



Public Distribution System and Food Security in India

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Food security remains a central concern for a developing country like India, where a significant proportion of the population depends on subsidized food for survival. It is defined as the condition in which all individuals have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to lead a healthy life. To address issues of hunger, poverty, and inequality, the Government of India has established the **Public Distribution System (PDS)** as a key institutional mechanism. The PDS plays a vital role in ensuring food accessibility and affordability, particularly for vulnerable and economically weaker sections of society.

Concept and Dimensions of Food Security

Food security is a multidimensional concept based on three core pillars:

- **Availability** – Adequate supply of food through production, procurement, and storage
- **Accessibility** – Physical and economic access to food
- **Affordability** – Ability of individuals to purchase food at reasonable prices

In India, food security is closely linked with poverty alleviation, social justice, and economic development.

Public Distribution System: Structure and Evolution

Structure of PDS

The PDS is a government-run system that distributes essential commodities such as rice and wheat at subsidized prices through a network of Fair Price Shops. Its functioning involves:

1. **Procurement** of food grains from farmers at minimum support prices
2. **Storage** in government warehouses
3. **Allocation** to states
4. **Distribution** to beneficiaries through ration shops

This system ensures both food security for consumers and price support for farmers.

Evolution of PDS

- **Pre-independence and early phase:** Introduced to manage food shortages and price control
- **Expansion phase:** Extended to rural areas to address widespread poverty
- **Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) (1997):** Focused on Below Poverty Line (BPL) households
- **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013:** Established a rights-based approach, covering nearly two-thirds of the population

Role of PDS in Ensuring Food Security

1. Enhancing Access to Food

The PDS provides subsidized food grains to millions of households, ensuring basic food availability and reducing hunger.

2. Poverty Alleviation and Social Protection

By lowering food expenditure, the PDS increases disposable income for poor households and acts as a safety net during economic distress, inflation, or crises.

3. Price Stabilization

The system helps regulate food prices by maintaining buffer stocks and releasing grains during shortages.

4. Support to Agricultural Sector

Government procurement under PDS ensures stable prices for farmers and encourages agricultural production.

5. Regional Success Models

States like Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh have demonstrated improved efficiency through better governance, transparency, and community participation.

Reforms and Modernization

Digitization and Transparency

- Digitized ration cards
- Aadhaar-based biometric authentication
- Electronic Point of Sale (e-PoS) devices

These reforms have reduced leakages and improved targeting.

One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)

This initiative allows beneficiaries to access their food entitlements anywhere in the country, benefiting migrant workers and enhancing portability.

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)

In some regions, subsidies are transferred directly to bank accounts, reducing corruption and administrative costs.

Challenges in the Public Distribution System

1. Leakages and Corruption

Diversion of food grains and irregularities in distribution remain significant concerns.

2. Targeting Errors

Inclusion of ineligible households and exclusion of deserving beneficiaries reduce the system's effectiveness.

3. Infrastructure Constraints

Inadequate storage, transportation, and distribution networks lead to wastage and inefficiency.

4. Nutritional Limitations

The focus on cereals like rice and wheat neglects dietary diversity, contributing to malnutrition.

5. Regional Disparities

Performance varies significantly across states due to differences in administrative efficiency and governance.

Way Forward

To enhance the effectiveness of PDS and strengthen food security, the following measures are essential:

- Diversifying the food basket to include pulses, millets, and edible oils
- Improving storage and supply chain infrastructure
- Strengthening monitoring and grievance redressal mechanisms
- Ensuring accurate identification of beneficiaries
- Promoting community participation and decentralization
- Integrating PDS with broader nutrition and welfare programs

Conclusion

The Public Distribution System remains a cornerstone of India's food security framework, playing a critical role in reducing hunger and supporting vulnerable populations. While

significant progress has been made through policy reforms and technological interventions, persistent challenges need to be addressed to improve efficiency and inclusiveness. With sustained efforts, the PDS can evolve into a more robust and comprehensive system, ensuring not just food security but also nutritional security for all.

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