

FOOD

## COVID-19: Bereft of clarity, why relief measures for Indian poor are not enough

Implementation of relief measures remains a concern. Those not registered under PDS scheme can be affected, say experts



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By Shagun Kapil

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As India entered a 21-day lockdown on March 25, 2020 to control the spread of novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), questions were raised on how those on the periphery — daily wagers, migrants, homeless — will fill their stomachs.

Several states have recognised the need to provide free or subsidised food to the marginalised, for which they announced measures as well.

Kerala was the first to put a robust structure in place — as anganwadis shut down, the state government ensured home delivery of mid-day meals. ASHA workers made sure that food reached its 26,000 children registered under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan announced that everyone in need — whether below poverty line (BPL) or not — will get free rice.

Other states soon followed suit. The Delhi government, for example, promised to provide 7.5 kilogram of free ration to its 7.2 million beneficiaries from March 30. It also tied up with non-profits to supply cooked meal to night shelters twice a day.

On the other hand, Haryana government decided to provide all BPL families their monthly ration for April free of cost. All government school children and those enrolled in anganwadis will be given dry ration.

On similar lines, Chhattisgarh government issued an order to provide dry ration instead of hot-cooked meals to children aged between three and six years and who were registered with anganwadi centres.

States like Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh announced distribution of three months' ration through their public distribution system (PDS) in one go.

The move came on the lines of central government announcement allowing 50 million PDS beneficiaries to lift their quota of subsidised foodgrains for six months in one go.

While Uttar Pradesh will provide free foodgrains for April and May to more than 8.58 million widows, aged and handicapped pensioners, Tamil Nadu will give Rs 1,000 to all ration card holders along with free rice, sugar and other essential commodities.

However, there is little clarity on the logistics of these measures.

For example, Karnataka government initially announced that food will be provided free of cost to the poor through state-run 'Indira Canteens'. But after the lockdown was imposed, it closed all such canteens to avoid large gatherings. An alternate plan was not chalked out till March 25, 2020.

Delhi, meanwhile, abandoned its plan to set up kitchens across the city and decided to provide food in night shelters.

One of the biggest concerns is about migrant labourers and the homeless who are not registered under PDS scheme, and hence remain out of free ration schemes' ambit.

To address this, a more decentralised system is needed, according to experts. They have warned that if appropriate measures are not taken, India could see high levels of malnourishment.

"It's an extraordinary situation. It's good that states have announced certain measures, but many issues remain unaddressed. Most measures announced are for those registered under PDS. What about the migrant labourers who are stuck in cities because of the lockdown?" said Dipa Sinha, convenor, Right to Food Campaign.

Rajesh Kumar, executive director, Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM), which is providing cooked meals to over 4,000 homeless people in Delhi with help from Delhi government, said that PDS won't help the 'urban poor' who don't have the facility to cook. He added that there was a need to have a more decentralised system and involve institutions such as anganwadis.

"The situation right now is more challenging in terms of accessibility rather than availability. Livelihood options for people are closed. We need a proper mechanism in place, not isolated measures," said Sachin Jain, director, Vikas Samvad, a capacity building and advocacy organisation in Bhopal.

He pointed out that in states where the state governments have announced dry ration, the quantity needs to be doubled.

"Mid-day meals were provided to children based on assumption that the family is earning and getting food from other sources. Now the whole family doesn't have anything to eat. So the quantity has to be doubled," he said.

He added that in Madhya Pradesh, almost 45 per cent population comprised labourers and migrants.

"But there are no measures for them so far. The state allowed people to take ration of three months in one go because the godowns were full and new crop had to be cultivated. But ration includes only rice and flour. What about other essential items like oil and pulses?" Jain added.

In Chhattisgarh, there is little clarity on how dry ration would be provided for the next 40 days, said Gangaram Paikra, an activist.

“There is confusion whether the dry ration will be given at home or families would have to go to the PDS centre to get it. There is no mention of that in the order,” he said.

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FOOD

## 320 million children worldwide missing out on meals due to COVID-19: WFP

Open letter calls upon Prime Minister Modi to ensure food security for all



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By Meenakshi Sushma  
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320 million children around the world are missing out on school meals due to school closures because of Covid-19, the World Food Programme has stated in a press release dated March 25, 2020.

Nearly nine million children the organisation feeds through school meal programmes across 57 countries, are no longer receiving them, due to shutdown of schools, the WFP added.

The children who were receiving food through the school meal programme, were mostly from poor families and the shutdown of schools had left them in a dire situation.

“This pandemic is having a devastating effect on school children around the world, particularly in developing countries,” Carmen Burbano, director of school feeding at WFP, said. “For children from vulnerable households, their only proper meal is the one they get at school. We can shift to online learning, but not online eating. Some solutions are needed and that’s what we’re working on,” she added.

Currently, WFP is working along with governments to ensure that school children and their families continue to receive the support that addresses their food and nutritional requirements during the COVID-19 crisis.

They have proposed a few alternative ways to provide food for the children which include take-home rations instead of meals, home delivery of food and provision of cash or vouchers. WFP is also working with partners to improve access to water and sanitation.

### The India situation

On the other hand, in India about 558.55 lakh children in the age group of 5-6 years are benefitted through the Mid-Day Meal scheme, according to the Annual Report 2018-19 published by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development. Schools and colleges have shut down due to the spread of COVID -19 disease in India as well.

For many of these children, school meals are their only nutritious meal during the day. The government needs to ensure that these children have access to food.

An open letter has been sent to the Prime Minister from the Right to Food campaign, an informal network of individuals and organizations working on food security issues in India. Within the letter, the network has demanded a few operational-level changes and food security is one among the demands.

“Arrangements must be made to home-deliver the nutrition / meals to all the target groups including young children, pregnant and lactating mothers. Take-home rations in the form of eggs, pulses, oil, and other items can be provided. The Supreme Court has also taken suo moto cognisance of this issue and on March 18, issued an order stating that “all the states must come out with a uniform policy to ensure that while preventing the spread of Covid-19, the schemes for providing nutritious food to the children and nursing and lactating mothers are not adversely affected,” the letter stated.

It asked the government to ensure that everyone can access Public Distribution System (PDS) rations through multiple means such as arranging for people to take turns to come and collect their rations to not crowd the shops, facilitate home delivery and so on.