

Poorest States Make Headway Towards Food Security But Bihar and Jharkhand Lag Behind

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Eastern India, the world capital of malnutrition, has reached a make-or-break point in the battle against hunger. For the first time, the National Food Security Act (NFSA) makes it possible to ensure that no-one sleeps on an empty stomach. Many people, however, are still struggling to secure their entitlements under the Act.

By way of reality check, a careful survey of NFSA was conducted by student volunteers in six of India's poorest states in early June 2016. Early survey findings suggest that four of these six states (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal) are making good progress towards food security for all: the Public Distribution System is working quite well and most people are covered. Bihar and Jharkhand, however, are yet to complete essential PDS reforms.

The survey was conducted on 1-10 June 2016 by student volunteers. In each state, investigators went from house to house in six randomly-selected villages spread over two districts and enquired about people's ration cards, PDS purchases, and related matters. About 3,600 households were covered – further details are given in the attached note.

As expected, Chhattisgarh emerged as the leading state in food security matters. Chhattisgarh enacted its own Food Security Act in December 2012. The state has a well-functioning, near-universal PDS which guarantees 7 kg of foodgrains (more than the NFSA's 5 kg norm) per person per month to rural households. Most of the sample households were receiving their full entitlements without fail.

The PDS reforms in Chhattisgarh have inspired similar reforms in Odisha, and more recently in Madhya Pradesh. The survey suggests consolidates earlier evidence that the reach and effectiveness of the PDS has dramatically improved in both states during the last few years.

West Bengal is the latest entrant in the league of successful PDS reformers. In the run-up to the recent Assembly elections, the West Bengal government went out of its way not only to implement the NFSA but also to universalize the PDS in rural areas. The survey findings suggest that in West Bengal, too, PDS reforms have had positive results: most people have a ration card, PDS distribution is regular, and leakages have dramatically reduced.

In Bihar and Jharkhand, however, the implementation of the NFSA leaves much to be desired. Many poor households are still waiting for a ration card, and even if they have one, some family members are often missing from the card. Also, PDS distribution is far from regular and leakages remain high, especially in Bihar. There is an urgent need to accelerate the process of PDS reform in both states - nothing prevents Bihar and Jharkhand from achieving the same standards of PDS effectiveness as the other sample states.

Needless to say, much progress remains to be made even in those states. Missing names in ration cards are a major issue in all states, including Chhattisgarh. In Odisha, there have been alarming cuts in the number of Antyodaya cards, causing severe hardship to the poorest of the poor. In

Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, there are major complaints about the quality of PDS foodgrains. Last but not least, the battle against corruption in the PDS is far from over.

NFSA Survey 2016: Selected Findings

	Proportion of sample households with a ration card (%)		Proportion of “missing names” in the ration cards ^a (%)	Average purchase of PDS foodgrains, as % of entitlements ^b		Proportion of hhs who felt quality of PDS grain is “good” or “fair” (%)
	Before NFSA (BPL or AAY)	After NFSA (Priority or AAY)		May 2016	“Normal month”	
Chhattisgarh	81	95	15	96	97	99
Odisha	62	88	8	96	99	86
Madhya Pradesh	55	84	6	100	98	72
West Bengal	51	86	13	95	95	57
Jharkhand	50	76	12	55	84	91
Bihar	64	83	17	15	84	58
SIX STATES	58	85	13	71	92	69

^a Priority households only (missing name = household member not listed in ration card).

^b Priority and Antyodaya (AAY) households combined. Here, “entitlements” refers to what a household is entitled to *as per its ration card*. Temporary disruption in the supply chain led to low distribution levels in Bihar and Jharkhand in May 2016. The figure for “normal month” in Bihar is an over-estimate, as it ignores “gap months” when there is no distribution at all (a resilient problem in Bihar).

Source: House-to-house survey of *all* households in six randomly-selected villages (three in each of two sample Blocks, located in separate districts) in each state, June 2016. The sample is biased towards deprived districts and small villages. *All figures are provisional.*