

**POLICY
BRIEF**

Ensuring Access to the Public Distribution System and Food Security

Advancing effective implementation of food-related relief provisions and entitlements for the urban poor through the COVID-19 pandemic

ABSTRACT

This policy brief draws upon the key findings from YUVA's report '[Living with Multiple Vulnerabilities: Impact of COVID-19 on the Urban Poor in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region](#)'. It aims to understand the urban poor's challenges and experiences with the Public Distribution System (PDS) across 10 cities in the Mumbai Metropolitan region and is based on data from:

14,133 households and 4,085 construction workers from 16 construction sites surveyed regarding enrollment in the PDS

172 interviews with women, transwomen, men, youth, children and the elderly living in urban poor communities

BACKGROUND

As stated in the Indian constitution, food is a basic social and economic right. The prevalence of chronic hunger and food insecurity point to a direct violation of human rights. In response to the loss of livelihood due to the pandemic-induced lockdowns, the Government of India introduced the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan for the most severely affected populations during this time. Initially, relief for ration card holders was announced with provisions of free additional supply of food grains to Priority HouseHolds (PHH) under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) and free gas cylinders to women under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana. Against the backdrop of the emergent migrant crisis, the provision for free ration was extended to non-ration card holders as well who had valid Aadhaar cards. When the lockdown began, the Maharashtra government also passed a Government Resolution (GR) to provide subsidised ration for Above Poverty Line (APL) saffron card holders in the state for the months of May and June.

Prior to the pandemic, the urban poor already faced challenges of accessing their food-related entitlements under the Public Distribution System (PDS). These included: a) Eligibility requirements to access a ration card, that often resulted in exclusion b) Procedural impediments and delays in issuance of ration cards c) Lack of awareness regarding entitlements and access barriers amongst ration card holders d) Entitlements linked to the place of origin and slow implementation process of One Nation One Ration (ONOR), resulting in lack of access to the PDS for migrant workers with valid ration cards in the destination state. In the midst of the current crisis where large sections of the urban poor continue to find themselves with no livelihoods to earn money for food, the PDS has emerged as a crucial safeguard that can alleviate their continuing distress. This policy brief captures the key barriers of the urban poor's access to food-related entitlements and provides recommendations to ensure the effective and inclusive implementation of food security measures.

THE CHALLENGE - KEY FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

1. ACCESS TO THE PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM (PDS)

| People with Ration Cards | People without Ration Cards |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Out of 14,133 households, 82.78 per cent of the households surveyed had ration cards and were enrolled in the PDS. Only 45.49 per cent had ration cards registered within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), and among 4,805 households living on 16 construction sites only 10.38 per cent had ration cards registered in the city where they worked. This resulted in a sizeable population of migrant workers with valid ration cards, unable to access the PDS in the MMR due to the delay in implementing the ONOR scheme. Almost 18 per cent reported not having linked their ration card to their Aadhaar card. Barriers of access included the cost of long commutes to ration stores, arbitrary decisions made by shopkeepers about the quantity of ration to be given and the unavailability of sufficient ration, especially at the beginning of the lockdown. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 17.22 per cent respondents reported not having ration cards at all. People who attempted to access ration with an Aadhaar card were impacted by misinformed practices of shopkeepers. <i>'The shopkeeper said that we will give ration only to (ration) card holders; that the people not having a ration card would get something from NGOs. But the government said that we can show our Aadhaar card and get ration'</i> said Sarita from Mumbai's Eastern Suburbs. Accessing ration through the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan relief package was challenging for people who did not possess both an Aadhaar card and ration card. Many transgender women and women-headed households did not have a ration card in their own name. |

| Area | Ration Card holders | Total number of households | Percentage |
|--|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (Island City) | 1,031 | 1,351 | 76.31% |
| Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (Western Suburbs) | 2,165 | 3,233 | 66.97% |
| Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (Eastern Suburbs) | 962 | 1,295 | 74.29% |
| Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation | 4,001 | 4,086 | 97.92% |
| Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation and Panvel Municipal Corporation | 2,710 | 3,263 | 83.05% |
| Thane Municipal Corporation | 61 | 61 | 100% |
| Ulhasnagar Municipal Corporation | 477 | 522 | 91.38% |
| Ambernath Municipal Council | 162 | 163 | 99.39% |
| Kalyan-Dombivali Municipal Corporation | 41 | 50 | 82% |
| Pen Municipal Council | 12 | 12 | 100% |
| Alibaug Municipal Council | 77 | 97 | 79.38% |
| Total | 11,699 | 14,133* | 82.78% |

Percentage of households that have a ration card

*Total number of households where this data was collected, N=14,133

| Sr. no | State in which household ration card is registered | Number of respondents | Percentage |
|--------|--|-----------------------|-------------|
| 1 | No ration card | 2,434 | 17.22% |
| 2 | Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) | 6,429 | 45.49% |
| 3 | Uttar Pradesh | 3,184 | 22.53% |
| 4 | Maharashtra (except MMR) | 1,121 | 7.93% |
| 5 | Bihar | 308 | 2.18% |
| 6 | West Bengal | 242 | 1.71% |
| 7 | Telangana | 68 | 0.48% |
| 8 | Madhya Pradesh | 67 | 0.47% |
| 9 | Jharkhand | 66 | 0.47% |
| 10 | Karnataka | 60 | 0.42% |
| 11 | Punjab | 35 | 0.25% |
| 12 | Gujarat | 25 | 0.18% |
| 13 | Others** | 94 | 0.67% |
| | Total | 14,133 | 100% |

State in which household ration card is registered

*Total number of households where this data was collected, N=14,113

**Others - Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur and Uttarakhand. (Less than 20 respondents in each state)

2. LACK OF AWARENESS AND BARRIERS IN ACCESSING IDENTITY DOCUMENTS

People who did not have Aadhaar cards or had not linked them to their ration cards indicated a lack of knowledge regarding the process, urgency and relevance of such documentation. Large sums of money charged by brokers to procure essential documents also emerged as a barrier in accessing ration cards. 'I tried to get a ration card (in 2015–2016) but they asked for a lot of money and a lot of documents. That time I had not made any proof.

They asked for Aadhaar card, voting card, PAN card. When I finally got all these documents, they asked for INR 15,000–20,000 to make my ration card. That time I told that guy (broker), "Why are you asking for so much money from us poor people?"; said Gauri, a transwomen from Mumbai's Eastern Suburbs. Additionally, bureaucratic delays were also reported by families after submission of required documents.

3. CHILDREN'S INADEQUATE NUTRITION WITHOUT ICDS CENTRES AND MID-DAY MEALS

Additional safety nets, such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres and mid-day meals available in schools, that are integral to meeting the hunger and nutritional needs of children, came to an immediate halt with the announcement of the lockdown. 'There is no money to even buy milk for my child. I am passing days by making him drink sugar

with water. He may even fall sick because of that. But what do I do?' said Latika, a homeless woman in Mumbai's Eastern Suburbs.

11.74 per cent of the total population surveyed were children under the age of 6 and 22.06 per cent between 7–18 years of age. Given their socio-

economic profiles, many of these children depend upon *anganwadis* and schools to access adequate

nutrition. Children themselves expressed their concerns regarding lack of food and unmet desires.

4. INADEQUACY OF RATION PROVIDED

Many families reported surviving on dal-rice, sugar-rice, *rotis* or *khichdi* throughout the lockdown period. 'They only give rice in ration. Where do we get other essential food items from? A household cannot run merely on rice', said Neera, a homeless domestic worker from Mumbai's Western Suburbs.

People were struggling to buy vegetables and other forms of nutritious foods to stay healthy and maintain immunity during the pandemic. 'Forget about green vegetables, we are finding it difficult to even afford onion and potato these days. We eat whatever we have—the same salt and roti. We somehow fill our stomach to be able to sleep', said Ravi, a *naka* worker from Panvel.

5. LIMITED ACCESS TO COOKING FUEL

Of the total households surveyed, only 3.57 per cent are current beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY). With only Below Poverty Line (BPL) families eligible for the PMUY, a majority of the

urban poor still have to pay to access cooking fuel. The cost of cooking fuel and challenges of access further intensify the challenge of food insecurity for the urban poor.

RECOMMENDATIONS

| Recommendations | For the Centre | For the State Government | For the Local Government |
|--|---|--|---|
| 1. Universalise the Public Distribution System (PDS) and provide emergency ration cards | Universalisation of the PDS must be centrally facilitated with states mandated to provide ration to any citizen irrespective of documentation. This will help millions in securing food irrespective of location, documentation or income category. | A Government Resolution (GR) that enables universal access to the PDS through emergency ration cards will ensure no one in the state suffers from hunger. Those without any documentation should be allowed to access emergency ration cards. The list of non-ration card holders who have accessed ration through Aadhaar cards as part of the relief package is now available with ration offices. This data can be used to identify those who can benefit from emergency ration cards. Fast-track processes should be introduced at Fair Price Shops (FPS)/ration shops where emergency ration cards can be issued based on current place of residence. People should be given 12 months to formalise these emergency ration cards with the ration office and link them with the One Nation One Ration (ONOR) plan. | Each FPS should have an area jurisdiction. This will enable fast-track emergency ration card preparation and can curb risk of duplication. FPS shops should be allowed to register individuals, families or groups of migrant workers living together and issue a single emergency ration card for them. Transgender persons, single women, unsupported senior citizens and other vulnerable groups must be given priority. |

| Recommendations | For the Centre | For the State Government | For the Local Government |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>2. Re-assess ration eligibility based on annual incomes—accounting for severe loss in earnings</p> | <p>States should be directed to re-assess income criteria and associated ration eligibility given job losses among informal workers and complete loss of savings.</p> | <p>A Government Resolution (GR) should be passed increasing the income limit for priority households (PHH) ration card holders from INR 59,000 annually to INR 1 lakh annually. All saffron card-holders should be re-categorised in urban areas as PHH. Furthermore, the annual income of several white card-holders, whose income is just above INR 1 lakh annually has taken a hit and a re-assessment of their current annual income is required to ensure ration eligibility. Ration eligibility cannot thus be limited to previously set income categories but respond to the needs of people whose incomes have been severely impacted over months.</p> | |
| <p>3. Enable greater access through functional online portals and awareness of schemes</p> | <p>To digitise the process of ration card issuance, renewal and correction, several online portals have been launched that are still not functional. These online systems need to be made functional to avoid barriers of access such as bureaucratic delays and middle-men. This will also ensure the fast-tracking of the One Nation One Ration (ONOR) scheme.</p> | | <p>The state government has issued a number of Government Resolutions (GRs) with regard to distribution. However, there remain huge communication gaps with no clear information available to those who need rations the most. There must be clear publicly available information on access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) in various languages and through various mediums.</p> <p>Fair Price Shop (FPS) owners must be given training to update their knowledge on new schemes for people's increased access to food-related entitlements. Regular inspections should happen at FPS for ensuring more accountability. There should be awareness of the complaint systems and quick resolutions should happen on complaints.</p> |

| Recommendations | For the Centre | For the State Government | For the Local Government |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4. Diversify foods and essential items provided through the Public Distribution System | <p>There is a real need to expand food provisions beyond rice/wheat and one pulse. Ration provisions must include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Onions, potatoes, cooking oil, milk powder, spices • Kerosene must be added to the ration kit until inclusive implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) is achieved • A hygiene kit with soap, masks, sanitisers and sanitary napkins | <p>The Government of Maharashtra must develop a ration package that caters to people's nutritional needs (mentioned earlier).</p> | <p>Local authorities should collaborate with communities in need and Fair Price Shop (FPS) owners to ensure and monitor availability, quality and the timely access to essential items provided through ration.</p> <p>Subsidised cooked food or canteen services like the Shiv Bhojnalaya should be made available to those in need even post the lockdown in a more decentralised manner with a focus on areas where daily wage workers are concentrated.</p> |
| 5. Ensure <i>anganwadis</i> and government schools continue their nutrition-related responsibilities remotely. | <p>In the absence of mid-day meals from schools and nutrition-related services from Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres, the Government of India should mandate that government schools and ICDS centres play an active role in providing nutrition and food security to children and their families during lockdown.</p> | <p>A Government Resolution (GR) should be issued to mandate and ensure monthly provision of dry ration to families of students who availed of mid-day meals in government schools, irrespective of having a ration card. <i>Anganwadi sevikas</i>, who tracked the growth of children under six years and addressed the health needs of pregnant and lactating mothers prior to the lockdown must be required to continue their responsibilities through telephonic check-ins and needs assessments. Monthly provision of take home ration should be initiated by the ICDS.</p> | <p>Schools and ICDS centres must oversee, support and collaborate with communities to ensure the effective fulfillment of the responsibilities of <i>anganwadis</i> and government schools in providing food security and nutrition to children and their families.</p> |
| 6. Ensure Ujjwala Gas access to all priority households | <p>Priority Households (PHH) should be made eligible for the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), thereby expanding the reach of the provision to urban poor families that are not categorised as being Below Poverty Line (BPL). The PMUY should allow online registrations and quick linkages to households.</p> | <p>Online registrations for this scheme can be linked to the Public Distribution System (PDS) whereby those who access rations at Fair Price Shops receive instructions and information on the registration process and access to this scheme when they collect ration.</p> | <p>The local government in collaboration with the ration office should ensure that households have access to cooking gas and ensure delivery of the same in an efficient manner.</p> |



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