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Layered food security: the public distribution system and indigenous food system practices in nagaland, India

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Abstract

This paper examines how Indigenous food systems interact with state-led food transfers to shape food systems in Nagaland, India. While public food programmes are often evaluated in terms of access and delivery, less is known about how they integrate with existing subsistence-based provisioning systems in Indigenous contexts. Drawing on primary data from 416 households across rural and urban areas, this study focuses on rice consumption to analyse how households maintain food security across seasons and how different food sources interact.

The paper highlights two main findings. First, Naga households exhibit strong food system resilience, maintaining stable rice consumption across harvest and lean seasons. This stability reflects the continued importance of Indigenous provisioning strategies, particularly long-term grain storage, which enables households to smooth consumption despite seasonal fluctuations in production and market access. Rather than relying on a single source, households draw on a diversified portfolio of food channels, including own production, storage, markets, kinship-based transfers, and state-led transfers distribution.

Second, the analysis shows that access to subsidised food through the Public Distribution System (PDS) reshapes sourcing behaviour without displacing traditional systems. PDS grain partially substitutes for market purchases and reduces reliance on informal transfers, especially in urban areas, while complementing rather than replacing stored grain from subsistence production. This indicates that public transfers are incorporated into existing food systems, forming a layered structure in which multiple sources jointly support food security.

These findings contribute to broader debates on multifunctional agro-food systems by demonstrating how state-led interventions can reinforce, rather than undermine, Indigenous food systems. In this context, resilience emerges not from any single source of food, but from the interaction between public provisioning, markets, and culturally embedded storage practices. Strengthening such complementarities is critical for designing food policies that support sustainable and resilient food systems in the Global South.

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