

Ensuring Food and Nutrition Security during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Draft recommendations from the United Nations World Food Programme, India

With COVID-19 becoming a global pandemic, it can become a food security emergency as well, if timely preventive measures are not taken. Containment measures, such as limiting person-to-person contact, though crucial, can pose a threat to the livelihoods and normal functioning of food supply chains, putting production as well as distribution at risk, leading to dysfunctional markets. Despite recent improvements in the nutritional status of children, the prevalence of malnutrition is well above acceptable levels, resulting in India being home to a large number of malnourished children.

The impact of this epidemic may further aggravate the situation, leading to a scarcity of staple foods and price hikes due to reduced cultivation, disruption in supply chains, shortage of labour, reduced employment, reduced purchasing power etc. thereby impacting the food and nutrition security of the most vulnerable in India.

To its advantage, India ensures food and nutrition security through its three large food-based safety nets, with 67 percent of its population relying on the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) for availing their monthly entitlement of food grains (rice and wheat) at highly subsidised prices and on the Mid Day Meals and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) for supplementary nutrition. The closure of schools and Anganwadi centres will also deprive the children and pregnant and lactating women of their nutritious hot cooked meals and Take-Home Rations (THR).

80 Crore

TPDS beneficiaries

9 Crore

Mid-Day Meal beneficiaries

10 Crore

ICDS beneficiaries

It is therefore advised to undertake the below mentioned responsive as well as risk mitigating steps to reduce the impact on food security and prevent further aggravation of the impact of the pandemic:

A. Response to reduce impact on food and nutrition security

1. *Allow advance allocation for National Food Security Act (NFSA) beneficiaries:* As an immediate step, the Government could allow NFSA beneficiaries to lift at least two months of their entitlement in advance.
2. *Temporary increase in the entitlement of NFSA beneficiaries :* Utilising the availability of adequate stocks in the central pool and to mitigate the impact of panic buying and anticipated disruption in the supply chain, the current entitlements of 35 kgs per household (HH), per month of the Antodaya Anna Yojna (AAY-poorest of the poor) HH may be increased to 43 kgs per HH, per month (an increase of 8 Kgs ,2 Kgs per person for an average household size of 4) and from 5 kgs to 7 kgs per member, per month for the Priority households (PHH), at least for the next 3 months. This increase will also compensate for the lack of Mid-Day Meals in schools and hot cooked meals at Anganwadi centres.
3. *Ensure availability of adequate stocks in all states:* The Central Government, alongside the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and Central Warehousing Corporation (CWC), should ensure that all FCI warehouses in each district or region are stocked with at least 3 months of requirement (in adherence to the existing buffer norms). If required, emergency movement of stocks should be undertaken to the places of need and norms for storage in open (Cover and Plinth) could be relaxed temporarily. Careful consideration for pre-positioning of stocks should be taken for places that are remote or are in disaster prone areas.
4. *Add Nutritious commodities to the food basket:* Based on the availability of stocks, addition of pulses to the PDS food basket could be done. In states where there is a demand and availability of coarse grains, an additional entitlement of 1 kg per member, per month could be given for the next 3 months. States already undertaking fortification of staples should be encouraged to continue and if possible, expand.
5. *Offload more in the open market:* The Government may also introduce competitive pricing to offload more food grains in the open market from its buffer stocks. To prevent scarcity, hoarding and increase in prices, this should be done at each state level to ensure equitable distribution across the country. This will ensure that adequate quantities are available in the open markets and prevent any rise in prices of essential commodities.

6. *Home delivery of PDS Rations and THR:* To mitigate the impact of the closure of schools and Anganwadi centres, a few States have already taken actions towards distributing the Mid-Day meals and supplementary nutrition available from the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme directly to the homes of the beneficiaries. For those vulnerable to COVID-19, such as the disabled and elderly living alone, approaches such as home delivery of the PDS rations and THR could also be adopted. Alternatively, the distribution of THR could also be done through the Fair Price Shops (FPS).
7. *Availability of updated information:* For the Government (central and state) to initiate a response, it should be ensured that updated information on the availability of stocks in all warehouses in the country (FCI, CWC and state) should be available to all relevant stakeholders. The Government should also develop a clear directive empowering the state and district officials to mobilise the food grains as per their requirement.
8. *Allow general public to buy from FPS:* In case of an emergency or in anticipation of dysfunctional markets, the government should also develop provisions to allow general public to purchase food grains from the FPS at economic rates.

Mass awareness campaigns through radio and newspapers should be undertaken before the implementation of any or all these measures. With the implementation of the above recommendations, there may be a temporary reduction in efficiency of the operations and have additional financial implications on the Government of India. However, given the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worthwhile to consider the additional reforms referenced above.

B. Risk management

1. *Prevent the spread of the virus:* The Central and state food department should issue necessary and clear guidance on the measures to be taken to prevent the spread of the virus at all locations within the food distribution value chain across the country.
2. *Operations at the Fair Price Shops:* In the entire Public Distribution System network the maximum contact with general public is at the Fair Price Shops (FPS-last mile retail shops) and more critically through the use of Point of Sale devices (PoS). To prevent the spread and reduce the exposure, it is recommended to:
 - a. Temporarily suspend the use of using biometric authentication (finger print recognition) and instead use alternative mechanisms like One Time Pin (OTP) or just manual recording of sales for distribution of commodities at the FPS.
 - b. The hours and days of operations of the FPS may be increased to reduce the inflow of beneficiaries at the same time.
 - c. Lift the restrictions of 50% liftings of grains in one go under national portability (One Nation One Ration card).
 - d. Use the FPS for dissemination of information to curb the spread of the virus.
3. *SBCC by people doing home delivery:* Given that for home delivery of rations/entitlements, people will be or are already visiting homes of the beneficiaries, this opportunity could also be used to increase awareness for the prevention from COVID-19.