

On the ground, concerns over fortified rice

According to a fact-finding team, beneficiaries complained of gastritis, diarrhoea and nausea after consuming it

SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, 11 May

As the Centre plans to distribute iron-fortified rice across the public distribution system (PDS) by March 2024, a fact-finding team of civil society activists has found that on the ground there is a fear that 'plastic-rice' has been mixed with normal rice.

This, they believe, is in the name of fortification, and in some cases, beneficiaries also complained of abdominal discomfort, gastritis, diarrhoea and nausea after eating the fortified rice.

The team also found serious lacunas and flaws in the manner in which the programme was being implemented in pilot districts.

There was distribution of fortified rice without proper labelling and warning about its adverse impact on people with sickle cell anaemia and thalassemia.

The fact-finding team included Vandana Prasad, a public health expert and associated with the Right to Food Campaign; Kavitha Kuruganti, farmers' rights activist with ASHA-Kisan Swaraj; Balram

and James Herenz of Right to Food Campaign, Jharkhand; Rohin Kumar of Greenpeace India; Soumik Banerjee of ASHA-Kisan Swaraj and Raj Shekhar Singh of Right to Food Campaign's national secretariat.

The team visited five villages in Khunti and East Singhbhum districts in Jharkhand between May 8 and May 10.

They met PDS beneficiaries, dealers, community health centre doctors and ASHA and Anganwadi workers, cooks and a rice mill owner, among others. =

"Fortified rice is not a proven approach to tackle anemia effectively, according to published papers and reviews. It is surprising that the Centre, in a hasty blanket approach, has already scaled up distribution of fortified rice to 257 districts across India. This is even though the so-called 'pilots' have not completed three years, nor have the findings been put out in the public domain," an official statement by the team members said.

It said in Jharkhand, too, official data on the government portal shows fortified rice being distrib-

CENTRE'S TARGETS

37.5 mt:

Fortified rice to be distributed till March 2024 to cover the entire Targeted Public Distribution Scheme and other welfare schemes



17.5 mt:

Amount of fortified rice to be distributed by March 2023 in 292 aspirational districts, alongside ICDS and PM-POSHAN schemes

3.5 mt:

Amount of fortified rice distributed in ICDS and PM-POSHAN in FY22

uted in two blocks of East Singhbhum (the designated pilot district in the state) from October 2021.

"However, without any data being shared on the portal about the distribution in other districts, fortified rice has already been taken to several districts. What is the meaning or purpose of the pilot then?" the statement added.

The team also found that a vast majority of women are picking out and throwing away the fortified

rice kernels added to rice. This includes those who were cooking at Anganwadis and schools.

"Such fortified rice kernels are clearly identifiable among the real rice kernels and are picked out by hand as well as during washing of the rice before cooking," the team observed.

The members also found that there is no information given to beneficiaries or no consent taken from them before giving them fortified rice.

Neither were PDS dealers informed beforehand, nor have village-level frontline workers of various departments been aware of the fortified rice.

"It appears as if the Government of India wanted to implement this programme quietly, if not clandestinely. The government was under the misapprehension that fortified rice kernels blended with regular rice will go unnoticed, and therefore, be consumed by citizens without any question," the report said.

The team also found that FSSAI and the government's own regulations on packaging and labelling of fortified food were being violated on the ground.

The Centre plans to distribute 37.5 million tonnes of fortified rice through the Targeted Public Distribution Scheme (TPDS) and Other Welfare Schemes (OWS) by March 2024.

Fortification of rice with essential nutrients has been started on a pilot basis from 2019-20 with a total outlay of ₹174.64 crore. The pilot focuses on 15 districts across 15 states, preferably one district per state.