

IN PERSPECTIVE

PDS needs paradigm shift

Self-help groups of women and self-employment of local youth could well transform the Centrally-controlled PDS

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The Essential Commodities Act— the legislative basis for the Public Distribution System (PDS)— of 60 years' antiquity, was recently amended by the Central Cabinet, deregulating the sale of some select farm produce by farmers.

"Today's cabinet decisions will have a very positive impact on rural India, especially our industrious farmers," Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted and added, "Long-pending agrarian reforms will enable the transformation of the sector."

The PDS is arguably the backbone of a system that aims to provide food security to those living below the poverty line and has the capacity to improve the lives of a very large number of people, especially women and children.

The unprecedented situation that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought in its wake, compels us to reassess our response to hunger and deprivation in the country and recalibrate how best the food security needs can be met. Understanding history helps. Famines in India were not uncommon till a little over 50 years ago with many people dying of starvation.

That we have become food self-sufficient is remarkable in itself. Only a few know that the PDS system has been in operation since 1960. It is arguably one of the largest networks that distribute food grains and essential commodities to millions of people month after month through a network of more than four lakh Fair Price Shops (FPS), to those households classified as poor.

Unfortunately, the PDS does not cover the people truly on the margins: The homeless, destitute, migrants, the abandoned, and the challenged (mentally); they fall between the cracks and are outside the boundaries of entitlement, for want of an identity. While the PDS is praiseworthy for its scale and spread, ensuring social accountability and better operational oversight are areas where considerable improvement is possible.

What are the fundamentals that matter in the PDS? The Public Affairs Centre (PAC) started examining the roots of the problem. The first was whether the delivery of food grains met the mandated standards. The government has for some time tasked local vigilance committees with this responsibility.

The evidence from the ground from PAC's action research over two years pointed out that the women Self Help Groups (SHG) function best as citizen monitors. Research and analysis clearly indicated that significant improvement in the quality and adequacy of PDS wherever the SHG took charge, relative to government-appointed vigilance committees. This was simply because the women worked in enlightened self-interest, that in the aggregate resulted in better outcomes for the community. The PAC pilot has demonstrated proof of concept. Karnataka should now scale up this initiative.

The enlightened self-interest of the SHG as a principle make the PDS work better— better transparency, accountability, quality— and holds potential as a transformative organising principle that should inform the PDS for the future.

This approach is especially relevant in the wake of the unprecedented crisis that has come in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike pandemics of the past— Spanish Flu, Ebola, HIV— the scale and spread of this pandemic is affecting the economy and society in unprecedented ways, compelling all to come to terms with a new normal, perhaps even a better normal.

Cardholders

The PDS and the way people collect their food entitlements must also change. Earlier, cardholders could go to a ration shop or a Fair Price Shop and collect their rations. Now, they are constrained by lockdowns and social distancing norms. Simply put, the logistics must now be planned from the demand side and not just the supply side.

It is the disadvantaged and vulnerable households who depend entirely on the PDS and therefore service delivery must respond to their needs. We need to reimagine the end to end distribution and logistics for such an extensive programme in a much better way. Decentralising food grain warehousing to the block level and deploying women SHG as the FPS must be explored as the future path to sustainable public distribution of essential commodities.

This would, in some ways, complement the recent initiative announced by the Government of India for migrant workers.

The prime minister urged them to focus on strengthening their own local and village economies. This begs the question: Will the endemically backward regions be able to absorb the returning migrants?

One opportunity is worth exploring. Whether some of the local operations of the PDS— supply chain management— currently done by the Food Corporation of India and/or the state food corporations primarily through outsourcing to private contractors, can be offered as small business opportunities for the young men and women from amongst the local population?

Self-help groups of women and self-employment of local youth could well transform the PDS from the Centrally-controlled, uninspiring behemoth to a decentralised socially accountable citizen-based system— the much-needed paradigm shift— to provide sustainable livelihoods and food security.

If done well, India may learn from Karnataka and the world from India, on how to put human development on a sustainable path. It is from history that we learn, and only from evidence-based insights that we learn better, for the greater good.

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