

Raipur Declaration on the Public Distribution Systems

India bears a disproportionate share of the world's hunger and undernutrition burden which is unfavorable even in comparison to sub-saharan Africa. A majority of the people in India suffer from protein, calorie inadequacy, and micronutrient deficiency, which have debilitating consequences for health and wellbeing throughout life and inter-generationally. Only about 30% of children have both protein and calorie adequacy and almost half the children are underweight. International evidence points to the fact that in developing country contexts like India's, investments in reducing hunger and meeting basic food needs will have greatest immediate and long-term impact on nutritional status, health and other development outcomes.

The role of the Public Distribution System should be seen in this context of widespread hunger and malnutrition in the country. The first step towards improving nutrition status is to ensure that people have access to sufficient food. The PDS should play the role of ensuring food security for all. Towards this end the PDS needs to be considerably strengthened.

Related issues such as adequacy of foodgrain production, agrarian and land use policies should be suitably reviewed in light of these food security objectives. The country is heading towards a situation of food deficit because the overall foodgrain production has stagnated. This has resulted in higher prices and unavailability of foodgrains affecting the most vulnerable groups. Recognizing that the institutional response of the state would be through progressive agricultural policies and increase in investments in agricultural sector, the state also needs to create stronger protective mechanisms for the poor. In the short term measures such as banning of exports, and importing of food grains is necessary. Further, the PDS should be expanded and strengthened to offer greater food protection to the poor.

In the context of this overall framework, The national workshop on 'Food Security through Public Distribution System – Prospects and Challenges held in Raipur between March 25th and 26th 2008 made the following recommendations:

1. The current poverty line used by the Planning Commission to determine the poverty ratios is highly flawed. The current poverty line is defined as per capita per month consumption expenditure of Rs. 49 for rural areas and Rs. 57 for urban areas at 1973-74 prices to meet per capita daily intake of 2400/2100 calories. To meet similar calorie requirement poverty line in 2004-05 should have been Rs 650/1000 per month per capita. However, for the 2004-05 survey the line was roughly Rs. 360 for rural and Rs. 550 for urban areas and thus a large number of poor were left out of the BPL lists.
2. The poverty line should therefore be increased to MPCE levels of Rs. 650 per capita per month for rural areas and Rs. 1000 per capita per month for urban areas(both at 2004-05 prices). This would roughly translate into 70% of the population being covered under BPL for both rural and urban areas.
3. We need to recognize that food entitlements need to be delinked from other benefits extended to BPL families. The ration card, therefore, should solely be a food entitlement card and not used for targeting for other schemes.
4. The current system of identification of the poor, based on the 13-point system, is deeply flawed. It results in both inclusion and exclusion errors, with a large number of deserving poor being left out of the BPL net. Given

that deprivations of food is linked to criteria beyond incomes alone, the identification of BPL families should instead be based on social and economic categories and deprived communities as well.

5. The Supreme Court has already defined certain social categories, which have to be covered under the Antodaya Anna Yojana. The most vulnerable groups such as widows, old people, disabled, people with stigmatized ailments, urban homeless, primitive tribal groups, destitute and other such excluded groups must be covered under the Antodaya Anna Yojana. The list of most food deprived categories needs to be systematized and AAY needs to be expanded and carefully focused on full coverage of these groups.
6. Even in the case of identification of the poor in urban areas income criteria alone must not be used, and as in rural areas the poor must be identified based on social categories and those most deprived of elementary public services, such as homeless populations, those living in slums, street children, people in begging, women headed households and so on.
7. It must be further recognized that there remains a small segment of the population that cannot even afford to buy grains at the AAY prices. These groups, such as those severely disabled, destitute, old people, are unable to work and are most vulnerable to starvation. Such groups should be identified and arrangements should be made to ensure their food security free of cost through programmes such as food transfers or entitlement feeding programmes.
8. To address the issue of malnutrition it is imperative that pulses and oils be included into the subsidized provisions of the PDS along the lines that some State Governments are already doing.
9. There is a need to retain the current entitlement of wheat, wheat should not be given as flour. There is no sectoral consensus on the scientific evidence on the effectiveness of fortification of flour. More importantly flour has a considerably lower shelf life than wheat and it is also not possible for consumers to ascertain the quality of the wheat used for making the flour.
10. All ration shops in the country should be de-privatised and hand over to panchayats, cooperative societies, existing grain banks and other public bodies. Working capital provision should be made available at zero interest rate and a long term basis to these public bodies and arrangements to store and disburse the food grains should be made in a public building. The FPS should be made economically viable.
11. Door step delivery of food grains should be the sole responsibility of the State Corporation and no intermediary institution should be used for reaching food grains to the FPS.
12. The entire quota of grain should be made available to the FPS and reach it in the first week of every month.
13. Commission should be increased adequately to make the FPS economically viable.
14. Social Audits of all ration shops should be made statutory and the renewal of the PDS shop should be based on the recommendation of the social audit, approved in the Gram Sabha.
15. The Essential Commodities Act should be suitably modified to ensure that all offences under the PDS should be made cognizable and non-bailable. Further, when lapses occur both departmental action under PDS Control Order, 2001 and criminal action under Essential Commodities Act should be initiated.
16. Shop level vigilance committees need to be strengthened and should include beneficiaries from all beneficiary groups including AAY and BPL. Fifty percent of the vigilance committee representatives should be women.

The vigilance committees should have the powers to take disciplinary action.

17. Government must mandatorily make proactive disclosure of information, as required under Section 4 of the Right to Information Act and put in the public domain all information pertaining to the card holders, offtake and distribution data from the State Godowns upto the FPS shop level and on the vigilance proceedings against erring FPS.
18. End to end automation of the entire PDS chain starting from the procurement to the distribution to the beneficiary at the FPS must be implemented in all the States.