

COMMUNITY CANTEENS 2.0

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Àn Indira canteen off Uttarahalli Road. On Monday, the canteens had served breakfast, lunch and dinner for free. | Photo Credit: [K. Murali Kumar](#)

In his recent address to the nation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a three-month extension to the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana. The government would provide 5 kg of grains and 1 kg of chickpea monthly to about 800 million beneficiaries across the country. Alongside, he highlighted the implementation of the 'One Nation, One Ration' (ONOR) scheme to improve access to subsidised grains for migrant workers. Lack of access to food drove millions of them to their native villages during the lockdown period.

While these measures are welcome, they may fall short of reaching all sections of this vulnerable population. Most migrant workers do not live with families; many do not cook their meals. Instead, a significant number rely on roadside vendors and dhabas. Without access to cooking arrangement or fuel, only subsidised grains are not a sufficient solution to ensure nourishment. Neither would it be sufficient to attract them back to the urban areas as access to affordable food remains a major concern. Instead, is there a way to ensure safe, nutritious and affordable food for all urban poor, while saving fiscal resources, creating jobs, and furthering sustainability goals?

The solution lies in tweaking an existing approach — community canteens. More than 10 States have run community canteens. Some notable examples include the Amma Canteens in Tamil Nadu and Indira Canteens in Karnataka. However, a drawback is that most of these canteens rely on continuous government support for their sustenance as meals are usually priced unsustainably low at 5-10 per plate. However, our preliminary analysis suggests that such canteens could be operationally self-sustainable by pricing the nutritious meals at 15-20 per plate. This would still be lower than what most dhabas and roadside vendors charge for a meal. While the Central government should extend the initial capital support, the implementation at the State level should be led by urban local bodies or municipal corporations, in collaboration with private entities as service providers.

Our analysis suggests that with an initial social investment of 26,500 crore towards 60,000 canteens and about 8,200 kitchens, we could serve three nourishing meals a day to the 30 million urban poor workers, primarily migrants. If all urban migrant workers rely on community canteens instead of ONOR, the investment pays back itself in less than six years, as it helps avoid the potential food subsidy outlay due to ONOR, leading to annual savings of about 4,500 crore thereafter.

Community canteens could also contribute to jobs, growth and sustainability. The 60,000 canteens, each serving about 500 beneficiaries on average, would generate more than 1.2 million jobs to serve 90 million meals a day. These canteens would also help bridge the nourishment gap among poor urban workers. Further, the government should leverage community canteens to shift diets and agriculture production towards more sustainable and sustainably harvested food crops. These canteens must incorporate low-cost yet nutritious and environmentally sustainable food items in the plate — bringing in coarse grains such as millets and sorghum into the dietary patterns. These canteens would create the demand signals for the farmers to diversify their crops and focus on sustainably harvested produce.

Under extreme circumstances, the lack of access to food is a matter of survival. But even in regular times, access to nutritious food is essential. Pandemic or not, access to affordable and safe food should not be an uncertainty for any section of the society. A renewed approach to community canteens would not only achieve nutritional security for migrant workers but would also create new jobs, save fiscal resources, support economic growth and promote sustainable diets and agriculture.

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