

# Facilitating community based monitoring of government food security scheme towards enhancing transparency and public accountability



CENTRE FOR YOUTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (CYSD)

**T**rócaire has supported community based monitoring of India's Public Distribution System (PDS), with its partner organisation CYSD, in the Koraput and Kandhamal districts in southern Odisha, India since 2012. This work has helped to reduce corruption within this government food security scheme so that families who are entitled to avail of the scheme receive their full entitlement. An independent study<sup>1</sup> on PDS found 36.8% of the grain supplied in Odisha is siphoned off, i.e. it does not go to the rightful beneficiaries. Trócaire's partner CYSD found through its own study that in the tribal dominated villages of Koraput and Kandhamal districts 28% of the grain is siphoned off.

CYSD also observed through earlier projects that not only are there issues with the quantity of grain provided, the quality of grain distributed through the system is very poor and tribal communities rarely claim their entitlements. Rice that is distributed through PDS is a major source of food for "below poverty line" families, but another challenge is the categorisation of these families. The Indian government uses data that is not up to date, and in reality around 20% of village populations in the project area who should be entitled to receive food are not ration cardholders. While there

The **Public Distribution System (PDS)** is a system through which the Government delivers its food security scheme in India. It distributes subsidised food and non-food items to poor families. Major commodities distributed include staple food grains (wheat, rice) and kerosene, through a network of public distribution shops also known as **fair price shop**. Learn more about how this system works here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/public\\_distribution\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/public_distribution_system)

is a grievance redress mechanism, it does not work well and is difficult to access.

Through Trócaire's support, CYSD introduced **community based monitoring systems** in 85 villages in Koraput and Kandhamal districts. This stemmed from a need to establish a space and an effective mechanism for communities to monitor and demand their entitlements and advocate for their right to food. Community based monitoring was deemed a way to improve government responsiveness to gaps in the PDS and support communities to demand better service delivery.

<sup>1</sup> Leakages from Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Way Forward, January 2015 by Ashok Gulati & Shweta Saini: [http://icrier.org/pdf/Working\\_Paper\\_294.pdf](http://icrier.org/pdf/Working_Paper_294.pdf)

### Why introduce community based monitoring of the Public Distribution System (PDS)?

- Vulnerable and marginalised people often remain excluded from the benefits of PDS.
- PDS cardholders are unaware of their entitlements under PDS, and often do not receive the quantity and quality of food grains they are entitled to.
- Statutory monitoring systems do not function well.
- Quality service parameters at the Fair Price Shops are not adhered to.
- Enormous siphoning off of items within the PDS.

## The Community Based Monitoring System – steps and strategies

Because there are many stakeholders involved in India's Public Distribution System and there are many points in the process where PDS items could be siphoned off, CYSD designed a multi-layered community based monitoring system and combined it with complementary strategies such as advocacy and multi-stakeholder dialogue. The idea was not only to support citizens to monitor the implementation of the PDS at different levels in line with India's government structure: at household level, village level, Panchayat<sup>2</sup> level, Block<sup>3</sup> level and District<sup>4</sup> level but also give citizens and CYSD the tools and evidence to lobby the local government for more transparency, better accountability and ultimately better service delivery. CYSD designed monitoring tools that would be used at each of the aforementioned levels and mobilised community members to establish citizen groups called Food Security Committees at village level, Panchayat level, Block level and District level to be in charge of the monitoring and to take part in dialogue with stakeholders in the system, and lobby PDS government officials.

CYSD also helped build the capacity of ration cardholders to engage with the Community Based Monitoring System through information and educational materials and meetings, as well as the deployment of youth volunteers in all 85 project villages to support and further orient cardholders in participating in the monitoring.

Ration cardholders monitored the quality and quantity of PDS items they received (rice, kerosene) at household level using a **pictorial tool**, which was then given to the village Food Security Committee members each month, who collated the information from the pictorial tools from each household and compiled the aggregated data into **Citizen Report Cards**. These Cards were then sent to the Panchayat level Food Security Committees as well as to PDS government officials. The Panchayat Food Security Committees then compared the data from the Citizen Report Cards from various villages to the data collected through **Community Score Cards** (Cards compiled at Fair Price Shops between retailers and ration cardholders). A fourth tool, a **PDS distribution tracking tool** was used by the Food Security Committees to correct operational lapses by tracking the information on requirement, allotment, lifting<sup>5</sup> and distribution of PDS items at the Panchayat, Block and District levels. A combination of the data from all tools is used to bring the evidence of gaps in quantity and quality of provision before the relevant government department for correction. The data gathered during this process has not only been used by communities themselves, but also shared with other civil society organisations and academics in order to highlight food security issues of tribal and indigenous people of Odisha. This has also given CYSD a platform to lobby the Government for policy changes.

Three further complementary strategies were ensuring a gender balance, establishing dialogue between the implementing stakeholders and the community and **making linkages with media**. In terms of the latter, the media were found to be sensitive to responding to people's issues whenever they have been contacted. The use of electronic media in particular to broadcast cases of corruption and manipulation drew the attention of higher authorities and the problems in question were resolved. In terms of **establishing dialogue between the implementing stakeholders and the community** at Panchayat, Block and District level, it was found that this strategy was key to redressing grievances in-situ and, providing clarity on the PDS provisions for beneficiaries and addressing implementation lapses, thus leading to better service delivery.

**Ensuring a gender balance:** Another key strategy was ensuring that there was a gender balance in the representation and capacity of the Food Security Committees. All Committees formed in 85 villages in the two districts had a 50-50 representation between men and women, which served to ensure that women's voices were

<sup>2</sup> Panchayat is a local form of government administration in India, and comprises a number of villages totalling 5,000 voters.

<sup>3</sup> Block is a local form of government administration in India, and comprises a number of Panchayats.

<sup>4</sup> District is a local form of government administration in India, and comprises a number of Blocks.

<sup>5</sup> Lifting refers to a stage in the process of getting PDS items from source to final destination. The PDS items are procured by the Central Government and allocated to each State, and subsequently to each District within each State where they are stored in assigned warehouses. The items are then "lifted" from the warehouses by whole sellers and sold to Fair Price Shops to be distributed (sold off at subsidized prices) to the final beneficiaries – eligible households.

being included in the decision making. Additionally both men and women committee members were equally trained in different skills needed for their role on the Committee, such as submitting memoranda, filing Right to Information requests and organising rallies and campaigns.

## Monitoring Tools

As mentioned above, separate tools were used at different levels of the governance structure: (1) a pictorial monitoring tool and a weight measurement tool at household level; (2) a citizen report card; (3) a community score card and (4) a PDS distribution tracking tool, as described in further detail below.

### Household level

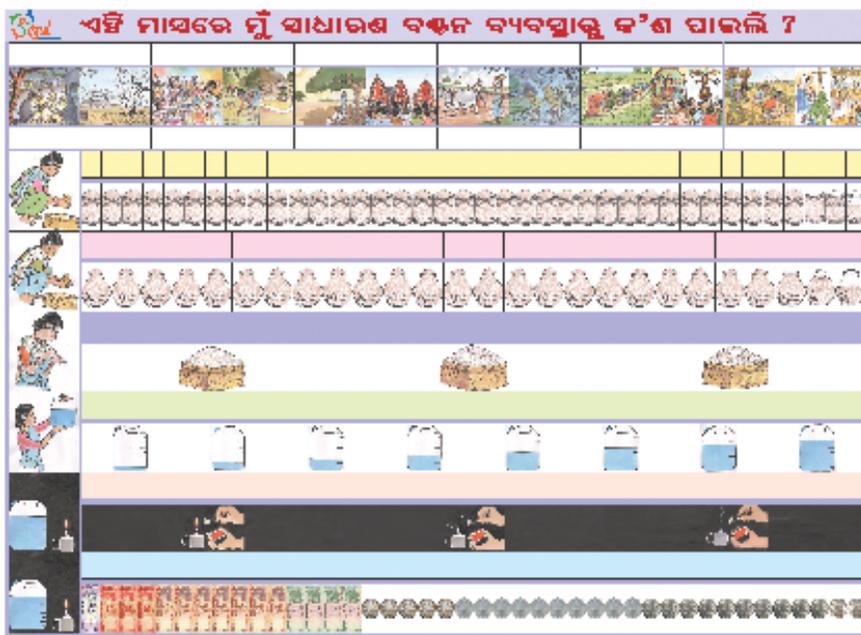
Two key tools have been developed by CYSD to allow households to properly monitor the rations they receive within the PDS. These include a pictorial monitoring tool and a weight measurement tool. Both of these tools went through a number of iterations before an appropriate tool was

developed that community members who are illiterate found easy and convenient to use.

The pictorial tool helps households to monitor the quantity, quality and price of their rations on a monthly basis. The pictures of the different months are based on representations of local festivals so households can easily identify the months the rations refer to. Mud baked pebbles are used to keep a record of every kilogram of rice received and the shortfalls.

The weight measurement tool is used by ration cardholders to check the quantity of rice and kerosene they receive. They use local resources and traditional instruments like tamb/ ada, rope and sticks to measure the quantity of items. They bring their locally available utensils with them to the Fair Price Shop when they collect their rations each month. When measuring the rice, they make a knot in a rope for each kilogram of rice received. If they do not receive the full quantity they are entitled to, they place a stick inside the last knot they make to show where the shortfall is. To monitor the quality of the rice, they keep a few grains in a plastic bag which they hand over to the village Food Security Committee, which subsequently checks it. To measure the quantity of kerosene oil received, they draw a mark on their plastic containers to show the level of measurement.

▼ Pictorial Monitoring Tool: household entitlement monitoring



This clearly shows what they should be entitled to and what they actually receive. A kerosene lamp is used to record the quality of kerosene oil. If it flames well, it is taken as good quality. If it flickers, this shows that the kerosene has been mixed with water and will not burn properly. After checking the quality and quantity of what has been received, the ration cardholder can file a complaint to the Village Food Security Committee and PDS government officials if anomalies have been found.

CYSD's support to Communities	Role of Food Security Committee Members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Formation and support to food security committees</li> <li>● Orientation to communities on accountability methods and tools</li> <li>● Practical demonstration of how to use monitoring tools at household and village level</li> <li>● Facilitation and ongoing support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ensure each ration cardholder monitors quality and quantity of items received.</li> <li>● Compile the records of findings and present the cumulative findings at meetings at Panchayat and Block level</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> Tambi and ada are the name of utensils in Koraput and Kandhamal, which are traditionally used to measure grain.

**Village level**

Citizen Report Cards are used to assess the broader village situation of the implementation of the public distribution scheme. The Village Food Security Committee prepares the citizen report card by collating the information from ration cardholders on their findings from monthly monitoring at household level. The Committee then sends this to the Panchayat level (which combines the data from a number of villages together) and to PDS government officials to highlight any issues relating to the implementation of the scheme and demand action to address them.

Citizen Report Cards measure the following indicators to evaluate the performance of PDS and bring out issues pertaining to village level food security.

- Household coverage of PDS
- Quality and quantity of rice and kerosene supplied
- Number of days in a month the Fair Price Shops remains open
- Rate for PDS kerosene oil charged by the retailer
- Timely delivery at the retail point

**Panchayat, Block and District Level**

At the Panchayat level, the citizen report cards from a number of villages is combined with findings from the community score card exercises at retail outlets (described below). Likewise, the citizen report cards are prepared at the Block and District levels by the respective committees. Advocacy agendas are prepared for lobbying government at different levels based on the findings of the citizen report cards.

**Panchayat Level: Community Score card**

The Community Score Card is used to track performance and functioning of the Fair Price Shops (where PDS rations are distributed) against the government norms. During this exercise the Food Security Committees arrange meetings for both ration cardholders and retailers at a mutually agreed location. During the meeting, the “community score card” which consists of a list of facilities available at the Fair Price Shop is presented before the ration cardholders and retailers to assign a numerical score (0 for not available, 1 for available) against each of the listed facilities. After this process, the assigned numbers are summed up and converted into percentages. If the retailer secures 60% or more in the rating exercise, the quality of service delivery at the retail shop is considered to be acceptable. If the score varies between 50-60%, the Fair Price Shop owner is asked to improve her/his

service quality. If the score is below 50%, the quality of service is considered to be poor and requires considerable improvement. CYSD has found this exercise particularly useful in increasing awareness amongst retailers of the exact requirements of Fair Price Shops as outlined within the government provisions.

**District, Block and Panchayat Level: PDS distribution tracking tool**

This tool is used to correct operational lapses by tracking the information on requirement, allotment, lifting and distribution of PDS items. This is done on a quarterly basis at Panchayat, Block and District level by the members of the Food Security Committees at these three levels. Information is collected based on an established template where the information on requirement, allotment, lifting and distribution of PDS items are available and simultaneously, members also verify the information at household level. Gaps in lifting and distribution are evaluated by the members. Irregularities are brought to the attention of authorities for necessary action.

▼ Community Score Card in Regional Language

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(ସର୍ବାଧିକ ସଂଖ୍ୟା-୨୮)

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 ବ୍ଲକ୍: ଜିଲ୍ଲା :

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## Impact

### Improved service delivery:

As a result of the detailed community based monitoring, ration cardholders are receiving their due entitlement. 73% of cardholders of the 85 villages are monitoring their monthly entitlement, and 92% of cardholders are aware of their entitlements under PDS provisions. 9 out of 26 Fair Price Shops are strictly following the government rules. Electronic weighing machines have been installed in all Fair Price Shops in the project areas. 101 people have received Poor Left Out<sup>7</sup> cards. 17 PDS cards which were discarded earlier due to families migrate from village, men passed away and their wives were no longer entitled to the benefits and few wrongfully withdrawn from cardholders have been reinstated through lobbying by the Food Security Committees. All the cardholders are getting their rice at 1 INR/kilogram, as per the PDS norm. While previously bags of rice contained large amounts of black or rotten rice, or small pebbles mixed to increase the weight, the percentage of adulteration has reduced considerably.

Previously, it was found that 25kg bags of rice only contained 22.5kg of rice. This gap has now reduced with bags on average containing 24.8kg of rice. The supply of kerosene oil is provided in a timely manner and the quality of the oil distributed has increased, as it is no longer mixed with water. Previously, the price of kerosene oil was fixed arbitrarily by the retailer, and varied from 16.50 INR/litre to 18 INR/litre. Now it is sold at 15.50-16.00 INR/litre at the retail point.

*"I represent the Food Security Committees at village and Panchayat level in Ghumar Panchayat. We negotiated with the block level PDS officials and managed to get an electronic weighing machine for our Panchayat. It was our long standing demand. Before we didn't get the due quantity of rice because there was a manual weighing machine. Using the electronic machine meant considerably less corruption. The process was going quite well but after three months, the machine broke, and again we were not receiving our proper rations. Then our committee decided to go to the district government officials to lodge our grievance. We took the help of CYSD community monitors and managed to have a meeting with the Sub-Collector. We found the Sub-Collector to be a woman just like us. We felt comforted in her presence. She patiently listened and actively took up our case. She rang the Block Development Officer, enquired about*

*the situation and ordered him to repair the machine. Within a week the machine was fixed and now we are not worried about rice going missing."* Gouri Nayak, village Food Security Committee member, Burudiput village.

### Increased local participation:

The PDS community monitoring at the household, village, Panchayat, Block and District levels has significantly increased community participation in different processes and forums of the PDS governance system. Communities have proactively participated in the Village Food Security Committees and have openly talked about their problems. Citizens are also exploring the forums in their hamlets and wider villages to raise their demand for improvement in the PDS service. Community based monitoring has also increased participation of locally elected representatives. They are showing an interest in the process of community led monitoring and have come forward to support this initiative. Most importantly, citizens who had been previously excluded from decision making forums are now taking an active role.

### Improved access to the grievance redressal institutions for marginalised populations:

Grievance redressal institutions formed by the government are considered to be ineffective because of their perceived apathy and indifference towards genuine problems of local populations. Community based monitoring has provided a platform at village, Panchayat and Block level where ration cardholders can submit their grievances. Household level monitoring and the active role of the Food Security Committees has reinvigorated the grievance redressal system. Ration cardholders have been able to use India's Right to Information Act to get information on the allotment and lifting of PDS items. Out of 1713 grievances lodged at different local government levels by ration cardholders and Food Security Committee members in the project area, 567 have been addressed.



▲ Block level PDS Public hearing meeting at Khajuripada Block, Kandhamal in the month of February-2014

<sup>7</sup> Given difficulties in maintaining up to date records of the status of those considered below the poverty line, and therefore those who qualify as eligible PDS beneficiaries, a new category of PDS ration card was created for those people who slipped through the net: Poor Left Out (PLO) cards. Eligibility criteria includes earning less than 5,000 INR (75 dollars) per month. Beneficiaries were selected by locally elected representatives and included disabled, single women, homeless, destitute, and elderly.

*“Earlier we were not aware of the provisions under PDS so we were being systematically cheated by the local retailer. Due to the intervention of CYSD, we got to know about these provisions. At the request of CYSD we formed a committee at village, Panchayat and Block level to address corruption within the system. Our ignorance has actually made the network of corruption very strong and we realized this after our meeting with CYSD staff. We were getting only one litre of kerosene from the retailer instead of three litres. When we came to know about the provision of 4 litres of kerosene for each ration cardholder, we got restless. We took this matter to our Panchayat meeting and then decided to move to the Block office. Accordingly we got our application written and engaged with the PDS officials at the Block office. The supply inspector listened to the situation and immediately issued an order to the retailer to provide 3 litres kerosene to each card holders. Now we are getting our quota of kerosene as per the actual lifting and we are very happy with the results of our efforts.” - Kasi Biswanath Harijan, Hatakhudpi village.*

**Enhancing Citizen Empowerment:**

The community led monitoring tool has increased awareness among the cardholders who were otherwise silent recipients of the benefit. It has helped communities to use different techniques, methods and skills to track PDS and also undertake advocacy to correct the system. People gained knowledge of the techniques on how to use the indigenous method of weight measurement and identify and record anomalies at the household level. The Food Security Committee members at the village, Panchayat, Block and District level were trained on using different tools to improve the quality of distribution practices in the PDS. Through this process, communities have felt empowered to make the PDS governance system accountable, transparent and responsive.



▲ Community monitor Damodar Gadaba observes as tribal women of Karnaguda village in Ghumar Panchayat, Kundura Block track their PDS rice.

**WOMEN LOBBY PDS OFFICIALS AND RECEIVE RATION CARDS IN THEIR NAMES**

Six families from Pakhnaguda and Ganthiaguda villages in Ghumar Panchayat, Koraput had ration cards only in the name of male members of their family. When these men passed away, their wives were no longer entitled to the benefits associated with the ration cards. In November 2014, the Panchayat initiated a verification process of ration cards. Despite all attempts by the women affected, Panchayat PDS officials refused to transfer the cards to the women’s names. Extremely disappointed, the women brought the issue to the Panchayat Food Security Committee. The committee organised a meeting between the six women and the PDS Supply Inspector at Block level and guided the women in preparing affidavits to submit to the Block office. These efforts resulted in the women being granted ration cards in their names and receiving their associated entitlements. The women are delighted with this outcome and are very thankful to the Panchayat Food Security Committee for their help.



Lachhma Soura



Susila Garahandia



Mukta Nayak



Jema Pradhani



Fulmati Ganthia



Kusuma Gouda

## Challenges faced

### Non-cooperation of ration cardholders because of fear and political influence:

In some cases, ration cardholders were afraid to be involved because of fear and political influence during the by-election period in Kandhamal district. During this time, village meetings were carefully orchestrated by CYSD field staff so that no political issues were discussed in the meeting. CYSD had to maintain low visibility of the meetings and avoided any media contact during that period. However when the election was over, political tensions decreased and normal meetings resumed.

### Caste-based discrimination:

CYSD works in villages with mixed caste communities. Facilitating participatory processes in these communities can be very challenging because of practices of untouchability between certain castes. However, as people started to understand the gaps within the PDS and learnt of their entitlements, they started to come together to address this common cause. Addressing food insecurity has thus to some extent helped to break the boundary of untouchability, although these divisions within the community remain an ongoing difficult challenge.

### Ineffective PDS advisory committees at government level:

Prior to CYSD's intervention, statutory PDS advisory committees existed, but they were not functional. Members of the committees were not always aware they had been nominated as members. Recognising this challenge, CYSD representatives met with individual members and urged them to come together and take on the responsibility of monitoring the PDS. CYSD also provided training to members of these committees on their roles and responsibilities. Now that this committee is more active, the Food Security Committees are able to work with them which has helped to improve the functioning of the PDS. At the Panchayat level, PDS tracking is now being done jointly by the Panchayat level Food Security Committee and the advisory committee.

### Left wing Maoist insurgency in Koraput project villages:

There has been a rise in Maoist activity in Odisha in recent years, and communities have often been caught in the middle between Maoist insurgencies and government counter measures. Food Security Committees have been suspected of being government informers by Maoists in the area. To address this, CYSD staff have managed to build rapport with representatives of the Maoist movement, and have convinced them that the Food Security Committee members are not government institutions but are citizens coming together to demand improved services from the government. While this has helped alleviate some community member fears, it is an ongoing challenge due to increased Maoist activity and increased government counter offensives.

## Lessons Learned



### Multi level community based monitoring tools:

CYSD has found that using different social accountability tools at different levels is a useful process for increasing transparency in the PDS operation. Ensuring that resource distribution is tracked at different levels has allowed for multi-layered evidence to lobby the government.

### Accuracy in information through pictorial monitoring tool:

Indigenous tools and the pictorial monitoring tool has ensured data is accurately collected at the household level. This tool has allowed communities to measure their rations during distribution, and has helped raise awareness of the actual amounts households are receiving.

### Increase in participation and empowerment of community through Community Based Monitoring:

The process of community based monitoring has helped to provide a platform for both community members and retailers to come together to address issues within the Public Distribution System. The process has helped communities realise they are rights holders and not merely beneficiaries.



▲ Jayanti Behury of Sakadi Village receiving her PDS rice

## Conclusion

The community based monitoring model described above is straightforward and can be easily replicated. The processes involved in this monitoring model are community driven. One does not need to be literate to perform monitoring activities at the household level. The instruments used for the monitoring are also indigenous and easily available. The model emphasises collective efforts by the community and endeavours to bring communities and implementing stakeholders together. It helps initiate increased trust

between different stakeholders as it fosters participation at every stage. The community based monitoring model works on both demand and supply issues. It helps to raise demand for quality services by increasing people's awareness of their rights and improves the supply side through advocacy based on critical evidence gathered during the monitoring processes. This monitoring system has been adopted in 20 villages outside the project area. It has the potential to be applied to the National Food Security Act as both the state and central government have mandated the use of social accountability tools to bring transparency in the provisions of the Act.

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**Photo Credit: CYSD**



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