – the poor who have lost their means of income because of either closure of workplaces, loss of jobs, or the inability to reach workplaces owing to the lockdown and need state support to live – through direct interaction with them. We begin with the principle that any initiative to alleviate the suffering of the poor has to primarily learn about the nature of their suffering. To this end, we ask how the PDS has worked during the time of the pandemic in providing relief to the vulnerable: where it is falling short, what are the aspects left unaddressed, where and to what extent PDS is misdirected, and so forth. Once we establish an understanding of the above, we aim to go forward to suggest ways, based on the information collected directly from the respondents, through which welfare policy measures such

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<sup>1</sup> A collection of literature is available at the Right to Food Campaign's website.  
<http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in/food-pds/articles>, Last accessed June 26, 2020.

as the PDS can be made more effective and inclusive to help people tide over the periods of crisis.

Accordingly, this empirical inquiry was structured under four themes.

- First, we tested people's *awareness* about the government announcement on the increase of food grains allotment through the PDS due to the pandemic. The Government of Delhi, where this inquiry was conducted, announced a total of 7.5 kg food grains per person per month and the central government announced 10 kg of food grains per person per month.
- Second, we examined *access* to PDS during this pandemic. We verified the sought information on the food grains received by the respondents and identified problems faced by the people when accessing the PDS during this pandemic.
- Third, we assessed the *impact* of the PDS in reducing the hardship of the poor by examining the adequacy and quality of ration received by the beneficiaries in the context of attaining food security.
- Fourth, we studied the *impact* of the pandemic on livelihood and food access and explored government interventions that could alleviate the problems of job loss and food insecurity during this pandemic.

### **Revisiting beneficiaries**

Constrained by the ongoing pandemic, which necessitated keeping a physical distance from respondents, we conducted telephonic interviews in June with PDS beneficiary households we came in contact with from a previous study (Ngullie 2017). These residents of households live in the districts of Northeast (Karawal Circle), Northwest (Kirari Circle), West (Vikasपुरi Circle), and South West (Matiala Circle) in Delhi. The rationale for the selection of sites relied on the maximum number of PDS households in each district and circle. At the time of the sampling for the first study (in February 2015), Kirari had 44,449 PDS households, Karawal had 38,763 PDS households, Vikasपुरi had 41,228 PDS households, and Matiala had 40,340 PDS households. At the time of the study, the list of households' name with the house address was available at the website of the National Food Security, Delhi. To choose a sample of 40 PDS households, we adopted Systematic Random Sampling to make the survey evenly representative. For example, we divide the total number of beneficiaries in a Circle (say 1,000) by ten (to select 10 households from each Circle), which gives us 100. Subsequently, our target households would be 100<sup>th</sup>, 200<sup>th</sup>, 300<sup>th</sup> and so on.

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This method enables us to make an unbiased selection from the entire list of beneficiaries. In case a particular beneficiary is not traceable or unavailable for some reason, the preceding beneficiary of the first selection is taken, that is, the 99<sup>th</sup> if 100<sup>th</sup> is not available, the 199<sup>th</sup> if 200<sup>th</sup> is absent, and so on. This method seeks to find the nearest possible alternative to the chosen beneficiary in case of her absence. We traced the households' addresses, conducted the survey, and requested their phone numbers (with consent) for follow-up purposes.

This time, out of 40 households contacted, 18 households, comprising 102 individuals, responded and enthusiastically consented to participate in the interview to study the working and the impact of the PDS in the current pandemic. Out of the 18 households, six are from the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, five are from the General category, three are from the Muslim community, two are Other Backward Caste (OBC-Hindu), and another two are OBC-Muslim. The respondents, who spoke on behalf of their households, comprised of 14 females and four males (husband or son) of the head of the household. The senior female in the family is the head in the ration card. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes.



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## II. QUANTITY, QUALITY, ACCESS – THE PROBLEMS PERSIST DURING THE PANDEMIC

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We find it interesting that all the respondents were aware of the enhancement of food allocation owing to the lockdown under the PDS announced by both the State and the central governments. However, not all households received the same amount of food grains. Variations were reported in the quantity of food grains received from the PDS versus that which was announced. Out of 18 households, only eight households received the announced amount of 10 kg per person; eight households received 8 kg per person; one household received 5 kg per person; another household received only 4 kg per person for each month.

For example, Sumitra, a resident in Kirari, North West Delhi received only 20 kg of ration for her four-member household at the rate of 5 kg per person. Gitanjali Devi and Vidhya Devi, residents in Karawal, North East Delhi received 8 kg of food grains per person per month for their family. As in normal, non-pandemic, times, the beneficiaries in Delhi received wheat and rice in the ratio of 4:1. For example, for a person receiving a total of 10 kg of food grains, the allocation would include 8 kg of wheat and 2 kg of rice, and for a person receiving 8 kg of food grains, it would be 6.4 kg of wheat and 1.6 kg of rice.

As a special arrangement for the pandemic, the beneficiaries received special kits containing the following items: one litre of refined oil, a pair of soap, and a packet each of salt, sugar, chilli powder, and *channa* or *chhole*. Yet again, the distribution was not uniform as one-half of the respondents received it only once in the last two months and the other half received it twice.

### **Exclusion – a major setback**

We found the exclusion of eligible members as a major setback in the PDS. Out of 102 individuals from 18 households, only 78 are registered in their respective family's ration cards. For example, Naina Singh has eight members in her household but only five are listed in the ration card, which reduces the food entitlement for the family. Sangeeta Devi, an intermittent informal labourer is a sole breadwinner in a family of five, whose husband is bedridden due to a chronic illness she chose not to disclose, and who received a total of 24 kg of food grains for three members registered in the ration card. These cases reflect the extent of exclusion in the food distribution system. Denial of food entitlement to some eligible members not enlisted in the ration card was found to be pervasive. All the respondents have been struggling to register new members in the family's ration card. With many citing bureaucratic hurdles, it indicates that

government agencies are reluctant to update their ration cards. Whenever they approach the Fair Price Shops (FPS) or the rations office to register new members, they are either turned away or are asked to come at a later date making them give up the hope of getting it done. Eventually, they make peace with whatever reduced amount of ration they receive.

In an exclusive case, a man used his Aadhaar card to collect his share of the ration after failing to add his name to the family's ration card. Shalini Devi's husband told her that he had filled up the ration card form and submitted it to the 'government' a 'hundred times' to get it updated; yet, it failed. Her husband managed to collect ration for the last two months based on his Aadhaar card. In this context, technological up-gradation embodied in the shift from ration card to Aadhaar card as the eligibility for receiving ration might work for the excluded individuals. On the other hand, several respondents informed about the low coverage of Aadhaar cards since not all family members possess one. For instance, only three out of five in a family or only five out of eight in another family possessed Aadhaar cards.

### **Absence of behavioural norms at Fair Price Shops**

We find it alarming to learn that beneficiaries are troubled by the long queues and congestion at the Fair Price Shops in this time of the pandemic. Geetanjali Devi, a mother of three from Karawal, North West Delhi, was deeply concerned about the risks associated with the collection of rations in overcrowded spaces. Being a widow, she had no helping hand other than her children but she never allowed her children, despite their insistence, to collect ration. The problem of overcrowding was conspicuous and they evoked concern about the near-complete disregard for physical distancing norms. Though the beneficiaries expressed remarkable awareness of the protective measures to be undertaken during the COVID-19, they helplessly put themselves at risk because of the indispensable need for food. Respondent Shahana Khatoon reasoned that the constant increase in cases in Delhi might be due to people having to step out of their houses to fulfil their basic needs and hence, suggested the government deliver these basic needs at their doorstep.

### **Inadequate quantity of disbursement**

Interrogating whether the ration from the PDS satiates the recipients' needs for a month elicited the sharpest responses from the beneficiaries. While some responses expressed shock, some were clothed in amusement, and still, others bordered on anger upon an assumption that the entitled ration would ensure their basic monthly food needs.

Najma Khatoon said “*Majak kar rahe ho kya?*” (Are you joking?). Mahesh, son of beneficiary Prabhawati Devi retorted “*Aap kbud sochiye, kaise poora hoga itna kam ration*” (Please think for yourself how can such a meagre quantity suffice for the whole family). He illustrated that all his six family members physically labour throughout the day and their minimum wheat consumption is about 2.5 kg per day, amounting to 75 kg per month, whereas they receive only 8 kg per month per person amounting to only 48 kg per month from the PDS as the maximum amount. The beneficiaries admitted the benefit of doubling the ration in times of pandemic and expressed satisfaction and preferred frequent distribution of the kits, favouring such diversification of items that include cereals and other food essentials. With some members of the households excluded from the PDS, there was complete unanimity amongst the respondents on the need to increase the allocation of ration per household. The current food allocation lasts in the range of 12 to 15 days. The food grains and the free-of-cost kits during this pandemic has only given them temporary relief in an overarching climate of extreme hardship.

### **Inconsistent quality**

The majority of the respondents reported that the quality of ration is inconsistent— sometimes it is fine, sometimes it is awful. Some expressed disappointments with the quality of wheat. Sugandha Devi explained, “*Bobot kharab gehu hai, roti kaari kaari banti hai aur swaad bhina hi hota*” (the quality of the wheat is substandard; roti made from the wheat looks black and without taste). Another respondent, the son of beneficiary Nirmala Devi, reported that sometimes the packet of wheat contains a lot of thorns in it. The residue wheat after removing the thorns is a much-reduced quantity. The complaints were mainly of bad quality of wheat. Most of the respondents were satisfied with the quality of rice.

### **Water woes and poor hygiene**

A pertinent issue that arose on the sidelines of our discussion over the telephonic interviews was the acute water crises across different locations in Delhi during this lockdown. Households residing in Kirari (North West) and Karawal (North East) in particular were the worst affected by the water crises. According to them, the water supply has been disrupted ever since the lockdown began and it only comes for half an hour in a day which is grossly inadequate. Water tankers came initially after complaints by residents but as the lockdown extended those tankers also stopped their service. Dhapar, a father of two, daily wage labourer and a resident of Kirari said, “*Ration chhod dijiye, paani ka samasya hai, jab paani hi nahi milega to jiyenge kaise*” (Do not ask about ration, water is the main problem here: unless we get water how will we live). Asha Rani exclaimed, “How can the authorities expect us to follow the sanitization norms when we do not

have enough water!” She indicated a lack of adequate water as a contributing factor behind the rise in cases. This particular issue we feel requires urgent remediation by government authorities if we are to get even close to our mitigation targets.

### **Loss of livelihood due to lockdown**

All the respondent households suffered either a lay off from the employer or loss of income as a result of the pandemic. Out of 14 respondents who worked as labourers, seven did not get even a single day of work due to lockdown. The income of some respondents who were self-employed reduced to a negligible amount under the effect of the lockdown. Phoolwati’s husband narrated that they earn a livelihood by rearing buffalos and selling milk. However, for the last two months, buyers are unable to pay for the milk but are borrowing milk on credit and making promises to pay later when they regain their incomes. This has foreclosed any hope of income that they had from their animal rearing livelihood. This appears to be a representative case for many others who are self-employed, having exhausted their income owing to the macroeconomic shock that this pandemic has produced. Emphasising that a “labourer is the pillar of the economy; the government needs to take care of the labourer”, Priyank, a respondent, suggested that the government could provide employment assurance or subsistence allowance during such economic crises. He reflected that the government could have established manufacturing units for masks, sanitizers, protective equipment, and other such high demand medical equipment in rural areas to address the shortage of these essentials on one hand and employ rural residents on the other.

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### III. IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON ACCESS TO FOOD

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The loss of livelihood induced by the pandemic has severely hampered people's access to food. Given the fact that massive unemployment and loss of livelihood has already engulfed the working millions due to the pandemic, and that some members of the households are excluded from the PDS, the quantity of ration provided by the government cannot act as a bulwark against hunger and want. It naturally leads us to the question of how they survive for the rest of the days without any source of income. Most of the respondents borrowed money to meet their food requirements. Thereafter consuming the ration from the PDS that lasts up to 15 days, they borrow money from their neighbours and friends. Similarly, those who received the kits only once in the last two months used their savings and borrowed money to buy these items again. Few are surviving on meagre savings while the rest are borrowing money from friends and neighbours. None of them could access bank credit due to lockdown. Each had developed their networks of informal borrowing, which they relied upon in times of extreme distress. In such a scenario, they expressed their anguish at falling deeper into a debt trap and not having a clue as to when they will be able to come out of it. The respondents declared that their meagre savings, ration from the PDS, and borrowed money from neighbours and friends are their only hopes of survival.

#### **The high share of food expenditure**

To fully understand the impact of the pandemic on economic access to food in Indian households, one has to consider the overall share of expenditure on food that Indian households incur on average. The average share of food in household total spending amounts to 43 per cent in urban India and rises to 53 per cent in rural India (NSSO 2011-2012: 106-107)<sup>2</sup>. For perspective, we can compare it to French households that spent only 13.2 per cent of their total expenditures on food and non-alcoholic beverages in 2017 (Eurostat 2018).

These statistics while confirming Engel's law— the poorer a household, the larger the share of total expenditures spent on food— also point to the uneven impact of economic hardship on access to food. The kind of economic shock generated by the COVID-19 might be the same for France and India, but its effect on the access to food is graver on the Indian population.

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<sup>2</sup> A more recent household consumption survey was conducted in 2017-18 but the data has not been released yet.

### **Persistent problems aggravate suffering**

Our empirical studies prove that most of these problems have been occurring from way back (Ngullie 2017, 2018). Corruption, thus, has not been rooted out in Delhi, even though the Arvind Kejriwal government hiked the FPS dealers' commission by 300 per cent in January 2018. The implementing machinery of the government has not yet established a proactive accountable system for the people. That many eligible individuals are excluded from the PDS has been enumerated time and again. Similarly, long wait and queue at the Fair Price Shops is a commonly reported problem. The lack of water and poor hygienic practices leading to food insecurity has been stressed many times. Moreover, the allocation norm of 5 kg of food grains per person per month under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013 is grossly inadequate to meet basic monthly food needs.

During this pandemic, PDS with enhanced ration has been a relief to the poor but with many shortcomings such as unequal distribution, exclusion, absence of social distancing norms at Fair Price Shops, and inadequate ration for the households alongside inconsistent quality. These problems have remained unaddressed for long. However, these lacunae in the PDS have never affected the vulnerable section so adversely as they do now. We have to examine these problems with one eye on the surrounding circumstances which have changed drastically for the worse in the wake of the pandemic. Earlier, even when the quantity was inadequate, distribution unequal, exclusion pervasive, quality inconsistent, people had other sources of income to supplement the ration they received under the PDS. One or two individuals from the household sending remittances from the city, income from various kinds of self-employment, and so on, provided succour to the poor in times of difficulty. Given the fact that all these sources have completely dried up, the situation is grim. Under such an overarching climate of hardship, we believe that any set of recommendations to be effective will have to speak to this new reality. Conscious of the above exigencies, we have attempted to make recommendations with a focus on the immediate measures that can be taken to reduce extreme hardship.

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## IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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We propose to make recommendations corresponding to the specific problems identified during the course of this exploratory empirical study. It is submitted that these suggestions are not exhaustive.

### **Problem 1: Unequal/Uneven distribution**

For tackling the issue of unequal distribution we suggest taking the help of the new blockchain technology to reduce leakages and enhance transparency. The PDS involves a long chain of transactions right from the procurement of the food grains by the government agencies to the disbursement to the beneficiaries.

The reasons for one household receiving 10 kg per person and another household in the same locality receiving 5 kg per person could go back to the PDS supply chain. The entire supply chain has various junctures, which are prone to manipulation leading to leakages, theft, and eventually culminating in the unequal distribution.

Food grains are first procured by the government under the Minimum Support Price. Then, they go to millers identified by the government for hulling and are returned to the government. Next, food grains are moved to the State godowns from where they are further moved to the Block godowns within the State by selected transporters. Finally, from the Block godowns, food grains are sent to the Fair Price Shops for distribution.<sup>3</sup>

- This entire supply chain can be a part of blockchain using the distributed ledger technology. With the help of blockchain technology, every point where the product is moved and then stopped for collection or storage gets stored in the electronic ledger. This way the food grain can be tracked from the place where it is despatched to its destination.
- At present, we have the GPS tracking of trucks carrying PDS supplies from the FCI godowns. Installation of GPS was taken up for the first time in the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan (2007-2012) on a pilot basis in Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh for tracking movement of vehicles transporting rations (*The Hindu Business Line*, December 4, 2012). More recently, Delhi and Telangana Governments had issued directives that all trucks carrying ration items

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<sup>3</sup> Centre of Excellence in Blockchain Technology, National Informatics Centre, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. 2020. [Public Distribution System\(PDS\)](https://blockchain.gov.in/pdspage.html). [https://blockchain.gov.in/pdspage.html]. Last accessed on June 25, 2020.

will have to have a GPS Tracking Device in them. Within Delhi, the Delhi State Civil Supply Corporation (DSCSC) had been entrusted with the installation of GPS trackers on trucks carrying rations (*The Hindu*, July 29, 2015). While the GPS technology did help to an extent in preventing the diversion of grains in movement or during transportation, but it could not prevent the diversion of grains from the godowns or the FPS under the watch of officials. It is here that we could upgrade to blockchain technology.

- Given the Government of India's emphasis on digitization and adoption of new technologies, there cannot be a better and a more opportune time to inaugurate the blockchain technology. However, as with every new technology, the full development of blockchain infrastructure might take time. Therefore we need some more immediate measures.
- One such mechanism for checking and making the process of distribution more accountable was suggested in mid-June by the Delhi High Court in a petition filed by Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan which sought time-bound redress of complaints regarding non-supply of rations and transparency in the distribution of food grains. A Bench comprising Justice Hima Kohli and Justice Subramonium Prasad directed the Sub-Divisional Magistrates in every district to conduct a surprise visit at the FPS coming under their territorial jurisdiction and ensure proper functioning.
- We suggest that a separate cadre of government employees be established for this purpose and stationed at all the FPS. They could be called Ration Inspectors and their job would be to ensure impartial and hassle-free delivery of food grains from the FPS. The formation of such a cadre only needs a notification by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, and the legislation can take place later. We do have a provision for periodic inspection of FPS by the Circle food supply officers and Special Commissioners as ordered by the Delhi government in response to numerous complaints received by the beneficiaries in 2015. Unfortunately, with no accountability and lack of supervision of these officers, inspections have been few and sporadic, and consequently, progress on the ground has been negligible. Therefore, having a cadre of officers permanently stationed at the FPS would have an impact.
- To ensure impartial discharge of duties by such ration inspectors, the existing Lokpal framework can be utilized. Any collusion or discrimination by the ration inspectors can be reported by any member of the public to the State Lokayukta who will initiate summary proceedings and adjudicate upon the guilt of the official. The period for



disposing a complaint by the Lokayukta can be fixed at one month by making minor changes in the Delhi Lokayukta and Uplokayukta Act, 1995.

## Problem 2: Exclusion

- For including the excluded in the PDS during this pandemic, Abhijeet Banerjee, Amartya Sen, and Raghuram Rajan have gone on record recommending a temporary ration card for a period of six months to everyone who is in need with minimal checks. They have rightly remarked: “The cost of missing many of those who are in dire need vastly exceeds the social cost of letting in some who could perhaps do without it.”<sup>4</sup> We support this mechanism as it is an expedient remedy to counter an immediate situation. The Delhi government has initiated this type of temporary e-coupon system; this facility is available in Delhi government’s website, which allows an applicant to login with the mobile number providing details of family members and Aadhaar and generate e-coupon to collect ration from designated relief centres. We have not verified this initiative.
- For many years, many eminent scholars have been proposing universal food security legislation instead of a targeted one that excludes many deserving persons (see Swaminathan, M 2000; Sen, A 2009; Himanshu and Sen 2011; Ghosh 2010). Similarly, K.R. Venugopal, former Secretary to the Prime Minister<sup>5</sup> suggested that ration should be issued to every person even without a Ration Card or Aadhaar Card based on a spot summary enquiry. Such a method would enable government officials to know the beneficiaries while dispensing with the necessity of possessing an identity card. This will help the cause of their dignity as well. The emphasis should be on giving something to everyone who has come to collect ration throughout the period of lockdown. Doing away with the need of Ration Cards is particularly important in the current situation because of at least two facts: (i) lakhs of migrant workers stranded outside their home States do not have a ration card, (ii) lakhs of people who never applied and never possessed a food card have become needy due to the lockdown. A recent petition by the former Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh in the Supreme Court has argued for universal coverage of food security. They contended that despite the government’s move to double the entitlement under the PDS, a large number of people who do not have

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<sup>4</sup> Sen, A, et al. 2020. [Huge numbers may be put into dire poverty or starvation, we need to secure them](https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/coronavirus-india-lockdown-economy-amartya-sen-raghuram-rajan-abhijit-banerjee-6364521/), *The Indian Express*, April 17. [https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/coronavirus-india-lockdown-economy-amartya-sen-raghuram-rajan-abhijit-banerjee-6364521/].

<sup>5</sup> Venugopal K. R. 2020. [The Problem Of Plenty: Steps To Beat The Hunger Pandemic](https://poshan.outlookindia.com/story/the-problem-of-plenty-steps-to-beat-the-hunger-pandemic/351199), *Outlook Poshan*, April 21. [https://poshan.outlookindia.com/story/the-problem-of-plenty-steps-to-beat-the-hunger-pandemic/351199].

food cards or who do not have it at the time of need are being left out. The Supreme Court declined to pass any directions and instead directed the petitioners to first make a representation to the government. Interestingly, in a 2016 judgment in *Swaraj Abhiyan v Union of India*<sup>6</sup>, the Supreme Court had ordered all the State governments affected by drought to provide 5 kg of grains per person per month to everyone who wanted it including those who do not hold a ration card. State governments have not yet implemented this judgment in letter and spirit. Something along these lines needs to be done. This verdict should be deemed to include all State governments irrespective of their drought status and carried into effect without any further delay. The government officials would do well to remember the important principle given by the three stalwarts of economics – the cost of missing many of those who are in dire need vastly exceeds the social cost of letting in some who could perhaps do without it.

- The proposed One Nation One Ration Card scheme should become operational immediately. Had it been in place, much of the misery experienced by migrant workers, who found themselves ineligible to take rations in the States where they worked, could have been avoided.

### **Problem 3: Absence of social distancing norms and congestion at the collection points**

- Aiming to weed out corruption and diversion of food grains, and to attain transparency in service delivery, on March 6, 2018, the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi approved a proposal for doorstep or home delivery of ration to bring ‘maximum ease’ for the PDS beneficiaries<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, the central government’s stand on the doorstep delivery is contradictory; even as the central government supports the idea, the Lieutenant Governor (LG) rejected the Delhi government’s proposal. This power struggle between the central government and the State government was simplified by the Supreme Court ruling on Article 239AA of the constitution— that in the matters within the legislative competence of the State Legislature, that is, every matter except Police, Public Order and Land as provided under Art 239AA clause 3 the LG has to act on ‘aid and the advice’ of the elected government<sup>8</sup> Following the ruling, the Delhi government approved it again but it has not been implemented yet. In the context of the COVID-19

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<sup>6</sup> WRIT PETITION (C) NO. 857 OF 2015.

<sup>7</sup> **Aam Aadmi Party’s Website. 2018.** [Cabinet approves doorstep delivery of ration under PDS](https://aamaadmi.org/cabinet-approves-doorstep-delivery-of-ration-under-pds/), March 6. [https://aamaadmi.org/cabinet-approves-doorstep-delivery-of-ration-under-pds/]. Last accessed June 23, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Govt of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India, Civil Appeal no 2357 of 2017.

crisis, doorstep delivery of packaged ration might ease the problems of beneficiaries and prevent transmission of the disease.

- During this pandemic, all the respondents complained of overcrowding at the ration collection points. They also expressed fear of catching the disease due to the complete absence of social distancing norms, but still went ahead to collect the ration. This act of risking infection for food at FPS reflects the humanitarian crisis. Desperate queues and huge congestion for free ration have proven the indispensability of the PDS and the need to strengthen it especially in terms of ensuring coverage of eligible individuals while taking into account behavioural norms strategy such as doorstep delivery of ration in the context of this pandemic. If the doorstep delivery takes time to be rolled out, the government can consider increasing and diversifying distribution points. Government schools have already been used as PDS delivery points but other public spaces such as sports stadia, public parks, post offices can be roped in to distribute ration as an emergency measure.

#### **Problem 4: Loss of livelihood and Income**

- We suggest the government should consider increasing both the coverage and the amount of cash transfers to all the vulnerable groups.<sup>9</sup> The Rs. 500 direct benefit transfer to the female accounts under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana which has been recently rolled out is grossly insufficient. The financial inclusion infrastructure put in place by the Jan Dhan Yojana can come handy at this time. The Union government can start with transferring either a one-time lump sum amount or smaller periodic amounts to all Jan Dhan Account holders. Thomas Reardon et al. have suggested cash for work schemes to employ workers to distribute emergency food rations, to upgrade sanitation in markets and other public spaces.<sup>10</sup> We support this suggestion.

#### **Problem 5: Inadequate Quantity**

- If the problems listed under the heads of ‘Exclusion’ and ‘Unequal distribution’ are addressed, the core of the problem of inadequate quantity would be addressed. In a

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<sup>9</sup> Mandir, H. et al. 2020. [A plan to revive a broken economy](https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-plan-to-revive-a-broken-economy/article31577261.ece), *The Hindu*, May 14.

[<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-plan-to-revive-a-broken-economy/article31577261.ece>].

<sup>10</sup> Reardon T. et al. 2020. [Covid 19's Disruption of India's transformed food supply chains](https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/18/commentary/covid-19s-disruption-indias-transformed-food.html), *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 02, Vol. LV, No. 18. [<https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/18/commentary/covid-19s-disruption-indias-transformed-food.html>].

previous study in Delhi, on average, a person required 6.18 kg of wheat and 2.96 kg of rice per month (Ngullie 2017).

- In this connection, 10 kg of food grains consisting of wheat and rice are suitable, during all times, and not just due to COVID-19.
- Secondly, various State governments should consider establishing community kitchens providing free food as done by the Kerala government to cater to the hungry as an immediate measure. Kerala's community kitchens have been quite successful in the current situation.

#### **Problem 6: Inconsistent quality**

- On this issue, we think that technology-driven solutions have the potential to resolve immediate challenges as well as long term challenges. Use of upcoming technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and the Internet of Things could be urgently adapted to eliminate the menace of adulteration and bad quality food grains. The monitoring of the quality of drinking water using machine learning has already been established by scientists.<sup>11</sup> Machine learning used in combination with sensor technology is used to measure the pH, colour, and turbidity of water and the result is recorded in a database. The system sends alert messages to the user whenever a recorded parameter is lower than the recorded values. Likewise, machine vision systems have shown to be effective in monitoring and evaluation of grain quality.<sup>12</sup> Such technologies should be promoted and employed as soon as possible for the purposes of monitoring PDS food grains.

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<sup>11</sup> Ashwini C. et al. 2019. Water Quality Monitoring Using Machine Learning and IOT, *International Journal of Scientific and technological Research*, Vol. 8, Issue 10. [<http://www.ijstr.org/final-print/oct2019/Water-Quality-Monitoring-Using-Machine-Learning-And-Iot.pdf>]

<sup>12</sup> Vithu P. and Moses J. A. 2016. Trends in Food and Science Technology, *Elsevier*, Vol. 56, pp. 13-20.

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## V. CONCLUSION

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An infectious respiratory disease, COVID-19, has again driven home the importance of well-designed and meticulously implemented food security policies that provide for timely access to adequate quality and quantity of food (and water), and good hygienic norms in times such as the ongoing pandemic.

Most of the problems that India's poor are encountering could be attributed to a lack of implementation of the existing food security framework, although the 'law may look good on paper' (Basu 2015). Barring a few recommendations like providing rations to needy people even without food cards and opening community kitchens, most other recommendations involve strengthening the existing PDS and other levers of food security.

For instance, sections 14, 15, and 16 of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 mandate all State governments to set up grievance redress mechanisms and a State Food Commission to oversee the proper implementation of the law. However, States have not ensured such a mechanism to date. Some States have constituted their food commissions but they do not function fully.

The NFSA also entitles persons who could not get their supply of food grains or meals to a food security allowance. It also entitles pregnant and lactating mothers to a maternity benefit of not less than Rs. 6,000 in addition to meals. If these provisions of the NFSA had been implemented, a lot of suffering could have been avoided.

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