Policy Brief

Impact of COVID-19 on India’s Mid-Day Meal Program

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Abstract: The COVID19 pandemic has definitively impacted India’s school feeding program. The pandemic also affected years of progress towards eradicating poverty, classroom hunger, and undernourishment, especially among children across India. India’s school feeding program is a legal entitlement following the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013, covering 116 million school-going children. The latest National Family Health Survey-5 reveals a high prevalence of malnutrition among children in India. Interestingly, the first ever Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) for the years 2016-2018 shows that 22 percent of school-going children are stunted, and 35 percent are underweight. This paper tries to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the scheme in India.

Introduction

The United Nations, in its policy report on the ‘impact of COVID-19 on children’, states rising malnutrition is expected to affect around 370 million children across 143 countries who solely rely on a meal in schools for their daily nutrition (UN, 2020). Another vital report by UNICEF on ‘COVID-19: Missing More Than a Classroom The impact of school closures on children’s nutrition’ highlights the glaring impact of pandemic on children’s health. The school nutritional program covers about 370 million children globally, with the largest beneficiaries being India (100 million), followed by Brazil (48 million), China (44 million) and other countries (Borkowski, et al., 2021). The pandemic has led to a 30 percent reduction in nutritional coverage, which used to be achieved through school meal programs, and among others, India is severely affected (WFP, 2020).

The closure of Anganwadis and schools meant millions of children were left out of the system and had to support their mid-day meal or school lunch, which were provided by highly functional public schools, indirectly from other supplementary dry-ration schemes and direct cash benefit provisions and through the Public Distribution Systems across India. The impact of the loss of livelihoods, increase in household poverty, the incidence of child labor, indicators of a child’s growth, and

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16 Anganwadi is a type of rural childcare center in India. They were started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition. Anganwadi means “courtyard shelter” in Hindi. Currently there are 1.37 million Anganwadis in India.
undernourishment are all interlinked (Borkowski, et al., 2021).

Literature Review

The state of hunger among children is a trend that will challenge the basic motto of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is ‘Leave no one behind’ (Desk, Express Web, 2021). India is ranked 101st among 116 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) for 2021 (von Grebmer, et al., 2021). The government of India has strongly committed to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). School-age children are beneficiaries of the world’s most extensive school feeding program (CNNS, 2019). Despite substantial economic growth in India over the most recent decades, chronic malnutrition (stunting) in children under five years of age reduced by only one-third between 1992 and 2016 and remains alarmingly high, with 38.4% of children stunted in the country (CNNS, 2019). In December 2020, the findings of the first phase of the 5th National Family Health Survey (NFHS) were released (PRS India, 2021); the report also highlighted the state of children in India and their undernourishment (NFHS-5, 2020).

Methodology

This paper builds on secondary and primary research material published by several data sources. Additional data sources used in this publication were published by the World Bank, UNICEF, World Food Program (WFP) and Government of India, NITI (National Institute for Transforming India) Aayog, Press Information Bureau, etc. For the present analysis, data were obtained from publicly accessible and official sources of these national and international institutions.

Importance of Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) and the Impact of COVID-19

School feeding programs provide the safety net to children from classroom hunger, and undernourishment directly addressing SDG-2. Several evaluations of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) have reiterated the relevance of the MDMS as an important means of providing nutrition to children from vulnerable households and helping improve school enrolment (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2019). The World Food Program (WFP) estimates that almost all countries have some form of school feeding program in place (WFP, 2013a) and are considered a common form of social safety net in the world (WB, 2018). Such schemes benefit 368 million children in developing and developed nations. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme is one of the most successful social welfare schemes with comprehensive benefits in terms of school enrolment and nutrition, among others (Dreze & Khera, 2017).

MDMS provides one hot-cooked meal to children per the nutritional standards provided in the Schedule II of the National Food Security Act, 2013 (Arumugam, 2021). Under the program, a hot meal comprises 100 grams of food grains, 20 grams of pulses and 50 grams of vegetables to provide 450 calories and 12 grams of protein. At the upper primary level, the child is entitled to 150 grams of food grains, 30 grams of pulses and 75 grams of vegetables to provide 700 calories and 20
grams of protein, meeting at least one-third of the daily nutritional requirement. Many states like Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, and Puducherry also provide added nutrition from their resources.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the closure of educational institutions, the Government of India issued guidelines in March 2020. An appeal by UNICEF in July 2020 stated that 1.19 billion students in 150 countries continued to be affected by school closures. Vulnerable and hard-to-reach children, including adolescents, were in danger of dropping out of the education system altogether because of significant inequities in access to remote learning, widening the education gap, according to the appeal.

The guidelines advised all states and Union Territories in India about providing hot cooked meals or food security allowance comprising of food grains and cooking costs (or its equivalent pulses, oil, etc.) to all eligible children covered under MDMS during the closure of schools. A state-wise analysis of offtake of food grains by states, available in the monthly bulletin of the Food Corporation of India, shows a somber picture. Of the 36 states and UTs in India, 15, including large ones like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha reported a decline in their offtake of food grains under MDMS in the months of April and May 2020 compared to the same months in 2019. Moreover, 27 states and UTs reported lower offtake for primary children in 2020 compared to 2019.

See Figure 1. (Appendix)

Overall, across India, the school lunch program was affected severely by school closures and a lack of alternate mechanisms at the local and sub-national levels of governance. Periodical lockdowns at the national and state level during the first wave and second wave of the pandemic have meant that school-going children who are dependent on the school lunch program were mainly deprived of their food intake during this period.

State of Nutrition and Hunger in India

India’s demography is hugely challenged by the twin dimensions of hunger and nutrition. India will benefit hugely from a healthier population, but an unhealthy population becomes unable to contribute to the nation’s growth instead of becoming a burden. Beyond COVID19, India’s twin pandemics are currently poverty from a multi-dimensional standpoint and lack adequate nutrition. The following illustrations and policy mechanisms highlight the urgency shown by the government agencies to tackle the menace of hunger and raise the nutrition level of India’s population.

A. Global Hunger Index 2021:

Global indices have repeatedly highlighted the state of hunger and nutrition in India. These indices are credible markers for measuring the progress of India every year from an international viewpoint. India is ranked 101st among 116 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) for 2021 (von Grebmer, et al., 2021). This is a big drop compared to 2020, when India ranked 94th in the GHI. The
annual index mentioned the level of hunger in India as “ alarming,” with its GHI score decelerating from 38.8 in 2000 to 28.8 – 27.5 between 2012 and 2021. According to the GHI 2021, the global prevalence of undernourishment is slowly increasing (von Grebmer, et al., 2021).

B. Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) 2016-2018:

The government of India has strongly committed to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To provide robust data on the shifting conditions of both undernutrition and overweight and obesity, the Ministry of Health conducted the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) to collect a comprehensive set of data on the nutritional status of Indian children from 0–19 years of age. Previous national surveys had not collected nationally representative data on children between the ages of 5 and 14. This population received less attention than those more vulnerable (preschool children and adolescents). Despite substantial economic growth in India over the most recent decades, chronic malnutrition (stunting) in children under five years of age reduced by only one-third between 1992 and 2016 and remains alarmingly high, with 38.4% of children stunted in the country (CNNS, 2019).

C. National Family Health Survey – 5:

In December 2020, the findings of the first phase of the 5th National Family Health Survey (NFHS) were released (PRS India, 2021). The NFHS provides essential data on health and family welfare needed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Government of India, for policy purposes. In the first phase of the fifth round, the findings for 22 states and union territories (17 states and five union territories) have been presented (NFHS-5, 2020).

See Figure 2. (Appendix)

The nutritional status of children below five years of age is worrying based on the data of the NFHS – 5 and NFHS – 4. Child Stunting (i.e., low height concerning age) has increased in 11 of the 17 states. Child wasting (i.e., low weight with respect to height) has increased in 13 of the 17 states.

See Figure 3. (Appendix)

D. State Nutrition Profiles for India

On September 30, 2021, NITI Aayog and the International Food Policy Research Institute, the Indian Institute of Population Sciences, UNICEF and the Institute of Economic Growth launched a report entitled ‘The State Nutrition Profiles’ for nineteen of India’s states and Union territories. This report provides useful information on the prevalence of various nutrition outcomes, like wasting, stunting, anemia, etc., based on data from National...
Health Family Surveys (NFHS) four, conducted in 2015-2016, and five in 2019-2020. It is aimed at helping policymakers identify critical areas for urgent intervention among children, women, and men. According to the report, eleven out of nineteen states have reported an increase in the percentage of stunted children from NFHS 4 to NFHS 5.

Ten out of nineteen states have reported a rise in the percentage of wasted children between the two surveys. Thirteen of nineteen states reported a higher percentage of underweight under-five children from NFHS 4 to NFHS 5. For each state, the report describes the health statuses of children, women and men that are most common and need immediate attention. Second, the report describes the improvement needed in the most lagging determinants of these statuses and the districts where interventions should be focused (PIB, 2021).

In 2017, the NITI Aayog launched a ‘National Health Strategy’ which laid out a vision called “Kuposhan Mukt Bharat” i.e., Freedom from Malnutrition. It described a strategy to reduce the prevalence of underweight among children younger than three years by 3% per year and to reduce anemia among children and women by 33% (from NFHS 4 levels). The NFHS 5 data also gives policymakers many opportunities to design policies of varying rigor not just for different states but also for districts within those states.

Policy Implications

The Government of India recently came out with a stronger push for addressing the central concern in the growth of children, i.e., nutrition and nourishment. The PM Poshan will provide a one-hot cooked meal to children studying in grades 1 through 8 in Government and Government aided schools across India. The scheme has been approved by Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) for the next five years beginning from 2021-22 to 2025-26 (PIB, 2021). The scheme which was previously known as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme will cater to 11.80 crore children studying in 11.20 lakh schools across the country. Some major highlights of the scheme are:

- The PM Poshan scheme will also be extended to children studying in pre-primary classes
- Special focus on micro-nutrients through School Nutrition Gardens to give children first-hand experience with nature and gardening.
- Social Audit has been made mandatory in all districts where the scheme is being implemented
- The PM Poshan scheme is integrated with the Prime Minister's Aspirational Districts Program, by which special provision is made for providing supplementary nutrition items to children in districts with a high prevalence of Anemia (PIB, 2021).

The total financial outlay of the scheme is $ 1.3 billion for the next five years beginning from

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18 PM Poshan (Hindi) means “nutrition”
2021-22 to 2025-26, which includes the contributions from the national government budget outlay and the contributions from the state governments.

**Sub-National Responses**

In India, the Supreme Court observation on the possible large-scale undernourishment post-school closure and stoppage of the Mid-Day Meal Programme and a lack of uniform response upfront on this issue, sub-national governments have taken different approaches. Some state governments are using home delivery of meals, providing dry rations to the students to the equivalent of their daily intake allotted under the scheme and cash transfers of the component assigned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: State-level Responses in India during COVID-19</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home delivery</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Take-Home Rations</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Cash Transfers</strong></td>
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**Key Findings and Recommendations**

The pandemic has definitively highlighted the need for consistent policy design and delivery of this globally important program. Some of the key findings and recommendations of this paper are:

- There is a definitive need to re-examine the policy design for the Mid-Day Meal Program to include aspects such as quality of diets and food-fortification options.
- Policy delivery at the central and sub-national level needs a multi-prong approach that goes beyond Take-Home Rations and Cash Transfers.
- Policymakers need to re-strategize to include crisis responses in critical programs like the Mid-Day Meal Program.
- Data integration is essential to identify and reach out to vulnerable children facing greater risk of lack of nutrition due to school closures.
- Prioritize reopening schools and adapt traditional school feeding programs to cater to children who need it most to continue to receive this vital source of support and food.

**Conclusion**

The pandemic has reiterated the importance and inter-linkages of school feeding programs across the globe. Several studies and working papers internationally and nationally are steadily emphasizing the need for a more robust and adaptable design and delivery of school feeding programs to counter the future crisis. Among all steps taken to manage the crisis of the pandemic across the globe, school feeding programs have a significant role in shaping the lives of children in the coming decade. Hence, it is vital to reopen the schools and restart the school feeding programs in their entirety. India must rework and focus on
national policy implications to address the large-scale challenge of the undernourishment of its children. In the short-term universalization of the Public Distribution System (PDS), the continuation of provision of additional food rations under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (Prime Minister’s Food Security Scheme for the Poor) for another year, the revival of hot cooked meals under ICDS and Mid-Day Meal scheme are some of the policy suggestions. The national and sub-national governments need to plan faster and together for a better future for India’s children in the coming decade.

References


Appendix:

Figure 1

Source: Food grain Bulletin, Food Corporation of India, New Delhi, June 2020; [https://dfpd.gov.in/food-grain-bulletin.htm](https://dfpd.gov.in/food-grain-bulletin.htm)

Figure 2: Proportion of Children Below Five Years Who Are Stunted

Source: Vital Stats NFHS-5 [https://prsindia.org/](https://prsindia.org/)
Figure 3: Proportion of Children Below Five Years Who are Severely Wasted

Source: Vital Stats NFHS-5 (https://prsindia.org/)
The proportion of children who are underweight (low weight with respect to age) has increased in 11 of the 17 states.