

# AUGMENTING NUTRITION IN SCHOOLS IN TAMIL NADU

*Importance of Government Announcement and  
Pathways for Strengthening the Implementation*

M S SWAMINATHAN RESEARCH FOUNDATION



## Introduction

Tamil Nadu has once again set a model with the introduction of a breakfast programme in government schools across the state. The timing of the introduction of this programme is important, as national and international agencies have warned of growing hunger due to Covid-19. Moreover, Tamil Nadu is the only state that has renamed the Mid-Day Meals Scheme (MDM) as Nutritious Meals Programme by adding protein rich foods like eggs, sundal etc. Currently, there is also an increasing emphasis worldwide on providing healthy and balanced meals to children at schools. During the first three quarters of the year 2021-22, about 22.38 lakh children (85 percent) in primary and 14.77 lakh children (77 percent) in upper primary were covered in Tamil Nadu.

In this context, the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation conducted a virtual consultation among different stakeholders, including researchers, international agencies, government officials, and community-based organisations on the potential pathways to further “Augment Nutrition in the Mid-Day Meals (MDM) Programme”. The three main themes of the consultation were:

### Linking School Nutrition Garden with MDM

A School Nutrition Garden (SNG) can play a significant role in providing better nutrition to school-going children by providing them with access to locally grown nutritious vegetables in schools. SNGs are a learning ground for students about nutritional foods and also provide social, economic, and environmental benefits<sup>1</sup>.

Nutrition gardens are already well-established in rural areas through programmes such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission, a poverty alleviation initiative in India<sup>2</sup>. In addition, SNGs are promoted through school education and can be implemented in conjunction with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). From our studies, it is evident that establishing household and community vegetable gardens is a proven, low-cost high-impact strategy to combat malnutrition. Existing literature shows that these initiatives have led to increased vegetable consumption and improved dietary diversity at the household level<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup><https://scroll.in/article/946395/in-public-schools-across-bihar-students-are-growing-their-own-vegetables-in-nutrition-gardens>

<sup>2</sup><https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1791234>

<sup>3</sup><https://systematicreviewsjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13643-019-1229-8>

<sup>4</sup><https://vikalpsangam.org/article/nutrition-gardens-help-students-learn-better-and-eat-better/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.orfonline.org/research/nutrition-gardens-a-sustainable-model-for-food-security-and-diversity-67933/>

<sup>6</sup><http://59.160.153.188/library/sites/default/files/Improving%20Household%20Diet%20Diversity.pdf>

## School Nutrition Garden



## Linking Nutrition Literacy with MDMS

The concept of linking nutrition literacy with school feeding is an emerging area that links food and nutrition knowledge with healthy eating. As with any behaviour change, healthy eating habits are most effective when taught early, especially as children are most vulnerable to nutrient deficiencies and are in dire need of energy-rich foods. The MDMS requirements need to be reconsidered based on ICMR-NIN's recommended allowances<sup>7</sup>. Physical activity at all age groups needs to be promoted to ensure optimal nutrition and health.

## Linking smallholder farmers with MDMS

Many countries source food for school meals locally from smallholder farmers to boost local economies. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) emphasised that localized procurement would strengthen nutrition, agriculture and social protection<sup>8</sup>. In India, the integration of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme with the PM-POSHAN promotes the inclusion of Farmer Producer Organisations and federations of women's self-help groups to link the MDMS with smallholder farmers – an integral part of India's agricultural economy. Therefore, there is a need to find ways to link local producers, especially small farmers, with the MDMS and nutritious food for students.

## Key Recommendations

### Linking Nutrition Garden with MDMS

- Students, parents, and PRIs must have knowledge, attitudes, and practices to overcome nutrition deficiencies. Involving them in SNGs would help in building their knowledge.
- A suitable SNG model can be demonstrated with locally grown vegetables and fruits to help school children improve their dietary habits and appreciate locally grown species.
- Technical support from KVKs/TNAU can be taken for planning and designing the garden, considering the nutritional outputs.
- Consider the nutritional deficiency condition of the district while promoting fruits and vegetables in the school nutrition garden.
- Leverage the horticulture department, rural development and other local departments in maintaining the SNG, especially during vacations.
- Rainwater harvesting systems can be installed in places where water is scarce.
- By increasing the number of stakeholders involved in the programme, it would be possible to scale-up the SNGs.

## Nutrition Literacy



<sup>7</sup>[https://www.nin.res.in/RDA\\_Full\\_Report\\_2020.html](https://www.nin.res.in/RDA_Full_Report_2020.html)

<sup>8</sup><https://www.fao.org/school-food/areas-work/inclusive-procurement/en/>

### Linking Nutrition Literacy with MDM

- To impart nutrition literacy to villagers, ambassadors could be identified at school level.
- Together with nutrition literacy, the seed ball approach, biodiversity mapping, and food system component interventions can be promoted. This will motivate students to conserve biodiversity, and understand the value of local food.
- Nutrition Resource Centres or Health Resource Centres to be developed by MDMs, and student participation should be encouraged.
- Develop educational tools such as books on food safety and growing a kitchen garden and distribute them to grassroots groups.

### Linking Smallholder Farmers with MDMS

- Location-specific strategies to engage women's groups and smallholder collectives (FPOs) in the MDM scheme.
- Inclusion of millets in the breakfast scheme of the school feeding programme.
- At least one-third of the food procured for the MDMS may be from local (village/block) farms.
- Infrastructure for procurement, storage, processing, and use of scientific support from institutions is required to advance the local supply chain.
- Convergence of government food security programmes and various stakeholders -public, private, public-private, CSR and Panchayati Raj institutions - to leverage the local supply chain and diversify MDMS

There is growing evidence of increasing enrolment in Government Schools after Covid-19 induced lockdown<sup>9</sup>. So it is the right time to enhance nutrition among school children. The Tamil Nadu government has taken a bold decision by introducing a breakfast programme. At the same time, it is important to ensure adequate resources for the noon meal programme for government and government-aided schools. With more children in government schools, allocations need to be increased. Lastly, a mechanism could be devised to ensure that children in private schools, particularly in rural areas, also receive adequate nutrition.

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### Smallholder Farmer's Participation



<sup>9</sup> A micro study on the "Governance Impact on Nutritional Security of Rural Children through the Noon Meal scheme in Coimbatore District" by Shanti Ashram & ICPH, 2022. (Unpublished)