

# afterword

## It's time to RISE and Shine

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### RISE to the occasion

Over the past two decades, there have been many experiments in the Take-Home Rations (THR) program. Dedicated government bodies, frontline workers and supporting organizations rose to the occasion and have given us better recipes, viable production models and mechanisms for women's participation, better governance and accountability. To further scale these gains, states must **RISE**, i.e. –

**Refine** THR composition and formulation,

**Improve** THR production and distribution,

**Strengthen** THR monitoring and accountability, and

**Enhance** the THR policy environment.

### Refine THR composition and formulation

Accelerating nutritional deficiencies in recent years has made the gaps in composition and formulation of THR more apparent. To address these nutritional gaps, states may explore alternatives to existing formulation and composition. There are some important points to consider while looking at the mechanics of reformulating THR. First, the intake of THR should fulfill crucial micronutrient (including iron, folate, zinc, vitamins B6, B12, and D) requirements of beneficiaries. Second, macronutrients such as carbohydrates, specifically added sugar content, should be reduced to an acceptable level, and the quantity of high-quality protein (such as pulses, dairy, soy) should be increased. And, last, it should be noted that the dietary requirements and taste preferences of pregnant and lactating women (PLW) and children are different.

### Improve THR production and distribution

Both decentralized and centralized models have their benefits and drawbacks. While the centralized model is more economical, its products are not always tailored

### Recommended policy interventions

- *Mandate fortification of ingredients to fulfill micronutrient requirements*
- *Include higher quality protein sources such as milk powder, whey, pulses and egg powder*
- *Reduce the added sugar content in THR*
- *Ensure at least two different products: one customized for PLW and the other for children*

to beneficiaries' tastes and preferences, often leading to moderate acceptance levels. On the contrary, the decentralized model fares well in consumer acceptance (anecdotal evidence) but is not economically viable and there are many lapses in quality control.

States should consider strengthening both models. Those states with centralized production should get the production unit to invest in technology such as mobile applications to gauge consumer or beneficiary reactions and get real time feedback for improving the formulation. To ensure access at the last mile, producers through these applications can track product delivery from the manufacturing facility to the consumer or the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centers. States with decentralized production can consider procuring raw materials at a block or district level so that better quality at lower prices is ensured – this is needed for the model to be sustainable. Further, conditional contracts and payments linked to THR products satisfying the recommended standards are ways to ensure good quality.

### Strengthen THR monitoring and accountability

The quality of THR has always been under scrutiny and is often questioned. Hence, better data monitoring and regular reviews of the existing program metrics at the national, state and local levels is recommended. Feedback from these reviews should be incorporated into future adjustments to legislation and management of THR production. States with both decentralized and

### Recommended policy interventions

#### For centralized models

- *Institute digital monitoring systems for feedback on taste and formulation of THR*
- *Producers can digitally track production and distribution of THR*

#### For decentralized models

- *Incorporate a system to procure THR ingredients at the block level*
- *Tie contracts and payments to the quality and timely production and distribution of THR*

centralized models should set up oversight committees for Self-Help Groups (SHG) or large-scale producers involved in THR production. For states with centralized models, THR producers can be held accountable for downstream access gaps with some portion of overall compensation directly tied to access by the beneficiaries. At all levels, ICDS should consider implementing performance management systems that link staff performance evaluations and compensation to program outputs and outcomes. Clear metrics for success should be established in order to determine feasible benchmarks for production, coverage and uptake and to improve the systems where shortcomings exist.

### Recommended policy interventions

- *Establish a process for regular review of data at national, state, and local levels*
- *Reform quality assurance and quality control procedures to ensure there is independent oversight of both centralized and decentralized facilities*
- *Link compensation of THR producers to beneficiary uptake*
- *Implement performance management systems for ICDS staff and establish clear metrics for success across the THR supply chain*
- *Increase transparency of performance metrics by making it public*

### Enhance the THR policy environment

The current form of the decentralized model has two goals: 1) improve access to nutritious food and 2) women's empowerment, and in practice, we often see that these two goals are divergent and incompatible. Women are both producers and beneficiaries in the SHG model. Therefore, if the SHGs do not have the capacity, capital and regular technical assistance to produce and distribute THR according to the established standards, the nutrition status of the women themselves, their children and their communities are affected. Also, there have been instances where male members of the family run the THR operations while the women are deputed to other low-cost employment options, often as daily wage laborers. This is at odds with the outlined agenda of social and financial empowerment of women.

In light of these challenges, the current situation demands that we return to the drawing board and rethink the policies driving the THR program. However, the Supreme Court ruling mandating production of THR via SHGs more or less corners policymakers into adopting one of two options:

#### Option 1

Reconfigure production systems to improve product quality in the short-term,

*and/or*

#### Option 2

Reform the state and national policies that govern THR production and distribution.

In the short term, there should be a thorough assessment of the production and distribution capacity of SHGs in states with decentralized systems. If these facilities are diagnosed to be incapable of maintaining the required standards for nutrition, quality, and accountability, alternate options should be considered. These alternatives could be food processors competing for regional contracts through open tenders, SHG-run production facilities operating at the block or district level, with assistance in food and business operations from private contractors, or other models such as centralized raw material procurement at the state level, capable of meeting predetermined standards. In the

long run, the policy framework guiding THR systems at national, state, and local levels deserves re-evaluation. Should an analysis of the legislative foundation of the THR program conclude that contradictory and incompatible objectives and policy gaps exist, a reform is necessary to ensure coherence of the program goals with legislation at all levels.

### **Now is the time to RISE and shine!**

There is a renewed focus on the THR program as one of the centerpieces of the government's ambitious POSH-AN Abhiyaan commitments and targets, making this an opportune moment for states to RISE and use these learnings. The coronavirus pandemic has also given us an opportunity to challenge the traditional food systems and use resources more efficiently. Given the program's broad reach and established presence in communities across the country, policymakers should take advantage of this opportunity to improve nutrition for the millions of beneficiaries who consume THR. Now is the time to shine a spotlight on THR and Refine, Improve, Strengthen & Enhance all facets of the program.