

*Mid-Day Meals during COVID-19 Pandemic: A Study of
Three Districts of Gujarat*

Smruti Bulsari, University of Essex
Kiran Pandya, Drs Kiran and Pallavi Patel Global University
Yogesh Vansiya, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat

Mid-day meal (MDM) Scheme was launched by the Government of India (GoI) in 1995 with an objective to encourage enrollment, increase attendance, improve retention rate, reduce the drop-out rate and most importantly, improving the nutritional status among children studying in primary (including upper primary) schools (GoI, 2017). Children enrolled in class 1 to 8 are primary school students. In fact, some states had implemented the mid-day meal scheme even before 1995. Gujarat had implemented this scheme, way back in 1984 (Government of Gujarat, 2019). Over these years, the scheme evolved from covering the children of government schools, government-aided schools and local-body schools to include children studying under the education guarantee schemes (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) centres. EGS and AIE are non-formal education centres; the details could be found in Department of Elementary Education and Literacy, (2001). The nutritional needs of the children are taken care by providing them a square meal for lunch at school. As per the MDM implementation guidelines (GoI: MHRD, 2011), the meals are required to be cooked in the school premises, either by a dedicated staff employed by the school or by the members of the self-help groups (SHGs). The scheme is funded jointly by the Centre and the State in the ratio of 60:40 and 100 per cent by the Central Government for Union Territories (GoI: MHRD, 2019b). Details of MDM scheme can be found in (GoI: MHRD, 2019a).

School closures following the lockdown, imposed as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, naturally led to closures of the MDM kitchens. Amid the lockdown and school closures, the results of a study by KMIC, (2020) reveal that 85 per cent of the children are deprived of the benefits to be provided in lieu of the mid-day meals, and also

that the parents could not go to the school for claiming their children's MDM entitlements. The results of the said study are based on survey of 375 parents of 700 children, enrolled in primary schools of Ahmedabad. It is worth noting that out of 700 children, 27 per cent (189 children) are in secondary school and hence, 511 children are primary school students. Out of these 511 children, only 27 per cent (138 children) are enrolled in government school. Thus, the findings about the efficacy (or otherwise) of MDM of the KMIC, (2020) study are based on a small very sample of 138 children, who are entitled to MDM. Moreover, these children belong to those households which are associated with the community initiatives of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIMA). Therefore, the finding that 85 per cent of children were deprived of MDM benefits on the basis of this small sample of Ahmedabad requires to be interpreted with caveats. The study partially quotes Katiyar, (2020) that the Government of Gujarat (GoG) made it easier to obtain food grains by providing the coupons that can be exchanged for food grains at the public distribution system (PDS) shops. However, apart from this, Katiyar, (2020) clearly states that Gujarat is among those seven states that have performed better in comparison with the other states in distributing MDM entitlements. She further mentions that in Gujarat, even the amount for cooking costs is paid to children's families over and above distribution of food grains.

GoI has been working proactively to ensure that the children are not deprived of the nutritional requirements even during the lockdown or school closures. GoI, (2020a) issued a circular on March 20, 2020, four days before the lockdown was implemented, to provide food security allowance (FSA) to children, while the schools would remain closed. The subsequent letter dated July 3, 2020, GoI, (2020b) provided for the FSA to children even during the summer vacations, with an intention to safeguarding their immunity during the pandemic by retaining their nutritional levels.

On one hand, the government is taking proactive measures to ensure that the nutritional needs of the children are met and their immunity is safeguarded. Katiyar, (2020) reports that the performance of Gujarat is better than most other states on distributing MDM benefits, while the results of (KMIC, 2020) results show that the 85 per cent children are deprived of the benefits in lieu of MDM. Therefore, in order to get a first-hand information on the state of MDM benefits disbursement in Gujarat, an exploratory study was undertaken in remote rural and tribal areas of three districts (Surat, Tapi and The Dangs). Tapi and The Dangs are tribal districts with very low-level of infrastructure facilities. In Tapi, only 9.8 per cent of its population live in urban area, whereas this percentage is 10.81 for The Dangs (GoI, 2011). The percentage of tribal population in Tapi is 84.18 per cent and that in The Dangs is 94.6 per cent (GoI, 2011). The Dangs is a hilly terrain, with a large cover of dense forests. Schools selected for the present study from Tapi and the Dangs are far away from their respective

district headquarters. Surat is a developed district but the talukas selected for the study are far away from the district headquarters, with modest infrastructure development. Thus, the study covered schools that are remote, largely rural and far away from urban centres.

A Structured questionnaire (schedule) with fixed-choice alternatives as well as open-ended questions was designed, pilot tested and then the schedules were canvassed during January – February 2021. The team personally visited 197 schools in 14 talukas of these three districts. The schedules were canvassed on principals in 177 schools, whereas in 20 schools, where principals were not available, the schedules had to be canvassed on school teachers.

The objective of this study is to examine the situation about the distribution of the MDM / FSA benefits to the primary school children, during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the schools were closed. The present study does not attempt to generalize the situation of the distribution of MDM / FSA benefits, rather it attempts to provide an independent perspective by undertaking a survey of primary schools in the remote and rural areas of these three districts of Gujarat.

Out of 197 schools selected for the study, MDM was not implemented in three schools and two schools did not respond. The analysis is therefore based on 192 schools, with a total enrolment of 17096 students (8641 boys and 8480 girls).

Out of 192 schools in Surat, Tapi and The Dangs, 158 (82.3 per cent) schools supplied food grains as per the GoI, (2020c) circular, 23 (12 per cent) schools transferred the amount equivalent to the MDM ration, including cooking oil, spices and cooking fuel to the students' bank accounts, whereas 11 (5.7 per cent) schools supplied food grains and cooking oil, and deposited the amount for spices and cooking fuel to the students' accounts.

Distribution of food grains and cooking oil was done through the PDS shops. The village people were able to visit the PDS for their monthly ration even during the lockdown months. Therefore, they collected the MDM ration, allocated for their children, at the time when they went to the shop for the family ration. Teachers / principals distributed the coupons for MDM ration to the children / household of the children, when visiting a street to impart education; street education was imparted during the school closure. Each day, the teacher / principal visited two to three streets and hence, there was no delay or lapse in distributing the MDM ration coupons.

On further investigating the response of depositing the amount for entire MDM / for spices and cooking fuel to children's bank accounts, the principals / school teachers informed the team that the school has taken special interest to open the bank accounts of in children's name when they get enrolled to the school. Therefore, most of their students already had a bank account. Since these children are minor (under the age of 18 years), their accounts are operated by either or both of their parents. Thus, for those children, whose bank accounts

were yet to be opened, the monetary benefits were transferred to their parents' bank accounts.

The food is cooked for the entire family. Therefore, the parents are not required to withdraw money from the child's bank account to buy additional spices and cooking fuel separately. However, in case any need arises to buy spices or cooking fuel for the family and money is required, the joint account holder of the child would operate the bank account to buy necessities for the family. No evidence of misuse of MDM amount, deposited in the child's bank account, was found during the survey.

These findings are based on the details given by the school principal / teachers to the study team members. Children's parents could not be contacted because during the working hours of the school, their parents would be either working on an agricultural field, in the factory or as a casual labourer. Therefore, the results of the present study are not directly comparable with that of (KMIC, 2020). However, on informal interactions of the study team members with some parents, wherever they could be contacted, they confirmed the information collected from the school principals / teachers. Moreover, the team did not find any reason to doubt / question the responses of principals / school teachers.

The analysis further reveals that in 139 (53.5 per cent) schools, principals ensured the smooth conduct of the MDM / FSA. In 67 (25.8 per cent) schools, officers for monitoring the performance of MDM along with the school principals / teachers were responsible for the purpose. In 41 (15.8 per cent) schools, teachers are responsible where as in 13 (4 per cent) schools, either the village leader or a leading citizen of the village is found to have taken the responsibility of ensuring the smooth conduct of MDM / FSA. The percentages here, add up to more than 100 per cent. This is because in some schools, more than one person (principal and school teacher, principal and MDM officer, or principal, school teacher and MDM officer, and such combinations) are found to shoulder the responsibility of smooth conduct of MDM / FSA distribution.

Thus, the present study gives an independent and alternative perspective on the status of MDM benefits distribution based on a survey of 192 schools in remote and rural areas of three districts of Gujarat. It is found that in these schools the alternative arrangements made for distributing MDM benefits, following the guidelines of the GoG and GoI, by setting up a system to ensure that the benefits reach the children.

Acknowledgements

Rushang Bhandari, Shambhavi Mehta and all Field Investigators.

References

- Department of Elementary Education and Literacy. (2001). Handbook for Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative and Innovative Education. MHRD, Government of India. <http://14.139.60.153/handle/123456789/2708>
- Government of Gujarat. (2019). National Programme of Mid-Day Meal in Schools: Annual Work Plan and Budget (pp. 1–122). http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/Files/PAB/PAB-2019-20/States/Gujarat/1_Writeup_Gujarat.pdf
- Government of India. (2011). Census of India. Ministry of Home Affairs.
- Government of India. (2017). Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme: Manual for District-Level Functionaries. <https://darp.gov.in/sites/default/files/Mid%20Day%20Meal%20Scheme.pdf>
- Government of India. (2020a, April 29). Mid-Day Meal [Circular]. http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/Files/OrderCirculars/2020/JS_DO-Letters/D.O%20Letter-29-04-2020.pdf
- Government of India. (2020b, July 3). Release of Funds towards provision of MDM / Food Security Allowance (FSA) during Summer Vacations as One-Time Special Measure due to COVID-19 Pandemic [Circular]. http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/Files/OrderCirculars/2020/Letter%20for%20actual%20expenditure%20during%20summer%20vacations.pdf
- Government of India. (2020c, August 31). Mid-Day Meal [Circular].
- Government of India: MHRD. (2011). Centralised Kitchens in Mid-Day-Meal Scheme. Press Information Bureau. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=70884>
- Government of India: MHRD. (2019a). Cabinet approves revisions/modifications in National Programme for Mid-Day Meal in Schools. Press Information Bureau. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=70884>
- Government of India: MHRD. (2019b). Central and State Shares in Mid-Day-Meal. Press Information Bureau. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=70884>
- Katiyar, P. (2020, August 1). Midday Meal Scheme: Shoddy Implementation by States Keeping Kids Hungry Amid Lockdown. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/midday-meal-scheme-shoddy-implementation-by-states-keeping-kids-hungry-amid-lockdown/articleshow/77305936.cms>

KMIC. (2020). Access to Learning for Low-Income Households During COVID-19 Pandemic: Case for Ahmedabad (pp. 1–38) [Research-based]. Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad and UNICEF.