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National Human Rights Commission

Minutes of the meeting of the Core Group on Right to Food held on 19th March, 2024

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) convened a core group meeting on the Right to food was held on 19th March 2024 at Manav Adhikar Bhawan in hybrid mode. The esteemed Member, **Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani**, presided over the meeting. The list of participants is enclosed at **Annexure-I**

Shri Devendra Kumar Nim, Joint Secretary, NHRC, welcomed all the participants. In his welcome address, he introduced the participants about the gravity of the issue and re-affirms our responsibility surrounding food security and nutrition in our nation. He laid down the agenda of the meeting based on four technical sessions.

Dr. Dnyaneshwar M. Mulay, Hon'ble Member, NHRC, initiated the core group meeting to align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1 and 2), emphasizing the Indian Government's initiatives and the challenges in policy implementation. He highlighted the difficulty of ensuring everyone is fed through government programs, citing issues with distribution, vested interests, and the struggle to provide quality meals. These challenges are particularly significant for tribal populations and migrant workers. Based on recent research, he stressed the need to identify and address these gaps. He encouraged panelists to contribute suggestions and feedback via email to the NHRC for further policy development and implementation.

Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Hon'ble Member, NHRC, in her opening speech, emphasized the importance of 'Universal Anna Suraksha' (Food Security) and the critical role of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in providing food security to over 80 crore individuals. She particularly focused on the nutritional needs of vulnerable groups like expectant and lactating mothers, and children. She also highlighted the 'Swarnim Shishu Avastha' (Golden Childhood Phase), the crucial first 1000 days for optimal growth. She pointed out the flaws in the PDS, including leakage and diversion of food grains, and advocated for a comprehensive approach to tackle these issues. She also mentioned the One Nation One Ration Card Scheme and the National Human Rights Commission's role in protecting the rights of vulnerable groups. She emphasized the NHRC's advisory on strengthening the PDS and ensuring access to nutritious food for all children.

Her speech concluded with a call for shared responsibility to ensure the PDS's effectiveness, integrity, and transparency, and a pledge to collaborative efforts towards 'Anna Swarajya' (food self-sufficiency) and the fight against hunger and malnutrition.

Session 1- Presentation/Address by Government Representatives

Shri Ravi Shankar, Joint Secretary, D/o F&PD, presented on India's Public Distribution System (PDS), emphasizing its alignment with the Right to Food, the National Food Security Act, and the SDGs. He highlighted the coverage of over 80 Crore beneficiaries, the allocation of food grains, and the implementation of the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) for portability. He also discussed the efforts to improve nutrition through rice fortification and the strategies to address malnutrition. The ONORC initiative was described as a technology-

driven innovation enabling beneficiaries to claim food grains from any Fair Price Shop. The presentation also outlined the grievance redressal mechanism for the PDS under the National Food Security Act. In the whole presentation he refuted the claim of widespread pilferage of food grains from the PDS.

Ms. Jyotika, Deputy Secretary, (Saksham Anganwadi & Mission Poshan 2.0 (Anganwadi Services & SAG), Ministry of Women and Child Development in her address discussed the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, now known as Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0. This initiative had been implementing a wheat-based nutrition programme for adolescent girls and combined three measures aimed at improving nutrition levels. The Department of Food and Public Distribution had ensured the timely allocation of food grains each financial year. For the year 2023-24, the estimated allocation had included 10,000 metric tons of wheat and 1,100,000 metric tons of rice.

She highlighted that to address potential leakages; measures such as SMS tracking and the Poshan Helpline are being implemented. All 14 Lakh Anganwadi centers are connected through the Poshan Tracker. Streamlined guidelines for the distribution of Supplementary Nutrition Programs (SNP) have been issued, involving various committees in the distribution and delivery system. The ministry is also considering revisions to the nutrition norms.

Smt. Deepa Anand, Deputy Secretary (MDM), Ministry of Education, discussed the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, which covers about 12 Crore children in 10.84 Lakh schools. The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) program addresses hunger and nutrition. The 'School Nutrition Garden' is operational in over 4 Lakh schools. The ministry provides fortified rice to school children and recommends fortified oil and grains in the MDM. She informs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), regular health check-ups, Iron & Folic Acid medicines, and de-worming exercises are conducted. The provision of Shri Anna advises incorporating Millets into at least one meal per day. Aspirational districts with high anemia prevalence are provided with special items like eggs.

On the technical front, she highlighted the Automated Monitoring System, Management Information System (MIS), and Joint Review Meeting deployed by the Ministry of Education to maintain the effectiveness of the scheme.

Dr. N. Arlappa, Scientist 'G', National Institute of Nutrition presented on dietary patterns and nutrient intake in India, focusing on tribal, rural, and urban populations. He highlighted the challenges in addressing these issues, emphasizing the need for strategies to combat malnutrition and hidden hunger. He noted that the Indian government has taken steps to improve nutrition through the National Nutrition Policy and the National Food Security Act of 2013. He pointed out major challenges such as India's ranking in the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Global Hunger Index, the triple burden of malnutrition, large regional disparities in malnutrition distribution, and the slow decline in under-nutrition prevalence.

Dr. Arlappa also discussed the prevalence of hidden hunger due to multiple micronutrient deficiencies and the challenges related to dietary patterns, including inadequate diets, poor dietary diversity, and low intake of essential food groups. Lastly, he emphasized the need for comprehensive strategies to address these issues, including increasing dietary diversity, supplementation, food fortification, and global public health and disease control measures.

Session 2- Effectiveness of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in addressing nutritional needs of specific vulnerable groups and tackling the problem of double burden of nutrition (i.e. pregnant women, lactating mothers, children)

Dr. Vandana Prasad, Community Pediatrician and Public Health Expert, Public Health Resource Network presented on topic ‘Technical and field experience-based course corrections POSHAN 2.0 and ICDS mostly in tribal areas’. Her team reviewed the POSHAN Tracker mobile application, used by Anganwadi Workers (AWW) for tracking children under the age of 5 years to monitor the growth aspect of the application and further recommended several issues raised to the Niti Aayog.

Follow-up assessments from January 2023 to February 2024 revealed several improvements at Anganwadi centers, including faster application processing, resolved data submission issues, enhanced offline functionality, and displaying children's ages accurately. However, significant issues persist, such as the lack of arrangements for growth monitoring, challenges with height measurements, and the inability to assess stunting, wasting, and underweight. Other concerns include the inability to link a third child with Aadhaar, using data upload dates for anthropometry, and widespread data manipulation due to targets. Nutrition-specific recommendations include implementing CMAM guidelines, improving data management, and focusing on supervised feeding. Key dietary diversity issues remain, such as the absence of eggs and challenges in promoting natural farming and nutrition-sensitive agriculture, including micronutrient depletion and pesticide use. Urgent action is needed to protect children with sickle cell anemia and thalassemia, amid rising blood transfusion needs.

Ms. Dipa Sinha, Assistant Professor, Ambedkar University, delivered a comprehensive address regarding the Public Distribution System (PDS) and its role in ensuring dietary diversity. The speech addressed key issues in the PDS system. Firstly, outdated population figures hinder coverage, proposing the use of projected figures to include more individuals, aligning with the National Food Security Act. Secondly, shortcomings in grievance redressal were highlighted, emphasizing the need for better implementation of essential provisions like social audits. Thirdly, to improve dietary diversity, the proposal included adding pulses and oils to the PDS, addressing protein and fat deficiencies. Fourthly, insufficient data collection on dietary diversity was noted, necessitating a dedicated system for comprehensive data collection. Finally, concerns over declining real-term budgets for essential programs like PDS and ICDS were raised, emphasizing the need for inflation-adjusted budgets to ensure effective service delivery.

In conclusion, the speech outlined challenges and solutions for enhancing the PDS's role in promoting dietary diversity and food security. Recommendations included updating population figures, improving grievance redressal, adding essential food items, enhancing data collection, and securing adequate budgets. Implementing these measures can transform the PDS into a more effective tool for promoting healthy eating habits and ensuring food security for all.

Dr. Shweta Khandelwal, Senior Advisor, Nutrition, Jhpiego India addressed the major challenge of the global prevalence of under-nutrition and over-nutrition, the dual burden of malnutrition (DBM), and its impact on parent-child pairs.

Her presentation underscored India's high prevalence of childhood stunting, wasting, and overweight, surpassing global averages. It noted a rise in Double Burden Malnutrition (DBM), affecting 1 in 4 households, with a faster increase in rural and poor households compared to urban and wealthy ones.

The presentation emphasized major recommendations to combat the global prevalence of under-nutrition and over-nutrition, particularly focusing on the Double Burden of Malnutrition (DBM). Key actions include creating environments conducive to healthy behaviors across the lifespan, implementing multi-sectoral approaches targeting rural and impoverished communities, and prioritizing the preconception period and the first 1,000 days of life. Additionally, improving data collection and awareness to promote locally available nutritious foods was underscored as essential for addressing the DBM effectively.

Dr. Mamoni Das, Dean, Assam Agricultural University started her presentation on the need to re-imagine the nutritional benefits of the Public Distribution System (PDS). The speaker highlighted that the primary goal of the PDS was to provide food and non-food items to the country's population to combat hunger, malnutrition, anemia, and other challenges faced by disadvantaged groups, including women and children.

The speaker questioned the necessity of the PDS despite its wide reach, aiming to address food and nutritional security. Issues plaguing the PDS include inadequate coverage, inefficient distribution, poor food grain quality, corruption, and improper target group identification. India also faces significant malnutrition challenges, with high rates of anemia and 45% of children under 5 chronically malnourished. Studies indicated positive impacts of PDS subsidies on dietary diversity and household consumption, but the speaker emphasized the need to address existing issues within the system.

Dr. Richa Kumar, Associate Professor, IIT Delhi addressed the forum about the five major challenges on topic '**The need for diverse nutritious food in the PDS to combat the triple burden of malnutrition (under-nutrition, obesity and micronutrient deficiencies)**'. She highlighted the importance of diversifying the Public Distribution System (PDS) beyond staple grains like rice and wheat, which were the focus of the Green Revolution.

The speaker emphasized shifting from highly processed diet grains to traditional oilseeds and jaggery for improved nutrient intake. She advocated for regional food diversity and collaboration with institutions like ICAR to promote natural farming. Additionally, she also highlighted the need to limit ultra-processed foods around schools and suggested providing fresh fruits and vegetables alongside fortified rice in the PDS to address nutritional deficiencies.

Session III- Corruption and leakage of food grains- implementation, issues and challenges

Dr R. Gopinath, Principle Scientist, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation

No Inputs

Ms. Vandana Singh, CEO, India Food Banking Network expressed pride in the Public Distribution System (PDS), acknowledging it as the world's largest food distribution system. She noted the various improvements made to address deficiencies in the system and emphasized the need for integration of data and experiences from various organizations, research institutions, and community-based organizations. She emphasized the need for credible data on nutrition and

food wastage to achieve system objectives, noting discrepancies in existing data. Highlighting issues of exclusion, she addressed the lack of ration cards for many individuals at the ground level. Additionally, she discussed protein deficiency and advocated for including lentils in the PDS, as well as addressing affordability issues surrounding the lack of fruits and vegetables in people's diets.

She concluded by emphasizing the need for continuous collaboration and integration of data on nutrition, protein, fruits, and vegetables to address under-nutrition.

Shri Siraj Hussain, Independent consultant, FICCI acknowledged issues with the items distributed in the Public Distribution System (PDS). He highlighted PDS leakage and questioned the continuation of physical food grain distribution. He advocated for a nutritional security vision by 2030 and 2047 and proposed reducing PDS beneficiaries by 2030. He suggested nutritional security solutions like providing eggs, vegetables, and millets in states with high government procurement.

He concluded by suggesting that states can be divided into categories based on their needs for physical distribution or Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). He stressed the need for choice in the PDS and proposed cash transfers instead of food in states with strong banking infrastructure and literacy levels. He concluded by advocating for policy reviews every five years.

Ms. Reshmi Dasgupta, Columnist, the Economic Times in her presentation focused on the challenges faced by beneficiaries in accessing benefits of PDS schemes in India, particularly the impact of corruption on the distribution system. India boasts the world's largest PDS operations, serving 80 crore beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act. However, corruption threatens this commitment, affecting ration cards, grain prices, and distribution services. Challenges highlighted include corruption hindering access, lack of inclusion, and local nexuses impeding efforts to plug leakages, as seen in recent incidents in West Bengal.

She provided recommendations which includes improving digital infrastructure accessibility, raising awareness, ensuring vigilance, and strengthening measures like Aadhaar linkage. NHRC's involvement in addressing PDS complaint redressal is advised. Action items involve reviewing digital infrastructure, launching an awareness campaign, coordinating with state authorities, and exploring additional monitoring avenues like social media and telephonic helplines.

Shri N. Venkateswaran, CEO, NABL in his address on Understanding the Quality Management of the PDS in India appraised the forum with initiatives such as the Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) and the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) being launched to strengthen and streamline the system. He highlighted the shared responsibility between Central and State Governments in the PDS, with the former procuring and selling food grains and the latter handling transportation and subsidization. Quality management spans procurement to distribution, overseen by Quality Control Cells (QCCs) conducting surprise checks. NABL accredited testing labs to ensure food grain safety, monitoring parameters like pesticide residue. Challenges include ensuring food grain quality amidst chemical and biological hazards and addressing quality management discrepancies.

His recommendations include strengthening the role of Quality Control Cells (QCCs) through more frequent surprise checks, implementing stricter monitoring for pesticides residue and mycotoxin contamination, enhancing coordination between Central and State Governments, and

augmenting NABL's role in accreditation testing laboratories to ensure food grain quality and safety.

Session IV- One Nation One Ration Card Scheme (ONORC): Implementation, challenges and Solutions)

Dr. Monalisha Sahu, Associate Professor, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health in her presentation discussed the challenges in implementing the Public Distribution System (PDS) and One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC). She highlighted issues such as lack of awareness among beneficiaries, exclusion errors due to digitization, incomplete Aadhaar linkage, and excessive reliance on IT. She also pointed out that the full operationalization of ONORC could disrupt the monthly quota of products received by Fair Price Shops (FPSs). Based on these challenges, she provided recommendations to improve awareness, reduce exclusion errors, ensure complete Aadhaar linkage, and mitigate technological challenges for the effective implementation of ONORC.

Dr. Alok Kumar Srivastava, Chairman, BIS FAD 28, discussed the implementation, challenges, and solutions related to food and nutrition security in India. He highlighted the significant projected population growth, the increasing gap between this growth and declining farming land, and the challenges related to the One Nation One Ration Card initiative. His recommendations included shifting to nutrient-dense foods in community nutrition programs, establishing cooperative community-based food processing centers, incorporating diverse menu options in community-based food programs, and leveraging cost-effective and nutrient-dense food formulations developed at various R&D institutions. He also suggested strengthening horticultural kitchen gardens in Anganwadi and schools and networking these centers for quality assurance, packaging, branding, and marketing different food products.

Dr. Sridevi Annapurna Singh, Director, CSIR-CFTRI suggested using coupons linked to ration and Aadhaar cards for purchasing nutritious food from supermarkets, eliminating procurement, storage, and transport issues. She proposed meal plans based on age and health status to ensure nutritional intake and diversity. She emphasized the importance of food processing, suggesting modern methods for preparing foods for self-help groups. She highlighted the impact of processing on foods like millets and stressed the need for scientific solutions and education for better nutritional security.

Presentation/Address by Special Invitee

Dr. B. Dinesh Kumar, Vice-President- Nutrition Society of India discussed the impact of natural disasters on food production and the role of technology in agriculture. He highlighted challenges in food distribution, including malpractices and the sale of poor-quality grains. He also pointed out the limited variety of plant species contributing to human caloric needs as a challenge in increasing food production.

His recommendations included emphasizing technological advancements in agriculture, reforming the public distribution system, and encouraging agricultural diversity. He concluded by stressing the need for collaboration and data integration on nutrition, protein, fruits, and vegetables to address undernutrition.

Dr. Penna Krishna Prasanthi, Senior Consultant Physician, Harshitha Hospital acknowledged the One Nation One Ration Card Scheme in the Public Distribution System (PDS). She noted the challenges faced by poor urban migrants and people Below Poverty Line in urban slums in becoming beneficiaries. She also highlighted the issues of inadequate quantity and quality of food grains in the PDS.

She proposed reforms such as mandatory Aadhaar Card linkage with special consideration for vulnerable groups, inclusion of cancer and dialysis patients in the targeted Public Distribution System, and increased nutrition requirement for special category people. She emphasized the need for capacity building and regular training for officials in the PDS, changes in commodities for specific communities, coordination with the ministry of education to decrease obesity, promoting kitchen gardens in schools, and ensuring edible oils quality. She acknowledged the efforts of the Government of India in ensuring food security through the PDS.

Dr. Rama Devi Ananthram, Consultant, LV Prasad Eye Institute emphasized the importance of nutritious food and community empowerment, and introduced the concept of a mothers' committee for hygienic food provision. She recommended distributing nutritious food like Khichdi, Pongal, and Idli to children, and suggested introducing various food combinations through the Public Distribution System. She proposed the cultivation and fortification of cereals, pulses, and millets, and the introduction of a product called 'Kanchi'. She highlighted challenges in introducing a nutritious meal to her patients and emphasized the need for control and food combinations. She concluded by emphasizing the need for community support and resources.

Shri Devendra Kumar Nim, Joint Secretary, NHRC thanked all the participants for the valuable inputs, and opened the house for a question and answer session.

Shri Devendra Kumar Nim, Joint Secretary, NHRC concluded the session while highlighting the need of Tasty, Nutritious and Healthy food.

Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Hon'ble Member, NHRC in her concluding remarks stated PDS is not just a program, but is a *Jeevanrekha* (lifeline) for millions. It is our collective *Dharma* (duty) to ensure its effectiveness, integrity, and transparency. Through collaborative efforts and renewed purpose, we can strive towards a future where *Anna Swarajya* (food self-sufficiency) is a reality, and the PDS becomes a beacon of hope in the fight against hunger and malnutrition.

The core-group meeting ended with a vote of thanks proposed by **Lt. Colonel Virender Singh, Director, NHRC**.

List of Participants

Core-Group Members, Ex-Officio Representative and Special Invitee

1. Shri Ravi Shankar, Joint Secretary, Department of Food & Public Distribution (D/o F&PD)
2. Ms. Jyotika, Deputy Secretary, (Saksham Anganwadi & Mission Poshan 2.0 (Anganwadi Services & SAG), Ministry of Women and Child Development
3. Smt. Deepa Anand, Deputy Secretary (MDM), Ministry of Education
4. Dr. N. Arlappa, Scientist 'G', National Institute of Nutrition
5. Dr. Vandana Prasad, Community Pediatrician and Public Health Expert, Public Health Resource Network
6. Ms. Dipa Sinha, Assistant Professor, Ambedkar University
7. Dr. Shweta Khandelwal, Senior Advisor, Nutrition, Jhpiego India
8. Dr. Mamoni Das, Dean, Assam Agricultural University
9. Dr. Richa Kumar, Associate Professor, IIT Delhi
10. Dr R. Gopinath, Principle Scientist, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation
11. Ms. Vandana Singh, CEO, India Food Banking Network
12. Shri Siraj Hussain, Independent consultant, FICCI
13. Ms. Reshmi Dasgupta, Columnist, the Economic Times
14. Shri N. Venkateswaran, CEO, NABL
15. Dr. Monalisha Sahu, Associate Professor, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health
16. Dr. Alok Kumar Srivastava, Chairman, BIS FAD 28
17. Dr. Sridevi Annapurna Singh, Director, CSIR-CFTRI
18. Dr. B. Dinesh Kumar, Vice-President- Nutrition Society of India
19. Dr. Penna Krishna Prasanthi, Senior Consultant Physician, Harshitha Hospital
20. Dr. Rama Devi Ananthram, Consultant, LV Prasad Eye Institute

NHRC Officials/Staff

1. Smt. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Hon'ble Member, NHRC (Chair)
2. Dr. Dnyaneshwar M. Mulay, Hon'ble Member, NHRC (Co-Chair)
3. Shri Ajay Bhatnagar, Director General (Investigation), NHRC
4. Shri Devendra Kumar Nim, Joint Secretary, NHRC
5. Lt. Colonel Virender Singh, Director, NHRC
6. Dr. Kanaklata Yadav, Research Consultant, NHRC
7. Mr. Abhishek Kumar Sharma, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC
8. Ms. Avani Verma, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC
9. Ms. Manisha Majumdar, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC
10. Ms. Arpita Sinha, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC
11. Ms. Niharika Sharma, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC
12. Mr. Raghawendra Singh, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC