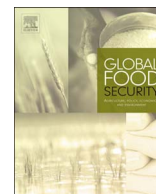




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Global Food Security

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/gfs](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/gfs)

## Social safety nets for food and nutrition security in India

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Jel codes:

H5  
H7  
I38

## Keywords:

Social safety nets  
India  
Complementarity and synergies  
Food and nutrition security  
Health

## ABSTRACT

This paper brings together existing literature on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India, offering a narrative review of the evidence on impacts on food security, health and nutrition of beneficiaries. Both programs operate on a large scale and have the capacity to impact the factors leading to undernutrition. It is evident that despite the deficiencies in implementation, both the MGNREGA and the PDS are inclusive and reach the poor and the marginalized, who are likely to also experience greater undernutrition and poor health. Data challenges have however prevented researchers from conducting studies that assess the ultimate impact of these two large-scale programs on health and nutrition. The evidence that exists suggests largely positive impacts indicating a clear potential to make these programs more nutrition sensitive not just by incorporating elements that would explicitly address nutritional concerns but also by directing specific attention to innovations that strengthen critical complementarities and synergies that exist between the two programs.

## 1. Introduction

India has seen a slew of rights based social assistance initiatives in the past decade. Among these, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2006, and the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, stand out for their scale and ambition. The MGNREGA is a demand driven program that guarantees a minimum of 100 days of unskilled manual work for each rural household. The works created under the MGNREGA are meant to provide communities with durable assets that can secure their livelihoods in substantive ways. The NFSA aims to provide for food and nutrition security through a human life cycle approach that addresses needs of an individual from birth to senescence. The MGNREGA is the largest public works program in the world, having generated more than 18 billion person days of work and involving expenditures at the cost of US\$ 44.6 billion since its inception in 2006.<sup>1</sup> The NFSA operates on a similarly massive scale and includes, among others, the largest school meal and childcare program and perhaps the largest subsidized foodgrain distribution scheme in the world with an allocation of 56.24 million tonnes of foodgrains across various welfare schemes during the year in 2015–16.<sup>2</sup> In content, the

programs envisioned under these Acts are not new. The developing world has a long history of workfare and food assistance programs that have been the subject of extensive research (Subbarao, 1997; Ravallion, 2003; Besley and Coate, 1992; von Braun et al., 1992; von Braun, 1995; Barrett, 2002). Yet, India's legal mandate to implement these as nationwide programs has few precedents.<sup>3</sup>

It is now well recognized that despite robust economic growth, India continues to grapple with persistent and widespread undernutrition, poverty and rising inequalities (Drèze and Sen, 2013, for example). Indeed economic growth, despite its importance, cannot alone deliver nutritional security, making a case for specific interventions to address nutritional problems (Haddad et al., 2002; Ruel and Alderman, 2013, for example). Recent thinking suggests that rather than merely scaling up “nutrition specific” interventions, given the scale of the issue, it might be necessary to combine “nutrition sensitive” interventions addressing the underlying causes of undernutrition (Ruel and Alderman, 2013). The latter typically operate on a massive scale, with the ability of reaching a large number of people vulnerable to undernutrition (Ruel and Alderman, 2013). India's experience with these two mega-programs in addressing the chronic problem of undernutrition

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Received 2 November 2016; Received in revised form 26 April 2017; Accepted 6 May 2017

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will therefore likely hold important lessons and shape policy discussions worldwide on the relevance, efficacy and potential of this approach. In India, there are intense debates on the desirability, optimal scope and structure of these programs. Notably, there are strong indications that under the current regime cash transfers may eventually replace in-kind transfers (Government of India, 2015), largely due to the former's relative fiscal merits and despite the recognition of the latter's contribution to the reduction in child under-nutrition in India (von Grebmer et al., 2015).<sup>4</sup>

This paper brings together existing literature on both these legislated efforts, i.e., the MGNREGA and the NFSA, offering a narrative review of the evidence on aspects of food security, health and nutrition in rural India. The following questions motivate our review. How far do these interventions advance food and nutritional security? What rigorous and systematic evidence is available on these impacts and pathways? Where are the gaps in research that limit our understanding of the efficacy of these programs? In addressing these questions, a goal of this paper is to examine the potential for synergies across these programs, both at the macro level and at the level of households, specifically in terms of direct and indirect impacts on health, food and nutrition security.

Within the NFSA, the specific focus in this paper is the Public Distribution System (PDS), which has been at the heart of these debates. We focus on rural India, given that the MGNREGA is relevant only for rural areas. Further, the scope of this paper is restricted to impacts on indicators of health and nutrition status and on select intermediate outcomes such as food consumption. Broader reviews of MGNREGA or PDS impacts on incomes, labour markets and wages are available elsewhere.

The paper is organized as follows. Following this background is a brief history of the MGNREGA and the NFSA (and especially the PDS), salient features of the Act and an overview of the scale of implementation. Next, we outline the conceptual pathways through which the two programs are expected to have an impact and the possible synergies between them, both at the macro level and at the household level. We then review the existing literature on impacts of the two programs on various aspects of food consumption, health and nutrition. We also identify gaps that persist in research on these impacts, flagging areas that require further research.

## 2. The programs: history, background and the current act

Neither the MGNREGA nor the NFSA is entirely new or revolutionary. The Indian state of Maharashtra had implemented an Employment Guarantee scheme (EGS) since 1972 that in fact provided the inspiration and template for the nationwide program. Even as early as the 1960s, the Third Five Year Plan refers to the need to provide work for 100 days of employment.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the NFSA merely consolidated and brought together under one Act a number of programs that had already been converted into legal entitlements by the Supreme Court of India in the Right to Food case.<sup>6</sup> The NFSA and the MGNREGA represent two of several rights-based interventions that were outcomes of a political context that permitted a space for a discourse on rights. These therefore have significance, even if only momentarily, that goes beyond their instrumental purpose.

The origins of the NFSA go back to 2001 when the threat of severe hunger loomed large in many parts of the country, even as the government had accumulated stocks of about 50 million tonnes (Srinivasan and Narayanan, 2008). In April 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), an active civil society group in the north

<sup>4</sup> Arguments for and against cash transfers in the Indian context are available in Pritchard et al. (2013), Kapur et al. (2008), Kotwal et al. (2011), Narayanan (2015), Khera (2014) and Drèze and Khera (2016), etc.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 23, Point 12, <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/3rd/3planch23.html>.

<sup>6</sup> For a history of the case, see Srinivasan and Narayanan (2008).

Indian state of Rajasthan, submitted a writ petition to the Supreme Court of India, demanding that the country's food stocks be used without delay to protect people from hunger and starvation. The ensuing litigation (PUCL vs. Union of India and Others, Writ Petition [Civil] 196 of 2001) provided a springboard for the Right to Food Campaign, which extended its efforts to also secure employment guarantee. (Srinivasan and Narayanan, 2008; Hertel, 2015; for discussions on the Campaign and Pritchard et al., 2013 and Drèze and Khera, 2016, for a broader discussion of the rights based approach underpinning these recent developments.). After protracted debate and discussion the Acts were passed – the MGNREGA in 2006 and the NFSA in 2013.

The MGNREGA involves a single program with several objectives. It has a definite national character and aims.

*“to provide for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.” (pg. 1 Government of India, 2005)<sup>7</sup>*

Although significant inter-state variations do exist in terms of modalities, priorities and implementation methods, the MGNREGA was not grafted on to pre-existing programs to the extent the NFSA was, and it tends to be more comparable across states.

The NFSA focuses on a lifecycle approach and involves a cluster of programs aimed at addressing food security and nutritional gaps for different target groups, mothers, pre-school children, school going children, adults and senior citizens. As the Act articulates, it aims to

*“provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.” (pg.1, Government of India, 2013)<sup>8</sup>*

Although much of the recent debates have focussed on the Public Distribution System (PDS) that provides foodgrains (mainly rice and wheat) at subsidized prices, the NFSA comprises several other programs over the life cycle, starting with maternity entitlements, infant and child feeding and care through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), school meals through the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme and food related schemes for pensioners and widows and the extremely poor (See Fig. 1; Appendix A Table A1 for details on entitlements as per the NFSA). Several of these programs predate the NFSA and some are not defined in terms of specific entitlements.

Despite the fact that the NFSA brings all of these programs together under a single umbrella, inter-state differences in entitlements and implementation reflect the differentiated histories of these programs in different states (See Narayanan and Gerber, 2015 for details). Together, the NFSA and the MGNREGA were meant to provide both food and employment enabling vulnerable households to survive systemic and idiosyncratic shocks.

## 3. Implementation and targeting

### 3.1. Scale of the programs

Debates on the NFSA and MGNREGA leading up to their promulgation and since have mostly focussed on their fiscal implications. It is therefore appropriate to lay out the scale of these programs in terms of both allocations as well as extent of beneficiaries. Many writers believe

<sup>7</sup> The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Gazette of India, No. 42 of 2005, September 7, 2005, Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India.

<sup>8</sup> The National Food Security Act, Gazette of India, September 10, 2013, Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India.

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