

Community-Based Monitoring to Ensure Right to Food in Odisha

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The right to food became a legal entitlement when Parliament passed the National Food Security Act (NFSA)¹ in September 2013. It was due to be implemented with effect from July 5, 2014. Odisha, one of Oxfam's focus states, missed the deadline. The state government estimates that nearly 3.1 crore people are likely to be benefited once the Act is enforced in the state; the state has set a deadline for July 2015².

The 2014 Global Hunger Index (GHI), released by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), showed improvement in levels of hunger among children in India over the past decade — underweight estimates³ of children (below the age of five) declined to 30.7 per cent⁴ from 43.5 per cent⁵. The report gave credit to the right to food schemes — Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Public Distribution System (PDS), rural employment programme and implementation of National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).

India is now ranked 120 in GHI as against 128 in the last report released in 2005. While no longer in the 'alarming' category, India continues to be in the 'serious' category — India, according to the report, has the largest number of chronically malnourished and stunted children under five⁶.

Odisha has high prevalence of severe malnutrition among children, mothers and elderly⁷ — 62 per cent women suffer from anaemia against the national average of 55.3

per cent while 65 per cent children remain anaemic and suffer from chronic energy deficiency⁸. Odisha has had a history of malnutrition and starvation deaths and yet, the government remains in a state of denial. In 2012, the government announced there were no starvation deaths in Odisha in the last four years⁹ while there had been reports of 50 chronic hunger deaths between September and December 2009 from Balangir district¹⁰.

Several fact-finding reports reveal irregularities and corruption— many ICDS centres are closed or understaffed, food supplied under Mid Day Meal (MDM) scheme have led to incidents of food poisoning, payments to schools and *anganwadis*¹¹ are pending for almost over a year and cases of inadequate quantities supplied through PDS have also surfaced¹². The statutory backing that NFSA lends could help rid the schemes of its drawbacks. Though there are demands for better supplementary nutrition and wider food basket for PDS, Oxfam believes that empowering the community to demand, access and monitor the scheme is most critical.

To take forward its objective of food justice and linking community based initiatives to macro level policy work Oxfam supports Right To Food (RTF) Campaign Odisha¹³ in 10 districts through Antodaya, a Kalahandi based non-profit organisation.

RIGHT TO FOOD SCHEMES TO NFSA 2013*

| 1940s | 1975 | 1995 | 1995 | 1997 | 2000 | 2001 | 2013 |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|---|--|
| PDS | ICDS | MDM | NMBS & NOAPS | TPDS | AAY | PUCL VS UNION OF INDIA | NFSA |
| Launched as a universal entitlement scheme | Launched to improve nutritional status of children between 0-6 years | Launched as National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) | Launched for benefit of pregnant women and senior citizens (above 60 years) from BPL households | Public Distribution System targeted to only BPL households | Launched as a scheme for 'poorest of the poor' | Supreme Court contends 'right to food' is a fundamental right | Act provides legal right to food to poor |

* Please refer to end note 14

ODISHA'S VILLAGE VOLUNTEERS

In September 2013, Antodaya (one of the organisations representing the RTF Campaign Odisha) filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Wheat that was meant for the *anganwadi* centre was dumped at the Bhawanipatna block office in Kalahandi district. In September, the district magistrate (DM) was asked to produce an enquiry report within eight weeks regarding the incident. The DM produced an Action Taken Report (ATR) following which the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) was suspended.

The *anganwadi* centre in Mohangiri village in Kalahandi (Nakrundi gram panchayat) was discontinued for two years between 2010 and 2012. The village volunteers filed a query under the Right to Information (RTI). For fear of being exposed, the officials immediately reinstated a *sevika* (*anganwadi* workers). "They replied to the RTIs after the *sevika* was appointed. In any case, our work was done," says Pradhan. The new appointee Pankajini Bagh revealed that though she was appointed in November 2013, she had not received payment since January 2014 and she had been taking loans to feed the children. The volunteers then filed an RTI and were planning to follow up with the CDPO. The complaint was filed by village volunteers trained by the RTF Campaign Odisha.

Oxfam, through the Campaign, is working on developing a strong village level organisation and training them to participate in the development process. The Campaign is independent of the office of the Supreme Court's Commissioner on the Right to Food Case. While the SC's

Commissioner on RTF works closely with the government, and generates evidence from the field to strengthen implementation of food schemes, the RTF Campaign Odisha keeps a tab on the government, schemes and service providers.

The Odisha model of community-based monitoring (CBM) is based on village volunteers trained to monitor the schemes in their villages, file queries under RTI, file complaints and then follow up with government officers. The panchayats in Odisha are not vested with any powers and can only monitor but not hear grievances. Oxfam is thus building a strong monitoring system through village volunteers who are being trained as vigil groups to monitor the schemes' implementation. They then take cases of non-implementation to quasi-judicial bodies like the national and state human rights commissions for grievance redressal.

"Unlike some states, the panchayat system in Odisha is powerless. Hence, the need to build village level organisations that can act as vigil groups. The RTI is an important tool," points out Pradip Pradhan, state convener, RTF Campaign Odisha.

Pradhan prefers the volunteer system to creating parallel community based monitoring systems. "The in-built community based monitoring systems of the government to monitor PDS, ICDS and MDM are ineffective. So instead of building another system, the volunteers are trained to strengthen the existing system."



Village volunteers of the RTF Campaign Odisha in Nakrundi gram panchayat in Kalahandi; Ravi Narayan Singh (extreme left), block coordinator, Antodaya trains the volunteers in these villages



A primary school at Amthaguda village in Karlapat Wildlife Sanctuary where, on the day of the visit, only 10 eggs were prepared for MDM to feed a class of 20 students. Though gaps remain, the mid day meals, earlier non-existent, have become regular

Pradhan has been an RTI and a RTF activist for over a decade and he has a strong network of RTI activists through the state. Oxfam has been supporting the RTF Campaign through Antodaya since 2013. Volunteers are carefully selected from villages in the project areas; they are not restricted to their village and work across villages.

The Campaign holds meetings, discusses problems, identifies potential volunteers and then trains them. Training includes holding talks with communities and functionaries, recording problems, filing RTI requests, writing complaints and following up with the government.

The responses received through RTI are used to highlight the issue in the media and use them as a basis for filing complaints with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Odisha Human Rights Commission (OHRC) and National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). In cases where they get no response from the RTI requests, the RTF Campaign Odisha approaches the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), a collective of lawyers working on human rights issues in India, to write to these quasi-judicial bodies.

Between March 2013 and August 2014, 64 cases were filed with NHRC, OHRC and NCPCR; these include cases of irregular supply of meals at *anganwadi* and children falling ill after consuming stale meals at school. Usually the quasi-judicial bodies like NHRC, OHRC and NCPCR take cognisance, initiate an enquiry and order ATRs from the district administration. Based on the Report, the NHRC, OHRC and NCPCR issue recommendations.

These recommendations however are not legally binding; it is the government's discretion to accept the recommendations and take action. Disposal of cases is

a rarity; in the last one year, no case has been disposed. These bodies have their limitations as their priorities are very different. "The experience with OHRC has been bitter. They issue directions for ATR, but they rarely follow up. It is a toothless and an ineffective body," states Pradhan. Taking the legal route isn't a feasible option; six cases have been filed in the last one year and hearings have been held for none.

In order to enforce effective implementation of these programme, the RTF Campaign Odisha also uses independent monitoring systems in the form of fact-finding and citizens' monitoring visits to different areas to collect first hand information from people, expose the administrative bottlenecks publicly and engage at appropriate levels for redressal.

The regions covered by the RTF Campaign Odisha are poor and inhabited by Adivasis (like the Porja Kondh) and Dalits. The food schemes, hence, are extremely important to ensure food security for the community. For instance, a few of the villages in Kalahandi, where the Campaign works, are in the Karlapat Wildlife Sanctuary and depend on subsistence farming and forests for their livelihood. The



Village volunteers meet regularly to discuss issues related to food schemes

villages are remote and due to problems of accessibility, the mid day meals, the *anganwadis* and work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) are irregular and inefficient.

For the villagers unaware of the details of the different schemes and Acts, the volunteers are a boon. It helps that the volunteers are from the village and are in tune with the local problems. The volunteers also have to deal with threats and assault. There have been instances of volunteers getting threatened and beaten up by village strongmen and service providers.

A volunteer from Nakrundi gram panchayat, unearthed a huge MGNREGA scam involving the *sarpanch*. He was threatened and beaten up by the husband of the *sarpanch*. Others too have faced similar situations but that has not deterred them. The volunteers' keep the Campaign informed of any threats they receive. The Campaign ensures that FIRs are registered promptly regarding the same.

There are no women volunteers at the moment. It is perhaps these risks associated with RTI that has kept them away. As across the country, RTI activists across the state have been harassed - beaten up, abused, threatened, humiliated in public, slapped with false rape charges, stripped off their jobs and even killed. However, a first step to bring girls in the fold has begun — 16 girls from the Nakrundi gram panchayat have been identified for training.

Volunteers meet at least once a week, discuss problems and follow-up course of action. Due to lack of funds, volunteer training hasn't been as often as the Campaign would have hoped. It was after Oxfam's intervention in 2013 that the network was able to hold two trainings; prior to that in 2012, the volunteers went without any training.

The volunteers are young and motivated; despite an option to go to the neighbouring town to get employment, they

choose to stay and work for the villages. "Even those who go away continue to be associated with the Campaign. And for those who leave the Campaign, new volunteers are trained at regular intervals," says Pradhan.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.prsindia.org/administrator/uploads/general/1388728622--TPDS%20Thematic%20Note.pdf>
- 2 http://www.odisha.gov.in/samachar/2014/Jul/data/05-07-2014/newspuspa_050714E.pdf
- 3 The latest figures are provisional
- 4 The survey by the ministry of women and child development with support from UNICEF in 2013-14 is yet to be made public. The government too hasn't accepted these numbers yet.
- 5 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) -3 (2005-06) DATA
- 6 Bera Sayantan, India Improves Its Hunger Record, Mint— Tuesday, October 14, 2014
- 7 http://www.odisha.gov.in/pc/Download/Economic_Survey_2013-14.pdf
- 8 http://www.odisha.gov.in/pc/Download/Economic_Survey_2013-14.pdf
- 9 http://www.telegraphindia.com/1121208/jsp/odisha/story_16288114.jsp#.Vqali0dsSfQ; as viewed on March 16, 2015
- 10 <http://indiatgether.org/balangir-poverty>; as viewed on March 16, 2015
- 11 *Anganwadi* centre is a government sponsored child-care and mother-care center as part of the oldest centrally sponsored scheme in India. It caters to children in the 0-6 age group. The word means "courtyard shelter" in Hindi. They were started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services program to combat child hunger and malnutrition.
- 12 Report on Monitoring of Food Security Programme through Fact-finding Visits in Odisha- Right To Food Campaign, Odisha; published March 2015
- 13 Right To Food (RTF) Campaign Odisha is independent of the Right To Food Campaign which is an informal national network of organisations working on the issue of right to food. The former is a network of 10 NGOs across the state and is independent of the SC Commissioners office on right to food.
- 14 PDS- Public Distribution System; ICDS- Integrated Child Development Services; MDM- Mid Day Meal; NMBS- National Maternity Benefit Scheme; NOAPS- National Old Age Pension Scheme; TPDS- Targetted Public Distribution System; AAY- Antyodaya Anna Yojana; PUCL- People's Union for Civil Liberties

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