

Chhattisgarh's COREPDS: Network Governance for achieving Good Governance

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The Public Distribution System (PDS) in India evolved as a mechanism for the management and distribution of food grains at affordable prices in the rural economy. Under this system, the government (central and at the state level), through Food Corporation of India (FCI) directly purchases and stocks food grains from the farmers across the country, assuring greater prices.

These food grains, in turn, are distributed through the PDS network of Fair Price Shops (FPSs) at subsidized rates to the poor. Plagued by issues such as wastage of grains and leakages at various levels, PDS also ranks in corruption among ten basic services in India (CMS, 2017). It is estimated that diversions take place either during procurement, transport of commodities or at the FPS before it reaches the final beneficiaries.

Chhattisgarh, the 17th most- populated state in the country, has been a forerunner in adopting an ICT- based end-to-end strategy for addressing some of these challenges in its distribution system. With digitisation of ration cards and Aadhar seeding with Ration Cards and 12,128 Electronic Points of Sale (e-PoS), Chhattisgarh is one of the three states in the country to implement online allocation of food grains, computerisation of supply- chain management, transparency portal, online grievance redressal and toll- free helpline numbers (as of December 2016) (DFPD Annual Report, 2015- 16).

The Chhattisgarh Centralised Online Real Electronic PDS (CORE- PDS) has been recognised and awarded the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Administration in 2010 for its initiatives and reforms, which includes both technical and non-technical aspects with a single clear objective of creating food security to 37 lakh BPL families without any diversion and leakage in a transparent way. Chhattisgarh is regarded as an example of transforming a non-functional Public Distribution System (PDS) into a functioning one with the help of technology along with active community involvement. At present, the Chhattisgarh PDS provides 35 kg of foodgrains at Rs. 1 per kilo under various schemes.

Addressing the chronic issues of leakages and diversions in the Public Distribution System in the state, the Government of Chhattisgarh (GoC) implemented the Centralised Online Real Electronic Public Distribution System (PDS) (CORE- PDS. GoC in association with the National Informatics Centre (NIC) computerized its entire food supply chain, from procurement to storage and distribution. In other words, a beneficiary of the PDS in a village or town in Chhattisgarh, through the bar-coded ration card provided to him, is eligible to visit any of the FPS in the state and purchase the ration. The quota of grains purchased, the transport of the grains from the warehouses to the FPSs and the transactions in the FPSs is monitored through real-time systems.

With an idea to eliminate leakages and duplicate ration cards, the state has completed the digitization of ration cards by seeding it with Aadhaar and made it available on the portal (DFPD Annual Report, 2015- 16). Smart ration cards were issued to all beneficiaries which enabled them to check their entitlements and how much has been purchased from any FPS, which was CORE- enabled. With around 12,000 FPSs been computerized through Android-based tablets, information on sales, purchase, and procurement was uploaded onto servers. A

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robust real-time information system was deployed for disbursement of the ration, which was made available on the web portal.

The Chhattisgarh COREPDS model is considered as one of the best models for the delivery of the ration to the poor and needy. Though there are specific problems like failure of Aadhar Authentication, non-inclusion of all family members in the ration, internet network issues, etc., the state government is ready to rectify the issues by introducing Android tab based authentication and Photo authentication for the delivery of food grains.

The main reason for the success of the Chhattisgarh model is the formation of networks with various stakeholders of the programme like bureaucrats, technocrats, civil society, media, and citizen. For example, various civil society organizations including Chaupal (Oxfam India's partner in Chhattisgarh), an organization taking the lead in the Right to Food campaign in the state and Oxfam India are organizing state-level public hearings. Public Hearing is attended by the eminent jurists, government officials from state and central governments, technocrats, civil society representatives, and beneficiaries. This kind of networks is working out for effective policy implementation and also addressing the issues related to food security. The inputs and insights emerging from such networking are crucial for the government as these non-state actors bring rich and grassroots level experiences. The networks facilitate the inclusive participation of various stakeholders in effectively addressing the challenge that was posed by the automation of PDS in Chhattisgarh. The state government is building a kind of network with citizens and civil society groups to identify the loopholes in the implementation of technology for the delivering of food security programme in the state.

Five technologies need to work together for biometric authentication to be successful – the point of sale device, internet connectivity, biometrics, the National Informatics Centre server, and the Unique Identification Authority of India servers (Yadav, 2017). There are high chances for the failure of the authentication process at any level.

According to A. K. Soma Shekar, Technical Director, National Informatics Center, Chhattisgarh and a pioneer in the implementation of ePDS in the country, says that according to UIDAI, Aadhaar has a false rejection rate of 5 percent and it is huge for the implementation of the social welfare scheme. Hence, he says that “One Aadhaar authentication in every five or six transactions will be enough to ensure the ration card is with the beneficiary” (Yadav, 2017). Can the Government build up a parallel authentication process (that is photo identification, that will be discussed later) until there is zero percent False Rejection Rate (FRR)? In the process, the Chhattisgarh Government with the help of civil society groups, technology partners, and citizens has modified the implementation of COREPDS by introducing Android-based.

The Aadhaar as an instrument can be used to plug out the problems in the implementation of the social welfare schemes like Public Distribution System (PDS), but there are certain challenges that are emerging with the policy innovation. The role of the Government is to address these challenges and modify their public policies by building effective networks with the various stakeholders. What kind of networks are suited to the government? How can the networks be effective? How the building of networks will help in effective service delivery?

These are the questions that the study aims to address after intensive fieldworks in both Chhattisgarh and Telangana. The reason for selecting two states is to bring the comparative public policy perspective on network governance and public service delivery.