

MEALS AT SCHOOLS IN INDIA AND THE USA: THROUGH THE LENS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

For the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more challenging for India and other countries such as the United States to provide meals to students mainly because of their schools having to be shut down frequently and unpredictably due to the number of daily infections and the severity of the situation as a whole. Established to address the lack of food security and safety for starving families, India's government-led Mid-day Meal Programme (MDMP) is the world's largest school meal service programme, followed in second place by its US counterpart, the National School Lunch Programme (NSLP). The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has issued directives to state governments to look into the supply of food grains or deposit funds into the bank accounts of the students' parents to ensure continued supply of food, especially in the event of lockdowns. However, many states in India have not been able to fully implement the MDMP; in contrast, the Federal government in the United States has ensured that school meals reached children in need during lockdowns. This article presents a comparative analysis of the meal service programmes being administered in both countries and how India could adopt the methods being used in the US. The authors also put forward other possible solutions as to how policymakers and practitioners in India can enhance food security for families in need.

Keywords: covid-19, pandemic, mid-day meal programme, primary schools, distribution channel, national school lunch programme, public-private partnership

Introduction

Pandemics can pose a great threat to human lives and the economies in many countries throughout the world, especially over extended periods of time. Accordingly, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 have, not surprisingly, included the spread of a life-threatening disease in the absence of the global administration of a vaccine, global economic insecurity, and the intermittent shutting down of schools worldwide (Qiu, Rutherford, Mao, & Chu, 2017). Throughout history, there have been incidents of schools being shut down due to risks of human-to-human transmission of viruses, but it is safe to say that the world has never witnessed such a large-scale global lockdown of schools before the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a recent UNESCO report, 185 countries have implemented school closures this year, and approximately nine out of ten school children globally have been unable to attend classes due to the pandemic (“COVID-19: Educational Disruption and Response,” 2020). Undoubtedly, attending school benefits students as they gain skills, knowledge, and the education needed to live autonomously and successfully in later life. It also assists them in understanding social skills, teamwork, and the significance of collaborative efforts to live in a society. Another significant benefit of attending school for students, which is also the main focus of this article, is having the opportunity to get a balanced and nutritious meal. Many students, including their parents, look forward to meals because they cannot afford to have a balanced diet at home. School meals therefore provide children with sustainable development, and this may be the only meal a day for many children around the world (Gleeson, 2020).

School meal service programmes constitute a global initiative to support underprivileged students by either offering them free meals or at subsidised prices. Several countries offer a school meal programme, such as the National School Lunch Programme (NSLP) in the US (the second-largest food assistance programme in the country), which provides nutritious meals to indigent children (Cullen & Chen, 2017 refer to Congressional Budget Office, 2015). Likewise, in India, nearly 120 million students are served hot cooked food under the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Programme (Joyita, 2013).

The COVID-19 outbreak has put millions of children around the world at risk of losing the benefits of regular school meals. In addition, the pandemic has also put governments in a quandary as school actors, civil society, and policymakers globally are unsure how to continue to provide students with the benefits of school meals during lockdowns as the efficacy of these programmes involve complex logistics and administrative activities. Countries around the world are considering innovative ways to continue their meal service programmes such as using school buildings, nearby parks, or community centres as hubs to deliver food; delivering meals directly to remotely situated students; or implementing money transfer programmes to meet this challenge (Saavedra, 2020). Despite several contingency plans, many difficulties and gaps have been observed, particularly in developing countries, in the efforts to continue the supply of school meals during lockdowns. Thus, this article is an attempt to identify the gaps between existing policies and their implementation and to explore solutions to reduce the gaps, as well as ensure equity and equality between the developed and developing countries.

Emergency Plans for the Mid-Day Meal Programme: India

In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) instructed states and union territories to distribute packaged meals or the equivalent amount of food grains as a substitute to students in need. Transferring money to parents' bank accounts was an alternate solution to continue the supply of meals to these students during the lockdown period (“HRD Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal to discuss issues related to COVID-19,” 2020). The Ministry also increased funds for the MDM scheme by Rs 800 crore (106,962,880.00 USD) owing to the COVID-19 outbreak in India (“Centre increases funds for Mid-Day Meal Programme given COVID-19 situation,” 2020).

Obstacles in Implementation of the Scheme

Despite these initiatives, many states in India have failed to deliver mid-day meals to the students in their schools. The Gujarat government, for instance, was unable to provide mid-day meals to around five million children enrolled in 32,891 schools (“COVID-19: No school meals for over 5 million Gujarat students,” 2020). This came as a surprise because Gujarat is the second state after Tamil Nadu that had started this scheme in 1984, intending to feed primary school students one meal a day. In fact, the statistics on the mid-day meal programme reported by Gujarat state in fiscal year 2005-06 had narrated a success story, the government having reached out to a total of 31,152 schools and covering 3.8 million recipients under the state budget of Rs 201 crores (26, 868, 152.40 USD) (Deodhar et al., 2007). In 2020, over 1.4 million children in Uttarakhand state did not receive their mid-day meals, food grains or allowances during April and May (Mishra, 2020). The Tripura government also failed to deliver food grains and has been unable to provide the full meal allowance to the children (Mishra, 2020).

On the 25th of July 2020, the *Indian Express* reported on the struggles of 80-year-old Sarbati Devi; living in a remote village in the Punjab district of India, she was more worried about her five grandchildren

than her own health during this pandemic. Following the closure of schools due to the nationwide lockdown from the 23rd of March 2020, she received two kilograms of rice, two kilograms of wheat along with Rs 200 (USD 2.68) which was then credited to her granddaughter's bank account, but only once (Goyal, 2020). In another story, Sandeep Kaur, a mother of two, hailing from another remote village in Punjab, stated that they had also received some amount of rice and wheat (only once) during this lockdown period, but no money.

Many families in the Punjab region, whose children are the beneficiaries of the MDM scheme, are eagerly waiting for schools to reopen so that they can be assured of at least one nutritious meal a day for their children as part of the Midday Meal scheme (Goyal, 2020). Clearly therefore, there is a gap between the decisions made by the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development and implementation at the state level regarding the supply of mid-day meals during the pandemic. A report published in *The Tribune* entitled "Coronavirus: Providing Mid-day Meals to Students at Home is Difficult for Teachers" stated that certain states are not able to execute a workable plan at the ground level (Mander, 2020). In many cases, schools do not have enough food grains to distribute, and some are buying the grains from local grocery stores on credit to continue the MDM scheme; but the question arises, are the funds allocated by the central government insufficient?

Fund transfer was another solution given by the central government to help in the distribution of the food grains to remote students during the lockdown periods. In the case of the absence of a student's bank account, especially for new students, money can be transferred to the parents' bank account as an alternate solution. But do all schools have the parents' bank account details to transfer the amount quickly during this time of crisis? Even if the funds are available to the parents or students' accounts, how will the family spend the money? How will they access food? More importantly, will the students receive well-balanced nutritious food? (Mander, 2020).

The global pandemic and the resulting lockdowns have forced poor and migrant families to go back to their hometowns since many jobs and employment opportunities are closed for an uncertain amount of time. The question here is, how would school authorities track those students who have moved from their registered location to more remote places? It might be a usual and common practice during non-pandemic situations; however, new measures that are not location-specific are needed. Many reports have stated that school authorities have mobilised teachers to distribute the food grains to the students (Goyal, 2020). Curfew passes were issued to the teachers, but the necessary safety kits were not provided (Tiwari, 2020; Mander, 2020). From a professional point of view, one can also ask whether it was appropriate to ask the teachers to visit high-risk zones to distribute food grains. This action not only puts the teachers at risk but also their family members, not to mention the students and their families receiving the food grains as well.

The other imperative question is, how would teachers commute during a lockdown when public transportation is not available (Sharma, 2020)? Moreover, will the teachers be reimbursed for their expenditure on transportation and how will they be compensated for the risks involved? One report stated that the school administration had asked teachers to use their own vehicles (Goyal, 2020), but not all teachers own vehicles or know how to operate their vehicles independently. Another significant observation is that there seems to be no clear guidelines available about the logistics, such as the distance covered by the teachers, time spent in distributing food grains, telephone communication with the students and their families, etc. Who will ensure that the student will be there to take the grains from the teacher? Again, there is no specific mechanism in place to address all these gaps like calling students before visiting their place, and availability of students' contact numbers for ease of access to the teachers who are currently working from home. In the post-pandemic period, there is a need to upgrade digital databases to help schools make all personal information of the students available to the authorities.

The History of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and its Present State of Affairs

The rationale and features of the Mid-Day Meal programme in India have a long history. It began as a national programme for nutrition support to primary education (NP-NSPE) and later was popularised as a mid-day meal scheme (Chutani, 2012). As per a detailed report from the Ministry of Education, Government of India (2006), the project was launched in 1925 by the Madras Municipal Corporation to support underprivileged children using state resources (James, 2013). By the mid-1980s, three more states - Gujarat, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu - and one Union Territory (Pondicherry) as well as tribal areas in some states like

Madhya Pradesh and Orissa had joined the Programme (Jayalakshmi, 2014). After a decade or so, between the years 1990 to 1991, the number of states implementing the Mid-Day Meal Programme increased by twelve-fold. Thus, the periphery of the programme was continuously expanding as more states joined in. In the initial phase, it was implemented only for primary students, using state resources that were sometimes combined with international assistance. Two states, namely Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, implemented the programme entirely with international aid (Sharma & Saini, 2015).

On the 15th of August 1995, the National Programme for Nutrition Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) was launched as a centrally sponsored scheme in 2,408 blocks throughout the country to facilitate the funding issue (blocks - akin to clusters of villages - are used for administrative purposes, especially for the implementation of legislation regarding planning and development by the Gram Panchayats or village councils). The NP-NSPE was subsequently introduced to all the blocks in the country between the years 1997 to 1998. However, for the first six years after the launch of the scheme (1995-2001), most states and union territories offered monthly dry rations containing wheat or rice to the children based on their school attendance ("Supreme Court Orders on the Right to Food," 2005), but failed to organise efforts to provide a cooked meal every day.

In the years 2001 and 2004, the Supreme Court of India issued two landmark orders regarding the Mid-Day Meal Programme. In 2001, the Court ordered all states and union territories to provide cooked food under the Mid-Day Meal Programme instead of dry rations ("Supreme Court Orders on the Right to Food," 2005). The programme was also made mandatory to be applied in every government and government-assisted primary school for the students from first to fifth grade. In 2002, this programme was expanded to include children studying in centres run by the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) as well as the Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) Scheme.

In 2004, the second Court Order included many suggestions like extending the mid-day meal from fifth grade to tenth-grade students depending on the infrastructure and funding availability at the state level. A revised nutrition guideline was issued to improve the quality of the meal, central financial assistance to the state and union territories was offered to overcome funding issues, and provision of cooked mid-day meals proposed during the summer break to the drought-affected parts of the country (Kadkol, 2017). These orders and further follow-ups by the Supreme Court transformed the Mid-Day Meal Programme into a legal right; it received the tag of being a universal scheme, and now it is one of the most extensive school feeding programmes in the world. However, although there was some success with the revised guideline, the programme still faced many challenges at the state level, which were managerial, technical, and logistical in nature (Deodhar et al., 2007).

A managerial issue refers to understanding of the planning and supervision of the programme by the central, state, and local governments. Technical problems refer to the nutritional and food safety concerns, and logistical issues were about the day-to-day implementation of the programme, such as location, storage, preparation, serving and disposal of excess food in government schools.

Since the time of implementation of the programme, budgetary issues at the state and union territory level have remained the same even during the COVID-19 outbreak. This is the main reason reported by the states and union territories for the failure of delivering healthy grains to the students; i.e., the lack of budgetary control, organisation, and effective support mechanisms. Thus, although it has been 25 years since its launch, and to the great misfortune of students, the budget constraints associated with the Mid-Day Meal Programme are still a concern.

To further understand the root cause of the issues mentioned above, many past state-level annual reports of the MDMP were analysed and it has been observed that detailed guidelines, including a contingency plan to deal with any unforeseen situation, have already been formulated at the state level. Some of the suggestions made by the authorities regarding the programme at the state level are the involvement of NGOs for serving food to students in villages in case there is no centralised kitchen in the state. Several NGOs in the rural areas have not only helped in feeding students but also made provisions for health check-ups of the cooks and helpers involved with the MDMP ("National Programme of Mid-Day Meal in Schools," n.d.). The contingency plan includes the formation of a disaster management unit at the State level to face any crisis.

Emergency Plans for the National School Lunch Programme: United States

Every day nearly 30.4 million students in the United States depend on free or low-cost nutrition meals under the National School Lunch Programme (NSLP) (Izumi et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) initially offered the "Grab and Go" meal service and special waivers to schools so that they could continue the meal service like they do in their summer holidays (Peikes, 2020). For example, the New York Department of Education created 400 hubs offering meals to New Yorkers ("Free Meals," 2020). This service was not limited to school students only, but was also offered to people of all age groups. In addition, families were allowed to collect the packaged meals from schools or the food hubs on behalf of their children during the pandemic. Many districts further introduced meal delivery services by using school buses to address the challenges of increasing COVID-19 cases while adhering to social distancing norms, reaching people with limited mobility, and rural communities ("School Nutrition Association," 2020). Some media reports also highlighted that in a few districts, the teachers took the initiative to distribute meals to nearby students.

Battling Hunger in a COVID-19 World

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the death of thousands of people in the United States and has had an incredible effect on the lifestyle of millions of people across the country, including meal service workers, volunteers, and school authorities. According to the School Nutrition Association, the increased attrition rate of the school meal service workers, policy stipulations, and budgetary issues have complicated the efforts of school officials to continue their foodservice operation (Kamenetz, 2020). The anxieties and fears of the meal service workers on account of the increased number of positive and suspected cases of COVID-19 infections have stopped them from continuing their services.

Many school districts in the United States provided safety kits to the meal service workers, and they were instructed to follow strict physical distancing guidelines as a safety measure. The School Nutrition Association also collaborated with many non-profit organisations and private corporations to meet the challenges of fund requirements for transportation, safety kits, overtime pay for the meal service workers, and expanding the service across the country. Further, many school districts in the United States, including the New York School Board, introduced an app and a website along with emailing services to ease communication during the meal supply process. They allow users to register online for home delivery of meals, nutrition services, community food services, and food pick-up schedules in different locations across the country.

Establishment of the NSLP: Its Past and Present

The National School Lunch Programme (NSLP) was established under the National School Lunch Act (NSLA), signed by President Harry Truman in the year 1946 as a means to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the country's children and to encourage more domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other foods (Rude, 2016). Initially, the NSLP provided meals to students in some states and localities, but over the past few decades this programme has grown to become the second-largest domestic food and nutrition assistance scheme in terms of number of children served and federal dollars spent (Ralston, Newman, Clauson, Guthrie, & Buzby, 2008).

While poverty still exists in the US, statistics indicate that the number of underweight children is on the decline. Conversely, obesity among poor children in the country is on the rise (Ralston et al., 2008 refer to Ogden et al., 2006). The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 allows the Department of Agriculture to revamp school meals to meet new nutrition standards for the children. Most issues related to the NSLP are concerned with the meals' nutritional value, programme cost, and student participation in the programme (Ralston et al., 2008). Other than that, the students' changing household income during the year may cause them to move in and out of the scheme. This was addressed by the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act in 2004 which confirmed the eligibility of certified students for one full year at a time to reduce possible errors.

Both countries started the school lunch programme at a time when malnutrition was a primary concern due to poverty. In India, malnutrition is still a significant concern ("Malnutrition is still a severe problem for

India,” 2017), and maintaining the quality of the mid-day meal seems to be a significant challenge. Mid-day meals can play an essential role in improving school attendance, preventing classroom hunger, and promoting social equity with adequate resources and quality safeguards (Dreze & Goyal, 2003).

Strategies Adopted to Distribute School Meals in India and the US

The challenges faced by school meal service programmes are not country-specific; problems have been observed globally, which have put millions of school children on the verge of food ambiguity (Pasquini, 2020). The features of the programme in India and the United States are similar, such as the distribution of meals, food grains, and the transfer of money to the beneficiaries as well as operation guidelines to the States in both countries.

As per the national emergency guideline of the Stafford Act (1988), President Donald Trump authorised state and local governments to receive federal aid in order to expand access to food assistance, be given additional support in hiring more emergency workers, and obtain medical supplies (Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker & Bleich, 2020). The White House has also signalled the states to run the NSLP by themselves without relying on the federal government during this outbreak (Abad-Santos, 2020). Deploying the emergency grants to strengthen existing campaigns like "No Kid Hungry" with the collaboration of private partners was another way to ensure access to free meals for the children during the period of forced school closures ("No Kid Hungry Releases \$5 Million," 2020; "Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention," 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for policy-based solutions that ensure food security for millions of American children (Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker & Bleich, 2020).

Similarly, in India, the central government has allocated funds to the states, but they are expected to do the execution and implementation of the scheme independently. Thus, there is no significant difference between India and the US in terms of government policy and guidelines for the execution of school meal service programmes. However, when it comes to the implementation of those policies at the ground level, the gap is more profound in India. Many public-private partnerships (PPPs) are contributing to the distribution of meals to school children in the US, but in India, the number of PPP initiatives is significantly less. The term PPP includes non-government agencies such as NGOs, the corporate sector, partnership firms, individuals, and community-based establishments (Skelcher, 2005).

PPP Model Feeds US Children During the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) adopted a PPP model to deliver food packages to children in rural areas in order for the scheme to remain cost-effective and sustainable during the school closure in the lockdown period (Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker & Bleich, 2020). "Meals to You" is a successful PPP between USDA, the Hunger and Poverty programme by Baylor University, McLane Global, and PepsiCo in addressing hunger resulting from the pandemic and its economic consequences. This programme, which had started out as a summer pilot project in the year 2019, was expanded and successfully implemented during the lockdown. The meal boxes were transported directly to children's homes through the US Postal Service or other delivery services ("USDA Meals to You partnership delivers nearly 30M meals in COVID-19 response," 2020).

Meanwhile, the US Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue, declared a collaboration with private partners like Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, McLane Global, PepsiCo, and others to transport nearly one million (1,000,000) meals a week to school students living in rural areas in the country during the nationwide school closure ("U.S. Department of Agriculture," 2020). The same press release quoted the following statement made by Jeremy Everett, Executive Director at Baylor University Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty;

"We are grateful to come alongside USDA, PepsiCo, and McLane Global to ensure that children impacted by school closures get access to nutritious food regardless of where they live."

In the same context Jon Banner, Executive Vice President, PepsiCo Global Communications and President, PepsiCo Foundation had the following statement: *"As schools around the country close, millions*

of schoolchildren now don't know where their next meal is coming from. In the face of this unprecedented crisis, the private sector must help ensure these students have access to nutritious meals" ("PepsiCo and partners to provide millions of meals to children," 2020). This clearly shows the vital role played by private partners amid shared concern about children in the country during the outbreak. However, there is no exact mechanism observed to ensure that the food is distributed effectively and fairly while preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus through the enactment of this process. PepsiCo promised US\$1 million to support Baylor University to create a solution with the USDA that would recognise children in need and deliver at least two million (2,000,000) meals per week. Since then, the USDA has considerably increased its capacity to provide more meals under the emergency plan "Meals-to-You" with the close association of private partners (Schwabish, Joo, Waxman, & Spievack, 2020). Three types of models, such as outdoor distribution, meal delivery, and indoor distribution, have been followed in the United States to distribute school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gostin, Friedman, & Wetter, 2020).

MDM Distribution Strategy Adopted by India and its Current Situation

In India, the nationwide lockdown came into effect on March 24, and since then, 321 million school-going children have been out of school (Sukumar, 2020). The Indian school authorities have followed various approaches such as parents collecting food grains or cash at the school and delivering food grains to the children at home, as well as direct bank transfers and distribution at fair price shops since then (Scott, Menon, Yunus, & Parajuli, 2020).

Eventually, the overall responsibility for the implementation of the mid-day meal scheme will always lie with the state governments. No significant changes have occurred in over 25 years except the involvement of a few NGOs like Akshaya Patra, Naandi Foundation, and local communities (Josephine & Raju, 2008) in the distribution of cooked meals under this scheme. In addition, many states have failed to distribute the food grains to eligible students during the coronavirus outbreak, and the primary reason for this failure is implementation issues such as the lack of quality human resources, inadequate government funds, the communication gap between stakeholders, and the inefficient distribution process (Katiyar, 2020). Hence, unfortunately, there will always be a gap that exists between the guidelines of the MHRD for implementation of the MDMP and the execution process.

Many studies have suggested the implementation of public-private partnerships to strengthen the existing operational model of the mid-day meal scheme and to reduce the gaps at the execution level. In effect, the government needs to identify the best private partner to implement the mid-day meal scheme (Josephine & Raju, 2008). The primary benefits of considering the PPP model for the MDM scheme are better efficiency in streamlining the allocated government expenditure as well as increased accountability and transparency in the process. Additionally, more cost-effectiveness and higher productivity can be achieved with the involvement of private partners, thus increasing the number of beneficiaries participating in the MDMP (Naidu, Sudha, & Raghavaiah, n.d.). An example is the involvement of Fast-moving Consumer Groups (FMCG) companies in India like ITC to address the logistical issues in the MDM Programme through the channel of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Deodhar et al. (2007). Furthermore, this begs the question; if most of the companies in India are already involved in many social projects as a part of their CSR activity, then why not in the MDMP?

The implementation of the PPP model had in fact been observed at the state level during the initial days of the MDM Programme, but not during the COVID-19 outbreak. Knowing the benefits of the PPP model in the successful implementation of the MDMP, why have state governments not considered such a model during the first COVID-19 outbreak in India? The exception is a few states in India like Andhra Pradesh which had involved the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in providing mid-day meals in Tirupati's rural and urban *mandal* (Josephine & Raju, 2008). However, such private collaborations were not effective enough to meet the heightened requirements in running the MDM scheme in every state efficiently during the outbreak.

Adoption of the PPP Model in the Global Context During a Crisis

Participants Countries across the world have adopted the PPP model not only during the outbreak, but also prior to that, working together with governments in the field of education, food supply, health, and many

more. Primarily the main benefits have been the reduction of gaps in bureaucracy and policy implementation, a reduction in the number of failed projects; and less budget constraints faced by government projects, all of which adds more value to the overall process of creating social equity (Akintoye, Beck & Hardcastle, 2008; Osborne, 2000). Existing works of literature, including research articles, media, and government reports, support the significance of PPPs and also the limitations of this model. Overall, many examples are observed globally in terms of the successful implementation of the PPP model to reduce the gap between policy and execution in non-crisis periods and also during global pandemics such as that caused by COVID-19.

The PPP model has proven to be an effective way of handling public service in the United States and the United Kingdom, followed by South East Asia. Other than that, PPP has also recently become a trending word in South Africa (Akintoye, Beck & Hardcastle, 2008). The major challenges of implementing the PPP model in developing countries are ethical and technical in nature (Nishtar, 2004). The ethical challenges are conflict of interest, contribution to shared goals and objectives, and lack of outcome orientation. The technical difficulties are in governance structures, power relationships, criteria for selection, sustainability, and accountability.

The implementation of the PPP model has been observed in the battle against HIV/AIDS in South Africa with the involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like "SACBC AIDS", and "the Newcastle Catholic ARV" Project with the collaboration of the local Amajabu District Department of Health (Sweegers, 2011). A strong PPP model played a role in the development of the ERVEBO® vaccine which was prepared during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in several African countries (Wolf et al., 2020). Schoeman (2007) questioned the utilisation of the PPP model linked to the roll-out strategies for HIV/AIDS interventions in South Africa through her detailed doctoral study. The researcher shed light on the positive and negative aspects of the implementation of the PPP model in health care reforms, concluding that the significance of this model is the reduction of the gap between policy implementation and execution.

Conclusions

The initial rationale for the school meal service programmes in the different political and socio-economical environments of India and the US was to address the issues of hunger and child malnutrition, and to increase school participation by serving meals. It has been observed that similar guidelines were issued by the Central Government of India and the Federal Government of the United States in running the meal service programmes. However, numerous media reports have disclosed the fact that many states in India have failed to implement the instructions issued by the central government, with a high number of beneficiaries of the MDM scheme not having received any food grains or money as instructed by the MHRD during the coronavirus outbreak. A report stated that out of 37 states and union territories, eight states supplied only food grains; one state only transferred cash; six states delivered both food grain and cash; eight states issued the order, but no action had been taken as of May 1, 2020; nine states have not taken any steps; and there is no information available for the remaining five states (Scott, Menon, Younus, & Parajuli, 2020). Most of the children's parents are jobless, and many are situated in remote places with their families and do not know when the service will reach them. They have no one to enquire from as to why this gap occurred during the crucial period of the lockdown.

On the other hand, the United States has implemented many strategies and guidelines issued by its federal government to ensure that every child received meals during the lockdown. Despite some gaps observed in the implementation process, several media reports assured that the meals reached the maximum number of children possible in the United States. One significant aspect of this success is the number of private-public partnerships which have helped to facilitate the meal service programme and expand its reach to the beneficiaries of the NSLP in the United States. In the Indian context, PPP initiatives are significantly less in presence, and many researchers in India have suggested that bringing in private partners is urgent to ease the implementation process of the MDMP and also to reduce bureaucracy challenges.

Within a historical context, India has witnessed the emergence of feasible public-private partnerships which have contributed to the growth of the national economy after the country gained its independence (Kutumbale & Telang, 2014). These Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) clearly constitute a viable and growing mode of creating efficient infrastructure in India; hence, the question is, why has the MDM Programme not benefitted from any similar private partnership? With this in mind, the authors of this study

strongly suggest the necessity of more public-private partnerships to reduce the gap between policy and execution of the MDM Programme.

This article traces the development of the two largest meal service programmes in the world and examines the challenges they have faced during this pandemic. It highlights the reasons behind the disruption of the MDM Programme in India by comparing the strategies adopted in the United States during the outbreak to deliver meals to vulnerable students. The authors, after referring to recent media reports and literature, have scrutinised the framework of emergency guidelines issued for delivering mid-day meals in India and the National School Lunch in the United States during the pandemic, as well as the implementation strategy adopted by both countries. They conclude that utilising a PPP model will help to establish more mobility for the MDM scheme during a pandemic like the current COVID-19 situation. Further, the PPP model can set the scene for the establishment of an effective modality during the post-pandemic period, based on the experience of these partnerships in the United States during the pandemic and pre-pandemic periods in that country. On a final note, the authors recommend the setting up of more public-private partnerships in India to enhance the mobility of the MDM scheme during the pandemic, as well as the implementation of new policies to support the PPP model in the post-pandemic period.

Though it was not part of the current research, future studies should assess the increasing concerns of students and teachers' wellbeing in India and the US, their mental health as well as any necessity for paid leave and reimbursements owing to the meal service workers who have to toil away as frontline people putting themselves and their families at risk of contracting the virus. Several experts have suggested that there is a need to introduce a new policy, programmes, recognition, and service benefits for the meal service workers during these trying times. For instance, in the United States, approximately four hundred twenty thousand (420,000) school cafeteria workers have now been classified as the most indispensable employees due to their initiative of delivering free meals to K12 school children, and by default, putting their lives at high risk.

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