

Community-Based Monitoring to Claim Right to Food in Jharkhand

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The 2014 Global Hunger Index (GHI), released by International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), showed improvement in levels of hunger among children in India over the past decade. The underweight estimates¹ for children below the age of five registered a decline from 43.5 per cent² according to National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-3 data in 2005-06 to 30.7 per cent in 2013-14³. Though still ranked at 120 (in underweight children) out of 128 countries, it has moved up eight spots from the last GHI released in 2005.

Despite improved numbers, India remains home to the largest number of chronically malnourished and stunted children under five, according to the IFPRI report⁴. The Index notes that while no longer in the 'alarming' category, the situation in India continues to be 'serious'.

The report acknowledges contribution of the right to food schemes — expansion of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), public distribution centres and rural job programmes— along with National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in the improved ranking. Its notes that despite uneven implementation of the social schemes across different states, it has helped improve the condition of children in parts of India⁵.

The National Food Security Act (NFSA) passed in September 2013, made right to food a legal entitlement⁶. The Act was to be implemented by July 5, 2014 but many states are yet to bring it in force. Jharkhand is one of them⁷. A focus state of Oxfam, Jharkhand stands to gain most from the Act

where 86 per cent of rural families will be entitled to the benefits⁸.

Jharkhand is a high risk state in terms of food security. Starvation deaths were reported as recently as September 2014 in Ramgarh district when Kamlesh Munda became the fourth member of his family to succumb to starvation related diseases. His parents and sister had died in 2003⁹. In 2002, 25 deaths due to hunger were reported from two villages in Palamau district¹⁰. In Jharkhand, the problem exists both in the delivery system and the awareness among poor families on rights and entitlements.

The statutory backing could help get rid of the inherent drawbacks like irregular Mid Day Meal (MDM) and leakages in the Targetted Public Distribution System (TPDS). But there is also a demand for better supplementary nutrition, wider basket of food for public distribution system and implementation of maternity entitlement scheme. Oxfam strongly believes that empowering the community to demand, access and monitor the right to food scheme is most critical.

Oxfam has been working with Chetna Vikas in Jharkhand, since 2011, to take forward its larger objective of food justice and the importance of linking community based initiatives to macro level policy work. Chetna Vikas works in 36 villages, in Deoghar and Dumka district, to establish a community-based monitoring (CBM) system called *Gram Ahar Raksha Dal* (GARD). Of these, 35 villages have established GARD. Chetna Vikas has been working in Dumka and Deoghar districts¹¹ since 1985.

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 general 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	PDS revamped to target poor 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 12



GARD meeting in progress in Pandanberha village in Deoghar district in Jharkhand

JHARKHAND'S 'GRAM AHAR RAKSHA DAL'

Lalita and Kundan spend most of their day running around older children in the village. For the five year olds, there is no *anganwadi*¹³ centre to go to. There were about 90 children, between the age of 0-6 years and 14 pregnant and 6 lactating mothers (in 2013-14) in Pandanberha village in Jharkhand's Deoghar district.

"There was a demand for an *anganwadi* centre for a long time. For the first time, we knew what to do about it," said Kamdev Rai, a member of the GARD. Lalita is Kamdev's daughter. The GARD members applied for an *anganwadi* in September 2013 at the Deogarh block office and were quite hopeful. The 2014 general elections, however, slowed down the smooth run.

The GARD model of CBM has given confidence to villagers to approach any officer concerned if the need arises. Kamdev and other members sent an application for an *anganwadi* centre to the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO). When the CDPO didn't respond, villagers filed an application under the Right to Information Act (RTI). Drafting RTI application is part of the training to all GARD members. Since its inception in 2013, GARDs in all the villages where Oxfam works with Chetna Vikas, have decided to apply for six *anganwadi* centres and finalised application for three centres.

"The idea was to create a system where people took control and responsibility to safeguard their basic rights. Something like a guard," says Pancham Prasad Verma of Chetna Vikas. And so came into existence the GARD, an acronym homonymous to guard.

GARD provides the beneficiaries and functionaries, of the right to food schemes, a common platform to initiate a dialogue and seek solutions to problems faced in the implementation of schemes. The model provides the missing link of CBM to the NFSA, which provides for a grievance redressal system that does not go upto the panchayat level; it ends at the district level. Apart from it being a grievance redressal system, the Jharkhand model has increased community participation, women's involvement, awareness of rights and improved transparency.



Gauri Devi stands outside her ration shop in Madhudinda village in Jharkhand's Dumka district. The GARD members have ensured that the details of the supply of the beneficiary are displayed as per the rules



Meeting of GARD members in progress in Dumka district

The concept of GARD was floated in 2012 but they were formed only in 2013. “We held regular meetings with villagers. They complained about inefficiency and lack of services like ICDS, PDS and MDM. We had to chase service providers to solve our problems; it wasn’t easy either to get hold of them or get them involved. It was important to make them accountable and so through GARD we brought beneficiaries and service providers on the same platform,” says Rani Kumari, one of the founding members of Chetna Vikas.

The GARD comprises *Sevikas* and *Sahayikas* (*anganwadi* worker and helper), *Sahiyya* (ASHA), MGNREGA¹⁴ mate (work site supervisors), *Paricharika* (cook at the school), members of women Self Help Group (SHG), and *Mukhiya* (village headman) along with the beneficiaries.

There is no limitation to GARD membership - Pandanberha has 10 members while Madhudinda, a village in Dumka, has 17 members (of which 12 are women). “The membership is open to everyone. We try to monitor the composition so it doesn’t favor any one caste, community or sex,” says Rani.

Though it took almost a year for Chetna Vikas to convince people to form GARD, the model has helped bring accountability and transparency. At Madhudinda, Saraswati Women’s SHG runs the PDS shop in the village. A couple of them are also members of GARD. “Earlier we didn’t know why the supplies were delayed or why inadequate quantities were distributed. When GARD was formed, we became members and it gave us an opportunity to question them,” says Shyama Devi, a GARD member.

She adds “We came to know that the PDS owner was getting lesser than standard share from the distribution centre. In order to distribute equally, everyone got a little less. She incurred expenses on transportation, which she

adjusted with a little extra share of foodgrain. It was fair, we thought”. Three women SHGs own three PDS shops in the 36 villages in the two districts where Oxfam and Chetna Vikas are currently working in.

The *anganwadi* centre at Shyama Devi’s village was working below desired standards — parents complained that hot cooked meals were not being served and there was complete lack of cleanliness. “At GARD meetings, we tried to understand the problems of the *anganwadi* worker. She complained of thin attendance (5-10 children) because of which she didn’t cook regularly,” says Sudha Devi, a GARD member.

GARD members then met with parents and convinced them of regular, hygienic meals if they sent their children to school. It took some convincing and a few meetings before the head count at the *anganwadi* increased to 35.

“There used to be a lot of anger and frustration that villagers felt towards the service providers, but there was neither any dialogue nor an attempt to see the perspective of the service providers. GARD has done just that,” says Rani.

GARD meets once a month and the meeting is open to everyone in the village. A host of other concerns are dealt with at the meeting — from fixing a hand pump at a school to planning cropping pattern. In Kordaha village, GARD decided to plant *Mahua* and other fruit trees along with traditional millets like *kodo* on a patch of wasteland in their village. A decision at these meetings is reached through a consensus.

GARD has encouraged women to participate in the decision-making. Linmuni Hembrom, a santhal from Kordaha village, is not a part of the seven-member GARD but is inclined to join “to contribute to issues related to health and education.”

There are concerns of exclusion, although not so much based on caste, class or sex, but in terms of the distance from the houses. For instance, in Kordaha, a few *Pahariya*, who fall under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) classification, households in the village were barely part of the meetings as the meeting venues were too far away from their homes. Chetna Vikas is confident of resolving this in the days to come.

The communities are confident that they could continue with GARD on their own. "In sometime. We need some support when we go to talk to government officers. We need Rani *ji*¹⁵ and Pancham *ji* to supervise our RTI applications," says Kamdev. A GARD federation is in the pipeline, says Pancham, and this will make GARD a force to reckon with.

Notes

- 1 The latest figures are provisional
- 2 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) -3 (2005-06) DATA
- 3 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.
- 4 Bera Sayantan, India Improves Its Hunger Record, Mint — Tuesday, October 14, 2014
- 5 Page 12 - Global, Regional and National Trends ; Chapter 2; Global Hunger Index 2014 - The Challenges of Hidden Hunger; IFPRI, Welthungerhilfe, Concern Worldwide
- 6 11 states and Union Territories (Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Delhi and Chandigarh) has so far implemented the

National Food Security Act. The deadline has been already been extended thrice.

- 7 <http://www.prsindia.org/administrator/uploads/general/1388728622--TPDS%20Thematic%20Note.pdf>
- 8 Press Note - Villagers Agitate for Food Security in Manika, Latehar (English, 25 July 2014).doc
- 9 <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/fourth-starvation-death-family-jharkhand;asviewedonMay18,2015>
- 10 http://scccommissioners.org/Reports/Reports/Jharkhand_FoodSchemesStatus_03.pdf
- 11 Deoghar and Dumka districts are in the Santhal Pargana division of Jharkhand, which have a mix of adivasis like the Santals and the Kols, dalits like Ghatwals, Harijan, Dom, Dusadh, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) like the Yadavs and the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) like the Pahariyas.
- 12 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
- 13 *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.
- 14 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is designed to provide job guarantee for at least 100 days in the rural parts of the country. Through this scheme, all the adult members (at least 18 years of age) of the any family in rural part of the country are given non-skilled work. (<http://www.mgnrega.co.in/>; as viewed on May 26, 2015)(<http://www.mgnrega.co.in/>)
- 15 'Ji' is an honorific used as a suffix in many languages of the Indian subcontinent

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