



Right to Food Campaign

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Universalising PDS is feasible and an urgent necessity for India

The right to food campaign is shocked and dismayed to learn that in a recent [interview](#) to *Business Standard*, Bishow Parajuli, United Nations World Food Programme country director in India, said that “universalising the PDS ... might not be feasible as everyone in India does not need social protection.” At a time when India is going through the world’s worst COVID-19 crisis, it needs a universal food security system more than ever.

Mr. Parajuli claims that “the current targeted PDS covers almost 67 percent of India’s population, which is close to being universal if you exclude the creamy layer.” Currently, only 57 percent of the country’s population is covered under the PDS, whereas 67 percent has a legal entitlement to subsidized foodgrains under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). Ration card quotas were distributed across states based on population figures from the 2011 Census, and have not been revised to account for the increase in population by more than 140 million people over the last decade.

It is unclear what Mr. Parajuli means by the “creamy layer,” but by no stretch of imagination can it include a third of the country’s population, as he implies. India’s headcount ratio according to the Multi-Poverty Index 2020, is a whopping [28 percent](#). According to the Global Hunger Index 2020, the situation in India is “[serious](#).” The level of [undernutrition](#) amongst Indian children under five years of age is alarming; the share of underweight children under five has in fact increased from 21.6 percent in 2015-16 to 23.7 percent in 2019-20. As the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed millions of additional Indians into poverty ([230 million](#), according to one estimate), the current level of deprivation in the country is likely to be much higher than these recent estimates.

Universalization is the only way to ensure that all food insecure households are covered under the PDS, given the large scale of exclusion errors in targeting. The experience of states that have a universal PDS (such as Tamil Nadu) shows that the rich self-exclude themselves from accessing subsidised rations. As noted by the Delhi High Court, food security households are even less likely to queue for subsidised food rations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Parajuli rightly points out the challenges in implementing cash transfers in India, such as lack of adequate markets in rural areas and the potential of misuse. This makes a

universal PDS all the more crucial, given that the country – including the villages – has a dense network of fair price shops. Over the past year, other social security programmes – such as school midday meals, anganwadi services, and even social security pensions – were discontinued for several months. Disruptions were least in the PDS, which served as a lifeline for millions of people.

India's current foodgrain stocks are 100 MT (including unmilled paddy and millets). This is more than adequate to universalize the PDS. The government must also include pulses and edible oil in the PDS basket, to improve levels of nutrition. We are pleased to note that Mr Parajuli acknowledges the importance of a diverse diet that includes fresh vegetables, fruits, and eggs. These items must be included in the meals to be provided by schools and anganwadis. The government must start community kitchens across the country that serve cooked meals with these items. Existing social security programmes (such as social security pensions, NREGA, and maternity entitlements) – which have been widely disrupted over the past year – must be implemented strictly and their monetary amount must be indexed to inflation. All Indians must have access to a minimum income and food support, now more than ever, as the country battles its worst health crisis in living memory.

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(On behalf of the Steering Committee of Right to Food Campaign)