

Press-Release

Social Security targets the weakest and most vulnerable sections of our society such as the elderly and children, offering them a basic level of protection. The Indian government offers its citizens several social security schemes and a 10 state survey by I.I.T Delhi and ICSSR was recently conducted which studied the impact and implementation of these schemes.

The schemes that the team studied offered a security net from the birth to death of individuals. The schemes studied were the ICDS, MDM, MGNREGA, PDS and Pensions. A team consisting of six students and members of local organization PAPAN conducted the survey in two districts of Himachal Pradesh, and across 8 villages. The team went to schools, aanganwadi centers, conducted household interviews, had village meetings as well as spoke to government officials to get the widest possible picture of these schemes.

Himachal Pradesh is widely credited as having a well-functioning social security system. While 4 out of the 5 schemes functioned quite well in comparison to several other states, the state of the MGNREGA was found to be quite poor in the state. Ignorance of application procedures and general lack of awareness have been major obstacles in helping labourers realize their MGNREGA entitlements.

The team started in the district of Kullu before moving to Sirmour. Aanganwadi centers and schools were visited to see the impact and coverage of the ICDS and MDM, and overall the picture seems to be quite positive. Families reported having received medicines and take-home ration for pregnant women. The aanganwadis seemed to function well by opening regularly with one exception in a village in Sirmour. While children were getting pre-school education, the team felt that the workers should be given more training so that they could engage the children better. Parents should also be encouraged to send their children to the aanganwadis more often.

The mid-day meal is served regularly in schools, is cooked hygienically and is usually nutritious. All schools had a School-Management Committee (SMC) which oversaw the scheme. Though a few teachers complained that MDM disrupts classroom activity by distracting the students, nearly all the teachers argued for its continuation and said that the overall health and nutrition of children had improved since the initiation of MDM. Parents also were in favour of the scheme, saying that it had helped out poor families especially who could not always afford good-quality food for their children.

Overall the team saw that the PDS is functioning quite well through the ration shops and depots. Himachal Pradesh offers several dals and mustard oil in its depots. While the delivery and quality of rice and wheat was good, most families complained of a shortage in dals and sugar. Hardly anyone reported receiving kerosene, and while the team heard allegations that it was being sold on the black market, there was never any evidence to substantiate these claims. The team had also asked families about their diet, and all the families seemed to be eating a nutritious and balanced diet.

The team had a detailed discussion with families about the proposed Cash Transfer scheme, where families would get money in their bank account to buy the same amount of ration from the market instead of the ration shops. According to our survey, majority of the families prefer the ration shops over cash transfers. Some of the reasons for this choice include the inaccessibility of banks, hassles involved in multiple visits and the possibility of the use of the cash on non-ration expenses.

The pension schemes that were studied were the National Old-Age pension, Himachal Pradesh Old-Age pension and the Widow Pension. While all pensioners reported getting the money on time every three months, they all complained that the amount was too low, and not enough to cover their expenses. Given the age of the pensioners, their major expenses were for medicines, and thus it was very important for them to have some cash in hand so that they could pay for any unforeseen emergencies. We also encountered a problem in Sirmaur district that the pensioners had to go to the post office themselves in order to get the pensions. This was in contrast to Kully district where the postman would come to the houses of the pensioners.

After listing out these positive findings from the survey, we would like to elaborate on some of the areas that need improvement. One finds that despite the efforts of the government and various officials, that many eligible people are out of the coverage of the pension lists. This is a huge problem especially for those who have been abandoned by their children, and do not have any regular source of income.

Similarly, the team also heard that families were put on the BPL lists on the basis of the political parties that they voted for, rather than the actual income levels of the families. This is a serious allegation, both in terms of the BPL lists and Pension schemes and needs to be looked into seriously.

For the team, it was also disheartening to see that discrimination on the basis of caste was quite wide-spread and prevalent all over Himachal. Many families that we interviewed said that they objected to their children eating with children of lower-castes in the schools. In addition we saw in the aanganwadi centers children from lower-castes often got left out. They either voluntarily decided to not attend the aanganwadis or were not visited by the aanganwadi sevika.

Coming to the issue of MGNREGA, the state of this scheme is quite bad in Himachal Pradesh, with huge levels of corruption and the collusion of many local stakeholders. To begin with, many of the families did not have their job cards. This leads to several problems, as the families themselves are often not aware that fake entries are being made in their job cards. The awareness about MGNREGA is especially low amongst female and SC respondents. Himachal Pradesh also has a system of thekedari which is prohibited by the Act. People reported that entries are made on their job cards which are either entirely false, or the number of days is inflated. When the money arrives in the personal bank accounts of the people, the thekedaar takes the people to the

bank, asks them to withdraw all the money, gives them a small cut and then keeps the majority of the money with himself.

This state of things in Himachal was extremely worrying for the team. Hence, a public meeting was held in the village of Matiana, in Shilai Block of Sirmaur District. The Gram Rozgar Sevak was invited to the event and he helped to clear a lot of doubts in people's minds about MGNREGA. He also warned the public against many potential channels of corruption during MNREGA job creation. A local volunteer from the NGO PAPN, who had joined the survey also helped to explain the procedures of MGNREGA from applying the job card to claiming the final wage, unemployment allowance or late payment compensation. Participants expressed their desire to work under NREGA by submitting a joint written application to the Gram Rozgar Sewak. Notably, many women and scheduled castes people attended the meeting and spoke their mind.

The Himchal Pradesh survey group consisted of six students: Pranjal, Shikha Nehra, Ujjainee Sharma, Deepak Vasisht, Kanwaljeet Singh, Yan Yifei and local volunteer Subhash Tomar (PAPN).