



India's Food Security Response to COVID-19

How India Fed 810 Million Poor and
Migrants in the Pandemic

January 2021



Women's Self Help Group operating a PDS shop during
COVID-19

COVID-19 Genesis and Challenges Related to Food Security

The COVID-19 pandemic has rattled countries across the planet, pushing them to unleash a variety of programs to protect their peoples.

More than 170 countries have announced some kind of social assistance measure, either in the form of cash-based transfers, or in-kind programs like distribution of food commodities, and vouchers.

For developing countries, one of the most pressing needs has been to provide food security, and nowhere was that felt more strongly than in India with its 1.4 billion-strong population.



Beneficiaries of the Public Distribution System following social distancing norms while collecting their ration

On March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a strict nationwide lockdown in a bid to prevent the progression of the novel coronavirus. Following that, India announced a series of measures to support the country's most vulnerable population.

The nation used one of the most powerful weapons in its arsenal: the Public Distribution System (PDS), a program managed by the Department of Food and Public Distribution, which provides subsidized food grains every month to around 810 million people, or two-thirds of its country's population. In the pandemic, the government promised to double the amount of grain it normally provides to all beneficiaries, added a new allocation of pulses, and made it all free for eight months. It also announced a separate allocation of grain and pulses for migrant workers.

The Public Distribution System run by the Department of Food and Public Distribution provides food security to about 810 million individuals through the distribution of more than 4 million metric tonnes of food grains every month

This stands out as the largest food assistance program anywhere in the world during the pandemic in terms of the number of people covered, which is more than 10% of the world population.

Its estimated cost of Rs 1.5 trillion, or \$20 billion, would also make it the largest program by value among comparable countries. The World Bank estimates that 29 low and middle income countries spend around \$55 billion on social assistance programs.

A few other developing countries that turned to in-kind food assistance include Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Nigeria.

Indonesia expanded its food assistance program called ‘Sembako’, from 15.2 million to 20 million low-income households, or around 30 percent of its population. It raised the level of benefits for some months, which in turn has raised the program’s budget to 43.6 Indonesian rupiah (\$3 billion).

Meanwhile, Bangladesh set a target to distribute free rice to the tune of 10 kgs each for nearly 10 million people who are part of its “ultra-poor and destitute families”.

In Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari approved the release of 70,000 Metric Tons (MT) of grain from the country’s National Strategic Grain Reserves, for distribution to poor and vulnerable persons.

In comparison, India’s goal at the start of its lockdown was to supply around 25 million metric tons of food grains under the Public Distribution System and other schemes to every nook of the country for the initial three months. That is more than the amount of wheat that the United States consumes in a year. The Government of India announced food assistance under Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PM-GKAY phase I). (See box)

Research conducted by MicroSave Consulting (MSC) shows that a vast majority of the intended beneficiaries got their due.

The government extended the special pandemic allocation for another five months, until November under Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PM-GKAY phase II).

Despite hiccups, experts and beneficiaries say that the pandemic has validated the existence and efficiency of the Public Distribution System.

India’s Food Assistance Programs

1. Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (Phase I and II)

- Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana I- Date Announced: 26 March 2020
What it Includes: 5 kg of free food grains (rice, wheat, or a combination of both) per person per month and 1 kg of free pulses per family per month to beneficiaries under India’s food security law.
Number of targeted beneficiaries: 810 million
Duration: April, May, and June. Allocation: 12.1 million MT
- Prime Minister Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana II -Date Announced: 30 June 2020.
What it Includes: Extension of free food grains and pulses to beneficiaries of food security law.
Number of targeted beneficiaries: 810 million.
Duration: July, August, September, October, November. Allocation: 20.1 million MT

2. Atma Nirbhar Bharat Scheme-Date Announced: 12 May 2020

What it Includes: 5 kg of free food grains per person per month and 1 kg of free whole gram per family per month to migrant laborers, stranded and needy families, who are not covered under food security law.
Number of targeted beneficiaries: 80 million. States were provided autonomy to decide who comprises migrants/ stranded migrants.
Duration: May and June. Allocation: 0.8 million MT

The utility of a system like the PDS can no longer be in doubt,” wrote Jyoti Rao and Prof. Piyush Tiwari on the University of Melbourne’s research website Pursuit. They said that if it wasn’t for stockpile of grains available with the Public Distribution System, the impact of COVID-19 on India “would have been catastrophic, resulting in widespread hunger.

The Government of India’s Response to the Pandemic and Its Efficacy

Food security has always been a top priority for the Indian government, and since 2013, a new law made it a legal right for the country’s poor.

The law, [National Food Security Act](#), mandates that the federal government provide subsidized food grains to about 67% of India’s population as per the Census 2011 (see Table 1). Eligible beneficiaries under the Priority Households

(PHH) category, are to be given 5 kgs of rice, or wheat, or a combination of the two, per person of every household, per month, at a nominal cost of Rs 3 (\$0.04) and Rs 2 (\$0.03) per kg respectively. For the poorest of the poor, under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), a standard allocation of 35 kgs is provided every month, irrespective of the number of family members.



Beneficiaries collecting free ration from a fair price shop

Table 1: Month-wise allocation and distribution of regular food grains (rice and wheat) entitlement under the Public Distribution System of India

Month	Total beneficiary (million)	Allocation of food grains by Government of India (million MT)	Total Distribution (million MT)	% Distribution
April 2020	809.5	4.35	4.20	97
May 2020	810.9	4.38	4.15	95
June 2020	810.9	4.38	4.12	94
July 2020	804.2	4.38	4.20	96
August 2020	805.0	4.38	4.15	95
September 2020	806.0	4.39	4.12	94
October 2020	806.1	4.39	4.06	92*
November 2020	805.9	4.39	3.94	90*

*Provisional data as the data was being updated at the time of report writing

On March 26, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that each beneficiary would get an additional 5 kgs of wheat or rice and each household would get 1 kg of pulses free for the ensuing three months. The new pandemic allocation was given under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (Prime Minister's

Poor Welfare Grain Scheme) (see Table 2). This program was later extended for five months until the end of November. Also, on May 12, the government announced a separate grain and pulse allocation for migrant workers for two months, under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Scheme (Self Reliant India Scheme. See Box).

The adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economies of countries across the globe and people's lives was such that access to food became the most crucial element to sustain life. The Indian Public Distribution System responded phenomenally—it carried and delivered nearly 640 LMT (64 MMT) of food grains in 8 months in response to the pandemic of the century.

- Sudhanshu Pandey, Secretary, Government of India, Department of Food and Public Distribution

Table 2: Month-wise allocation and distribution of food grains (rice and wheat) under PM-GKAY

Month	Total beneficiary (million)	Allocation of food grains by Government of India (million MT)	Total Distribution (million MT)	% Distribution
April 2020	809.5	4.00	3.75	94
May 2020	810.9	4.00	3.74	94
June 2020	810.9	4.01	3.65	92
July 2020	804.2	4.02	3.72	93
August 2020	805.0	4.02	3.75	93
September 2020	806.0	4.02	3.79	94
October 2020	806.1	4.02	3.73	93*
November 2020	805.9	4.02	3.58	89*

*Provisional data as the data was being updated at the time of report writing

To distribute the grain, the federal and state/ union territory governments relied on its established and extensive logistical network, which involved the use of trains, ships, trucks, horses, mules, and even helicopters.

The bedrock of this network is technology. Right from digital monitoring of grain in government godowns, to geo-positioning systems that track the movement of trucks, to biometric authentication of beneficiaries, the Public Distribution System has undergone a digital transformation during the recent years. These technologies enabled officials to keep track of real-time data, and synchronize all the movement and multiple players involved. (See Box)



Mules carrying ration to the fair price shops through difficult terrains of hilly areas

Digital Transformation of the Public Distribution System

The end-to-end computerization of the Public Distribution System is one of the biggest reforms undertaken by the Department of Food and Public Distribution. From the computerization of supply chain management systems, to digitization of ration cards, to online allocation of food grains, technology is now part of each step of the program.

At the behest of the Department of Food and Public Distribution, the National Informatics Center has developed software applications that have been made available to all states and union territories. These applications include modules for procurement, food stock reporting, stock transfer/ movement, allocation, distribution reporting, ration card management, and Fair Price Shop (FPS) automation, for delivery of commodities to end beneficiaries using biometric authentication.

The center and state governments have coordinated to provide the necessary infrastructure and financial support for computerization of the system.

Several states have achieved 100% end-to-end computerization, while others are fast getting there.



Home delivery of ration to an elderly beneficiary

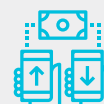
01

End-to-end computerization of PDS through digitization of the beneficiary database and supply chain mechanism thereby enabling distribution of food grains using biometric authentication



02

Direct Benefit Transfer through cash transfer in beneficiary accounts in Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Puducherry



03

Integration of the PDS systems of the states/ union territories under a central system namely **Integrated Management of PDS** to enable nationwide portability of ration cards under the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme.



04

Aadhaar-enabled eKYC of beneficiaries at FPS to update the list of active beneficiaries in the database



Still, the lockdown presented an unprecedented situation and put the system through a stress test.

It passed with flying colors takes away from objectivity, according to two nationwide surveys.

Our research shows that, on average, 91% of beneficiaries received food grains via the Public Distribution System in the first two months of the lockdown. The research also shows that 94% of entitled beneficiaries got ration after the lockdown was relaxed in June, either under the regular entitlement, or under the special

pandemic allocation, or both. The findings are based on two surveys of around 5,000 households in 18 states/union territories, done between April and September.

Dalberg, a consulting firm, found that on average, 91% of surveyed households had received grain from the Public Distribution System by June 3, up from 50% in April. Dalberg's study covered 47,000 low-income households in 15 Indian states, between April 5 and June 3. The multiple-round study surveyed households that identified themselves as below the poverty line, rather than using the government's database of entitled beneficiaries.

India's formidable PDS apparatus has set a shining example of food security response during COVID-19 to the whole world.

- S. Jagannathan, Joint Secretary, Government of India, Department of Food and Public Distribution

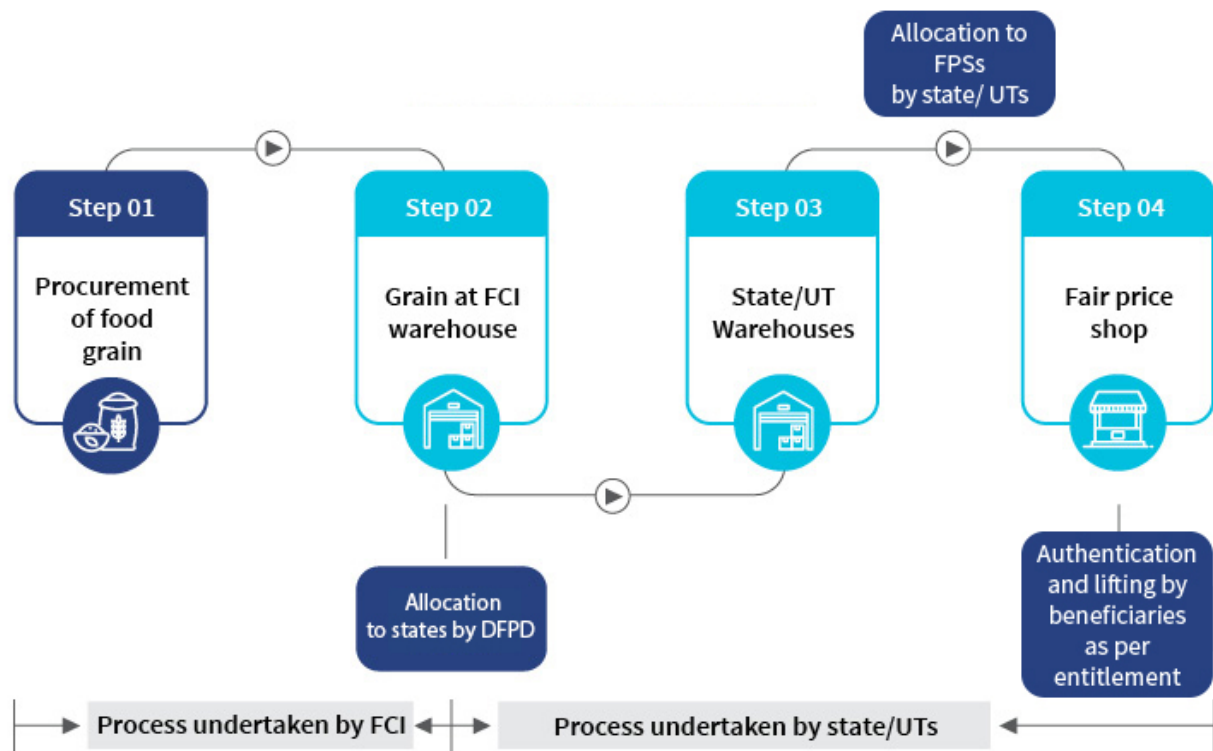
Grain Movement Amid the Lockdown

The Public Distribution System is one of the most elaborate supply chains in India, given the sheer quantity of food that moves through the system and its geographic reach.

It is operated under the joint responsibilities of

grain from the farmers and "mandis" or farmer markets, storing them in various warehouses and depots across the country, and transporting them to different states, for distribution under food security law. Once the grain reaches the FCI's godowns in a state, it

Process of grain movement



the federal government, and the governments in the states and union territories.

The Food Corporation of India (FCI), a state-run entity, is in charge of procuring

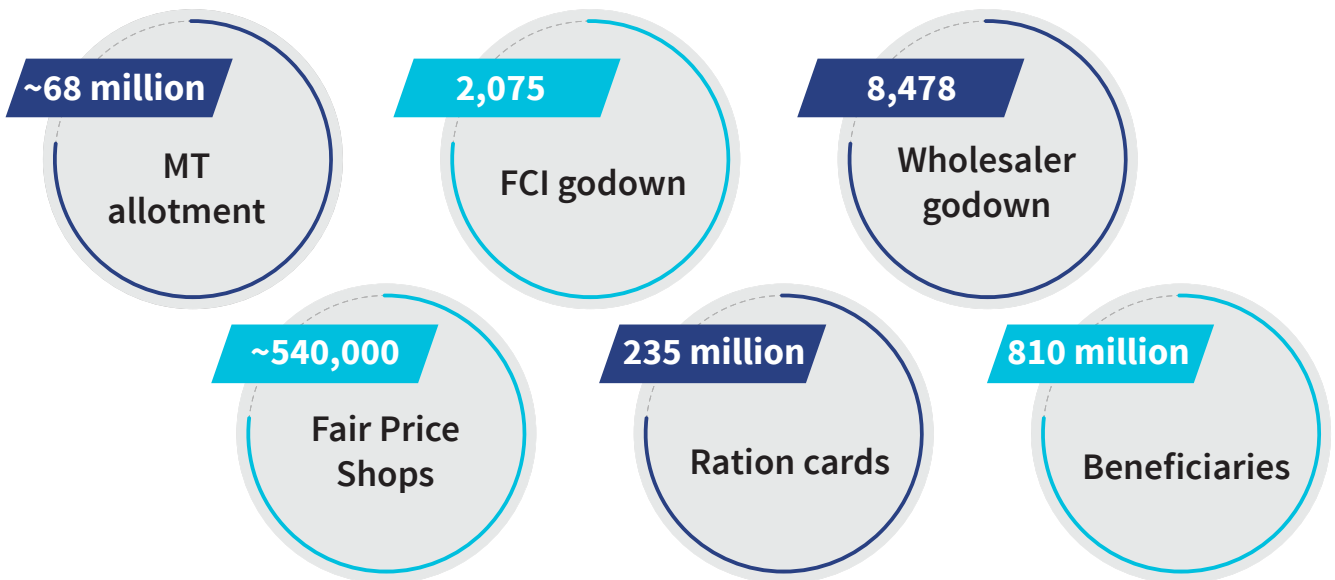
becomes the state's responsibility to bring the grain to the state owned godowns or/ and "Fair Price Shops" or ration shops from where intended beneficiaries can get these.

The FCI chairman has described the company as a “logistic operator working on a 24/7 basis.”

FCI procures most of its wheat from four states— Punjab, Haryana, UP, and MP, while rice is mainly sourced from more states including Telangana and Chhattisgarh, among others. These are then transported to FCI’s godowns in 28 states and eight union territories. It moves 85% of the grain using the railways. But once unloaded from the train, the grain is loaded on to trucks and other road transport.

room-like situation,” said one senior FCI official.

While state godowns already had grain, FCI needed to quickly replenish its stocks. However, this was not as simple as shipping a package via Amazon.



In the initial weeks of the lockdown, the officials faced a series of challenges. One of the first was to energize the staff to work, at a time when everyone else was staying at home to avoid a disease about which little was known. Fear was widespread.

FCI can only send grain to a state godown when it has space available to hold the grains, and that in turn depends on how quickly state authorities collect the grains from the godown for distribution to beneficiaries. This requires close synchronization with officials at FCI’s 2,075 godowns across the country.

FCI has 40,000 employees, and 80,000 contract workers, a large majority of whom perform the task of manually loading and unloading bags of grain from trucks, trains and other transport.

The Government of India quickly stepped in, and announced in early April that it would provide life insurance cover to more than 100,000 FCI officials, including 80,000 laborers working during the COVID-19 crisis.

Meanwhile, a "core committee" was created within the FCI headquarters in New Delhi, to plan all movement and monitor all activity to transport record quantity of grain. “It was a war



A daily call was held between FCI officials in Delhi and the different states, to calculate how many tonnes of grain each state can receive per day. Based on that, each afternoon FCI would inform the Indian Railways how many "rakes", or freight wagons, it would require the next day, and at which stations. A rail rake can carry 2,700 metric tonnes of grain, and typically equals 40 wagons or more.

Between April and June, FCI used an average of 1,600 rakes per month to transport grains, versus 800 to 900 rakes in the same period in previous years, according to FCI. At its peak, in early April, it moved more than 100 rakes in a single day.

Priority was given to send grains to the farthest regions, like the north-eastern states, which can take 5-6 days to reach by train. It took a couple of days less during the lockdown, since passenger trains were not plying then.



Once the grain trains would reach the major railheads in the various states, grains had to be transported by road to FCI's godowns. To reach the far-flung regions of Arunachal Pradesh, like Tawang and Tezu, this involves covering 100 to 150 kms by road.

Overcoming the Challenges of the Lockdown

The nationwide lockdown disrupted this otherwise well-oiled system.

Truck drivers could not come on duty because of restriction on movement. Permissions and transport had to be organized for them. A few did not come out of fear, so government officials had to cajole them and ease their anxieties. In some cases, the government provided them masks and sanitizers.

When trucks carrying grain tried to cross state borders, they would be stopped by the local police, which was under strict orders to halt movement even though the movement of essential commodities were allowed. The

food departments of states/UTs coordinated with several police stations and authorities to allow these trucks to pass. "I used to call people at night 11 pm," said one senior official of the Jammu & Kashmir Food and Civil Supplies Department.



In some places, workers at the state and FCI godowns were asked to stay at the godowns itself in the initial weeks, so they would not get stuck in lockdown restrictions. They were provided food and other provisions.

It can take state authorities 15 to 20 days to collect or “lift” grains from FCI’s godowns, given that it involves manual loading and unloading of more than tens of thousands of tons of grain.



Total cost of free food grains (rice and wheat) for eight months under PM-GKAY is estimated at around Rs 1,17,000 crore (\$16 billion)

Food Security Response in Remote Areas of India

Consider how grain was taken to different parts of Jammu & Kashmir, a primarily rural union territory. For districts which have roads, grain was loaded on to trucks, and smaller vehicles like a jonga. But horses and ponies were used to carry grain to the most remote, hilly areas, like Doda and Kishtwar. This journey takes 20 to 22 days from the state godowns.

Other states took different measures appropriate for their terrain and requirements.

In remote parts of Arunachal Pradesh, like Vijoynagar Circle, which have no road connectivity, 750 quintals of rice and pulses were airlifted and dropped by helicopters of the Indian Air Force and Indian Army.

The Indian Army stepped in to support the transportation and distribution of food grains to beneficiaries in remote areas of the north-eastern state of Tripura.



Kerala, in addition to grain, distributed a special kit in the coastal areas of Thiruvananthapuram, which had been declared “containment zones”. The kit included sugar, tea, oil, spices, and soap.

In West Bengal, when super cyclone "Amphan" caused some godowns to be shut in May, the state was asked to collect its stock from alternative godowns.

In Uttar Pradesh, the state government distributed free ration to 30 million beneficiaries in a single day during the lockdown in April. Additionally, they followed all the COVID-19 protocols while distributing the ration. This is a feat in itself as this is the highest single-day distribution in India.

When FCI godowns would fall under zones that were declared “contamination zones”, by local authorities, it slowed operations.

Despite all these challenges, between March 24 and June 30, FCI moved 13.9 million MT of food grains using nearly 5,000 rakes and nearly 1.5 million MT through 91,874 trucks across the country.

At the same time, FCI continued with a key part of its operation — procurement of grain from farmers. Wheat harvesting typically starts at the end of March, and procurement begins in April. Due to the lockdown, the government extended

the dates by a fortnight. The number of procurement centers was doubled in states like Punjab and Haryana, and farmers were given time slots for which to bring their produce, to avoid overcrowding.

By mid-June, FCI had procured 38 million tons of wheat, an all-time high for wheat procurement.



Trucks loaded with food grains ready for dispatch

“Extraordinary efforts have been made...to ensure that wheat is procured from farmers without any delay and in a safe manner,” said an official from the FCI.



Beneficiary standing in queue to collect ration following social distancing norms

Atma Nirbhar Bharat - Aid to Migrants/ Stranded Migrants

In mid-May, the government announced a program to provide free food grains to migrants/ stranded migrants who were hit hard in the lockdown.

The goal was to aid all those people who could not get grain from the food distribution system either because they were not eligible under the National Food Security Act, or for any other reason. The government targeted the migrants/ stranded migrants in the following two ways:

1. Offering migrants/ stranded migrants who are beneficiaries of the Public Distribution System the option of portability to lift ration from any FPS in the country under One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) Scheme.
2. Aid to migrants/ stranded migrants who are not registered as beneficiaries under the Public Distribution System. Since India does not have a documented list of migrants/ stranded migrants, the Department of Food and Public Distribution made a liberal estimate of this population to be 10% of the total beneficiaries of food security, which came to 80 million. Accordingly, the department allocated 8 LMT of food grains for the two-month period of May and June. By the end of June, states had already collected around 6.4 LMT of grains from the Food Corporation of India.

States and union territories were given the freedom to identify migrants/ stranded migrants and other needy people who did not have ration cards.

Officials in the state food and civil supplies departments, with the help of district administration and civil society organizations, took various steps to identify such people, including people who were in transit, in quarantine centers, labor camps, and construction sites.

These identification efforts and surveys indicated that around 28 million could benefit from the free food grains under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat scheme. Grains were delivered to them on war-footing through Fair Price Shops and also through special distribution centers set up on major roads and highways, quarantine centers, shelter homes, labor camps, and even mobile vans.

By the end of August, the program successfully served about 98% of the total 28 million population estimated by the states/union territories.



Distribution of ration through different means

Distribution of Ration through Fair Price Shops

The last stop in the distribution system, before grains reach intended beneficiaries are the Fair Price or "ration" shops.

Numbering approximately 540,000 shops, India has three times more ration shops than it has bank branches. It is the largest distribution network of its type in the world.



Beneficiaries following social distancing at an FPS

Once the grains reach the ration shop, their distribution is the responsibility of the state government. So, the management and response of these shops during the pandemic varied from state to state.

As part of the digitization of the PDS, around 4,90,000 (90%) of all ration shops in India now have a machine meant to authenticate the

Ration card holders conduct approximately 130 million biometrically authenticated transactions every month

beneficiary. These machines, called electronic "point of sale" machines, are much like the portable devices used for swiping credit or debit cards. Beneficiaries typically give their fingerprints on the device, which are then matched to a database of beneficiaries to "authenticate" them. Once authenticated, a ration shop dealer allocates authorized grains, and this transaction is recorded and transmitted to a central database, thus allowing officials to get real-time information on distribution.



Beneficiary conducting biometric authentication on PoS machine at FPS

FPS dealers took varying measures to maintain safety for themselves and the beneficiaries.

Crowd management was one of the biggest challenges for FPS dealers during the lockdown as people thronged to these shops. "People have a mindset that as it is a free ration there might be shortfall during distribution," one FPS shop dealer in Maharashtra told our researchers.

In several states like Kerala and Delhi, to avoid overcrowding, a numbering or token system was used, based on which ration card holders

were given a time slot, whether to come in the morning, or in the afternoon.

Shop opening times were increased and staggered in several states.

“Shopkeepers were selling household items worth Rs 50 (\$0.7) for Rs 100 (\$1.4) during the lockdown. It was difficult for us to manage. The free ration provided by the government helped me to feed the family properly” – said a beneficiary from Madhya Pradesh

White circles were marked outside the stores, so that people would maintain distance. “Police personnel occasionally visited the shop and they made sure that all safety measures are being followed,” one shop dealer told us.

Many shops installed a new apparatus, similar to children’s play slide, in which the grain would be poured by the shopkeeper at the top, and collected at the bottom by beneficiaries.

For the sanitization of the shops and workers, FPS dealers said they got some help from local governments in the form of masks and sanitizers, but for the most part they were on their own.

Beneficiaries, meanwhile, were glad for what they got.

We did not have enough income during the downturn,” said one beneficiary. “Free ration given by the government has helped us a lot.”



Food Security Lessons Learnt from Pandemic

Technology leading to efficiency: Before the government utilized technology in the Public Distribution System, it was combating externalities like inadequate delivery, diversion and leakages due to poor supply chain management, and related issues.

In the pandemic, however, more than 90% beneficiaries reported receiving food grains,

despite difficult situations.

This was made possible by a combination of initiatives, such as digitization of the supply chain and beneficiary database, improvement in storage and transportation infrastructure, and improved governance and monitoring (aided by technology) by the federal and state governments.

In short, technology has been central to the transformation of the Public Distribution System and in improving its efficiency.

New twist in in-kind vs cash debate: The speed and efficiency with which India was able to provide grain in all corners of the country has put the benefit of a Public Distribution System into sharp relief.

This provides fresh food for thought on the global debate about how governments can provide social welfare to the needy.

Experts had been leaning increasingly toward pushing for more cash transfers. However, during the nationwide lockdown, having cash did not serve for much. For those who live in faraway areas, it would not have been possible to travel to the nearest bank unit to collect their cash, or to visit a shop to buy food. Besides, there were instances of food prices being raised sharply by shopkeepers.

In such scenarios, having direct access to grain was much more valuable and the procurement operations sustained the growth of agriculture sector while manufacturing and service sector contracted. A symbiotically stable Agri-PDS ecosystem in India has become a role model of food security for the world to emulate. This adds

a twist in the global narrative that cash transfers are the way to go when it comes to providing social safety nets.

Portability of benefits: Given India's large migrant population, which leaves home to find work in different states, it is imperative to have a system which provides access to social welfare benefits irrespective of the beneficiary's physical location. The pandemic has reiterated this need for a portable social protection.

India is already on the path to providing this with its **One Nation One Ration Card** program. This is a first of its kind initiative that offers choice and control to beneficiaries, and can help curb a crisis for migrants/ stranded migrants in future. (See box)



One Nation One Ration Card

One Nation One Ration Card is an ambitious plan and effort of the department in association with state/ union territories governments toward achieving nation-wide portability of the benefits under the 'National Food Security Act, 2013'. The scheme is highly beneficial for the numerous migratory beneficiaries who frequently change their place of dwelling across the country in search of temporary employment or for other reasons and eventually get deprived of their food security benefits due to migration. Such migratory beneficiaries, if they desire, can use this facility and lift their entitled quota of subsidized food grains by simply providing their same/existing ration card number or Aadhaar number to any FPS dealer in the State/UT of their migration. They can lift the available entitlements, by authenticating the portability transaction through their Aadhaar (either biometrically or through Aadhaar OTP).

The beneficiaries are able to take benefit of portability without incurring any additional cost and paperwork, as there is no need to surrender the existing ration card issued in the home state/ union territory or to apply/obtain a new ration card in the state of migration. Currently, 32 states/ union territories have implemented portability to facilitate benefit delivery to beneficiaries.

Frequent Update of Beneficiary Database:

While India has achieved the huge task of creating a digital database of beneficiaries eligible under its food security law, given the country's rapid population growth, millions of people who are needy may have been left out. The government should step up its existing efforts to update the list of beneficiaries more frequently to reduce errors in inclusion and exclusion.

Road to Nutritional Security: India needs to continue its efforts to evolve from merely providing food security to nutritional security.

The country ranks low in the global hunger index, partly because of undernourishment, and wasting and stunting of children.

The Public Distribution System can play a role in alleviating this, by providing wheat and rice that is enriched with vitamins and minerals. To do this will require tweaks in the distribution system, adding a step for bringing the grain to and from fortification mills. That, in turn, will require additional manpower, cost, and time.

The government has started moving in this direction. Government of India approved a centrally sponsored pilot scheme on “Fortification of Rice and its Distribution under

Public Distribution System” in 2019. Under the scheme, rice is fortified with Iron, Folic Acid, and Vitamin B-12. The Pilot Scheme focuses on 15 districts—preferably one district per state during the initial phase of implementation.

Communication and Grievance Resolution:

Though India announced several programs to support the poor, many beneficiaries were not aware of all the programs. Our research showed that even those who received the benefits didn't know what they were due.

In light of this, in any future crisis, more efforts should be made to communicate with beneficiaries. There should also be a feedback loop, through an effective grievance resolution mechanism, to allow two-way communication between the government and beneficiaries.



Beneficiaries waiting to collect ration

Conclusion

At a time when many countries were grappling with disruptions in food supply chains, India delivered food grains to millions of people, despite stringent lockdown conditions, thanks to the Public Distribution System.

A series of initiatives to digitize the system over the past decade have made it more transparent and efficient, reducing leakages that had plagued the system in the past. Bogus and duplicate ration cards are eliminated, and deserving new beneficiaries added. The elimination of duplicate ration cards is an ongoing process with the help of de-duplication exercise.

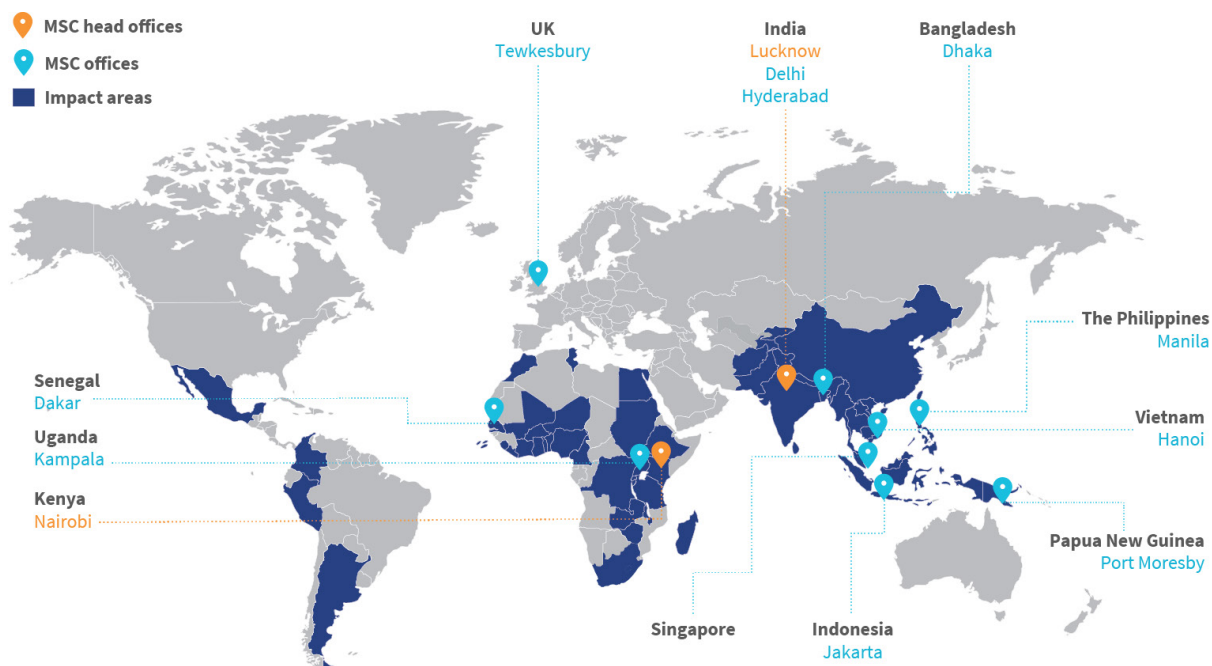
Now, efforts are underway to take PDS to the next level, with the One Nation One Ration Card program. Using the latest technologies, this program will enable nationwide portability of ration cards, so that individuals anywhere in the country can avail their benefits.

The success of the PDS at a time of great need has recast the debate on the most optimal social protection program. While global thinking had been veering toward cash transfers, the pandemic has shown that food transfer continues to be hugely relevant. The ideal solution may lie somewhere in between.

List of Definitions

Public Distribution System (PDS)	Public Distribution System is the system for distribution of essential commodities to the ration cardholders through the fair price shops, such as food grains (rice/wheat/coarse grains) entitled under the National Food Security Act, 2013. Besides some state also distribute other food and non-food items such as sugar, edible oils, kerosene etc. at subsidized prizes through fair price shops.
Fair Price Shop (FPS)	Fair price shop is a shop, which has been licensed to distribute essential commodities to the ration card holders under the Public Distribution System
FPS dealer	FPS dealer is a person and includes a cooperative society or a Self Help Group (SHG) or a corporation or a company of a State Government or a Gram Panchayat or any other body in whose name a shop has been licensed to distribute essential commodities under the Public Distribution System.
Ration Card	Ration card is a document issued under an order or authority of the State Government for the purchase of essential commodities under the Public Distribution System from the fair price shop.
Food Corporation of India (FCI)	<p>The Food Corporation of India was set up under the Food Corporation's Act 1964, in order to fulfil following objectives of the Food Policy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective price support operations for safeguarding the interests of the farmers. • Distribution of food grains throughout the country for Public Distribution System. • Maintaining satisfactory level of operational and buffer stocks of food grains to ensure National Food Security
e-POS	It is an electronic point-of-sale device that enables electronic transaction for distribution of food grains and authenticate PDS beneficiaries biometrically.





This report was prepared by MicroSave Consulting (MSC) in collaboration with the Department of Food and Public Distribution (DFPD), Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution (MoCAF&PD), Government of India (GoI). The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect the views of DFPD, Government of India or any state government of India. Neither DFPD nor MSC guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this work.

Attribution - Please cite the work as follows:

MicroSave Consulting (MSC), 2020, India's Food Security Response to COVID-19:
How India Fed 810 Million Poor and Migrants in the Pandemic