

INDIA: Advancing the Right to Food by empowering the most vulnerable to claim State support

India has the world's largest number of undernourished people. To address this, the government introduced a host of programs to support the Right to Food. But are these really effective for the most vulnerable? Sunita Dhan, a young mother from Khunti district in the state of Jharkhand, has been struggling to provide her two-year old daughter with adequate nutrition. By empowering citizens like her to get the support they are entitled to, civil society can play a crucial role in advancing the Right to Food.



Despite improvements malnutrition remains above acceptable levels

India, the most populous country in the world, has enjoyed steady economic growth, achieving self-sufficiency in grain production in recent years. Yet 43% of children continue to be chronically undernourished. In addition, the benefits of high growth have not been equitably shared among regions. The state of Jharkhand exemplifies this, recording significantly less development than other parts of the country.

India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme aims to address malnutrition among young children and women by providing nutritious meals through rural child care centres called *anganwadi*. However, due to inefficiencies in design and delivery many women who are in particular need are left empty-handed. Often, they are not aware of the support they are entitled to.

Advocating for effective implementation of safety net scheme

Welthungerhilfe and its partner Partnering Hope into Action Foundation (PHIA) decided to intervene to ensure people get access to their rights. The first step was to empower women by creating awareness of their entitlements and helping them to raise their voice. This included encouraging them to monitor the ICDS scheme and provide feedback on its performance, making *anganwadi* workers more responsive to their needs.

Sunita Dhan has two young children. Her 2-year-old is severely malnourished as she was unable to breastfeed her after birth. At a meeting in her village organized by PHIA, she learnt that ICDS provides supplementary nutrition free of charge to children from 6 months to 6 years old in the form of hot cooked meals and take-home rations (lentils, rice, jaggery, peanuts and potatoes). PHIA also mobilised women to take part in a social accountability exercise using the Community Score Card. In this way, beneficiaries interact directly with service providers. Sunita realised that she had been deprived of her entitlements: the *anganwadi* centres would be closed for days and leave mothers without urgently needed support. She and other women raised their concerns in a village forum called *Gram Sabha*.

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Feeling empowered

With the support of PHIA the women went a step further: They participated in seminars and roundtables and attended a public hearing organized by the State Food Commission in October 2023. They also filed an online complaint. For women who had never stepped outside their villages this was indeed an empowering process. They now have a better functioning *anganwadi* centre. The condition of Sunita's daughter as well as other malnourished children has improved. "In the beginning, I was the only one raising my voice against the way the *anganwadi* centre was functioning. However, after the community score card exercise many more women are now coming forward", Sunita proudly reports. Rani Hassa, a field worker at PHIA,

adds: "I am very happy that women in the villages have started realising their rights. If they see any shortcomings in the functioning of *anganwadi* centres, they immediately raise their voice against it."

PHIA's work did not stop here. They took the issues raised at the grassroots level to block, district and state level government officials. They also shared the benefits of conducting Community Score Card exercises. Officials have welcomed this feedback mechanism for highlighting gaps in service delivery, prompting plans for its expansion across all villages. Advocacy efforts with senior officials resulted in positive changes such as the opening of new centres, including additional food such as eggs in meals and *anganwadi* workers receiving their salary regularly.

Lessons learned

- **Information and raising awareness:** Raising awareness of rights holders, especially of those whose rights are being violated, is crucial. If the poor and hungry see themselves as powerless, unable to act or respond, they won't be able to uphold and assert their rights.
- **Need for Right to Food coalition at macro level:** The role of such coalitions is essential to do advocacy and channel evidence from grassroots to the national level in order to galvanize policy, legal and administrative changes. The presence of eminent individuals in the coalition with vast knowledge and experience encourages duty bearers to consider the recommendations and suggestions they receive.
- **Capacity building & effective monitoring:** Both rights holders and duty bearers have considerable capacity building needs. Rights holders need to understand their entitlements while duty bearers need to be trained and sensitized regarding their roles and responsibilities. Effective monitoring using instruments such as the Community Score Card is key to determine whether progress is being made and whether officials are meeting their obligations.



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Suchita Kumari,
Project Coordinator, PHIA

PHIA's Right to Food-project in Jharkhand has built a robust two-way bridge between government and communities to prioritize, discuss and implement strategies for improving the accessibility of nutritious and diverse food to vulnerable groups.

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