Case Study

e-PDS Portal of India

December 2012

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Promoted by Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances
Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions
Government of India

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The lack of transparency in the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India has been one of its perennial problems. However, this problem is a subset of the larger problem of information scarcity. The recording of information relevant to the PDS is largely manual. This allows for large scale corruption, blocks transparency and accountability and slows down the operations of the PDS.

The Government of India, therefore, accorded the computerisation of the PDS the highest priority so that the gap of information scarcity could be addressed and the attendant problems of lack of transparency and inefficiencies at various levels could be addressed. With that objective, the Department of Food and Public Distribution launched the project 'Computerisation of Targeted Public Distribution System'. A series of modules were launched to digitise various aspects of the PDS - from procurement, storage, distribution to beneficiary identification. These modules were integrated in to the PDS Portal of India.

The portal, designed and maintained by the NIC, is a one-stop database for the PDS. It contains state-wise commodity rates, allocation policies, allocation and offtake details, storage capacity data, ration card details and PDS related news. It also provides details of all the stakeholders involved in the PDS.

The initiative has greatly improved transparency and accountability in the PDS, brought about standardisation in its hugely heterogeneous management, provided states an incentive to update information and accorded beneficiaries a single site of reference for PDS-related information.

METHODOLOGY

The Governance Knowledge Centre (GKC) team decided to document the PDS Portal of India as a best practice as it carries out the vital function of providing information on the management of the PDS. It does this in an integrated and holistic way, giving all-India data. While this in itself is a great step towards promoting transparency and accountability, the available information also acts as a foundation for better informed planning and management, allowing for more efficient allocation decisions, beneficiary tracking, supply chain management and grievance redressal.

The team used both primary and secondary research methods for the preparation of this best practice document. Secondary research methods were applied to obtain data on the background, objectives and operations of the project. To fill in the lacunae in the data obtained, an interview was conducted with the head of the initiative, Dr. Ranjna Nagpal, Senior Technical

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Director and Head of Department of the Food and Consumer Affairs Infosys Division at the National Informatics Centre (NIC).

BACKGROUND

The Public Distribution System (PDS) in India is a country wide network that provides subsidised food to vulnerable sections of the population. Started in 1943, the PDS is today a vast and complex system comprising of around 5 lakh Fair Price Shops (FPS)[1].However, the PDS is also beset with a host of chronic problems such as leakages and inefficiencies in the supply chain, lack of transparency in its operations and massive errors of inclusion and exclusion. Errors of inclusion and exclusion involve the undeserving having access to the PDS and the deserving being excluded.

While various solutions have been suggested to solve these problems, the end-to-end computerisation of the PDS has become a prerequisite for its transformation. The Central Vigilance Committee under the Chairmanship of Justice D.P Wadhwa appointed by the Supreme Court recommended that monitoring the functioning of PDS operations through the use of information and communication technology should be given the highest priority.

The Central government has undertaken a series of steps to fulfil this mandate. The Department of Food and Public Distribution (DoFPD) initiated the project 'Computerisation of Targeted Public Distribution System'. This involved the implementation of the Integrated Information System for Food Grains Management (IISFM), an MIS solution that aims to provide an online food stock inventory of the country. Further, it includes the existing Ration Card Management System (RCMS), an MIS solution that deals with ration card digitisation and the ePDS module that handles online ration card management, FPS management and allocation order generation. These modules provide the foundation for the e-PDS Portal of India.

The portal was developed in a period of 4 months and launched in October 2012. It is a website designed to provide dynamic information on the functioning of the PDS all over India, integrating data from the previously mentioned information systems. In addition to central-level data, state governments update the site with information that lies in their domain. In addition to promoting transparency and aiding monitoring and evaluation by providing information on the functioning of the PDS, the portal also carries out the function of bringing standardisation in the otherwise heterogeneous management of PDS related data and also gives states an impulse to update their records. The site is intended to be of use to all the

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[1] 'UID AND PDS System'. *UIDAI*. Web. 20 December. 2012.
<http://uidai.gov.in/images/FrontPageUpdates/uid_and_pds.pdf/>

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stakeholders in the PDS, starting with the beneficiaries themselves and on to implementing and accountability agencies. The site provides detailed data such as commodity rates in various states, off-take and allocation details, allocation policies in various states, contact details of stakeholders and so on. The ensuing analytics will not only enable greater transparency and accountability but also allow for fine-tuning and improving PDS operations.

OBJECTIVE

The PDS Portal of India provides information on policies related to the PDS, information on Central and State schemes, price of PDS commodities in the States, allocation and offtake details, stake holder information, fair price shop details and ration card information. The portal also provides links to Central and State-level websites that are relevant to the PDS.

PROGRAMME DESIGN

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Central Level:

Department of Food and Public Distribution: The Portal comes under the Department of Food and Public Distribution in the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution.

National Informatics Centre (NIC): The Portal was designed and developed by the National Informatics Centre. It also hosts the site. With regard to the implementation of the project, the NIC's major activities have been development of application software, supply & installation of computer systems with system software and other peripherals, providing LAN and WAN connectivity, training staff and providing technical support services.

Food Corporation of India (FCI): The FCI is in charge of procuring food from the producers and storing it at FCI depots.

State Level:

Administrative Bodies: These bodies are involved in the management of the PDS. Their roles are the same as earlier, the only difference being that they now enter their data on the PDS portal of India. However, this is limited to the states that have come on board the Stakeholder Identity Management System (SIMS). All their contact details are available on the PDS portal.

State Food and Public Distribution Department: The stakeholders relevant to the PDS in the department are the Food Directorate, District Food and Supply Officer,

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Taluka/Tehsil/Block/Sub-Divisional Food and Supply Officer and Food and Kerosene Inspectors.

District and block offices: These are the administrative offices involved in the management of the PDS. The personnel from here enter data onto the PDS portal.

PDS Supply Chain: These bodies are involved in distributing the entitlements to the beneficiaries. Their contact details are recorded by the administrative personnel mentioned above.

State Godowns: These procure food from the FCI depots and store it at the state level for further distribution to the FPS level.

Wholesaler Agencies: The wholesaler transport food from the godowns to the FPS level.

FPS Dealers: These distribute food to the eventual beneficiaries.

Beneficiaries: The portal is of relevance to anyone who has a stake in the PDS.

WORK FLOW

The computerisation of the PDS was a pre-requisite for the functioning of the portal. This was done with the objectives of transparent PDS supply chain management, efficient monitoring of foodgrain storage, stock management and issuance process, effective ration card issuance and management, assurance of foodgrain distribution to the intended beneficiaries, grievance redressal, and strengthening of social audit. It was also intended to provide the foundation for a single unified platform and technology solution that would allow for national level coordination of PDS operations.
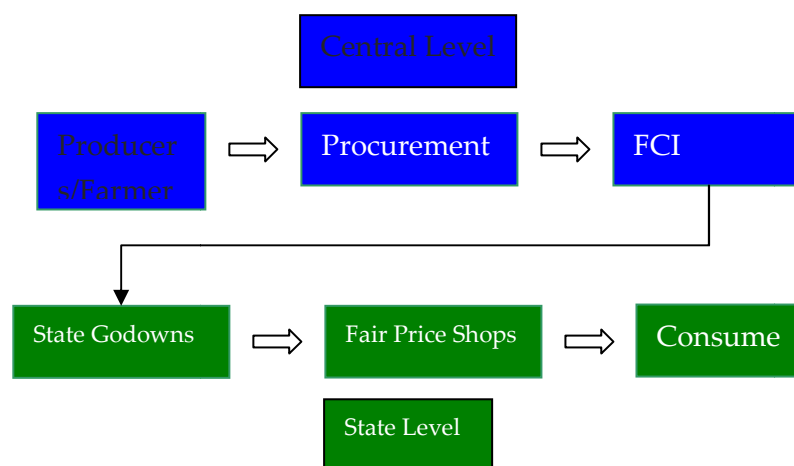
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Figure 1: Food supply chain in the TPDS
Source: OneWorld Foundation India 2012

Figure 1 provides the entire PDS network. The process begins with the Central Government lifting stocks from the producers, who are generally farmers, through the Food Corporation of India. The stocks are then allocated to States on the basis of the number of APL, BPL and Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households. These three divisions are standard across the country, but various states add their own additional categories. Nevertheless, the total number of beneficiary families remains the same and is distributed among the additional categories. These numbers are arrived at on the basis of surveys carried out by the respective States. The Centre's responsibility is procurement of grain, its allocation to the States and storage.

The State pays the Central government a 'central issue price' for the grain and lifts the stocks allotted to it from Central godowns where the grain is stored. The responsibility of the States is to ensure that it gets the grain from the godowns and warehouses where it is stored to the final beneficiary. This is done through the network of Fair Price Shops (FPS), or what is known in common parlance as 'ration shops'. This forms the front end of the system where beneficiaries, who are the consumers, obtain their entitlements.

This was, in brief, the process involved in getting the grain from the producer to the consumer.

Along this chain there are various levels, stakeholders and ICT needs. Figure 2 shows the different TPDS stakeholders and ICT needs.

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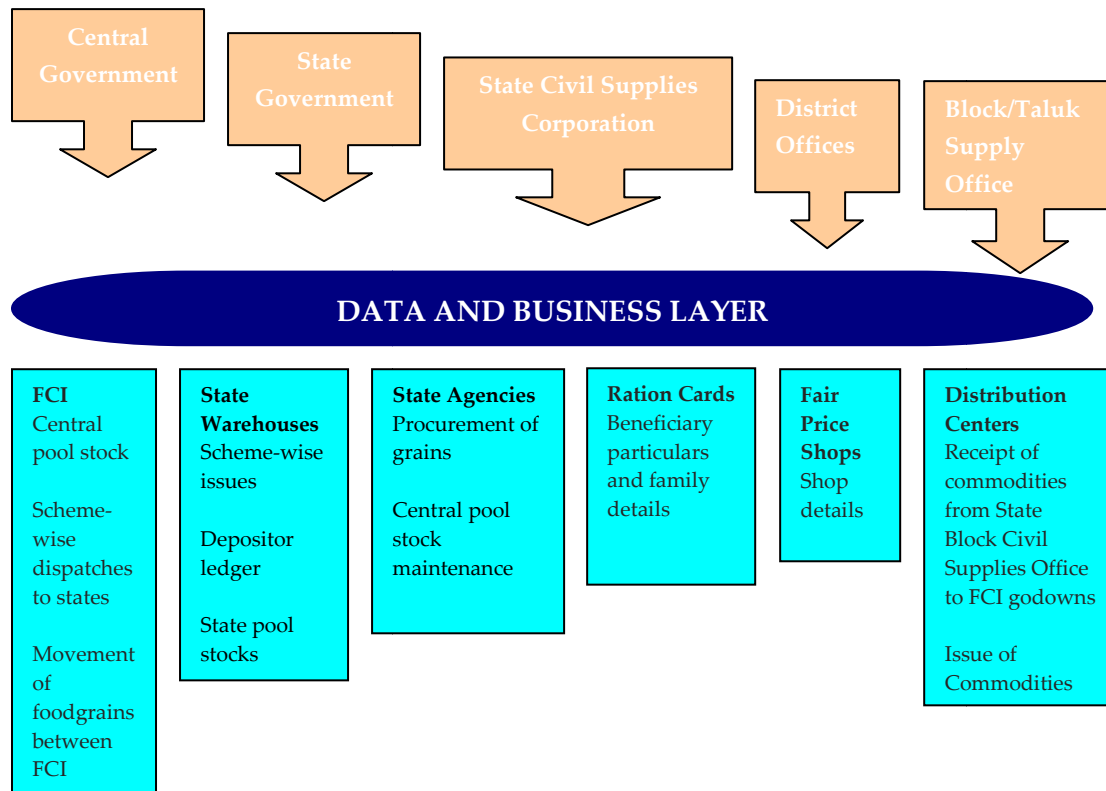e-PDS Portal of India
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Figure 2: TPDS stakeholders and ICT needs Source: NIC 2012

The computerisation of the PDS required the digitising of the ICT components mentioned in Figure 2. The larger goal was to have a single unified technology solution for end to end computerisation of TPDS. Figure 3 contains the process flow for this integrated solution.
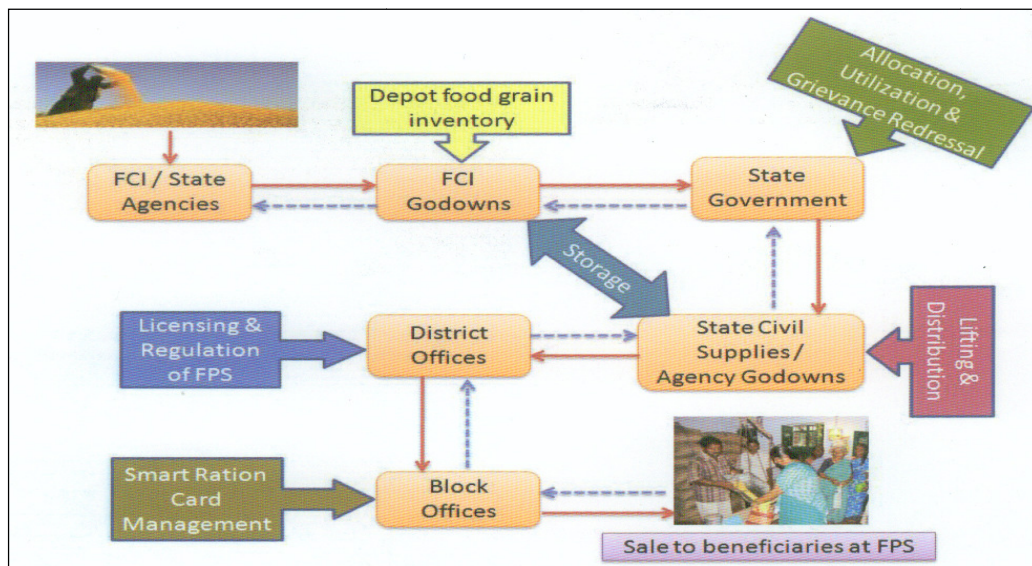

Figure 3: Single unified TPDS solution process flow
Source: NIC 2012

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To attain this goal, the following PDS modules were designed:

1. Ration Card Management: This module was designed with the objective of creating a central repository of ration cards which is updated online for any transfer, migration, updation, etc. This would enable it to tackle the challenge of duplicate/bogus cards, make available the digitized list of beneficiaries on public portals and provide updated ration card details as input for the allocation module.

2. Allocation and Supply Chain Management: This module was designed to automate the food grain allocation process, track stock position and movement of food grains from the central pool to state depots and further down to the FPS. It would also place information on the web for ration card holders, FPS list, stock position, allocation, foodgrain lifting and distribution by FPS and would enable the automatic dissemination of information through SMS or email.

3. Automation at the FPS Level: This would enable ensuring that the right beneficiary obtained his/her entitlement by identity authentication through smart card, food coupon and bio-metrics prior to issuance of food grains. This would allow for the electronic recording of transactions at FPS like the quantity of foodgrain issued, payment made and other relevant details.

4. Transparency and Grievance Redressal: This module consists of a call centre for grievance registration and redressal, information dissemination through email/SMS. Furthermore, it was envisaged that the creation of a unified portal with information of PDS operations would help in social auditing.

The implementation was envisaged over three phases. Figure 4 provides the schematic.

Figure 4: Phases of implementation of TPDS computerisation
Source: NIC 2012
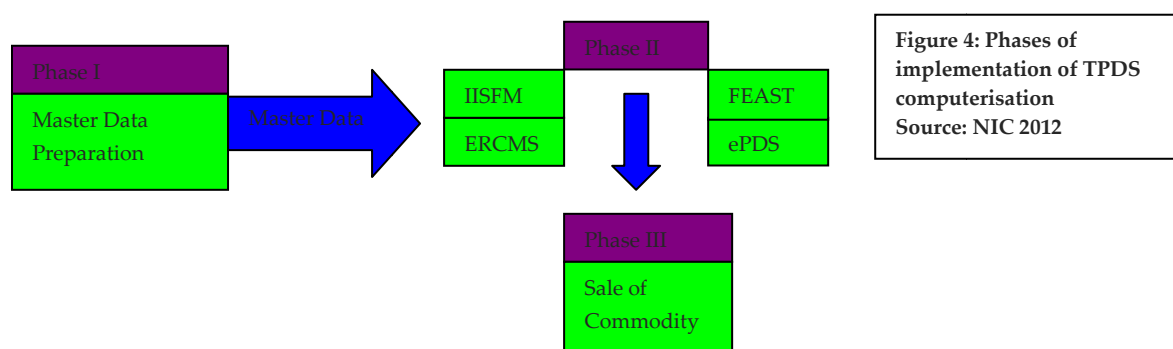
The above schematic provides details on the various phases of implementation. Phase I involves bringing all the stakeholders in the PDS on board a single platform and the

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preparation of a central database that contains the following details: depots, commodities, schemes, location directories, offices, cards and caste master data.

This identification and codification of each stakeholder in the PDS is done through the Stakeholder Identity Management System (SIMS) module. This is an online platform designed to create the master data specific to the needs of the PDS across States. It is a single repository of stakeholders like the District Food and Supply Officer (DFSO), food and kerosene inspectors, godowns, wholesalers, FPS, etc. Each stakeholder is provided a unique code, ensuring uniformity and national level data standards. All India conformity is indirectly ensured with the MCAFPD tying funding to the use of these standard formats. Different states are at different levels regarding practices used in computerisation of the PDS. There is variation in the data formats used and in the level of computerisation. Some states manage their own portals while some do not have portals. The SIMS is therefore an attempt to ensure standardisation in data collection and processing with respect to all-India PDS operations.

Phase II of the project involves utilising this master data to feed it into the ration card management and allocation and supply chain management modules.

Ration Card Management:

The ration card management module is an online work flow based application that includes functionalities like issuance and modification of ration cards with facility to capture full details with approval mechanism. It also allows for transfer, surrender, cancellation and duplication of ration cards and has the capability to integrate with the Unique Identity (UID) or the National Population Register (NPR). The application provides separate dashboards for District/Taluka Food Authorities to monitor, approve and process various operations of ration card management. This allows for a dynamically updated ration card database that provides linkage with the allocation and supply chain management module and also allows real time information dissemination through portal and SMS.

It consists of the following sub-modules: Existing Ration Card Management System (eRCMS) and e-PDS.

Existing Ration Card Management System (ERCMS): This module utilises master data relevant to ration cards captured in Phase I. It deals with ration card data digitisation, issuance and migration. Once this data has been digitised, it feeds into the e-PDS module.

e-PDS: This module replaces paper based ration cards with smart cards. It was based out a system and process study that took place in Haryana and Chandigarh and the generic software was developed inhouse by the central team at the NIC headquarters.

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The application is for smart ration card preparation and issuance of commodities using smart card. The system focuses on reconciliation of data where all transactions can be reconciled to get the allocation of commodities and their lifting by actual beneficiaries through an online system. It is designed to introduce transparency and accountability in operations, reduce redundant workload, integrate information relating to operations handled by different agencies and aid in quick decision making and timely allocation of commodities. It is an MIS and aids monitoring by using biometric authentication at point of sale (PoS) to check genuineness of the beneficiary. The implementation is taken care of by the respective state team in consultation with the central team. Figure 6 contain the process flow.
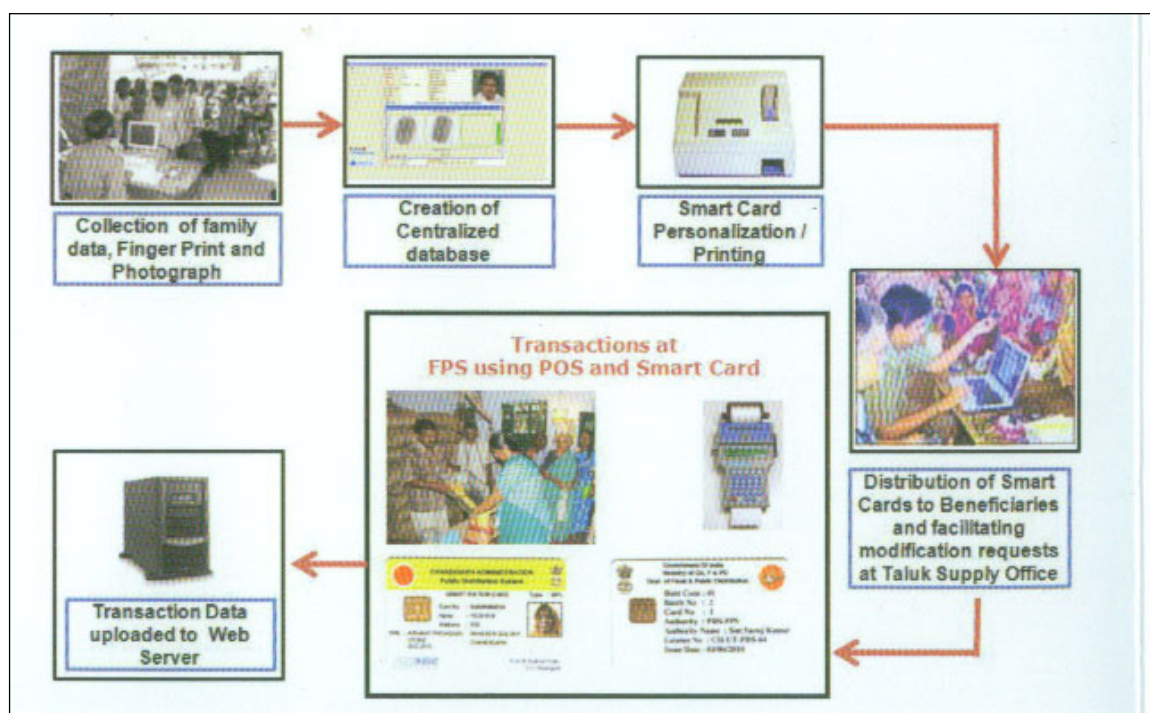

Figure 6: Smart Ration Card enrolment, personalisation, issuance
and distribution of commodities
Source: NIC 2012

The module can be customised for replication in other states and consists of the following sub-modules: data digitisation software, grievance redressal and the Centralised Application Software (CAS). CAS consists of the following modules: allocation and distribution, ration card management system, FPS licensing including renewal, key management system, PoS operations management and smart ration cards personalisation and printing.

Allocation and Supply Chain Module:

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The allocation and supply chain management module consists of the following sub-modules: Integrated Information System for Food Grains Management (IISFM) and Food and Essential Commodities Security and Target (FEAST).

Integrated Information System for Food Grains Management (IISFM): This is an online MIS that provides the food stock inventory of the country. It captures the complete workflow of FCI at depots all over India. It records transactions such as receipts, issues and dispatches, provides the stock position of nearly 1700 depots of the FCI, information related to chemical treatment/infestation carried out on the foodgrains stored in the depot and the allocation and offtake under various schemes. It is comprised of different sub-modules such as District Information System for Foodgrains Management (DIISFM), IISFM Rapid Reporting Services (IRRS), Depot Code Management System (DCMS), Decentralised Procurement Module (DCP) and an Online Movement Module.

FEAST: This module automates allocation to FPS, tracks payments by FPS dealers to state agencies, payments to the FCI and generates Release Orders. It further tracks movement of commodities from the FCI to the State godown and from there to the level of the FPS. It also generates truck challans and SMS notifications to the beneficiaries and gram panchayat leaders.

The final phase of computerisation involves verifying the sale of the commodity through smart cards, biometrics or food coupons.

All the aforementioned modules come together on the **PDS Portal of India**.
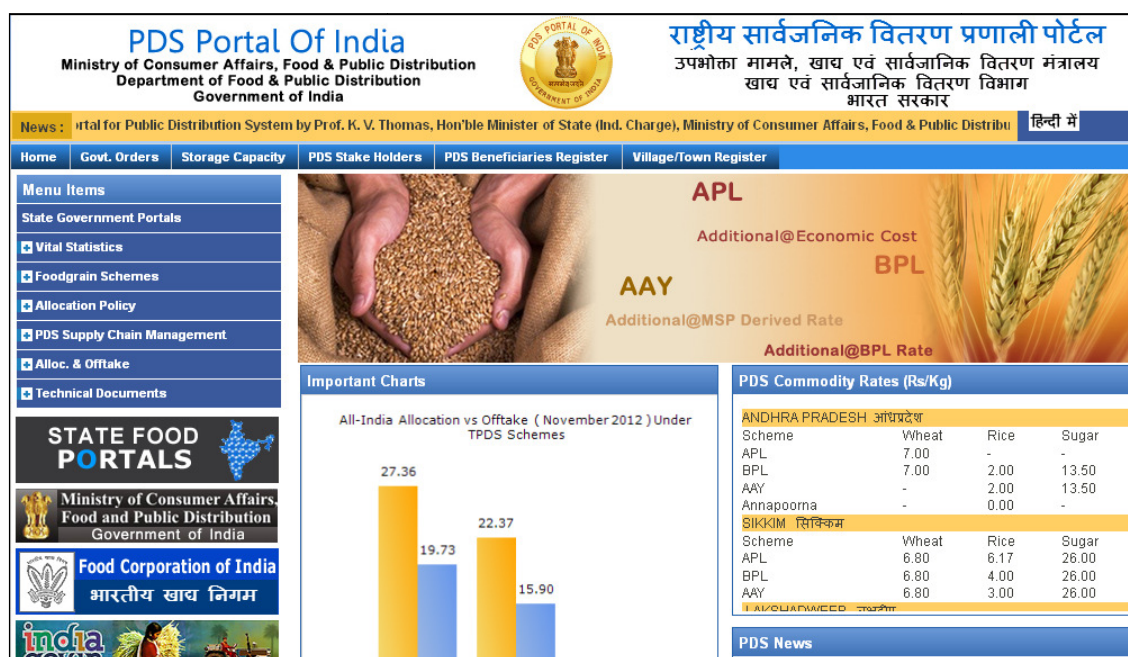

Figure 8: Screenshot of the PDS Portal of India
Source: http://pdsportal.nic.in/main.aspx, 2012

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The portal is an integrated all-India platform designed to provide the following data on the PDS:

Statewise Stakeholder Report
- Details of DFSO, TSO/AFSO, Food Inspector Office
- Summary Report of Godowns, Warehouses and FPS

Ration Card Report
- District, Taluka, Tehsil, Block, Circle, FPS wise Ration Card Count
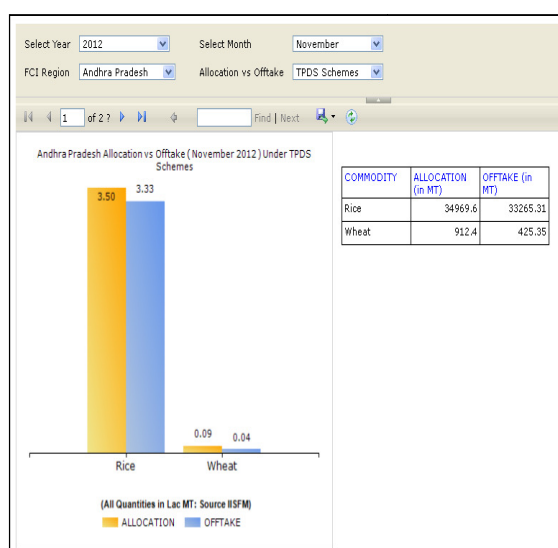- Details of Ration Card

Allocation Details
- Allocation Policy– Commodities (Quantity entitlement and Price)
- District wise monthly allocation order of the State
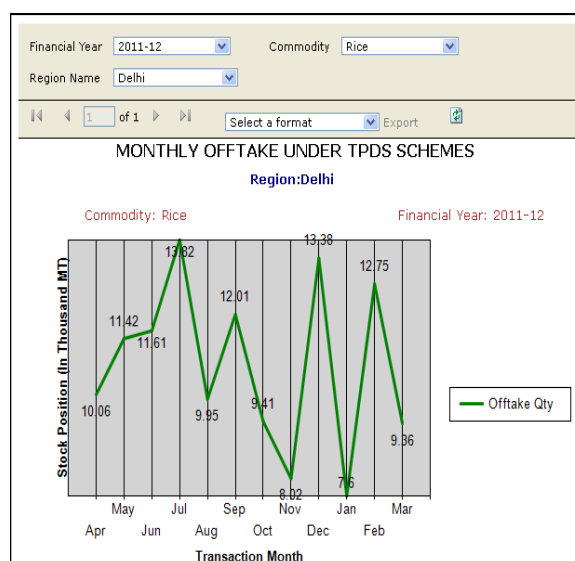- FPS wise monthly allocation order of the district

**Figure 9: Data provided on the PDS Portal of India
Source: NIC 2012**

Godown Report
- Capacity and stock position of godowns
- Godowns offtake report

Stock Movement Report
- From FCI godowns to state godowns
- State godowns to FPS

The data enables users to access analytics on various aspects of PDS operations. Figure 10 displays the analytics available from the site itself.

a)   b)

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c)   d)

Figure 10: a) Andhra Pradesh allocation vs offtake details under TPDS for rice in November 2012 b) Monthly rice offtake for Delhi in FY 11-12 c) State Schemes for Allocation Policy d) Regional capacity of FCI godowns as on 21/12/12

Source: http://pdsportal.nic.in/main.aspx, 2012

The analytics displayed in figure 10 allow stakeholders to examine state-wise monthly allocation vs offtake details for particular commodities, monthly offtake details for commodities, ration card categorisation in various states, storage capacity of FCI godowns and the total storage capacity for states. However this data is only available from states that are using SIMS. States which have not yet migrated to SIMS or are using PDS portals of their own are linked to on the site but users cannot access their analytics on the portal. Initiatives are being taken to ensure that all the States eventually are on the SIMS. These involving giving financial incentives to states that are using the SIMS.

Technology

All the software used for the PDS portal has been developed in house. The e-PDS uses an open source platform. The components of the IISFM are a Transaction Data System, an MIS at the zonal and regional level and Decision Support System for the national level. The technology platform used ASP.NET, MS SQL Server 2005 and MS SQL Reporting Services 2005. The smart cards are Smart Cards Operating Systems Standards compliant. The biometrics used are for face imaging, fingerprinting and iris scans.

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Capacity Building

The development of the portal involved 15 – 20 people working on the project in the NIC in New Delhi. In each state there are 1 – 2 NIC members who act as coordinators and are in charge of helping the states with implementation.

Training has been provided to all the stakeholders to carry out data entry by the NIC itself. It is now switching to trainer's training and is asking the states to provide trainers.

Currently, at the Central level there are 170 FCI officers handling 600 revenue districts.

Way Forward

The portal is still a work in progress. Not all states are on board the SIMS. Currently, the NIC is assessing the technical needs of States such as hardware and software and finalising State plans based on their demands. The phases have been unevenly implemented across the country and the process of bringing all the stakeholders on board is still going on. The remaining phases of the PDS portal are all-India ration card digitisation, standardisation and processing of the data and putting it online for public access.

Therefore currently there is still wide discrepancy between the standard format and the actual look of the site. Information that is available on the back – end is still not available on the front-end, such as percentage utilisation of godowns.

Finally, the PDS portal is also adding features to ensure that it is compatible with the UID and the direct cash transfer system.

FUNDING

The IISFM was sanctioned in the year 2003 with a budgetary allocation of Rs. 97.66 crore as a plan scheme of Department of Food & PD. The PDS portal was initially funded by the NIC itself, with the funding now coming from Planned Fund Approval.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The launching of the portal has provided PDS stakeholders a single platform where they can access data on its operations. It is also a step towards promoting transparency and accountability in the PDS through making this data public.

The portal also gives states a compulsion to update their data and streamline and improve their data collection. At present, FCI Headquarters in 5 Zonal Offices, 23 Regional Offices, 167 District Offices and 1600 depots have been covered under the IISFM project. In addition, the

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state godowns for 7 de-centralised procuring states are being covered for storage system automation. With regard to the SIMS, 20 states have been brought on board so far. The FCI and NIC team in charge of implementing the IISFM module won the PCQuest IT Implementation Award for the Maximum Social Impact, IT Project of the Year 2006 and the CSI Nihilent e-Governance Awards 2006-2007 for the Best e-Governance Project in the G2G/G2E section.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Understanding the complexity of the domain itself was the major challenge for the NIC. The huge number of stakeholders in the PDS, the scale of its operations and the wide variance within States with regard to its management posed significant challenges for standardisation and bringing all of them on board on a single platform.

Managing the Location Directory and devising a module which provided implementing agencies a unique identity that was not dependent on physical address was another challenge.

Devising an allocation module that could capture state-wise PDS commodity costs also took time in development. However the biggest challenge faced was ensuring that the task of PDS computerisation was carried out systematically by partners who looked at computerisation as a commercial proposition.

POTENTIAL FOR REPLICATION

The conditions responsible for making this best practice successful are:

1. Strong political commitment at the central level to computerise the PDS. This established a clear direction.
2. Continuity of personnel who implemented previous projects on computerising the PDS. This shortened the learning curve.
3. Holistic planning that brought disparate sub-modules into one larger integrated platform.

The benefit of such a portal is that it can be integrated with many other systems. It therefore becomes possible for the PDS portal to be linked to health systems, transport systems, etc for even more integrated planning. The PDS can be linked to a health MIS to fine-tune the sort of food that could be allocated to a region to improve health or with transport systems to divert public transport where it is more required. The possibilities are many.

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SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROGRAMME

The programme relies entirely upon funding and is not a revenue generating model. However it provides information to the public on their entitlements and expenditure of their tax money and therefore making it a profitable venture is neither possible nor desirable.

From other perspectives the programme is eminently sustainable. Operationally, the portal does not alter existing processes and only shifts the site of data entry. This makes the learning curve for PDS related personnel short as they only need login and familiarise themselves with the PDS portal back-end dashboard.

The portal being an information system is invaluable as it provides continuous feedback on the performance of the PDS, one of the most important public service delivery systems in the country. For the sustainability of the PDS the function of the PDS portal becomes critical.

CONCLUSION

The PDS Portal of India is a very important addition to one of country's oldest systems. The PDS existed from pre-Independence times and today sustains millions of citizens by providing them foodgrains and other essential commodities. Given that large utilities cannot be managed without information, the PDS portal closes a huge gap that existed with regards to its better management. While the portal is still a work in progress, the possibilities it generates are many.

Research was carried out by the OneWorld Foundation India (OWFI), Governance Knowledge Centre (GKC) team.
*Documentation was created by Research Associate, **Abdul Muheet Chowdhary***
For further information, please contact Rajiv Tikoo, Director, OWFI.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Background

1. What was the motivation behind this project?
2. How long has it taken to develop the portal?
3. Was there a beta version?
4. What were the initial challenges faced in setting it up?

Process

5. What are the sources of information for this site?
6. The information on the site is limited, with many states not represented. What steps are envisaged to make it comprehensive and updated?
7. What is the process involved through which the data in the site is updated?
8. A lot of information is provided by linking to state portals where often not all states are covered and there is lot of variation in data formats. What will be done about this situation?
9. The allocation and offtake section contains only allocation details. There is no disaggregated data that provides information on how much off-take is taking place at the FPS level. This is not in consonance with the data template put up on the site. Similarly, offtake is also given at the regional level, with no data on level-wise offtake. Any measures planned to rectify this?
10. What is the role of the Location Directory within the stakeholder identity management system convey?
    a. How is it intended to further transparency in the PDS?
11. Where does the information for the Wholesalers come from?
    a. Who records the data and from which sources?
    b. What role do they play within the PDS?
12. How is data obtained on the storage capacity of godowns?
    a. What are the sources of data and who updates it using what technology? Please provide details of hardware and software.
13. Regarding godown capacity, percentage utilisation is not given. Any measures planned to rectify this?
14. In the region-wise capacity of FCI godowns, what is the logic of the FB, FD, FE etc system of categorisation of states?
15. Why is silo capacity missing from the FCI register?
16. What is the technology, manpower and process involved in running and hosting the portal?

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Technology

17. Please provide details on the technology used at various points in the process of updating the portal such as at the godown level, the FPS level, the offtake monitoring level, the allocation level, etc.

18. Regarding the Stakeholder Identity Management System,
    a. Who was it developed by?
    b. How much did the development cost?
    c. What function does it carry out?
    d. What software does it use?
    e. Who operates it?
    f. What is the process through which it works?

19. At what all points and how are the various biometric technologies such as iris, fingerprint and face capturing used in the system?
    a. What is the human resource involved in managing this?
    b. Where is the data stored?
    c. What is the total cost of all the biometric devices used?

20. What is the technology involved in running and hosting the portal?

21. Any moves to convert the database into Hindi?
    a. Any moves to expand the languages available?

22. Any plans to integrate the portal with Aadhaar infrastructure?

Capacity Building

23. Was any training provided to all the stakeholders in managing the data?
    a. If yes, what sort of training and by whom?

24. What was the human resource involved in developing the portal?

Awareness Generation

25. Any initiatives taken to publicise this portal?

26. Are there any plans to publicise the portal amongst beneficiaries?

Monitoring and Evaluation

27. What are the methods to verify the reliability of the information on the portal?

28. Currently there is no option for feedback on the site. Are there any plans to include a section where users can provide their feedback?

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Funding

29. What was the cost involved in setting up the system?

30. What is the cost involved in running the system?

31. Where do the financial resources come from?

Achievements

32. What has been the impact this site has had?

Challenges

33. What are the challenges currently faced in running the site?