

Research as if People Matter

NFSA Survey 2016

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Since the implementation of reforms enacted by the National Food Security Act 2013, the public distribution system provides food security to a larger number of people than before, and has less leakages overall in six of the poorer states of India. The methods and results of a people-centred six-state survey are presented in brief.

“First of all, thank you everybody for the hard work and goodwill,” economist Jean Drèze said with a playful smile. The room full of student volunteers, who joined the National Food Security Act (NFSA) Survey 2016 (henceforth the survey) for nothing less than “Hard Work, No Pay,” chuckled and laughed. Drèze continued, “We are very impressed with all the teams ... I think the survey was really a success!” Drèze had just commenced the debriefing session that was held in Ranchi,¹ marking the end of the survey. Drèze, with fellow economist Reetika Khera, initiated the survey to understand the progress in implementation of reforms to the public distribution system (PDS) after the enactment of the NFSA 2013.

The survey was conducted during 1–10 June in six of the poorer states of India (Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal). The research, which included surveys and public hearings or *jan sunwais*, found that PDS reforms have led to improved food security for a larger number of people in these six states. The loss of foodgrains due to inefficiencies and corruption has reduced considerably as well. Bihar and Jharkhand were, however, found to still be “laggards,” with inadequate coverage, and lower but persistent levels of leakages. West Bengal

began reforming its PDS only in December 2015 and shows better coverage than earlier. As it does not have survey data to corroborate these findings as yet, its results ought to be viewed with caution. Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha began reforms earlier, and the PDS there is better implemented with wider coverage in general, has low levels of leakages, and has assured entitlements at the right prices.

A team of about 40 student volunteers (divided into six teams) surveyed 3,600 households, in a “sample biased towards deprived districts and small villages.” Two districts in each state were selected, with at least one of the districts being selected for proximity to the base of operations in Ranchi, Jharkhand. The villages within the district were selected through random sampling. This survey follows in a long line of similarly organised research exercises that run on shoe-string budgets, involve student volunteers, are largely financed by “individual donations with no-strings-attached,” and involve a component of follow-up action. Earlier such surveys studied the progress in implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as well.

Public hearings were conducted after the surveys not to resolve individual grievances, but to publicly discuss matters related to the PDS in a transparent manner that forced the administration to be accountable to citizens. The survey team would make this clear from time to time during the hearings. However, some aggrieved persons at the hearings would still come with the expectation that their individual problems would be addressed.

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I witnessed two such public hearings, one at Bankey Bazar in Gaya, Bihar, and another at Bharno in Gumla, Jharkhand. At each of the hearings, more than 300 people, largely women, were in attendance, with people joining and leaving through the day. The survey teams presented their findings to a gathering of respondents and other aggrieved persons from the nearby villages in the presence of the local administrators and fair price shop owners or dealers. There were also independent observers like journalists, academics and even Supreme Court-appointed advisors. Some local administrators cooperated with the survey and attended the public hearing, while one marketing officer (in charge of monitoring the supply of PDS rations) at Bharno did not attend the public hearing.

The main mediators at both public hearings were volunteers, the majority of them women. In addition to the presenting key findings as well as questions that arose from them, volunteers also sang songs accompanied by the local residents.

Slogans were also shouted quite regularly throughout the proceedings. The Bihar team even rehearsed a skit before the Bankey Bazar hearing, though they did not perform it eventually. Volunteers also video-recorded testimonials of aggrieved individuals in order to be able to use the evidence in public interest, if needed.

Issues Raised

Teresa Meenji, a 76-year-old woman who was at the Bharno hearing, said that she was not receiving rations, and that her ration card had been taken away by the dealer. Widowed at 56, she was originally from another village, Khartanga, but had no house to live there. She lives alone in a dilapidated house in Palmadipa, which she told me leaks when it rains. One of her daughters, who was active in a women's association near Bharno, had passed away as had her only son, who used to work in Ranchi. Her other two daughters lived in Delhi. She had come to the jan sunwai with the hope that her grievance would be resolved. If given a chance, she said she would question the authorities.

Dealers are known to take away ration cards, or coupons (as in Bihar). There were other cases of dealers taking away ration cards and not supplying rations on time at Bharno. There were complaints of this kind raised at the public hearing at Bankey Bazar as well.

A recurring problem in Bankey Bazar seemed to be of dealers overcharging beneficiaries under various pretexts; cost overruns, bribes to higher-ups, and so on. Manmati Devi, a resident of Nauhar informed the gathering at Bankey Bazar that she was forced to pay ₹4 per kg for rice and ₹3 per kg for wheat, when the fair price was actually ₹3 and ₹2, respectively. This meant that if she bought 13 kg of rice and 10 kg of wheat, she would end up paying ₹82 instead of ₹59.

Leakages were also reported during the survey in Bihar and again at the Bankey Bazar hearing. Persons at the hearing complained that dealers would not provide rations every month saying that there was insufficient supply of foodgrain. This was discussed during the hearing and the marketing officer, Umesh Rajak, who was present, clarified that there was no shortage in supply during the period that the dealers did not distribute rations. This meant that despite regular supply, the dealers were not releasing rations. The marketing officer said he did not have the power to cancel dealership licences, and that he would inform the higher authorities.

No Clarity on Aadhaar

There is clearly still confusion, even among local administrators, over the significance of Aadhaar cards in availing PDS entitlements. At the Bharno hearing, the District Supply Officer (DSO), Binod Shankar Mishra, mentioned that Aadhaar was required for updating household information, or to issue a new ration card. Khera had to caution him that this cannot be so, as it would be going against Supreme Court orders that disallow making Aadhaar compulsory to avail entitlements in anyway. The DSO who initially continued to claim that he had written orders, conceded to Khera's argument.

Updating information of newer members of the household in ration cards is

itself a problem. When the Socio-Economic and Caste Census was conducted in 2011, data from it was to be used to identify those eligible for priority card rations under the PDS. However, what has happened since is that the process of updating household size data has become a problem. Children born after the survey in 2011 or persons who joined a household through marriage, for instance, have not been included in ration cards in many cases as a result. This updating is often contingent on the willingness of local administrators.

Another issue of grave concern has been the government's move to shift some Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) beneficiaries to priority card entitlements under the NFSA. The AAY beneficiary households receive 35 kg of foodgrain per household, irrespective of the size of the household, while, NFSA entitlements are allocated for each member of the household (5 kg per person in most states). Such a transition may be beneficial to large households as the AAY would mean effectively less per person (say for a household of 10). The Bankey Bazar Block Development Officer (BDO) Sanjay Kumar, announced at the public hearing that orders were received to determine the AAY beneficiaries who could be shifted to NFSA entitlements.

Odisha has been trying to do similar kind of shifting of beneficiaries, and the survey team from Odisha had found that many of the AAY beneficiaries were effectively being excluded and losing existing entitlements in the process of transition. It is unclear how this transition is being planned. AAY beneficiaries are the most vulnerable. Data has been since collected in the Bankey Bazar block, but is yet to be compiled and computerised, according to the BDO. Kumar later told me that the new data will help identify those who are availing these entitlements while not meeting the eligibility criteria.

Public Hearings

These public hearings require not only the involvement of people, but cooperation from the local administrators and the dealers. It could be that local administrators may not cooperate, or that dealers may not attend the hearing

(as was the case in Bankey Bazar). Further, it could be that dealers may seek to undermine these hearings. Dealers are usually better-off, more powerful members of the village, and have a say in relevant matters. Just before the Bankey Bazar public hearing was to begin, the survey team got news from a resident of Raksa village that a dealer and his associates had tried to deter people from Raksa and Nauhar from attending (bribes and threats were also mentioned). However, it turned out to be a false alarm, as most residents of the village had sent at least one member of their households to attend the hearing. When I asked Drèze about the possibility of disruptions, he said that sometimes dealers came in groups or planted their own people at these hearings. However, it is not easy for them to disrupt such events, and they get intimidated when they have to answer the public or talk to the DSO or BDO, said Drèze.

The public hearings are an important and distinctive feature of this kind of research. According to Drèze, public hearings are a very useful complement to the survey. Both in terms of fulfilling the ultimate purpose (which is to contribute to the realisation of the Right to Food) and do research. He said that there is a certain satisfaction in being able to do “both research and action without seeing the two as being opposed to each other, as many academics tend to do.” The survey teams learn a lot from the public hearing itself and people’s testimonies help them understand issues and problems better. When they try to get people’s complaints addressed and engage with the administration, Drèze feels they all

discover a lot also about how the system works and how people are disempowered ... All these things are important to understand why the PDS is where it is and how it can be reformed. So I feel it’s a very satisfying kind of approach.

Drèze (2002) has discussed some of these issues in an essay titled “On Research and Action,” where he discusses issues of objectivity and whether being involved in action detracts from the rigour of research. He takes the view that research must integrate the two.

The public hearings I went to were planned with attention to detail. Posters were prepared with information on rules and laws related to the PDS. Lists of entitlements were put up. Further, while the Bihar team along with Drèze and Khera were preparing for the Bankey Bazar hearing, the team discussed—as they pasted posters, tied banners, answered questions from curious bystanders, and arranged chairs—if it would be better to avoid using a stage and place the desks and chairs at ground level. The team agreed that the stage imposed a hierarchy, while they also felt it gave some structure to the meeting. Khera recalled that at an earlier public hearing, where this was not made clear, attendees ended up sitting in chairs designated for panellists. Eventually, it was decided that the stage was not to be used, and that the chairs and a row of tables would be lined up at ground level.

Richer by Experience

The entire six-state survey, according to Drèze, cost less than ₹2 lakh. In large part, this is because the student surveyors were not paid, and also because the teams were expected to use available public transport, live in public buildings where possible, cook food instead of buying it commercially, among other ways to keep costs low. Each team, which had about six members, worked within a tight budget of ₹10,000 that included food, travel and all expenses incurred during the entire research exercise. Accounts had to be submitted to Khera and Drèze at the end. The Bihar team, for example, stayed in a school building in Nauhar village in Gaya district. Staying there was convenient because there was a handpump for water, and a toilet right next to the building. Usually, *anganwadi* workers would be provided supplies by the team treasurer or logistics in charge to make food for the team. The *anganwadi* workers would be paid a sum for cooking.

Speaking about what this survey means for the students involved, Drèze said, “Many of them have not been exposed to this side of India, these issues ... It gives them a whole new perspective, new ideas.” He does not believe that involvement in such surveys will be

necessarily “life changing,” but that a “significant minority of them will continue to take interest in these issues and try to work in a different way.”

The student surveyors are from various parts of the country. Some were undergraduate students, while some were doctoral students. Rigzin Yangdol was one such student volunteer. She was part of the team that surveyed Chhattisgarh. She hails from Ladakh and had just finished her undergraduate studies in economics from the Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi. Her friends had already participated in previous surveys like these, and she had been keen to participate in one. She found it a very good experience, where she got to see ground realities first-hand, including the problems people faced. When asked what she felt about “Hard Work, No Pay,” she said, “It was hard work, but I would say I am a richer person now, even though I was not paid.”

Speaking about this kind of research, Drèze said,

We rely on the people’s interest in the issue and the goodwill. We do not pay the investigators as you know, ‘Hard Work No Pay.’ You can say well, this can detract from the quality because you have to pay them if you want good results. Actually, I think it is exactly the reverse. The fact that people come here not for money but out of interest and passion, really helps us a lot to do good work. Also it is a joy to do, because we work with people who are actually interested in the issue and you like working with each other. So, the cooperative angle is also important. This survey is partly of course a research exercise, to find out what is happening, but is partly also developing a new way of doing research.

NOTE

- 1 The session was held in a dormitory of the Yogada Satsanga Society of India. This organisation supported the survey by providing the survey teams with dormitories and food at no cost in Ranchi.

REFERENCE

- Drèze, Jean (2002): “On Research and Action,” *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 37, No 9, pp 817–19.

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