



Synthesis Brief



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Woman farmer
harvesting millet in
Koraput district,
Odisha
Photo credit: LANSA

Agriculture policies primarily address production, productivity and farmers' welfare. However, policy and investment choices on crops / livestock, also region, institutions and infrastructure have consequences for incomes and nutrition of poor populations. LANSA research examined some aspects through empirical research and policy analysis.

Agriculture Policies:

A study of the evolution of policy debates on agriculture and nutrition since independence to the present found that the framing of undernutrition shifted from a health issue (1950-'65) to a problem of food shortage (1965-'75); then a multi-dimensional poverty challenge (1975-'97), to a nutrition and food security issue after 1997. Only in recent years, there is increased awareness around the potential of agriculture for balanced, diversified and nutritious diets. However, deep-rooted perceptions about agriculture remain, and may hinder development of further nutrition-sensitive agricultural programmes and policies (Barnett and Srivastava, 2016).

Puri (2017) examined the rollout of the 2013 National Food Security Act (NFSA) to find that it was too early for a verdict on the impact, but

preliminary studies on NFSA implementation showed - increase in coverage of eligible beneficiaries, a decline in exclusion error, a rise in the purchase-entitlement ratio (PER) and improvements in foodgrain transportation. States / UTs that implemented reforms - doorstep delivery of foodgrains, end-to-end computerisation of TPDS, simplifying eligibility criteria, and improving grievance redress mechanisms - reaped benefits of better food security, also political success. There was still a lot to be done nevertheless.

Public Distribution System:

A study of the universal public distribution system (PDS) followed in Tamil Nadu found a significant, positive contribution of PDS to cereal and calorie consumption; also savings across population

sections were higher among rural and urban poor (Anuradha 2017). The findings are important in the context of direct-benefit transfers being considered in lieu of food distribution in kind. Examining targeted PDS in five predominantly rice-eating states (Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and West Bengal) where reforms happened even before the enactment of NFSA, it was found that rice was available to a majority of population at very low prices (<Rs 3/kg). Using National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) household consumption survey data, the study found significantly high coverage of TPDS and average off-take of grains in four out of five states than the rest of India with the average household purchasing an additional three kg rice per month. Households in Chhattisgarh used money saved from PDS rice to buy more pulses, edible oil, vegetables, sugar, and non-food items. The need for administrative reforms to improve grain delivery and control diversion to open markets was highlighted (Kishore and Chakraborti, 2015).

Karnataka government began supply of millets through the PDS in 2014, and Raju et al (2018) examined different aspects of the initiative from production and procurement of millets to consumption. Although a bonus over minimum support price to encourage farmers to cultivate millet and have sufficient quantity available for procurement was announced, the study found that local procurement and distribution must increase for the supply of millets via PDS to be viable. Major challenges seemed to be: streamlining the procurement mechanism, equipping officials with proper training for quality assessment, creating a longer procurement window in line with crop's harvest period, and reducing time between procurement and payment. On the consumer side: while finger millet in south Karnataka and sorghum in north Karnataka form an important part of the household food basket, consumer preferences for different millets require a decentralised procurement and distribution mechanism. Consumer preferences and cultural factors, along with awareness around benefits of consuming millets must be taken into account to have successful inclusion of millets in PDS.

Consumption and dietary trends

Examining dietary transition in India using NSSO household consumption survey data over two

decades Tak et al. (2019) found, diets have not transformed sufficiently to overcome major gaps in intake of micronutrient-rich foods. Although diets have diversified since 1990s, consumption of micronutrient foods remains a dismal low especially in rural areas. Significant proportions of the Indian population were unable to consume fruits, milk, meat, fish/seafood, or egg, and consumption of legumes had stagnated. A situational analysis study on production and consumption of pulses based on secondary data recommends the need for an organised market for pulses, assured procurement, timely decision on import of pulses, also greater R&D on pulse varieties to increase production and availability. States distributing pulses via PDS showed higher consumption of proteins than other states (Rampal 2017). Examining protein consumption through plant and animal sources, it was found that as income increases - consumption of proteins increase; and as prices of pulses increase - consumption of animal source protein increases, thus highlighting the need to contain volatility in pulse prices (Rampal 2018).

Key Suggestions

1. Nutrition sensitive agriculture policies that promote production and availability of nutrient-rich food crops and production diversification to enhance diet diversity
2. PDS should continue, and administrative reforms are necessary to plug gaps in delivery
3. Regionally differentiated policies and strategies, including decentralised procurement and distribution systems, to address heterogeneity in food preferences and improve diets
4. Increased consumer awareness about diverse diet and non-cereal agriculture products with particular effort to improve fruit, vegetable, and meat intake

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