

An Approach to the Study of Public Distribution System and Its Sustainability in India

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SUMMARY

Studying the notion of sustainability of public distribution system in India is at the core of this paper. The initial part of the study focuses the theoretical evolution of the concept of food security in India. This particular section analyses the features of National Food Security Act 2013. Here, the main aspects such as availability, accessibility and utility play a significant role in the production and distribution reforms. Further, the study reveals different schemes of food security in the country that provides an overview of existing contributions in the field of the public distribution system. Also, appropriate mechanisms to implement different acts and policies are in the focus of this paper.

The concept of food security has a variety of interpretation. However, in actual sense, it is determined with the absence of hunger or we can say it as a way where one can get an affordable or sufficient measure of food. The importance of food policy in providing efficient price support programmes to protect farmers' interests has been significant in India. It also deals with the distribution of food grains throughout the country for public distribution system. There are three aspects to food security: availability, access, and utilisation. Food accessibility refers to having regular access to enough food in suitable quantities.

Food access is the ability to obtain the right foods for a wholesome diet with enough financial and physical resources. Based on understanding of fundamental nutrition and care, as well as access to clean water and sanitization, using food is the proper use (World Health Organization). Availability along with access of food is being dealt with both individual and beyond at all level and at all times, while, utilization is the ability to absorb the effectiveness of nutrients for a regular body function of an individual. Stability refers to the measurement of these three aspects of food so that the individual does not have to worry about being food insecure.

Sustainable food security will have to be defined as 'physical, economic, social and ecological access to balanced diets and safe drinking water, so as to enable every individual to lead a productive and healthy life in perpetuity' (Swaminathan, 2001). India is a country where 1/3rd of the total population is dependent on agriculture as the chief means of livelihood.

Therefore, sustainability of food is itself is a very important phenomenon where we observe certain issues like, poverty, starvation, malnutrition, alienation and so on. For this, the government of India has also taken various initiatives which would be discussed below, for a greater management of food in the country. Sustainable development denotes the idea of using resources in a way that can be reused for the future generation. It is a means of conservation of resources for the further use.

Here, for a country like India it is necessary to primarily focus on the oriented programmes having a great concentration on various social aspects such as; population issues, health, sanitation, education, child development, employment, and most importantly empowerment of women and farmers. Regarding this, food policies also play a significant role in preserving an adequate level of operational and buffer stocks of food grains to guarantee national food security. In order to provide new routes out of poverty, such as through local value addition through local processing and by connecting farmers directly to higher-value export markets, sustainable food production also requires the creation of sustainable food value chains.

Idea of Food Security in India

According to the concept, "Food Security" means that there is always food accessible, that everyone has access to it, that it is nutrient-adequate in terms of quality, quantity, and diversity, and that it is respectable in the particular culture. Only when all of these are taken into account is food secure (FAO, 1996). According to the law, the right to adequate food is a subset of the right to a sufficient standard of living, which is a subset of economic rights, human rights, and international law.

However, the Right to Food is inherent to a life of dignity, and Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which protects a fundamental right to life and personal liberty, should be read in conjunction with Article 39(a) and Article 47, to understand the nature of the obligations of the state to ensure the effective realisation of this right. In light of this, the

government is required to provide for all the necessities that must be met in order for a person to live with human dignity, including healthcare, education, just employment practises, and protection from exploitation. According to the commission, the Right to Food is a necessary component of living a life of dignity, and Article 21 should be read in conjunction with Articles 39(a) and 47 to fully grasp the state's responsibilities in ensuring the successful realisation of this right.

Article 39 (a), which was established as one of the Directive Principles and is fundamental to the country's governance, requires the state to direct its policies toward ensuring that all of its citizens have the right to an adequate means of subsistence, while Article 47 outlines the state's responsibility to improve the level of nutrition and standard of living of its citizens as a primary responsibility. Thus, the Right to Food is a guaranteed fundamental right under the constitution and is upheld through the constitutional remedy set forth in Article 32.

India is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which was established in 1966. Article 11 of that Covenant specifically affirms everyone's right to an acceptable standard of living, which includes appropriate nutrition. India continues to rank among the worst countries for human rights despite its robust economic growth, rapid information technology development, and claim to be the largest democracy in the world.

Development of Public Distribution System:

Public Distribution System is one of the instruments for improving food security at the household level in India where millions of poor suffer persistent poverty and malnutrition (Dev, 1998). The food security status of a household is not merely a 'technical' matter of production, but one that is determined by several socio-economic variables specific to a household. That is, household food security is influenced by how exactly the various macro-economic policies get mediated through the socio-economic locations of households. In this context, the Public Distribution System (PDS), whose objective is to supply food grains at subsidized prices to people, has to be seen as a very necessary and important social protection program. PDS is operated under the joint responsibility of the central and state governments.

The central and state governments share responsibility for running PDS. The central government is in charge of acquiring, storing, transporting, and bulk allocation of food grains, while the state governments have the responsibility of operationalizing the PDS and distributing the food grains to the consumers through a network of ration shops. It is basically, varies from state to state.

In India, the colonial government introduced a rationing system for rice and wheat, in 1939, in Bombay. This system of rationing was subsequently extended to six cities under the Defence of India rules. In 1942, the government of India created the Department of Food; in 1943, the continuation of rationing, maintenance of a reserve stock and extension of the rationing scheme to the rural area were recommended by the First Food grain Policy Committee set up by the Department of Food. This led to the coverage of 13 cities under the rationing scheme in 1943, 103 cities in 1944, and 771 cities/towns in 1946. In addition to towns, some rural areas where food shortage prevailed were also covered under the rationing system. When the Second World War came to an end, India decided to do away with the rationing system, as recommended by the second Food grain Policy Committee of 1947.

However, in 1950, when post-war inflationary pressures rose rapidly, India reintroduced the rationing system in urban areas. The increase in prices of food grains after the war was nearly four times higher than in the pre-war period. Five Year Plans for development programs were initiated in India in 1951 and Public Distribution System was considered as the social policy for inclusion in the plans. In the First Five Year Plan (1951-56), the PDS was extended to rural areas where chronic food storages were prevalent. Some rural areas were defined as statutory rationing areas where the supply of food grains through PDS was obligatory, while other areas were under non-statutory rationing. However, in 1958, during the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61), the production of food grains dropped to 58.3 million tonnes, which not only made the government of India revert to the system of procurement of cereals and reintroduce control on private trading of food grains but also revived the importance of PDS.

This was the period that witnessed a rapid increase in the number of ration shops from 18000 in 1957 to 51000 in 1961 in India. The Third Plan (1961-66) period, coinciding with the initiation of the 'Green Revolution', witnessed some major organizational changes in food distribution. Promotions of the cooperatives and government agencies for the management of PDS was planned during this period. Again, The Fourth Five Year Plan came into being (1969-74), intending to stabilize and maintain the price of buffer stocks to promote a regular supply of food grains. In the Fifth Five Year Plan period (1974-79), the repeated occurrence of crop failures, food shortages, and price fluctuations led to the acceptance of a policy of expansion of PDS as a stable and universal program of food grain distribution.

The Sixth plan (1980-85) made PDS a long-term strategy to control prices, reduce fluctuations and achieve equitable distribution of essential commodities, particularly food grains. During the Seventh Five Year Plan period (1985-90),

PDS was included in the Minimum Needs Programme in 1987-88 to ensure the availability of essential items (wheat, rice, sugar, gas, kerosene oil, and cloths) at reasonable prices to the vulnerable sections of the population. It was during this period that arguments on restricting PDS to a defined target group began. However, the government decided to continue with a universal approach to PDS. There was a steady growth in the number of Fair Price Shops in India over the years indicating an expansion in coverage of PDS. Thus, the PDS became a permanent feature of food policy and the entire population was covered in both urban and rural areas across India by 1986-87.

Moreover, the onset of the Structural Adjustment Programme, since 1991, the Public Distribution System witnessed drastic changes. This period saw the introduction of a targeting approach to PDS in place of the earlier universal approach. The Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) was introduced by the government of India in 1992 in specific target areas, tribal areas, certain designated hilly areas, and urban slums. RPDA aimed at improving or providing access to PDS to people living in remote areas that did not have ration shops till then. Again, in 1997, the government of India announced a major change in the PDS.

The PDS was converted into a Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) with dual pricing throughout the country. That is, the focus of PDS was changed from "all in poor areas", (which means that the system was an important sense of universal in a given region) to "poor in all areas", (which means targeting everywhere). The TPDS had an impact on entitlements, on the number of food grains distributed, on prices, and also on coverage. Under the TPDS, the beneficiaries are classified into two categories; Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL), using the poverty line determined by the planning commission as the dividing line. The price to be paid for the commodities and scale of allotment are both different for the two categories. The two-tier subsidized pricing system was introduced to benefit the poor.

In September 2013, a significant change was brought in the food policy of the Government of India, when the Right to Food was made a legal entitlement through the National Food Security Act (NFSA). That is, food entitlements that were mere provisions under different schemes and programs became legal entitlements through NFSA. However, the Act is built on the TPDS mechanism to distribute entitlements.

The National Food Security Act of 2013 (NFSA) has some of the aspects listed below:

1. The National Food Security Act of 2013 now governs the Public Distribution System (NFSA).
2. The former poverty estimates are no longer linked to coverage under PDS.
3. According to population estimates from the 2011 Census, the Act covers close to two-thirds of the entire population of the nation.
4. Under two categories of beneficiaries, 50% of the urban population and 75% of the rural population are eligible to receive highly subsidised food grains:
 - a. Homes aided under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)
 - b. Priority Families (PHH)
5. The former Planning Commission (now NITI AYOJ) determines state- and UT-specific coverage based on the NSSO household consumption expenditure survey from 2011–12.
6. The Act grants each AAY household 35kg of food grains each month, but only 5kg to each PHH person.
7. Each state/UT government is responsible for identifying the beneficiaries/households under the NFSA and must set its own eligibility requirements.
8. Up until June 2019, the highly subsidised central issue prices for coarse grains, wheat, and rice will remain at Rs. 1, Rs. 2, and Rs. 3, respectively.
9. No state or UT has had their NFSA food grain allocation reduced. Tide-Over allocation fills up any gaps in the allocation process.
10. To issue ration cards, the beneficiary household's oldest woman (18 years or older) is referred to as the "Head of Family."
11. Grievance redressed mechanisms are provided for women's empowerment through state food commissions, DGROs vigilance Committees, and committees at various levels.
12. A clause allowing for the disclosure of documents pertaining to PDS operations and the posting of beneficiaries lists on public websites/portals to increase transparency.
13. Support for states/UT in covering costs associated with intrastate grain handling and transportation as well as FPS Dealer's margin.

Different Schemes of Food Security in India:

Schemes are mainly the programmes initiated by any government to cure the problems of the general masses. In India, different governments in their tenures try to deal with the challenges of people with certain initiatives such as launching

some policies, programmes or it can be certain schemes. It mainly helps the poor or the under-nourished class to have a better way of living. Some of the schemes related to food security in India are as follows:

Integrated Child Development Services (IcDs), 1975

The Integrated Child Development Service was launched in 1975 with an aim to improve the nutritional and health status of the children below the age of six years, pregnant and lactating mothers, in all rural and urban slums. The programme is divided in three branches: the Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP), which addresses children and pregnant/lactating women; the Kishore Shakti Yojana (KSY) and the Nutrition Programme for Adolescent Girls (NPAG), aimed at girls in the age group 11-18 (19 in NPAG). The KSY is universally applied whereas, NPAG is conceived for underweight adolescent.

Rajiv Gandhi Drinking Water Mission, 1991

The programme was earlier known as Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP) which was introduced in 1972-73 by the government of Gandhi Drinking Water Mission (RGNDWM) in 1991. Through RGNDWM the central government supplements the efforts of the state governments by providing assistance under the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme.

Mid-Day Meal Programmes, 1995

As a part of safety net measures, the government of India initiated several programmes for the benefit of children, tribal, and others. The most important of them is Mid-Day Meal Scheme which was launched in August 1995. The aim of the scheme is two-fold; first, to ensure the necessary nutrition to every child in the age 6-10, and second, to provide primary school instruction to the child. The Mid-Day Meal is not just a programme to enforce the right to food, but is also meant somehow to attract the children to come to school, creating the basis for their future livelihood. A special focus is placed on children living in drought-affected areas, guaranteeing them adequate support during the summer vacation.

Village Grain Banks Scheme for Chronically Food Scarce Areas, 1996

The main objective of the Village Grain Banks Scheme (VGBS) is to provide safeguard against starvation during the period of natural calamity when the marginalised food insecure households do not have sufficient resources to purchase the rations. The scheme has two components, viz; food component and cash component. Under the food component, each grain bank will store one quintal of food grains per family for an average 40 Below Poverty Line/Antyodaya Anna Yojana families, which will be released as one time grant by the Central government.

Annapurna, 2000

The Annapurna Scheme was designed to give food security to those old people who have the criteria for being eligible under NOAPS, but do not get money from the scheme. Under the Annapurna, 10kg of grains are transferred monthly to old destitute people who are eligible for NOAPS but do not get the pension. Since 2003, the scheme was completely transferred to state level. Under this scheme, the BPL households are eligible to get 35kgs of food grains per month from public distribution centres. The food grain is supplied on free of cost to the beneficiaries.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme, 2005

The central objective of the Policy Integration Department of ILO is to further greater policy coherence and the integration of social and economic policies at both the international and national level. To this end, it works closely with other multi-lateral agencies and national actors such as governments, trade unions, employers' federations, NGOs and Universities. The objectives of the programme as stated in the guidelines are to enhance livelihood security while producing durable assets, empowering women, reducing distress migration and promoting social equality.

National Rural Health Mission, 2005

In order to make the necessary structural corrections in the fundamental healthcare delivery system, the Government of India launched the National Rural Health Mission (2005–12) in recognition of the role that health plays in the process of economic and social development and in raising the quality of life for its citizens. The mission takes a synergistic approach by connecting health to the components of nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, and access to safe drinking water. It also aspires to mainstream Indian medical systems to improve access to healthcare. Goals include:

1. Reduction of the Maternal Mortality Ratio and Infant Mortality Rate (MMR).
2. Universal access to public health services like nutrition, immunization, women's health, children's health, water, sanitation, and hygiene.
3. The prevention and control of infectious and non-infectious diseases, including those that are endemic to a particular area.
4. Access to primary healthcare that is integrated and thorough.
5. Demographic balance, gender equality, and population stabilization.
6. Revitalise mainstream AYUSH and regional health customs.
7. Support for active lifestyles. (Ramulu Bala, 2016).

National Food Security Mission, 2007

The National Food Security Mission is recognised that the current path of grains production was not fast enough to cover for the increase in the population, which causes a global food scarcity. This plan's primary goal is to boost the output and productivity of wheat, rice, and pulses on a sustainable basis, so to preserve the food security of the country. Along with this, another objective of the policy is the creation of more job opportunities for the rural households.

National Rural Livelihood Mission, 2011

The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), which is intended to combat poverty, was established by the Indian government in 2011 as a component of inclusive growth through social mobilization, institution building, financial inclusion and a variety of reliable sources of income. The Mission's primary goals are to: use a saturation approach to reach all families; organise at least one SDG member from each HH, preferably women; cover all villages in phased manner; special focus on states with large tribal population; cover seven crore rural poor HHs; provide credit and subsidy (nearly one lakh in five to six years); generate income at least Rs 50,000; promote self-employment opportunities; eliminate hunger, malnutrition and rural poverty; and reduce inequalities (Bala, Ramulu, 2016).

Implementation of the Mechanism; Problems and Recommendations:

In the conclusion, it can be observed that the process of food security in India is a chain of certain implications. Five-year plans, universalization of PDS, certain programmes and policies have been implemented by the government of India for the sake of the people, for their better way of living and for the development of the nation. Although it cannot be denied that some such programmes have not been succeeded for various reasons. There is no doubt about it that we have so many problems in our implementation process, whether it may be ground-level or it may be something else. But one cannot ignore the mechanism of the chain that is been regulated the whole process of food security system in the country. So, to deal with it, certain problems and recommendations are here to discuss:

Problems:

Food waste reduction represents an important but often overlooked component of sustainable food systems as it can be seen that up to 33% of all food harvested is wasted in global sphere. Certain problems are there to observe such as; limited benefit to the poor, regional disparities in PDS benefits, burden of food subsidy, urban bias, high operational cost, inefficient government machinery, increase in prices, problem of larger buffer stocks, climate change and low productivity. The low productivity is caused by lack of improvement in agricultural productivity which is eventually a reason of climate change and it further owe to the inadequate resources and markets to obtain agriculture's resilience. The issue of access and affordability relates to all the benefits provided by government programmes and schemes intended to assist urban slum dwellers, which are only utilised by recognised slums. Ironically, around 50% of urban slums go unnoticed and are consequently excluded from government programmes. The fact that this labourer class depends on daily employment wages, which have a tendency to fluctuate on different days of the month, may also contribute to food insecurity.

As a result, access to and procurement of food may be unstable. The amount of food grains wasted at FCI as a result of faulty storage and careless management is a significant obstacle to the NFS Act's success. The key strategies to prevent significant losses at the storage point are consistency in fresh procurement, regular intervals following harvesting season, and continual offtake of the food grains from the FCI godowns. Every social initiative the government has launched now very certainly has the problem of corruption as the top priority. Although many welfare programmes' intentions and justifications are undeniable, there is always scepticism over how well they will actually be carried out and provide the desired outcomes. The NFS Act's ambitious operation hangs in the balance in an anti-probity environment.

Recommendations:

While dealing with the sustainability of food and its security in the country, it is important to first keep a note that, land, water and biodiversity are the precious natural resources that provide base for food production and sustenance of food and nutrition security. It is, therefore, necessary to plan scientifically to conserve these resources along with the elements of the regional ecology for keeping the life support systems intact. What is equally important is to maintain harmony between the modern technology of production of food grains and local ecosystem. Food waste reduction presents a significant potential to enhance food security and reduce the environmental impact of agricultural systems across the supply chain.

The 'One Ration Card' scheme should be operationalized through the proper issuance of ration cards to individuals seeking food grain so that the PDS can be accessed at any geographical location in the country. The government should ensure continued home delivery of meals and cooking materials to the beneficiaries of the supplementary nutrition programme under the ICDS and MDM for as long as anganwadis (childcare centres) and schools remain closed. Nutritious food should be provided to the vulnerable section of the population, especially during the pandemic and its aftermath, as this can help avoid heightening food insecurity. Post pandemic programme has the potential to cater to the health, nutrition and livelihood needs of the migrants who have returned home. MGNREGA has also made an important contribution to child wellbeing, through the reduction of hunger and improvement of health and education, and it must continue to be promoted.

The government should incentivize the production of water-and nutrient-efficient crops (such as millets and pulses) that replenish the soil and utilize less water (in comparison to water-intensive crops like sugarcane and paddy) by announcing a lucrative MSP and input subsidies for farmers. It is crucial to reconsider providing subsidies for certain crops as they are having an adverse impact on the natural resources. Sustainable agriculture practices- such as crop rotation, mixed cropping with pulses, using bio fertilizers, and integrated pest management- must be encouraged and promoted.

Sustainable food value chain implementation can provide crucial development opportunities for millions of low-income households in Asia and the Pacific. However, food value chains are intricate and complex systems, and it may be challenging to pinpoint the precise causes of their unsustainable features. Most often, it is important to address multiple issues in order to break the cycle of poverty. This, of course, calls for a great deal of harmony and cooperative effort among the many players along the value chain, including farmers, agribusinesses, governments, and civil society organisations. Public, corporate, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from all over the world are working together to develop and implement novel solutions to these problems, with the goal of making a significant and long-lasting impact on the system as a whole. There are many takeaways from this experience.

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