Bharti Institute of Public Policy and Max Institute of Healthcare Management at ISB" in collaboration with "Tata Initiative on Nutrition at NIN"

National institute of Nutrition and Indian School of Business collaborative initiative

Roundtable on

Reimagining PDS: From food to nutrition security

February 16th, 2018. Indian School of Business, Hyderabad

Objective: Organize a roundtable for experts in order to develop a position paper that sets an implementation research agenda on "Reimagining PDS: From food to nutrition security**.**"

Background: The Public Distribution System (PDS), which is one of the largest food security systems in the world, essentially aims to ensure calorific adequacy to its beneficiaries through food grains such as rice and wheat. More than two-thirds of the quantity of these grains is procured in Punjab, Haryana, western UP, and the Godavari Basin in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana, and transported over long distances for household consumption. Sporadic and intermittent efforts have been undertaken by few states (e.g., Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh) to distribute millets, maize and pulses through PDS. However, these efforts have lacked a set of overarching goals and objectives, and failed to ensure continuity over time.

India is currently grappling with high prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies as well as rapidly rising burden of non-communicable diseases. Due to high nutrient density and fibre content of millets, substituting a part of the food basket offered by PDS would improve the nutritional quality of the rations and mitigate some of the nutritional problems. Beyond improved nutrition, including locally grown coarse grains and pulses is likely to mitigate other undesirable consequences of the current centralized procurement and distribution model of the PDS. These include: (i) mismatch between grains offered through PDS and the local consumption baskets, which often include coarse grains such as maize and millets, (ii) inappropriate cultivation practices by rice and wheat farmers resulting in depletion of ground water and soil fertility in producer states such as Haryana and Punjab, and (iii) transportation of food grains over long distances leading to higher costs, post-harvest losses, and carbon emissions.

Motivation: We believe that PDS is a natural candidate for addressing the widespread malnutrition across the country at scale. The latest National Family Health Survey reveals a grim picture – in 2015-16, 58.4% of children aged 6-59 months continue to be anaemic, as do 53% of women aged 15-49 years. In the latter case, the needle has hardly moved from the 55% anaemic women recorded in 2005-06. PDS has become a primary source of calories for the poorest households, yet more the half the children (less than five years) in lowest wealth quintile are stunted and 49% are underweight. While some of these outcomes could be related to calorific inadequacy, monotonous cereal based diets deficient in protein and multiple micronutrients continue to play an important part in the problem. For example, more than 90% of children aged 6-23 months did not receive a nutritionally-appropriate diet in 2015-16. With the expanding reach and penetration of the PDS, an expansion of the scope of the programme from food security to nutrition security, and from calories to all the important nutrients, is likely to make a dent in the grim national picture.

Re-imagining PDS to provide nutritional security implies expanding the present basket from rice and wheat to include coarse grains and pulses. In the short term, even without any changes in the production and consumption decisions, utilizing this channel will require making significant changes in the current procurement, storage, and transportation patterns. In the medium term, such a shift

will trigger changes in the crop production and consumption patterns themselves, which, in turn, will influence outcomes on other dimensions, such as ground water depletion (due to low water intensity of alternate crops) and nutrition status of households (due to high nutritional content of alternate cereals and pulses). Given these potential multi-dimensional processes, the feasibility and success of expanding PDS depends on rigorous research and a robust monitoring, learning and evaluation (MLE) agenda that is integrated into the implementation plan.

Approach: The round table consultation will help to outline the research agenda by inviting participation from experts working on aspects of production, procurement, distribution, consumption, and public health to share insights from existing and ongoing research. Based on the discussion, faculty from NIN and ISB will prepare a draft report on the potential benefits and challenges of expansion of the PDS basket, using available data and resources. The final report and a policy briefing paper will incorporate the feedback and insights from the consultation.