

Mid-Day Meal Scheme amidst COVID-19 in India - A Review Based Analysis

Samridhi Arora, Kanchan Sharma*

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a crisis like situation in the health and education sector devastating lives of many, particularly children from poor families and putting their future health on the verge of deterioration. It made hard for today's man to get a healthy meal a day in pandemic induced economic shutdown. Mid-Day Meal Scheme is also promising a kind of food security to the children for whom it is quite hard to get their daily meals in the crisis. It is really important to determine the drivers and stressors deteriorating health and nutritional conditions since the pandemic is on high. Keeping these in notice, the present study was conducted to have a holistic view of the current condition of the operationalization of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. It has been tried to know whether the current implementation of Mid-Day Meal Scheme is promising a healthy meal to the children since the operationalization has been changed in context of the COVID-19 scenario. Instead of hot cooked meal, food security allowances, and dry ration are supplied to the beneficiary children. The study was conducted to know that at how much level the beneficiaries actually receiving the benefits of the scheme currently. Some suggestions were also made at the end of the study to make the scheme more available and better in terms of its distribution of services to the beneficiary children.

Keywords: COVID-19, Economic shutdown, Food security, Health crisis, India, Mid-Day meal scheme, Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity and poor nutrition have been one of the major challenges in the developing countries like India. A significant number of children from various spheres of the country are undernourished and show remarkable presence of stunting, wasting, anemia, and other forms of malnutrition. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the situation got worsens than before. The pandemic resulted in millions of fatalities globally that cannot be ignored. Diet lays a crucial role in determining the health of an individual especially in the country which was going on the verge of undernutrition. In India, around 14% of population is undernourished. The portion of children who are stunted under 5 years of age is 38% and 21% for wasting. Furthermore, 51% women who are in their reproductive age were anemic in India.^[1]

Mid-Day meal scheme provides a kind of food security to the children especially those who are from poor families.^[2] But due to the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes very difficult for the people to provide meals to their children as they do not have any source of income during the pandemic due to countrywide shutdown implemented by the Central Government to tackle the situation of spread of COVID-19.

THE ORIGIN OF MID-DAY MEAL SCHEME

The scheme was implemented in 1995 in India and was later implemented in all the stated across the country. It is the largest nutrition program in the world. But now, its name has changed from Mid-Day Meal Scheme to "Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman" from September, 2021. Under this scheme 100 g of food grains (rice and wheat) were allotted for children of primary classes and 150 g of food grains for those in upper primary classes free of cost supplied through Food Corporation of India.^[3] Furthermore, individuals are hired under this scheme specially for cooking Mid-Day Meal and Rs.1000 honorarium is provided to them for the duration of 10 months. Each school is having a teacher incharge

Department of Home Science, University of Jammu, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir.

Corresponding Author: Kanchan Sharma, Department of Home Science, University of Jammu, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir. E-mail: kanchansharmajammu@gmail.com

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for proper implementation of the scheme who works under the supervision of the head of the school. He/she monitors and maintains the distribution and operationalization of the scheme. The Mid-Day Meal incharge also have to manage the accounts of inventories regarding the scheme and any other kind of disparity.

MID-DAY MEAL IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

Coronavirus lead to global shutdown which resulted in economic crisis and poses food security at risk levels. This food crisis altered the ratio of hunger and undernutrition. The global shutdown and decrease in economic activities adding the closure of schools agitated the problem of getting a meal in these times especially for those people who are daily wagers and whose children are dependent upon the school meals for the part of their nutrition. These conditions have potential to aggravate the chances of hunger and undernutrition and in result, may impair the growth of children leading to reduced cognitive and physical activities.^[1] The conditions could worsen over time. In these times, care and health services also got restricted.^[4] The objective of India to achieve Sustainable Development Goal-2, that is, to reduce hunger is also not possible due nutrition shortfall as it ravaged the health and economic conditions globally. This devastated food security and

livelihood of people also resulted in the disruption of food supply chains.^[5]

RISK DRIVERS

The Central as well the State Government took various initiatives to tackle the COVID-19 induced food and economic crisis (Figure 1) and decided to safeguard the health and nutritional levels of the children especially for whom who find the meal provided in the school a substitute rather than complementary one. The government ensured a kind of food security to those children (both primary and upper primary) who has been enrolled under Mid- Day Meal Scheme in the government schools. Under this, government is providing monetary benefits to them through Direct Benefit Transfer for the cooking costs of the meal. The proposal for same was approved recently in 2020 by the Union Education Ministry for Education Ramesh Pokhriyal "Nishank."^[6] This Food Security Allowance (FSA) has been transferred directly to their bank accounts. In addition to this, grains are also supplied to them to help them to overcome the fall of nutrition and ensure at least a meal in a day to their hungry children. In the state of Goa, government is providing FSA comprising food grains, pulses, oil, vegetables, etc., and their equivalent cooking cost to the children enrolled under Mid-Day Meal Scheme till schools are closed due to the pandemic situation. Furthermore, the state government was awaiting the clearance from the finance department for provisions under FSA at the time of November 2021. Rajasthan government is providing only food grains to the children under the scheme while in Telangana, food kits are provided to the each individual and fifteen hundred rupees (per family) to families falling under below poverty line. The food kits are comprised 12 g of rice.^[2] A leading newspaper of the country reported that in Delhi, despite of the order issued by the government to provide monetary benefits instead of the hot cooked Mid-Day meal which is not possible to provide currently, many beneficiaries admitted that they had not received any kind of compensation or benefits under Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Some children who were studying in government schools and some in municipal schools, their parents reported that they had not received the monetary benefit since April, 2020. Some of the parents also provided that they did not had work during lockdown and thus, were not able to get meals for their families. Some also committed that they were able to get only chapattis while some passed the days by having tea and biscuits only. In response to these conditions, the higher officials said that they did not have funds from the state government to distribute further to the beneficiaries. Contrary to it, Directorate of Education of Delhi provided that enough funds are there. They also said that their department had been transferring FSA regularly to the officials to further distribute them to the children and there was no such problem encountered. A member of Delhi Commission for Protection of child Rights commented that the delay in transferring of the funds was due to slow processing of the funds and also ensured that it would be received by the children soon. An adviser to the Delhi Education Minister made a statement that the delayed processing of funds transfer was due to the engagement of majority of officials in COVID-19 related duties since the month of March.^[7] In Andhra Pradesh, dry ration is provided to beneficiary children. They were supplied with eggs and chikkis.^[8] Government of Bihar has directed the concerned department to give 358 rupees to primary and 536 rupees to upper primary students for 80 days directly in their linked bank

accounts. This monetary assistance is provided along with the supply of dry ration.^[9] Many activists and nutritional experts did not found it convincing and depicted that this amount has failed to meet the current nutritional requirement at that time.^[10] In Chhattisgarh, dry rice and lentils were distributed among the beneficiary children. The primary class children were provided with 4 kg rice and 500 g lentils and the upper primary class children got 6 kg and 1200 g of rice and lentils, respectively. Haryana is providing dry ration and sanitation items such as face mask, soap, and sanitizer were distributed to the door steps of beneficiary children along with the drop out and out of school children.^[11] In Kerala, government has been providing monetary assistance along with rice kits to the beneficiary children for 40 days. These kits were being distributed by the Parent teacher association or Mid-Day Meal Committee. However, the pace of distribution was not satisfactory. Furthermore, the cook-cum-helper engaged under Mid-Day Meal Scheme were not getting salary and are unable to get their meals.

Level	Particulars	
	Food grains (g)	Other
Primary	100	Pulses (20 g), veg (50 g), oil (5 g), etc.
Upper primary	150	Pulses (30 g), vegetables (75 g), oil (7.5 g), etc.

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of School Education and Literacy, Circular on FSA, July, 2020

A respondent from Bihar reported that the financial assistance they were receiving in April got stopped by the month of May. Respondents from West Bengal depicted that they received only 350 rupees for the month of June only and also supplied with the dry ration. They also reported that the school principal told them that the amount was for the lunch of their child that was enrolled in the school. In Uttar Pradesh, a respondent revealed that he was getting the FSA and dry ration under the scheme which helped him to overcome the scarcity of food at their home. In the state of Odisha, the state government along with some volunteers distributed dry ration to the beneficiary children for 3 months in advance. They were also provided with the coupon of fair price shop, having a unique ID. Using the coupon the beneficiary children and their parents were able to draw ration from the fair price shops. The coupon will be reconciled later to settle the account with the shop owner.^[10] In a survey conducted across five states (Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh), it was obtained that only 8% of children were receiving cooked meals and among them UP was worst with 92% of children who were not receiving Mid-Day Meal while 53% received dry ration and 4% received monetary benefits under the scheme. It was also provided that the focus of the Uttar Pradesh government was to provide FSA while Chhattisgarh focused on home delivery of dry ration.^[2] A survey conducted in Uttarakhand and TN revealed that the people belonging to poor families had reduced their food intake due to the economic crisis aroused because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The maximum reduction in consumption was observed for fruits followed by pulses, vegetables, and oil. The least reduction in intake was found for other foods items except that mentioned above. The results concluded that such high level of reduction in the intake of food items that form main portion of the meal would leave undermining effects on health and nutrition of people particularly children as they were in crucial stage of their life. It was evident from the media reports that poor people

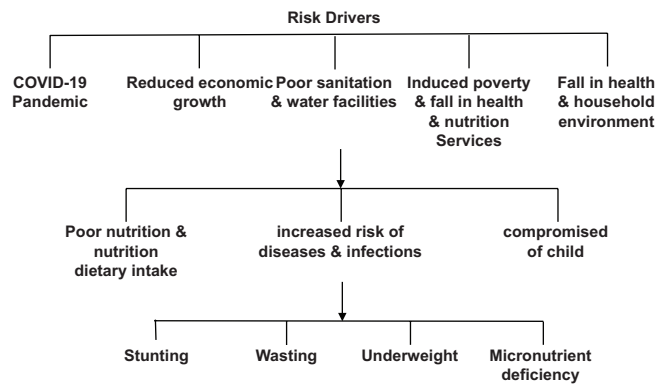


Figure 1: Effects of COVID-19 on different drivers of health of children in pandemic

were suffering more in getting food for their family. A news article revealed that one-fourth percent of the respondents admitted that they never went completely out of food during the pandemic lockdown while one-third percent of them depicted that they occasionally went out of food, that is, for 1–2 days. Very few of the respondents revealed that they frequently went out of food for 4–7 days and faced extreme hunger during the lockdown situation. Majority of the respondents admitted that they were following the practice of eating less in day or skipping meals and then staying hunger for preventing complete shortfall of food during the lockdown in pandemic.^[12] In a report, it was revealed that some states were not able to execute a workable plan at the ground level to tackle the current pandemic situation. It was also provided in the report that many schools did not had enough of dry ration to distribute it further among the beneficiary children. Some school authorities were managing by buying the grains on credit from the local grocery stores to continue the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. The report also raised questions like how those children would avail their dry ration who had migrated from their registered places to their native towns? and how the school authorities will trace and contact them? it was also asked in the report that since many schools were mobilizing the teachers to distribute grains to the beneficiary even without the necessary safety kits, is it safe to mobilize the teachers to high risk zones for distribution of the dry ration?^[13] It was also reported in a report that fewer states were providing FSA than initially approved by the Programme Approval Board.^[14]

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 doubled the burden of undernutrition and over-nutrition. It has affected the lives of many people all over the spheres of the globe by deteriorating the key determinants of health and lead to poor dietary intake, affected mental health, social isolation, lack of health-care facilities, and schooling especially among vulnerable sections of the society.

UNICEF data of pre-pandemic already made it crystal clear that world was not able to meet the Sustainable Development Goal-2, that is, to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition even without considering the effect of COVID-19. At present, diet and health are deteriorating more, making it more difficult for the persons to get back to their normal health and nutrition levels especially the poor ones. Only implementation of Mid-Day Meal Scheme up to the mark will not be enough to get

back to the normal nutrition levels since, various stressors are already causing the elevated levels of disturbances and also the devastation posed by the COVID-19 pandemic made the health more worse than before. In spite of giving dry ration only they must be supplied with food kits containing a whole package of nutritious and healthy diet which might be comprised dry grains, pulses, non-perishable and/semi-perishable food items, eggs, milk, etc., that will contribute to their health better than the dry ration alone. It is also good over distributing monetary benefits as it is difficult to ensure that they will make use of the same money for food only. They shall be provided with sanitary kits comprising of soap, sanitizer, face mask, gloves, etc. Online programs should be conducted regarding sensitization of the children regarding COVID-19 spread, symptoms, and precautions that needed to be taken.

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