

Can Government-Allocated Land Contribute to Food Security? Intrahousehold Analysis of West Bengal's Microplot Allocation Program

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Summary. — This study evaluates the impact of India's land-allocation and registration program in West Bengal, a program that targets poor populations and promotes the inclusion of women's names on land titles. Although we are unable to detect statistically significant program effects on current household food security, we find that the program has positive impacts on a range of outcomes that are expected to lay the foundation for future food security including improved security of tenure, agricultural investments, and women's involvement in food and agricultural decisions. Findings provide lessons in designing and implementing innovative and integrated approaches to reduce hunger and undernutrition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite rapid economic gains over the last decade, India continues to struggle with hunger and undernutrition. India is home to the largest number of malnourished children in the world, and its Global Hunger Index score has stagnated for the past 17 years in spite of a concurrent near doubling of its gross national income (von Grebmer *et al.*, 2012). The Indian paradox, whereby high levels of hunger persist despite solid state-level economic performance, holds true in West Bengal, a state that, with an 18.5% prevalence of undernourishment, 38.5% of children under five underweight, and a 5.9% under-five mortality rate, ranks eighth among the 17 Indian states in the State Hunger Index (Menon, Deolalikar, & Bhaskar, 2009).

This lack of significant progress on food security is not for want of effort. National and state governments have implemented various public programs with mixed results, underscoring the complexity of India's food security situation (Deaton & Dreze, 2009). The Public Distribution Program, for example, is a massive government intervention that distributes staples to India's poor through Fair Price Shops. Although implementation varies by state, in most cases, the Public Distribution Program is a perennial political target for its various failings and abuses, such as black marketing of foodstuffs, *ghost* ration cards, distribution of inferior quality goods, and misidentification of beneficiaries (Food Corporation of India, 2010). The Integrated Child Development Services and the Mid-Day Meal are two national initiatives targeted at children's food security, the former for children under the age of six and the latter for all children in primary school. A recent evaluation of the Integrated Child Development Services food supplement found 65.8% effective coverage rate (India, Programme Evaluation Organization, 2011) and the most recent work plan from the northeastern state of West Bengal acknowledged that the Mid-Day Meal program implementation varied greatly in quality by administrative area (India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2011).

In parallel to a number of food distribution programs, state governments have invested considerable efforts on a wide range of training and asset-based interventions meant to improve food security by decreasing poverty and improving livelihoods. In rural communities, the menu of interventions often includes programs that allocate or regularize homestead land, such as the Nijo Griha, Nijo Bhumi (NGNB) program, which is the immediate successor to a related homestead allocation program launched in 2006 under another name by the Department of Land and Land Reform in West Bengal.¹ According to the Indian National Sample Survey Organization's 2004 report, 427,000 households in the state were landless and homesteadless. Under the program, the government purchases tracts of land and provides microplots, only a fraction of an acre in size, to landless rural families. The fact that this program allocates land rather than just formalizing land tenure makes it distinctive and unique compared to other land reform programs in other Indian states. The microplots are intended for building a homestead, cultivating a small vegetable garden, planting fruit and wood trees, and raising livestock. These plots, documented with *pattas* (land titles) issued by the state, are expected to enhance families' ability to access government services, agricultural inputs, and financial resources, thereby enhancing families' income, reducing their vulnerability, and improving their food security. Recognizing the pervasive additional constraints that women often

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face in accessing economic resources and acknowledging the key role women can play in their households' well-being, NGNB explicitly stipulates that pattas issued to dual-headed households should be issued in the woman's name only or jointly titled to the male and female heads.

Landesa, a nongovernmental organization focused on land legislation and programing among poor populations, has provided technical support to the Department of Land and Land Reform since 2009 to pilot changes to the NGNB program (and, earlier, the Cultivation and Dwelling Plot Allotment Scheme), identify best practices, and facilitate scaling it up to reach 100,000 households. In addition, and as part of an umbrella initiative to study the gender gap in asset ownership, Landesa has partnered with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to evaluate this land-allocation program. This paper evaluating linkages between homestead allocation and food security is a result of this collaboration.

This study is particularly timely, given that the Government of India has recently promulgated a food security ordinance concerned with household-level food security that will soon be considered by Parliament; that the Government of India has to craft and approve its 13th Five Year Plan, which is bound to propose avenues for enhancing these same outcomes; that the Government of India is committed to passing a national rural homestead bill entitling landless households in rural areas to a homestead plot of 10 decimals; that India's Minister of Rural Development has recently signed an agreement to fund state-level land-allocation programs; and that India's civil society is playing a critical role in advocating and monitoring for inclusive land rights.

Using mixed methods data collected during 2010–12, we explore three sets of questions. We start by briefly examining who becomes a beneficiary of the NGNB program, drawing on key informant interviews with government officials involved in the process at all administrative levels from village to district and on interviews with the beneficiaries themselves. We then assess program outcomes such as household tenure security, household agricultural investments, and women's involvement in food and agriculture decision-making—outcomes that when enhanced are expected to lead to increased household production and long-term food security. Lastly, we examine whether the NGNB program has already yielded some of its expected long-term food security benefits by considering households' vulnerability to hunger, their dietary diversity, their protein consumption, and how food is distributed within the household.

Our results indicate that the program's implementation at the block level allowed for considerable variation in the processes used to select beneficiaries, to demarcate plots, to distribute titles, and to provide infrastructure support. Compared to eligible non-beneficiary households, we find that NGNB households are significantly more likely to have improved intermediate outcomes, including reports of tenure security, use of credit for agriculture, investments on improved agricultural inputs, and women's decision-making over household food and agriculture. We find that the size of the plots matters and that the inclusion of women on titles is instrumental in achieving these improved outcomes. Although these results are very encouraging and expected to improve future food security, we find no evidence of significant improvement in current food security among beneficiary households. Our study finds results similar to those of [Li, Rozelle, and Brandt \(1998\)](#), with tenure security having an impact on longer term horizon investments, and empirically shows the gendered link between land-tenure security and a number of agricultural inputs and outcomes.

In the following sections, we describe why and how agricultural production and tenure security relate to food security

more generally and provide context with brief descriptions of the land situation in West Bengal and the NGNB program. We describe the data collection, methodological approach, and key indicators used in the analysis. We then use qualitative data to portray the process by which the NGNB program selected beneficiary households and rely on quantitative analysis to test NGNB's impact on households' pathways to future food security (intermediate outcomes) as well as their current food security status. We conclude with a discussion of results, recommendations for land and food policy, and suggestions for further research.

2. FOOD SECURITY AND LINKAGES WITH LAND AND AGRICULTURE

At the World Food Summit in 1996, it was agreed that “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Food security thus comprises three so-called pillars: food availability, food access, and food use ([Quisumbing, Brown, Feldstein, Haddad, & Peña, 1995](#)). Food availability requires that enough food of adequate quality is produced, purchased, or received on a consistent basis. Food access requires having the economic, social, or political means to obtain nutritious food on a continuous basis. Food use refers to the knowledge and complementary conditions required to appropriately consume food that meets nutritional needs. This extends to issues such as sanitation, food preparation, healthcare, and water safety. These pillars are applicable from the global level to each individual within a household. Thus each unit of aggregation—a nation, a region, a household, an individual—is considered food secure only if its food availability, access, and use requirements are met.

Agricultural advancements in more nutritious crops and improved yields have the potential to secure the availability of a larger supply of more affordable, healthier food. Studies such as those by [Li *et al.* \(1998\)](#) and [Deininger, Ali, Holden, and Zevenbergen \(2008\)](#) explored direct links between land-rights security and agricultural production, finding that land-rights security will positively affect long-term land-saving investments and induce new investment in land, which leads to higher production. Studies by [Kyomugisha \(2008\)](#), [Deininger \(2003\)](#), and [Besley \(1995\)](#) looked at linkages between land-rights security and factors such as access to credit and technology adoption that are hypothesized to improve agricultural production, finding that land security is an important aspect of these processes.

However, food production is only one aspect of food security. Most of the rural poor in developing regions continue to experience difficulties accessing food due to poverty. Since their livelihood strategies tend to rely heavily, directly or indirectly, on agricultural activities, their income is more responsive to growth in the agricultural sector than in any other sector ([Christiaensen, Demery, & Kuhl, 2011](#); [Ligon & Sadoulet, 2011](#)). This argument for supporting smallholder-inclusive agricultural investment seems particularly relevant in the context of India, where remarkable economic growth at the national level has not trickled down to the rural poor ([FAO/WFP/IFAD, 2012](#)).

Furthermore, there has been increasing, yet far from sufficient, acknowledgment that gender differences, social norms, and intrahousehold dynamics can affect whether and to what extent households' rights to land affect food security. The literature suggests that reducing the gender gap by enhancing women's control over resources can yield increases in agricultural production ([Allendorf, 2007](#); [Fletschner, 2008](#);

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