Pandemic Lessons
Delhi's Quest to Universalise Food Security

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How did India's capital of more than 20 million widen its food security net to reach underserved populations during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown? Using publicly available data, government orders and insights from informal settlements, the article discusses the lessons from the Delhi government's food relief efforts on universalising food security benefits.

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As Delhi faced a second deadly wave of the coronavirus pandemic, with a daily positivity rate of 32.7% on the last day of April 2021 in comparison to 6.8% during the last surge (mid-September) 2020, the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) announced an extended lockdown to contain the viral transmission under existing conditions of crumbling health infrastructure and rising death tolls. As yet another season of uncertainty associated with livelihood, housing and food insecurities lurks, scores of migrants, who constitute 42% of Delhi's population, started gathering at the city's bus terminals. Reminiscent of the large-scale exodus of migrants from the city about a year ago, the situation points to deep-rooted spatial exclusions and socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by urban migrants. Even as the second wave's effects on healthcare systems are visible and far-reaching, we might anticipate likely, less visible implications on food availability and distribution for underserved populations.

When the lockdown was announced in March 2020, Delhi and other cities across the country responded to the short-term needs of migrants and other vulnerable populations. The GNCTD's food relief efforts during last year's lockdown are one such intervention, which offer valuable lessons for universalisation of food security benefits, beyond the location-specific and group-wise targeted coverage of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. The Delhi government's food relief approach was also instructive as it traversed through the unique complexities of urban spatial informalities, and supply chain issues that are not usually envisaged in a food security architecture that has a higher coverage in rural areas (75% of population) compared to urban areas (50% of population) (NFSA 2013). A survey of 4,000 households across 11 states conducted by "Hunger Watch" in October 2020 revealed relatively higher coverage of the public distribution system (PDS) in rural areas (56%) as compared to urban areas (27%), indicated by the proportion of NFSA cardholders among survey respondents (Narayanan and Sinha 2020).

Food Security Architecture

As is well known, a targeted, subsidised food security system exists in India through which "eligible" households can access uncooked food supplies ("ration") monthly at subsidised prices through a ration card. The ration card specifies the fair price shop (FPS), more colloquially known as a ration shop, from where supplies can be accessed. Formerly, households were classified as below poverty line (BPL) and above poverty line (APL) households for the identification of beneficiaries and distribution of benefits under the targeted public distribution system (TPDS). The NFSA, 2013 reclassified households as priority households and the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households. Priority households (formerly BPL households) are entitled to receive five kilogram (kg) of foodgrains per person per month at subsidised prices, while AAY households (who are the poorest of the poor) are entitled to receive 35 kg of foodgrains per household per month at subsidised prices (NFSA 2013; see also Nayak 2019).

However, this targeting is subject to exclusions, which we broadly categorise as location-based exclusions and eligibility-based exclusions. Administratively, beneficiary lists are prepared at the state level and linked to the FPS in proximity to the location of residence of the household. These beneficiary lists also form the basis of foodgrain allocations by the union government to the states under the NFSA. Barring some pilot schemes, benefits under the NFSA are not typically portable, rendering both interstate and intra-state migrants locationally disadvantageous (GOI 2017: 29–30). To avail benefits, they need to obtain a ration card issued by the state in which they reside and from the

respective zonal office. Obtaining a ration card requires identity documents that can serve as a proof of residential address which are not easy to furnish. For example, migrant renters are often unable to submit proof of residence due to resistance on part of houseowners/landlords to provide access to an electricity bill. Not only migrants, but residents in the same city can be disadvantaged when they have to move locations (either willingly or forcefully). In Delhi's resettlement colonies for instance, residents evicted to marginal sites have had to struggle to claim benefits under the NFSA (including cancellation of their previous cards) (Kattakayam 2012). Such location based exclusions are interlinked with eligibility-based exclusions that arise when either (i) households do not manage to obtain a state-issued ration card and are thus, ineligible for ration, or (ii) households do not find themselves on the relevant state-level/zonal level targeted beneficiary lists despite managing to procure a ration card. This can also be attributed to non-updation of data used to prepare these targeted beneficiary lists under the NFSA, such as the lists of priority households or AAY households.

Food Relief Efforts

Sequence of universalisation: How did India's capital city with a projected population of 21 million address food requirements amidst one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world? Four avenues can be identified, which taken together aimed to reach out to more than 50% of the city's population. First, free-of-cost regular allocation of foodgrains were to be provided to those who were already covered under the NFSA, that is, those who had functioning ration cards. Further, additional foodgrains allocation was also to be provided to these ration card holders free of cost under the Government of India's Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY).[1] At that time, there were 7.273 million beneficiaries[2] under the NFSA in Delhi who could access these regular and additional allocations through FPS (ration shops) assigned to them. These allocations aimed to cover about 34.63% of Delhi's population. This

Figure 1: Universalising Food Security in Delhi during Lockdown 2020
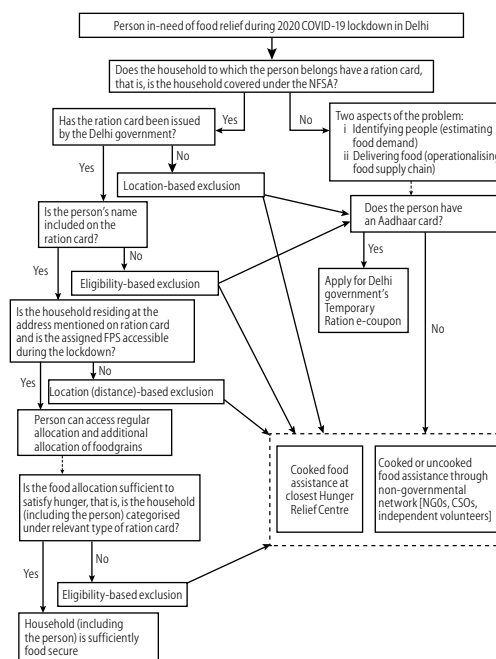
Source: Authors' analysis.

is shown in Figure 1: such persons (and their households) can be said to be sufficiently food-secure during the lockdown. Second, possibly on realising the limited extant coverage of the NFSA, the Government of India (GOI) introduced Atma Nirbhar Bharat Yojana for foodgrains in mid-May 2020.[3] Through this, GOI aimed to provide foodgrains to an additional 0.7273 million beneficiaries in Delhi, that is, potentially covering another 3.46% of Delhi's population. Third, the GNCTD initiated the Mukhya Mantri Corona Sahayata Yojana (MMCSY), which aimed to distribute foodgrains in the form of temporary ration to 3 million "non-PDS beneficiaries" (that is, 14.27% of Delhi's population) through e-coupons.[4] As Figure 1 shows, this scheme served to cover households disadvantaged both due to location-based and eligibility-based exclusions. In addition to foodgrains, each household was also to receive an essentials kit, similar to what was distributed to households with a ration card under the MMCSY.[5] A resident of Delhi who wanted to apply for the temporary ration food assistance needed to upload their Aadhaar card (which did not need a Delhi address[6]) as part of the application process and enter other details such as contact number and address. Fourth, the GNCTD recognised

that there were people in need of food assistance who did not have Aadhaar cards and planned to provide them foodgrains and essentials kits through emergency food relief (printed) coupons distributed through the elected members of Parliament and legislative assembly in Delhi (2,000 beneficiaries per elected representative and 20,000 through the Delhi's Minister for Food and Civil Supplies);[7] this initiative aimed to reach 0.174 million people, potentially covering another 0.83% of Delhi's population.

Significantly, in addition to foodgrain relief, the GNCTD organised distribution of cooked food through hunger relief centres (HRCs). This food was available at nearly 2,000 points of distribution across the city and was universal in that anyone in need of cooked food could queue up and access it, subject to availability. At present, a little over 200 HRCs are operational at different points in the city.[8] Like the temporary e-coupon scheme, this serves to cover persons and/or households that are excluded on the basis of location and eligibility (Figure 1).

Spatial and temporal variations: The additional allocations beyond the NFSA, which were put forth by GNCTD as an emergency measure, saw temporal and spatial variations. In terms of cooked daytime meals, the GNCTD organised a daily average of 0.367 million meals (from end-March to early-August 2020), with a maximum single-day capacity of 0.92 million meals during the daytime of 3 May 2020.

The three maps (Figures 2a, 2b, 2c, p 14) highlight important aspects with regard to the spatial distribution of cooked meals over lockdown and normal phases in Delhi. The first one (Figure 2a) shows the distribution of average daily daytime meals across the 11 districts of Delhi, where the highest coverage is observed in South Delhi and South West Delhi districts, and relatively high coverage (although in lesser amount) is seen in North West Delhi, West Delhi and North East Delhi districts. While this distribution is broadly similar to the distribution of impoverished

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Figure 2: Spatial Analysis of the GNCTD's Cooked Meal Distribution over the Entire Lockdown–Unlock Period

Figure 2a: Distribution of Average Day Time Daily Cooked Meals over the Entire Lockdown–Unlock Period

Bottom 25% (<20912)
25%–50% (20912–31776)
50%–75% (31776–47417)
Top 25% (>47417)

Figure 2b: Distribution of Share of Non-hired Workers to Total Workers

<15%
15%–30%
30%–45%
>45%

Figure 2c: Distribution of Average Daytime Daily Cooked Meals to per 1,000 Non-PDS Population (Projected by 2021 Factors)

Bottom 25% (<=18)
25%–50% (19–27)
50%–75% (28–70)
Top 25% (>=71)

Data sources: For cooked meals: http://delhishelterboard.in/occupancy-report/food.php.
Population data is from Census of India 2011 and Census Projections, 2019.
Number of NFSA beneficiaries are taken from NFSA Dashboard: https://nfsa.gov.in/public/nfsadashboard/PublicRCDashboard.aspx and https://nfs.delhi.gov.in/Citisen/HouseWithFS.aspx?type=0.
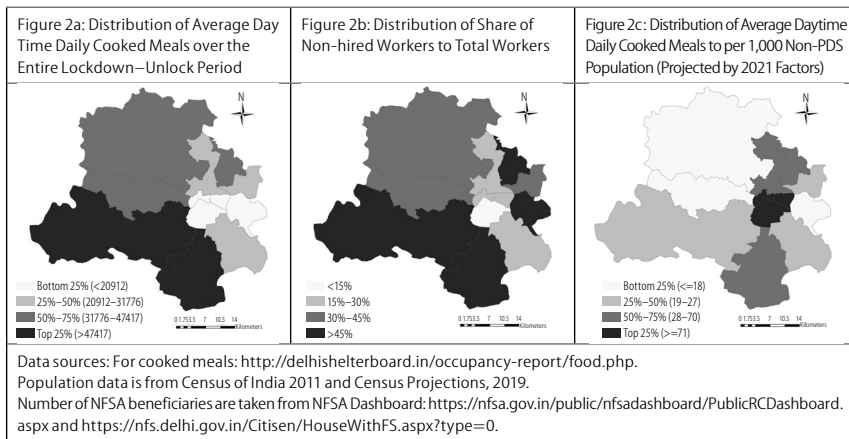
Figure 3a: Daily Average Cooked 'Day' Meals (by Week) Organised during Lockdown by the GNCTD: 24 March to 2 August 2020
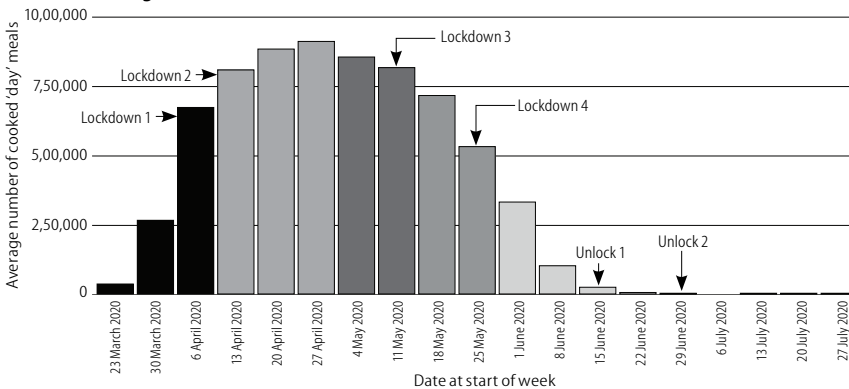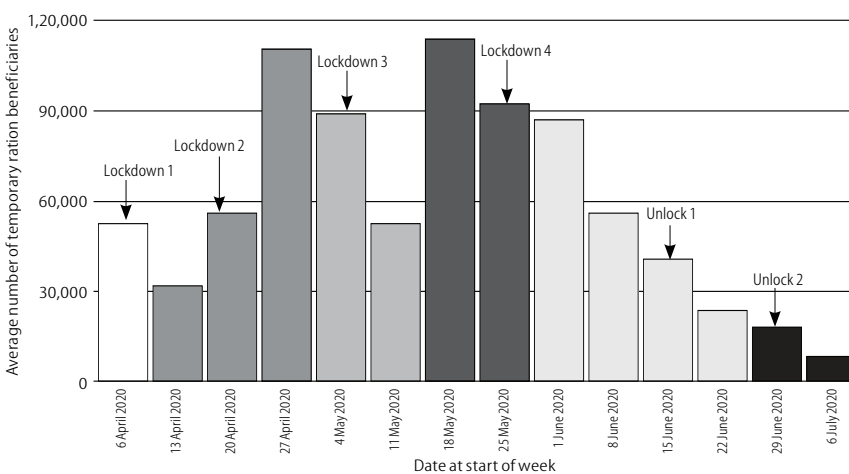

Figure 3b: Daily Average Beneficiaries (by Week) of GNCTD's Temporary Ration e-coupons during Lockdown: 9 April to 10 July 2020

Data sources: For cooked meals: http://delhishelterboard.in/occupancy-report/food.php. For temporary ration: http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/doit_food/Food/Home/COVID19/DAY-WISE+NON+PDS+REPORTS/.

population in Delhi, proxied here by the share of non-hired labourers[9] to total workers (Figure 2b), it falls short in relation to the concentration of such workers in East Delhi and Shahdara districts. However, the share of these average cooked meals to the districtwise population (projected to 2021 using state-level factors) of non-PDS population is meagre across all of Delhi (Figure 2c), and not proportional to the spatial distribution of cooked meals. Even as districts like North West Delhi or West Delhi have higher average number of daily meals served, the magnitude was lowest in relation to the distribution of non-PDS population across these districts. This underscores significant scope to ramp up levels of cooked meal distribution in the relatively impoverished districts.

Temporally, the initial phases of the lockdown saw a marked increase in the cooked food distribution. A steady decline was seen towards the end of the lockdown and during the normal phases, suggesting long-term difficulties in running cooked meal distributions in relation to adaptive demand and supply conditions (Figure 3a).

Through the temporary ration e-coupon scheme, from 9 April 2020 to 10 July 2020, foodgrains (wheat and rice) were distributed to a total of 5.5 million beneficiaries. To understand the number of unique households that received this food assistance, we consider essential kits' distribution, which was limited to one per household. During these months, 7,38,255 unique households received these kits. Assuming an average of five members per household, we arrive at an estimated total of about 3.7 million unique beneficiaries, against a targeted outreach of 3 million. Similar to cooked food distribution, the temporary ration scheme witnessed a decline during the last phase of the lockdown, and the normal phases subsequently (Figure 3b).

Delivering food assistance at-scale was not easy and these efforts ran into operational challenges. Cooked food distribution in several centres could not keep up with increasing demand; on the other hand, there were a few centres where the supply of cooked food was greater than demand, implying that supply was not adjusting to the dynamic, changing demand. While the aggregate coverage and scale of delivery of cooked food was impressive, at the level of certain neighbourhoods—especially those with informal settlements—the coverage was limited. We heard of instances in resettlement colonies where residents waited in queues for hours but, by the time their turn came, they were told that the cooked food was over. Maintaining the quality of cooked food was challenging, especially when the temperatures soar in the weeks of May and June. In the initial weeks, the fear of police violence made people hesitant to walk to access the cooked food. The website for temporary ration e-coupons ran into technical glitches; several applications were either "pending" or "under processing" for weeks.

Notwithstanding operational challenges such as technical glitches, delays in disbursement of e-coupons and demand–supply mismatch at several hunger relief centres, GNCTD's food relief efforts under lockdown 2020 offer lessons that underscore the sheer potential of outreach when the state apparatus is mobilised. These lessons foreground the complexities of universalising food security in urban India.

Lessons for the Present

On 4 May 2021, Delhi's chief minister announced that about 72 lakh (or 7.2 million) ration card holders of Delhi will get two months of free ration (foodgrains) from the Delhi government; he explained that this decision was taken because lockdowns impose huge economic problems for the poor, especially for those who are daily wage labourers. However, less than a minute later, during the same public briefing, he said "agle do maheene ke liye sabko ration muft diya jaayega Dilli sarkar ki taraf se" that is, "for the next two months, everyone will get free ration from the Delhi Government."[10] Many interpreted this to mean that free foodgrains will be available for all, even for those who do not have ration cards. Within a few hours, the web link to apply for the GNCTD's temporary ration through an e-coupon system—which had been used last year—began circulating among people who did not have ration cards. However, when potential applicants were not able to even complete the first step of the application (which involved receiving a one time password [OTP] on the applicant's contact number), they were disappointed and realised that they could not yet apply to avail free ration. This alone demonstrates the sheer desperation of the city's underserved populations to find food security in a situation wherein livelihoods are rendered more precarious under the current lockdown.

A recent order of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) dated 20 April 2021 lays out the vision of the GNTCD "to ensure the welfare of daily wagers and migrants staying in Delhi," including providing them food.[11] As the GNTCD grapples with the challenges of providing for the welfare of underserved populations under continued conditions of the pandemic, it would do well to reflect on lessons from its efforts to universalise food security benefits in 2020.

First, large cities like Delhi pose unique challenges related to portability of food security benefits, where exclusions are common owing to multi-locational livelihood strategies of migrants. Other than benefits being tied to location, outdated data sets and issues relating to proof of identity cause eligibility-based exclusions, especially if the food security architecture is overtly based upon paper-based registrations. The GNCTD's temporary ration e-coupon system managed these complexities as it required a single identity proof, namely Aadhaar. The minimum documentation requirement made this scheme nearly universal and demonstrated remarkable political will to expand service delivery. It relied on potential beneficiaries self-selecting into the scheme, distinguishing it from the strictly targeted nature of the PDS.

Second, data pertaining to district-level cooked food distribution demonstrates that some of the districts with relatively high levels of impoverishment received higher number of cooked meals. Going forward in this wave, the GNCTD might consider intervening and prioritising resources in a similar spatially targeted manner, alongside dynamic data updating to assess how demand for cooked food distribution changes and evolves. However, there is also the need to scale up the distribution of cooked meals in districts wherein the supply was not sufficient in relation to the population not covered under the PDS.

Third, the food relief efforts demonstrated departmental convergence and redeployment of existing physical infrastructure. While cooked food and temporary ration distribution was overseen by the Department of Food and Civil Supplies, the centres were either run from schools administered by the department of education, or from night shelters run by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB). Much like the use of existing infrastructure for food relief, mohalla clinics might be considered as the first points of contact for providing consultations, assessing infection severity, and serving as distribution points for generic medicines under the current dispensation. This might also reduce the existing burden on hospitals and enable healthcare access in spatial proximity. Dynamic and integrated data-sharing processes across departments are key to address ongoing pandemic challenges. Coordination across public and private stakeholders, and civil society organisations is also necessary for smooth functioning.

The GNCTD's efforts to expand food security benefits offer a unique vantage point from which we can look at the universalisation and integration of the structures of social protection, essential to regain the trust of migrants and the urban poor in the city's governance systems. In the specific case of Delhi, governance challenges have arisen on account of the intersection of multiple governments, and the state government (that is, the GNCTD) has often had limited powers (Sheikh and Banda 2015). Despite recent governance changes in Delhi which influence political decision-making, these lessons should not be lost.

NOTES

1 The GNCTD order (dated 21 April 2020), http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/0f676c804e035ffc9879fbd194e333e1/c1172.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-2117589106.
2 As per the data provided in the GoI order (dated 15 May 2020), http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/2bdf57804e8d25e6a09ee3d194e333e1/Allocation%2Bto%2BMigrants.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-1991227734.
3 The GoI order (dated 15 May 2020), http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/2bdf57804e8d25e6a09ee3d194e333e1/Allocation%2Bto%2BMigrants.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-1991227734.
4 The GNCTD order (dated 5 April 2020), http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/906a6c804e05b9e99b9bfbd194e333e1/GuidelinesNonPDS.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-2117972981.
5 The GNCTD order (dated 23 April 2020), http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/93ae09004e1e821380cfe3d194e333e1/Allocation+and+Distribution+of+free+Ration+230420.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod= -2118130335.
6 This was clarified in the "FAQ for Registering for E-Coupon" document that the GNCTD released and which was made available online at http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/8b79a60045fa9017b16ff705b04fca82/FAQ.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-2117700719.
7 The GNCTD orders that detailed this are available at http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/4feof3004e2a8dc88b68ebd194e333e1/MP%26MLA+coupan%27s+letter+4th+May+%281%29.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-2117972981 (dated 4 May 2020); http://fs.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/65d87d804e12dd82b307f3d194e333e1/.Order+Emergency+Relief.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&lmod=-2117972981 (dated 27 April 2020)
8 http://delhishelterboard.in/occupancy-report/food.php, viewed on 16 May 2021.
9 The 6th Economic Census defines "Non-Hired Labourers" as workers who are not formally hired by the firm/entrepreneur and who are not

usually paid by them for providing any form of assistance. This category includes self-employed people like street vendors, unpaid family workers, home-based workers and workers without any form of fixed monetary allowances.

10 The announcement can be, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHXu5tqa_XQ.

11 The DDMA order is available at http://ddma.delhigovt.nic.in/wps/wcm/connect/DOIT_DM/dm/home/covid-19/orders+of+ddma+on+covid+19/order+383.

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