

Governance and Food Security: A Study of the working of Public Distribution System in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya

Priyanka K.Nongkynrih,

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Saint Mary's College, Shillong, India

Abstract: *Good governance involves a proactive role by the government in delivering the needful goods to the people. Good governance becomes all the more important in a society plagued by poverty, malnutrition, hunger, disease. Meghalaya a largely rural agrarian economy is plagued by high incidence of poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, lack of basic infrastructure and high level of Infant Mortality Rate, Total Fertility Rate and anemia amongst children and women. The state has been chosen as an area of study keeping in mind the high rate of people living Below the Poverty Line (48.90% as per the Community and Rural Development Survey, 2002). To tackle such weak economic and health indicators ensuring food security to the marginalised group becomes an important task. There are many food delivery mechanisms in place but by far the Public Distribution System (PDS) has been the largest food delivery mechanism reaching out to a larger group. In this backdrop the Paper will analyse the working of the PDS in the state and how far it has been able to achieve its goals and objectives. The paper will look at the role of three important stakeholders namely the Government, Dorbar and Civil Society in ensuring an effective PDS.*

Methodology: *Both primary and secondary sources have been used. Primary sources included interviews with officials of the Food Civil Supply and Consumers Affairs Department, Govt. of Meghalaya; headmen of local Dorbars, President of Meghalaya Right to Information Act. Other primary sources included documents published by the Department of Food and Civil Supply. Secondary resources included the use of books, newspapers and websites.*

Key words: *Food Security, Public Distribution System, Civil Society, Dorbars, Government.*

I. Introduction

Governance and Food Security

Governance as a concept has assumed great importance in contemporary times. This has been more so with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations at the Millennium Summit General Assembly of the United Nations held in September 2000, which focuses amongst others the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, reduction of child mortality rate, gender equality and empowerment, achieving universal primary education, improving maternal health etc (UN Millennium Summit 2000). Good Governance is a basic criteria for economic development. It seeks to address the needs of the weaker and marginalized section of society. Besides the state a number of stakeholders are involved in Good Governance. It requires an active participation by civil society to bring about accountability and transparency. Good governance becomes all the more necessary for a country like India flanked by high level of poverty, malnutrition, corruption and underdevelopment.

Public Distribution System and Food Security

Food security will not be achievable until and unless a system of good governance prevails. For this there needs to be an institution in place and a delivery mechanism to carry out the policies. Food security can never be achieved without a proactive role played by the Government. The Indian Constitution ensures food security to its citizens through Article 21 and 47. Article 21, of the Indian Constitution guarantees to every citizen the right to life and liberty which implies the right to live with dignity. Article 47 of the Constitution makes it a primary duty of the state to raise the standard of nutrition and standard of living of its people and to improve public health. In a federal set up like India both the Centre and the states play a vital role in ensuring food security to its citizens. A number of schemes like the Mid Day Meal and Integrated Child Development Service Programme have been implemented by the Government, which aims at ensuring food security, reducing malnutrition and enhancing calorie intake of the children. But by far the PDS has emerged as a critical source of food security to the marginalised group. Provision of subsidized food grains to the poor to ensure minimum nutritional support and ensuing price stability are the two main objectives of the PDS. Public distribution was started in 1939 as a war-time rationing measure (Swaminathan Madhura: 2000). Consequently the PDS was retained by the Government as a social policy to serve the interest of the marginalised sections. By the first five year Plan the rationing was extended to rural areas which were facing chronic food shortages. The Agricultural

Prices Commission and Food Corporation of India (FCI) were created which further strengthened the PDS. By the 1970s PDS was universalized in the country. PDS is operated jointly by the Central and state governments. The Department of Food Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs has been entrusted with the responsibility of manning the PDS.

Working of the Public Distribution System in East Khasi Hills

Meghalaya became a full-fledged state on January 21st 1972. With an area of 22,429 sq. kms it has a population of 29.64lakhs (2011 census). It is largely a rural area with an agrarian economy. As per the Planning Commission Report the population living Below Poverty Level in 1992-93 was 37.92% and it came down to 17.1 % in 2009-10. However the Survey conducted in 2002 by the Community and Rural Development Department, Govt. of Meghalaya shows the BPL figure of the state at around 48.70%.

East Khasi Hills the area of study in this paper is one of the 11 districts of Meghalaya. It covers a total area of 2,748 sq.kms and has eight blocks under it. Shillong, the capital of the state, is the district headquarters. The population of the district rose from 537906 (1991 census) to 824,059 (2011Census). The population falling under the BPL category in the district as per the C&RD Department 2002 survey stands at 46.93%. As per the survey conducted by the C&RD Department almost all the blocks in the district have very weak indicators in terms of poverty.

With such a large number of population living below the poverty level as reflected in the 2002 C&RD census it becomes important for us to analyse the role of the food delivery mechanisms available to ensure food security to the marginalised group. There are three important stakeholders that are involved in the process of implementing PDS in the state viz the Government, Dorbars and Civil Society. They are involved in implementing and checking the effectiveness of PDS at various levels.

Role of the Government

An important step taken by the government to uplift the status of the poor is the implementation of the Public Distribution System. The Citizen's Charter clearly underlies the importance of Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). It states "The objective of TPDS is to ensure availability of foodgrains to all bonafide citizens and to ensure that it is at price affordable for even the poorest in the State" (Citizens Charter, Department of Food and Civil Supplies, Govt. of Meghalaya http://megfcsca.gov.in/reports/citizens_charter.pdf, retrieved on 10th June 2015).

The Food and Civil Supplies Department located in Shillong is responsible for the implementation of the PDS in East Khasi Hills. Under the TPDS families have been classified as (i) Above Poverty Level families (ii) Below Poverty Line families and (iii) Antyodaya Anna Yojna families. The TPDS in the state is based as per the 1993-1994 BPL estimates of the Planning Commission which stands at 37.92 %.

**Table 1: No. of APL, BPL, & AAY households in EK Hills during 2007-2008
(1993-1994 Planning Commission estimates)**

Sub- Division	Number of APL families/ households	Number of BPL families/ households	Number of AAY families/ households	Total
Shillong	68,436	32,998	20,537	121971
Sohra	8,106	3,284	2,044	13434
Total	76,542	36,282	22,581	135405

Source: Basic Information on TPDS, Food Civil supplies and Consumers Affairs Dept, Government of Meghalaya http://megfcsca.gov.in/families_districtwise.html retrieved on 13th June 2015.

The amount and price of essential commodities to be allotted to consumers is fixed by the Food and Civil Supply Department.

Table 2: Allotment and prices of essential commodities under the TPDS

	Scales of supply per month	Retail prices
Rice for APL families	16.150 Kg	Rs. 9.30-Rs.11/kg
Rice for BPL families	35 Kg	Rs. 6.65/kg
Rice for AAY families	35 Kg	Rs. 3/kg
Wheat (whole meal Atta)	1 to 5 Kg	Rs. 7.40-Rs.7.80/kg
Levy Sugar	697 grams per head to all consumers (APL,BPL,AAY)	Rs.13.50-Rs.14/kg
S.K.Oil	Urban families- 9 litres Rural families- 4 litres	Rs.16.15-Rs.19/litre

Source: Basic Information on TPDS, Food Civil Supplies & Consumer Affairs Department, Government of Meghalaya <http://megfcsca.gov.in/tpds.html> retrieved on 13th June 2015.

In November 2001 the Antyodaya Anna Yojna card holders have been introduced where rice is supplied to the poorest of the poor family at the scale of 35kgs per month at a minimal price of 3.00 rupees. The FCI which has been in charged with procuring and distributing the essential commodities is the nodal agency from which the essential commodities are obtained. Wholesalers or government nominees are appointed by the Government who lift the commodities from the FCI. The Fair Price Shops (FPS) in turn lift the commodities from these wholesalers. The number of FPS in East Khasi Hills as in 2007 is 881(District Statistical Handbook, 2008). At present there are 66 wholesalers/government nominees operating under the Shillong Sadar and 9 wholesalers operating under Sohra subdivision of East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya for the year 2013-2014 (www.megfcsca.gov.in/, retrieved on 12th June 2015). These are private players appointed by the government and their licenses get renewed every year depending on their performance.

The Food and Civil Supplies Department located in Shillong is responsible for the implementation of the PDS in East Khasi Hills. The Department monitors the distribution of commodities through the PDS. To prevent the diversion of food grains to the open market, a Lifting Officer is stationed in the FCI to oversee the lifting of commodities by the wholesalers. The FCI issues a sample slip to the Civil Supply Department where the quality of food delivered to the wholesalers is graded. The Deputy Commissioners and SDOs further ensure that the food grains lifted from the FCI is of marginal or average quality. However the absence of any technical experts in the Department to test the quality of food grains has clipped the wings of the Department.

The Food and Civil Supply Department maintains a Village Grain Bank, a centrally sponsored scheme which aims at providing food security to safeguard against starvation during periods of natural calamity or during lean season when the food insecure household do not have sufficient resources to purchase ration. There are nine Village Grain Banks located in East Khasi Hills (www.megfcsca.gov.in/, retrieved on 14th June 2015).

The Food and Civil Supply Department is overall in charge of regulating PDS in the state. The Inspectors in the Department regularly conduct inspections of FPS to prevent any malfunctioning. To prevent the prevalence of 'ghost cards' computerization of APL cards have been implemented in the District.

Role of Civil Society in PDS

The Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the state have been taking up issues affecting the common man and an important issue they have raised time and again is the effective implementation of PDS. Reports of diversion and issuing of poor quality food grains have often been brought out by these NGOs. They have on a number of occasions brought to light the corrupt practices prevailing in the system and how commodities meant for the targeted group gets diverted to the open market.

Some examples of NGOs taking up the issue of PDS include:

The **Seng Longkmie (Women's Organisation)** of Laitumkhrach locality in Shillong in the late 1980's and early 1990s had taken up the problem faced by the consumers which included supply of inferior quality of rice, irregular supply of essential commodities and malfunctioning of PDS(Lyngdoh, MPR:1998 pp 87-88).

The **Meghalaya Right To Information Movement** under the leadership of Michael Syiem had unearthed the wheat scam where wheat worth crores of rupees under the TPDS has been diverted for the past several years. The Department of Food and Civil Supplies however responded that the wheat was distributed in districts where there was demand. FPS do not lift it from the FCI as wheat does not constitute part of the diet of the local tribal (Assam Tribune, February 10th, 2011). The MRTIM filed an RTI against the FCI on the 12th January 2010 after receiving numerous complaints from the consumers regarding the quality of rice distributed through the FPS. It was discovered that though the rice supplied from the FCI godowns has been certified as 'A' grade, those available in the FPS are not fit for human consumption. The FCI in its reply informed that the "quality of sugar supplied to the government was sound and free flowing condition" (FCI Report to the RTI filed by MRTIM, 3rd May, 2010). A lot needs to be answered in terms of quality of food grains received from the FCI and the quality actually supplied to the consumers.

Organisations like the **Khasi Students Union** takes part in checking malpractices prevalent in the PDS. On a number of occasions this organization has taken up the issue of malpractices in the distribution of essential commodities through the PDS. The KSU had taken strong note of a FPS dealer under Mawryngkneng Block of the East Khasi Hills for allegedly manipulating the distribution of Annapurna scheme to the beneficiaries under the block. This even led to the cancelling of the license of the fair price shop dealer by the Deputy Commissioner of East Khasi Hills (Shillong Times, April 5th, 2012).

Members of the Civil Society like the **Seng Kynthei, Seng Samla** are part of the vigilance committee which is responsible for monitoring the working of FPS.

The above mentioned cases are but few of the occasions when NGOs have come forward to take up the issue of irregularity in the PDS. NGOs bring about transparency in the working of the PDS and by highlighting the issue makes the consumers more aware. They have brought to notice the maladies affecting the working of PDS in the state and have raised their concern over the corrupt practices prevalent in the system. Seng Samla (Youth Organisations) in many localities like Upland Road (Laitumkhrach, Shillong) distributes kerosene

supplied through the PDS. The active involvement of the civil society needs to be encouraged as this would bring to light the lacunae prevalent in the system. NGOs like the MRTIM are encouraging consumers to use the RTI to bring about transparency in the working of the PDS.

Role of Dorbars

Meghalaya being placed under the Sixth Schedule is out of purview of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Fifth and the Sixth Schedule brought about a process of decentralization which allowed the tribal population to have separate laws for the governance and administration of these areas. This was done with the purpose of protecting the cultural tradition and customs of the tribal population. The Khasis have traditional political institutions called Dorbars which work at the grass-root level. Different tiers of Dorbars have been existing since ancient times in the rural and urban areas of Khasi Hills. Though no constitutional recognition has been accorded to them however in course of time they have assumed a place of significant importance. The people identify themselves with such institutions as they are rooted in society. These Dorbars comprise of all adult members or ‘Rangbahs’ who reside in the village and perform various functions from maintenance of law and order to looking after the affairs of the villages, carrying on government schemes etc. The power and authority of the Dorbar Shnong was derived from the customs and traditional practice.

The Dorbars assist the Government in the implementation of schemes like the NREGA, NRHM, PDS etc. The Government relies on such institutions as these institutions work at the grass-root level and is therefore in touch with the ground realities and are in a position to monitor the implementation of the schemes.

Role of Dorbars in implementing PDS

- The Vigilance Committee which is set up at the FPS level besides comprising of cardholders, social workers and consumer activists will also consist of the Headman of the locality. The Chairman of the Vigilance Committee may be headed by the Headman or Secretary of the local village. The Vigilance Committee is to review the working of the PDS and report to the officials any discrepancy.
- As per the Citizens Charter (Department of Food and Civil Supply) all bonafide citizens of the State who are duly recognized and recommended by the local headmen/Dorbar are eligible to obtain rations under the TPDS. As far as the APL families are concerned, the list is prepared by the respective headmen/Dorbars.
- The Dorbars play the important role of making Public announcements before the residents of their localities both in urban and rural areas when the Food and Civil Supplies Department releases essential commodities through the FPS. The Government no doubt through the print and electronic media makes such announcement when the essential commodities are released however the role played by the Dorbar is far more effective as many people especially in the rural areas may not have access to media.
- The rates of essential commodities distributed through the PDS vary from place to place. The FPS do not charge the amount as fixed by the Food and Civil Supplies Department. Dorbars in many localities and villages have stepped in to streamline the price and see to it that the FPS does not overcharge the consumers. This has helped to bring about some amount of parity in the prices of commodities sold through the PDS.
- A Utilisation Certificate signed by the Headman needs to be obtained by a FPS dealer for renewal of his dealership. In certain villages/localities meetings by the Dorbar are held once a year to appoint FPS dealers. The Dorbar Shnong would recommend the renewal of only those FPS dealers whose work was found to be satisfactory. In this manner the working of the FPS gets monitored and it also keeps them on their toes to effectively carry out their responsibilities.
- FPS dealers are appointed on the basis of the recommendation of the Dorbars.
- In some Dorbars regular meetings are often arranged with the FPS dealers where matters concerning the PDS are discussed.
- Members of the Dorbars often conduct surprise checking on the FPS located in their localities/ villages.
- FPS dealers have to regularly maintain statement registers which require the signature of the Headman of the locality/ village. This keeps a tab on the working of the FPS and if any discrepancy is found it is reported.

The Dorbar Shnongs are important stake holders in the PDS. An active, transparent and empowered Dorbar can play a very important role in monitoring the implementation of PDS. The role of the Dorbar is highly lauded as it brings in more transparency and accountability. Moreover for a huge programme like the PDS to be effective constant monitoring at every level is important. The Dorbars work at the grass-root level and as such can be effective instruments for monitoring the implementation of the programme. The Dorbars have intervened on a number of occasions seeing to it that the deserving beneficiaries are not deprived of their rights and that their names are included under the PDS. The Food and Civil Supplies Department has acknowledged the role played by the Dorbar Shnongs in implementing the TPDS. These institutions are

however beset with a number of problems. It has been alleged that they are non democratic and non transparent in nature and since there are no prescribed powers and functions their functions varies from locality to locality. Women are still excluded from membership to the Dorbar and are denied voting rights. On many occasions too it has been reported that these Dorbars have acted in an authoritarian manner. Cases have been reported where 17 families of a village in Dongrum locality of Mawsynram village in East Khasi Hills have been ostracized by the Dorbar after they had filed an RTI against the FPS dealer (Shillong Times 31st May 2012).

These institutions have come to play an important role both in the urban and rural areas therefore what is required is democratic processes with well defined powers and functions to set into these institutions. Modern democratic processes should blend with the traditional institutions to bring about more effective governance.

II. Conclusion

Challenges in the working of PDS

The working of PDS in the state is marred by a number of problems and hurdles. Some major hurdles standing in the way of an effective implementation of PDS in the state are as follows:

The first challenge lies in the fact that Meghalaya is a consumer state and therefore has to depend largely on other states for the supply of rice, wheat and sugar.

Identification of the BPL families is very important to address the food security issue. There is a remarkable difference in the manner in which the Centre (Planning Commission) and the state arrives at the number of BPL families. The problem of inclusion and exclusion arises if a proper methodology of defining the BPL is not identified. The allocation of food grains to the state is made on the basis of the estimate given by the Planning Commission. This is also unjustified because the poorer states already overburdened with a high BPL population faces another burden of having to provide food to the extra population as this responsibility is thrown on the shoulders of the state. A consumer state like Meghalaya will have to face the extra responsibility of having to procure food grains on her own to feed the unaccountable BPL population.

Another problem facing the PDS is the quantity of essential commodities distributed through the PDS. The amount of food grains distributed through the PDS is quite minimal and insufficient to meet the monthly requirements of a family. This is more so for a tribal family where the number of people in a household is usually large. The allotment of 35Kgs of rice per month for a tribal household will be insufficient. The people therefore have to turn to the open market for meeting their requirement. Moreover the essential commodities distributed through the PDS in the state will do little in promoting the nutrition standards of the people. Human nutrition cannot be promoted by mere consumption of rice and wheat and that too at a very meager amount.

Members of the civil society in the state have on a number of occasion found out that the quality of food grains distributed through the FPS is not even fit for human consumption. This thus reduces the whole purpose of having PDS to improve the nutritional security of the marginalized group.

Another major challenge the PDS faces in the state is the problem of leakages. Reports of diversion of essential commodities meant for distribution through the PDS to open markets is often reported. One reason for this diversion is that the APL cardholders do not lift their ration as a result of which leakage takes place. Another more serious factor leading to leakage is the presence of ghost cards.

Another problem that surfaces with regards to the working of the PDS in the state is the lack of a uniform pricing system in the FPS outlets. Though the Food and Civil Supplies Department fixes the price of the essential commodities the prices vary from place to place. The profit margin received by the dealers is very meager. Therefore to recover their loss (transportation, carrying charge, shop rent etc) they raise the price of the commodities.

III. Recommendations For Improvement In The Working Of PDS

Various measures need to be adopted to ensure an effective PDS in place.

A modified BPL list should be put in place so that the problem of exclusion and inclusion does not arise. In order to promote the nutritional standards of the people the amount of food grains distributed should be increased and nutritious items like cereals, pulses, vegetables, fruits etc should be distributed. Distribution of essential commodities should be based on the number of units in a family.

Efforts should be made by the concerned authorities to make regular inspection of FPS and check the quality of food grains distributed; the lifting of commodities by the FPS dealers from the FCI needs to be monitored; the Department should also have facilities like a quality testing lab so that the commodities sold at the FPS can be tested regularly and action can be taken against the erring authority.

Decentralization of the PDS should take place. Firstly, products of local consumption should be distributed through the PDS. Decentralization would focus on the food crops that are locally consumed and produced. Diverse range of cereals, vegetables, pulses would be available. A combination of such crop will ensure that the nutritional needs of the community are locally met. For instance in a tribal state like Meghalaya wheat is not an item of local consumption and as such many a time it is not lifted from the FCI and FPS. It thus

becomes important to make commodities of local consumption available through the FPS. This will not only create a demand but also boost the production of the locally available food items. Distributing vegetables like potato through the FPS would benefit the local people to a large extent. Besides improving their nutritional requirement it will also boost the production of this item which in turn will help the local farmers.

A strong redressal forum should be in place so that the grievances of the public are addressed. Strong action needs to be taken against any erring authority. For this the Vigilance committee needs to be constantly at work. In order to bring about uniform pricing of essential commodities the profit of the dealers should be increased. The PDS has been identified as an important mechanism to ensure food security to the marginalised group. Successful implementation of PDS in the state has been far from achieved due to the presence of many bottlenecks. Every effort should be made to remove these hurdles so that ensuring food security to the marginalised group becomes a reality. All the stakeholders- government, wholesalers, FPS dealers, civil society and consumers should be actively involved. Reform measures should be introduced to remove the loopholes present in the system and strengthen the working of the PDS. A proper monitoring system should be in place to check the leakages. PDS is the largest means of ensuring food security in India therefore every step should be taken in making it work effectively. Successful working of the PDS will not be possible without a committed government in place, a vigilant civil society ensuring transparency in the system and an effective Dorbar monitoring its implementation at the grass root level.

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