



**Right to Food Campaign
(Secretariat)**

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HUNGER WATCH

Hunger Watch speaks to 3,994 persons belonging to vulnerable and marginalised communities from 11 states across the country

People continue to have depressed incomes and are yet to reach pre-lockdown levels. For about one in four respondents, the income in September-October was half of what it was before lockdown.

Over two-thirds say nutritional quality has worsened and quantity has reduced (in September-October) compared to pre-lockdown

The Right to Food Campaign along with a number of other networks launched the ‘Hunger Watch’ in September 2020 to track the situation of hunger amongst vulnerable and marginalised communities in different parts of the country, in the context of the COVID pandemic. The Hunger Watch aims to conduct field surveys followed by local action towards demanding access to entitlements as well as drawing attention of governments and media to the prevailing situation of hunger in the country.

The Hunger Watch was conducted in 11 states. Vulnerable communities in rural and urban areas were identified by local activists/researchers who then shortlisted the households to be surveyed within these communities based on group discussions with the community. A simple questionnaire was developed and administered using smart phones. This is one of the few in-person surveys that have been conducted since the pandemic. While the data being presented may not be representative of the district, state or country, they do, however, tell a story of deprivation of thousands of households in similar situations.

The preliminary results from the Hunger Watch that we share here, show that the hunger situation is grave, even five months after the lockdown has ended. A large number of households report lower levels of income (62%), reduced intake of cereals (53%), pulses (64%), vegetables (73%) and eggs/non-vegetarian items (71%), worsened nutritional quality (71%) and an increased need to borrow money to buy food (45%). Government support in the form of free rations, and alternatives to school and anganwadi meals in the form of dry rations and/or cash transfers reached more than half the people (PDS having relatively better outreach). While this support from the government programmes has been crucial, the staggering levels of hunger witnessed during the Hunger Watch also showed the

inadequacy of measures announced in the Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY). Many are left out and even among those who did get the entitlements, the overall consumption was still lower than what it was before the lockdown. This calls for urgently strengthening and expansion of these schemes.

Malnutrition levels in India have always been high. However, some improvements have been seen in the last 10-15 years following Supreme Court interventions that universalised school meals and supplementary nutrition through ICDS and expanded Public Distribution System (PDS) (through orders passed under the ‘Right to Food’ case, PUCL vs Union of India, 2001 to 2017). These interventions were further strengthened through the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. Among other things, NFSA guarantees 5 kilograms of cereals per person per month at highly subsidized prices to 67% of the population through the PDS. While these entitlements do contribute to the overall food security of households and play an important role in preventing starvation, ensuring nutritious diets for all and eradicating malnutrition requires much more. A well nourished society is not only a constitutional imperative but is also vital to improve the health of the economy.

Access to employment and livelihoods is a critical determinant of household food security. Other services such as health, sanitation and hygiene contribute to preventing and treating illnesses, which can then prevent malnutrition as well. An enabling environment for child care in the form of maternity entitlements and creches is also essential. Better status for women within the household and the community has also been seen to contribute to reducing child malnutrition. While some progress has been made on these fronts, many gaps remain. Even before the onset of the pandemic, the fruits of growth in the Indian economy did not benefit the poor. 90% of the workforce belongs to the informal sector with no social security and as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey data, more than 80% earned less than ₹18,000 a month; the minimum living wage as per the 7th Pay Commission.

The last few years have seen precarity rise with the country facing the highest levels of unemployment, stagnant rural wages and a slowdown in economic growth. The Right to Food Campaign documented over 100 hunger-related deaths from across the country based on media reports and fact-finding investigations since 2015¹. In this background, the stringent national lockdown and the spread of the pandemic has exacerbated the deep economic distress resulting in a multi-dimensional crises of livelihoods, food and healthcare. The Right to Food Campaign constituents have been reaching out to individuals and governments in order to help families that have been affected by the current situation.

Although the lockdown has ended, it has been observed that the economic crisis continues. People who lost their jobs are yet to find replacements. Work, even where it is available, is even more irregular and for fewer days. Finding the resources to ensure three full meals for the entire families is a big challenge for many households. Families are using different coping mechanisms – we have seen children being withdrawn from schools and sent to work, assets and jewellery being sold, money being borrowed to buy food, massive reductions in the quantity and quality of food consumed. These are some of the things that the ‘Hunger Watch’ attempts to systematically document.

¹ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fKfm69Hd3su-w8kY_kCsohPuC63qAz1bIVr_I-LTEQ8/edit?ts=5fce5765

The main findings from the survey are presented below. Based on the capacity and resources of the local organisations, a varied number of households have been surveyed in different states. The figures presented here are not weighted by the sample size or population of the states but are simple averages. A detailed report with further details and disaggregation will be released soon.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HUNGER WATCH

Profile of Respondents

- 3,994 respondents from 11 states (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Delhi, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal)
- 2,186 in rural areas and 1,808 in urban areas
- Uttar Pradesh (967), Madhya Pradesh(558), Gujarat(403), Rajasthan(374), Maharashtra(249), Chhattisgarh(187), Jharkhand(179), Delhi(146), Telangana(81), Tamil Nadu(66) and West Bengal(784)

Low income: 79% of the respondents had income less than Rs 7,000 per month before the lockdown. 41% of them earned less than Rs 3,000 per month before the lockdown.

Marginalised Communities:

- Roughly 59% of the respondents were Dalits/Adivasis, 23% were OBC and about 4% were PVTG. About 64% identified themselves as Hindus while 20% were Muslims.
- 55% of the respondents were women.
- 24% were slum dwellers, 14% were single women headed households and 7% of the respondents had households with a member who was disabled.
- About 45% were casual labourers and 15% were farmers.

Change in Consumption Patterns in September-October compared to before lockdown

Compared to pre-lockdown, incomes in September/October still remain affected

- About 43% of them had no income in April-May. Out of these people, only about 3% have gone back to income levels of what it was before lockdown. 56% of those who had no income in April-May continued to have no income in September-October.
- Compared to April-May, while fewer people had no income, roughly 62% of the respondents said that their income reduced in September-October compared to pre-lockdown. And, among those whose income reduced, for about one in four respondents, the income was half of what they earned before lockdown.

In summary, what we see is that for a large majority of people, there is no change in their economic status from what it was in April-May.

Consumption of cereals, pulses and vegetables “decreased a lot” in September/October compared to pre-lockdown

- 53% reported that their consumption of rice/wheat has decreased in September-October and for about one in four it has “decreased a lot.”

- 64% reported that their consumption of dal has decreased in September-October of which about 28% reported that it has “decreased a lot.”
- 73% reported that their consumption of green vegetables has decreased in September-October and for about 38% it has “decreased a lot.”
- About 77% of the PVTG families reported to have reduced the quantity of food consumption in September-October compared to before lockdown. Quantity of food consumption decreased for about 74% of the Dalits and for about 36% it ‘decreased a lot’. About 54% of the Adivasis reported that their quantity of food consumption decreased. About 7% reported that their quantity of food consumption increased in the last 30 days. About 69% of the OBCs said that their consumption either decreased somewhat or decreased a lot and just 3% said that their quantity of food consumption increased in September-October. For about 68% of those in the general category, the quantity either ‘decreased somewhat’ or ‘decreased a lot’ and only about 3% reported that their consumption increased.

Reduction on Consumption of Eggs/Non-veg items staggering

- About 17% of our respondents said that they consumed eggs/nonveg ‘often’ before the lockdown. Among them, 91% said that their eggs/meat consumption has decreased in September-October and a staggering 58% said that it has “decreased a lot.” About 46% of the respondents said that they consumed eggs/meat ‘sometimes’ before the lockdown and among them, 76% reported that their egg/meat consumption has decreased.

Large proportion skip meals and go to bed hungry

- About 56% of the respondents never had to skip meals before lockdown. Of them, one in seven had to either skip meals ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ in September-October
- In September-October, about 27% respondents sometimes went to bed without eating. About one in 20 households **often** went to bed without eating.

Overall decline in nutritional quality and quantity, even the relatively better off affected badly

- About 71% reported that the nutritional quality of food has worsened in September-October from what it was before lockdown of which about 40% said it’s become “much worse.” While lower income groups were affected more, 62% of those who earned more than Rs 15,000 per month before lockdown reported that their nutritional quality worsened in September-October compared to before lockdown.
- Two-thirds reported that the quantity of food has either decreased somewhat or decreased a lot now compared to before lockdown. 28% reported decreased a lot.

Need to borrow money for food has increased for all

- For about 45%, the need to borrow money for food has increased from pre-lockdown periods. Even among those in the highest income bracket (> Rs 15,000 per month pre-lockdown), about 42% reported that their need to borrow money has increased. This again points to the fact that the need to borrow money for food was high regardless of the income levels of the household. Moreover, the need to borrow money among Dalits was 23 percentage points more than those in the 'General' category.

Discrimination Faced

- One in four Dalits and one in four Muslims report they faced discrimination in accessing food since lockdown and about 12% of Adivasis faced discrimination. This was one in ten among those in the 'General' category.

Access to Entitlements

- 70% have some kind of ration cards that gives them subsidised grains (priority, AAY, state ration cards etc, including 2% who had temporary cards/coupons)
- 86% of those who had any ration card that is eligible for subsidised grains, said they received their usual entitlement of foodgrains from April to August
- 88% of those who had NFSA ration cards (1715 households) said that they did receive the free grains that were given under PMGKAY from April to August
- 57% households with school going children (2531 households) said their children received mid day meals or alternative (dry rations/cash) in September-October
- 48% households with young children/pregnant lactating women (2125 households) said they received supplementary or alternative (dry rations/cash) from anganwadis during September-October

Demands

While this is the situation on the ground, some of the policy and legislative developments in the last few months are such that they could make the situation much worse. The four labour codes disempower the informal sector workers and make their access to wage employment even more precarious, thereby, affecting their ability to buy food. The three farm Acts, as is being argued by the farmers' movements, endanger the entire procurement mechanism and hence the PDS itself. During this crisis, as the Hunger Watch also shows, the PDS has been one of the few safety mechanisms that has worked for those are included in its net. Many also expressed the added vulnerability faced by them, especially in ensuring nutritious meals for children, in the absence of the school and anganwadi meals. The need therefore is to ensure universal access as well as expanded entitlements during this period of crisis. In this context, we make the following recommendations/ we demand the following:

1. A universal public distribution system that provides every individual with 10 kg grain, 1.5 kg pulses and 800 gm cooking oil for at least the next six months (up to June 2021).

2. Nutritious hot cooked meals, including eggs, through anganwadi centres and school midday meals to be distributed while following all safety guidelines related to distancing, sanitisation etc.
3. No mandatory fortification of any food product
4. Universal child care services with a priority to those who are most affected by the COVID pandemic.
5. Revival of all services of ICDS, including growth monitoring, additional supplementary nutrition for severely malnourished and nutrition counselling.
6. Maternity entitlements under the Pradhan Mantri Matritva Vandana Yojana without any restrictions on number of births or conditionalities to be met.
7. Enhanced social security pensions of at least ₹2000 per month for old people, single women and disabled persons.
8. Repeal of the Farm Acts and steps to guarantee MSPs not just for rice and wheat but also pulses, oilseeds and millets.
9. Strengthening of the FCI and setting up systems for decentralised procurement of a wide variety of food crops while linking these to food distribution schemes such as PDS, mid-day meals and ICDS.
10. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) was created to save Indians from hunger. It also ensures farmers get Minimum Support Price (MSP). Despite the additional grains being provided as part of COVID relief, the additional budgetary provision for FCI in the supplementary budget is only Rs 10,000 crores. This continuous underfunding of the FCI means weakening of price support to farmers and pushing them also into further debt. Government of India should provide adequate budget to strengthen the system of FCI.
11. Ensure 200 days of employment per household under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) under the statutory minimum wages. Ensure timely payment of wages.
12. Even in urban India, wages for casual work remain abysmally low. Given the lack of social protection and the increasingly private provision of public goods like healthcare and education, a rise in the wage rate from very low levels is not only desirable but urgently needed. As such, there is an urgent need to create a National Urban Employment Guarantee Programme. Variations of this have already been operational in a few states such as Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Jharkhand.