Policy Brief

Food (In)security in South Asia: Comparative Study of India and Bangladesh

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Abstract: The 2030 Sustainable development goals for the world pave the way to deal with the dynamic world and the problems relating to the basic amenities of every individual in the world. One such goal is “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.” Food security is one of the significant global challenges in the world. In South Asia, the situation is one of the worst, with 13.4% of the population being undernourished in 2019, according to data by Statista, a decrease from 13.8% in 2018. However, the pandemic is believed to have derailed the improvement by further forcing nations into poverty.

Over the years, countries such as India and Bangladesh have tried to focus on the issue of food security. India introduced the Public Distribution System during World War II to ensure rations to the poor, which evolved after independence in several stages. In 1997, it was reintroduced with the targeted approach to benefit the poor. Similarly, India’s eastern neighbor, Bangladesh ensures food security in its region through various programs. The largest was launched in 2016 as the ‘Food Friendly Program.’ During the pandemic, India used its robust Public Distribution System to distribute ration kits to 800 million people under the ‘Pradhanmantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana,’ and Bangladesh also used the Food Friendly Program to ensure food to its citizens. However, both programs fell short of expectations, and loopholes were observed in the systems.

The paper includes a comparative study of the food security schemes of India and Bangladesh, their evolving nature, and the current situation. Additionally, there will be an assessment of the loopholes in the system for decades and the ground realities of these programs. Furthermore, the food distribution programs of India and Bangladesh during the pandemic will be analyzed with a few suggestions to improve the system.

Introduction

“End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” is one of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, aiming at the target of zero hunger across the globe. Along with food security, the further goal is to modernize the farming sector, especially in

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developing nations, providing easy access to resources to farmers to increase the income of low-income farmers. Food security is one of the significant global challenges in the world. In South Asia, the situation is one of the worst, with 13.4% of the population being undernourished in 2019, according to data by Statista, a decrease from 13.8% in 2018. However, the pandemic is believed to have derailed the improvement by further forcing nations into poverty. According to the Global Hunger Index 2021, India ranks 101 out of 116 participant nations, Pakistan 92, Bangladesh, and Nepal 76, performing only better than some African nations.

South Asia is home to one-fourth population of the world, with India alone having more than 1.4 billion people expected to overtake China as the most populous country in this decade.

A joint report by UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank, ‘Levels and Trends in Child Malnutrition 2021’ found that nearly 32% of the children below the age of 5 were stunting in South Asia in 2020 which is a decline from 49% in 2000 but still far below the global average.

According to the report, “In 2020, more than half of all children under five affected by stunting lived in Asia and two out of five lived in Africa while more than two-thirds of all children under five affected by wasting lived in Asia and more than one quarter lived in Africa.” With such an overwhelming population and ever-increasing population trends, food security will be challenging for these nations to manage in the coming decades.

While the situation continues to be abysmal, countries such as India and Bangladesh, over the years, have tried to focus on the issue of food security. Both nations introduced various policies and schemes to ensure food security for the poorest of the poor. In line with these initiatives, the ones impacting the ground are India’s Public Distribution System (PDS) and Bangladesh’s Food Friendly Program (FFP). Both initiatives aim to ensure food security by enabling free-of-cost or subsidized food grains to the poor. While the objective is to achieve zero hunger, the two nations still have a long road to cover.

India introduced the Public Distribution System during World War II to ensure rations to the poor, which evolved after independence in several stages. In 1997, it was reintroduced with the targeted approach to benefit the poor. The scheme was divided into two categories, and the grains were distributed to citizens from below poverty line groups and above poverty line poor to reach over 60 million families. The scheme ensures seamless connectivity and the use of the country’s federal structure to maintain the food economy. Both the central and state governments provide the distribution of grains with the provision of a ration card to a family to avail of the scheme’s benefits. Through the Food Corporation of India (FCI), the central government procures, stores, transports, and allocates the grains to the states. The responsibility to distribute grains among people, issue ration cards, and maintain Fair Price Shops (FPS) lies with the states. Every state has adopted a different strategy to make commodities available to their citizens depending on the cultural norms and
requirements. The center provides wheat, rice, sugar, and kerosene to states and union territories. Some states add commodities such as spices, edible oil, pulses, etc.

Similarly, India’s eastern neighbor, Bangladesh, ensures food security in its region through various programs. While there has been active participation of the NGOs working to ensure food security, Bangladesh’s government has experimented with several policies since independence to ensure food security. The largest was launched in 2016 as the ‘Food Friendly Program.’ Food Friendly Program aims to provide food security to 27.5 million people from the low and middle-income categories annually—the proposed provision of 30 kg of rice per month to all eligible families from March-April and September-November. While, in quantitative terms, Bangladesh has achieved self-sufficiency in food production, its low ranking on the Global Hunger Index highlights the gap between production and delivery mechanisms along with the execution of the policies on the ground.

**Loopholes in India’s PDS and Bangladesh’s FFP**

During the pandemic, to provide food to the poor, India used its already established network of food economy through the public distribution system. However, it was launched in the form of a new program with a distinct feature.

> The ration kits were made free for 800 million people rather than provided at subsidized rates. India used its robust

During the second wave, Bangladesh also used the Food Friendly Program to ensure food to its citizens extending the scheme from March to May 2020 instead of the general provision of lean months of March-April. However, both programs fell short of expectations, and loopholes were observed in the systems. Though the country has utilized its federal structure to the fullest to ensure the success of the public distribution scheme, the decentralized model allows states to distribute grains on their terms leading to inequality within the country. While states like Tamil Nadu provide free grains to all with a ration card, others charge an amount lower than those the central government offers. Furthermore, the ration kits differ in nutritional value as states add some grains according to their food department policies leading to some states being on the backseat in providing proper nutritious food to their citizens. However, this issue was resolved during the pandemic when the central government offered free ration kits directly to the citizens, with states assisting in the distribution function.

Another loophole in the Public Distribution System was observed in the ration card mechanism. The ration cards, until recently, were not applicable inter-state. This disallowed the migrant population, mainly workers and laborers, to benefit from the PDS. However, the one nation-one ration card policy helped
resolve the issue. The Supreme Court of India mandated the procedure for all the states to comply with until July 31, 2021. Another problem that was observed was the quality of the grains provided. Several leakages have been reported in the system. The food grains do not reach the beneficiaries and are transported and sold in the black market. Furthermore, many have questioned the poor quality due to improper storage facilities.

Similarly, the Food Friendly Program of Bangladesh suffered during the pandemic when the demand for food grains rose above basic needs. The newly defined eligibility status remained ambiguous, and several households were unaware of the reason for not being the beneficiary of the scheme,

“A majority (36.7%) did not know the reason; another 23% thought they were removed without valid justification, and about 13% thought they were excluded because of disagreements with local officials.”

According to a survey conducted by International Food Policy Research Institute. Several other issues, such as supply chain disruptions, forced kitchens to run out of food. The food grains did not reach beneficiaries due to the nationwide lockdown and lack of proper infrastructure to deal with the unforeseeable shock, such as the pandemic. The IFPRI study revealed, “the survey results show the FFP program fell short. Just 64% of respondents reported receiving their full entitlement of 60 kg of rice in March-April, and 58% reported receiving less than 10 kg of the promised 30 kg in May.” The loss of jobs further pushed people into poverty, creating new poor; however, they were unaccounted for.

**Recommendations for Improvement in the PDS and FFP**

A refined approach must be made to make these programs successful and survive shocks like the pandemic. India’s PDS should mandatorily stick to a minimum nutrition requirement in their ration kits and ensure a properly nutritious diet for the citizens. Within the PDS, according to standard needs, a separate provision for nutrition should be made for children and pregnant women. The center further needs to check the leakages and diversions due to fake ration cards, diversion of grains to ineligible populations, etc. A GPS-enabled transport of food grains is integral to end leakages and monitoring and control systems should be installed to stop the black marketing of these grains. Ration cards should work according to the national standards set for all states. This will ensure a common standard for determining eligible populations and prevent political interference in determining eligibility as per the vote bank politics. It is integral for India to ensure the quality of the grains provided. Proper quality checks should be carried out to ensure this, and storage infrastructure should be made more advanced with upgraded technologies. The digitalization of the food economy is a necessary reform to ensure transparency and availability of the service to the public. Lastly, the accessibility can be increased with initiatives such as doorstep delivery of rations or the number of Fair Price Shops district-wise.
Bangladesh's Food Friendly Program needs to monitor and work consistently to accommodate those who fall into the poor population category. The eligibility status needs to be appropriately defined to remove loopholes. The leakages in the program, similar to India’s case, due to the diversion of food grains to ineligible populations must be rectified. It is necessary to build storage infrastructure and maintain supply chain infrastructure in every upazilla, accommodating the lowest level of government to facilitate last-mile connectivity. Bangladesh is focusing on Digital Bangladesh Program. Like India’s reform strategy, Bangladesh should include digitalizing the food-friendly program to monitor, strengthen, and avoid leakages, but this should be promoted with accessible digital infrastructure to the beneficiaries.

Conclusion

Even though several challenges persist, India’s and Bangladesh’s important food security initiatives have helped ensure food for most of the eligible population. The countries need to take a more proactive approach and resolve issues to help citizens benefit from the initiatives and remove loopholes, ensuring the initiatives are well-built-in infrastructure to accommodate unforeseeable shocks. While the pandemic tested the ground realities of the programs, the situation could have been way worse without the already established networks through these initiatives. Enabling the policy side measures and improving the infrastructure can help the two neighbors achieve the ambitious target of zero hunger by 2030.

References


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