

SPOTLIGHT ON INDIA

Transformative efforts across multiple systems to safeguard nutrition outcomes in the context of the polycrisis

India's response to the polycrisis was deliberate, rapid and flexible, mobilizing its extensive national social protection system as well as other systems to safeguard access to nutritious diets, essential services and positive nutrition and care practices. The response built on existing policies, programmes, and legislative measures that place nutrition and food security at the centre of the country's rights-based and inclusive development agenda. The Government's unprecedented efforts helped improve food security for the most vulnerable.

Adaptive measures were taken to sustain the delivery of essential services: When Anganwadi (community childcare) centres closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, community-based Anganwadi workers continued to provide services, such as supplementary food rations, micronutrient supplements (IFA and vitamin A), growth monitoring and promotion, and counselling through home visits.⁹¹ Many of the nutrition rehabilitation centres for the management of children with severe acute malnutrition continued to function via outpatient services. When schools closed nationwide, the school meals programme pivoted to provide take-home rations for children,⁹² and school-based nutrition services were instead provided through the health system's community-based programmes. For example, the Ministry of Education issued guidance requesting all states to provide either hot meals or a Food Security Allowance comprised of food grains, pulses, oil to all eligible children, while community-based workers provided IFA supplementation to adolescent girls during home visits to mitigate disruptions to school-based health and nutrition programmes.

Existing delivery platforms were expanded with budget support: Existing national social assistance programmes (which already had extensive reach) expanded their food and cash distribution rapidly following the allocation of new Government funding.⁹³⁻⁹⁶ National social protection programmes shared databases to expand support to the poorest and most vulnerable. Many Indian States initiated additional social assistance packages, leveraging their existing delivery systems, to enhance the impact and reach of these social assistance programmes.⁹⁷⁻⁹⁹

Existing and newly emerging vulnerable groups were supported: Migrant labourers were included within



the food ration programme and other expanded social protection programmes.⁹⁵ Additionally, the Reserve Bank of India offered loans specifically for women through self-help groups in rural regions and credit lines with up to ten-year repayment options.⁶⁷

Technology drove innovation: Mobile apps were used to register for social assistance programmes and access payments.¹⁰⁰ A mobile monitoring system also provided information on eligibility for support and facilitated decision-making.

Market-driven innovations helped rebuild a disrupted food system: Government triggered several initiatives to protect the food system, ranging from large-scale procurement of farm produce (e.g., wheat, milk, fruits, vegetables), to employment guarantees, cash transfers for farmers and adjusted loan repayment schedules. In addition, the private sector played a key role in adapting the food system in response to the polycrisis, including through public-private partnerships and market-driven innovations (e.g., improved use of technology to better match supply with demand).

No single system is likely to be sufficiently resilient on its own to fully mitigate the impact on food and nutrition security in the context of a polycrisis. This rich collection of country experiences demonstrates the importance of leveraging multiple systems – food, health, water and sanitation, education and social protection systems – and enabling them to be more resilient in safeguarding access to nutritious diets, essential services and support positive feeding and care practices during a polycrisis.

The country experiences shared in this chapter demonstrate that building resilient systems that can deliver for nutrition requires focusing on the most

vulnerable groups via social protection systems, food system actions (such food fortification), strengthening local capacities and empowering communities, and leveraging enabling factors such as collaborative platforms and shared information management systems and technologies. As countries continue to face crises that threaten the nutrition of the most vulnerable, putting these learnings into practice to build more resilient systems has never been more urgent.