

## **CHHATTISGARH GOVERNMENT SHOULD NOT GET COERCED INTO FORTIFIED RICE DISTRIBUTION IN PUBLIC SCHEMES BY GOVERNMENT OF INDIA –**

### **STATE GOVERNMENT SHOULD ADOPT RESPONSIBLE, EFFECTIVE AND SAFE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF MALNUTRITION IN CHHATTISGARH, AND ABANDON RICE FORTIFICATION**

*Raipur/New Delhi, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2022:* Activists of Right to Food Campaign (RTFC) and Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) urged the Chhattisgarh government to abandon its rice fortification interventions. They appealed to the state government that it should not get coerced into distributing fortified rice in the food schemes being run in the state by the Government of India. “Anaemia is a public health issue, and not a matter of feasibility or logistics of distribution of fortified rice. Health is a state subject, as per India’s Constitution. The state government, given that Chhattisgarh is self-sufficient in paddy production and also has a decentralised procurement system in place, should step out of Government of India’s unscientific and risky policy of iron-fortified rice in public schemes”, said the fact team members. A report of a fact-finding visit on June 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> 2022, by two teams to 11 villages of 5 Blocks of 4 districts, was released in a press conference today. The teams also met with State Food Minister Shri Amarjeet Bhagat in addition to senior bureaucrats at the state level, medical experts, district level officials and frontline functionaries of different line departments, PDS dealers, a rice miller and other stakeholders. The teams included public health practitioners.

“There is really no basis for the large scale scaling up of rice fortification scheme in Chhattisgarh, where the state government is distributing 25% to 45% of all fortified rice being distributed in the entire country in just this one state right now.

“The pilot in Kondagaon district has not been completed, nor evaluation done and results put out for public scrutiny, even as scaling up has been done to 12 districts now where all rice being distributed is already (iron-) fortified rice. The pilot evaluation cannot be just of efficacy, but of safety also.

“It is important to note that Chhattisgarh distributes more fortified rice per beneficiary household than in other states (more than 10 kgs per individual per month in many cases), and it is not clear if rice fortification standards have been set by FSSAI keeping this in mind. Further, even the Take Home Ration (THR) distributed by the DWCD in the state is fortified where norms require 50% of the RDA of iron to be met by the fortified THR. Meanwhile, micronutrient supplementation programs are also going on, along with iron-rich foods being distributed in government schemes. There is no evaluation of potential iron-overdosing from a plethora of interventions.

“While this would be a matter of concern even in a normal situation, Chhattisgarh also has high disease burden of sickle cell disorders in the state and around 1.5 lakh persons are estimated to be sickle-cell-diseased (which is an extrapolated estimate given that comprehensive screening and diagnosis has not happened). While the numbers cannot even be estimated at the population-level due to a lack of any screening programs as of now, thalassemia is also an issue to contend with. There are also other diseases like malaria and tuberculosis that the state has high prevalence of. In all these conditions, iron-fortified food is contra-indicated. These diseased persons (whose numbers are significant) and their families are already going through enormous hardships in accessing diagnostic and medical-care facilities, and indiscriminate distribution of iron-fortified rice is irresponsible on the part of any government. It is also quite unjust that Adivasi communities are getting subjected in a disproportionately high manner to this risky approach to tackling anaemia”, said the fact-finding team members.

The fact-finding visit sought to cover a gamut of related issues, including compliance to statutory regulations. “We found that labelling regulations are being flouted in numerous ways, and in any case, such labelling regimes have no real meaning in the context of undiagnosed and uninformed communities, and when the end consumer buys a product in a loose, unpackaged form. There is only an aggressive promotional campaign from the state government to extoll the virtues of fortified rice at this point of time, without giving a full picture to beneficiaries and without allowing them prior informed choices. It is also seen that in Chhattisgarh, the stencilled and labelled gunny sacks are returned back to the procurement agencies and the fortified rice transferred into other bags at the dealer shops which defeats the purpose of labelling. We also discovered that the state government does not seem to have control over the supply chains of fortified rice, and such rice is turning up in districts where it is not ostensibly being distributed. Meanwhile, the state government is incurring significantly higher expenses in the rice fortification program, under pressure from Union Government to scale up, compared to the budgets required for targeted micronutrient supplementation programs. All of these factors lead us to urge the state government to immediately stop the rice fortification program”, said ASHA and RTFC in their joint statement.

“We would also like to take note of some exemplary and unique initiatives of Chhattisgarh government which have the potential to address malnutrition. This includes the Suposhan Abhiyan, a holistic, diversity-laden, food-based intervention. The NGGB and Godhan Nyay Yojana in Chhattisgarh also reflect a ‘One Health’ approach, which is that soil health and nutrition is connected with plant health and nutrition, which in turn is connected with human health and nutrition. This is also linked to planetary health of course. The state government is yet to scale up its millets mission but this intervention is on the anvil. Poshan Vatikas have also been noted by the fact-finding teams in schools and anganwadis. Chhattisgarh is also home to nutrient-rich diverse local foods, including uncultivated forest foods and greens. It has been home to nutritionally superior traditional landraces of paddy and millets. The fact-finding teams urge the government to invest on these real, community-controlled, natural alternatives rather than on synthetic chemicals in the name of fortified foods in a reductionist, ineffective and potentially risky approach to malnutrition”.

For more information, contact:

1. Kavitha Kuruganti, ASHA-Kisan Swaraj at 8880067772
2. Sangeeta Sahu, Right To Food Campaign Chhattisgarh at 9993637787
3. Dr Randall Sequeira, Public Health Practitioners at 9829477656
4. Raj Shekhar, Right To Food Campaign National Secretariat at 7985946875