

THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT IN REDUCING HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), enacted in 2013, marked a pivotal shift in India's approach to food and nutritional security by legally entitling over two-thirds of the population to subsidized food grains. This study examines the role of NFSA in reducing hunger and malnutrition across India, with a focus on its implementation, coverage, and impact on vulnerable populations. Despite improvements in food access, challenges persist in addressing nutritional adequacy, systemic inefficiencies, and regional disparities. The study uses secondary data and policy analysis to evaluate NFSA's effectiveness and propose actionable recommendations for enhancing its impact.

INTRODUCTION

India, despite being one of the world's largest producers of food grains, continues to grapple with widespread hunger and malnutrition. According to national surveys, millions of people—particularly children, women, and rural households—suffer from undernutrition, stunting, and food insecurity. Recognizing this persistent challenge, the Government of India enacted the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013, aiming to provide subsidized food grains to approximately two-thirds of the population. The Act marked a paradigm shift by converting food access from a welfare provision into a legal entitlement, thereby reinforcing the state's commitment to ensuring food and nutritional security for all.

This study seeks to critically examine the role of the NFSA in reducing hunger and malnutrition across India. It explores the Act's implementation mechanisms, coverage, and effectiveness in reaching vulnerable populations, including priority households, pregnant and lactating women, and children. By analyzing secondary data from national surveys and policy documents, the research evaluates whether the NFSA has succeeded in improving food access and nutritional outcomes. The study also considers regional disparities, systemic inefficiencies, and the integration of NFSA with other nutrition-sensitive programs such as POSHAN Abhiyaan and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

Understanding the impact of NFSA is crucial for refining India's food policy and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger. While the Act has expanded food coverage, its ability to address malnutrition especially micronutrient deficiencies and dietary diversity—remains limited. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse by identifying gaps in implementation and proposing actionable recommendations for enhancing the Act's reach and nutritional effectiveness. It also offers insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers working toward inclusive and sustainable food systems in India.

CONCEPT OF FOOD SECURITY

Food security is a comprehensive and multidimensional concept that refers to the condition in which all individuals, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. This definition, widely accepted and endorsed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, emphasizes not only the availability of food but also the ability of individuals to access and utilize it effectively and sustainably.

The concept of food security is built upon four interrelated pillars:

1. **Availability** – This refers to the physical presence of food in a region or country, which depends on domestic agricultural production, food imports, food aid, and stock levels. Ensuring availability requires robust agricultural systems, efficient supply chains, and climate-resilient practices.
2. **Access** – Even when food is available, individuals must have the means to obtain it. Access includes both economic access (affordability) and physical access (proximity to markets or distribution centers). Social inequalities, poverty, and exclusion can severely limit access, especially for marginalized groups.
3. **Utilization** – This dimension focuses on how the body uses the food consumed. It involves proper dietary intake, food safety, clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. Malnutrition often persists not due to lack of food, but due to poor utilization—such as diets lacking in essential nutrients or unsafe food and water.
4. **Stability** – Food security must be consistent over time. This means that people should not be at risk of losing access to food due to sudden shocks like economic crises, natural disasters, conflict, or seasonal shortages.

CONCEPT OF THE NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT (NFSA)

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, is a landmark legislation in India that transforms food access from a welfare-based approach to a legal entitlement, aiming to ensure food and nutritional security for a majority of the population. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) was enacted by the Government of India in July 2013 with the primary objective of providing legal entitlement to subsidized food grains to approximately two-thirds of the Indian population. The Act represents a paradigm shift in the country's approach to food security moving from a discretionary welfare model to a rights-based framework. It is grounded in the belief that access to adequate food is essential for living a life with dignity, as implied under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution (Right to Life).

The NFSA consolidates and strengthens existing food-related schemes such as the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). It legally entitles:

1. Priority households to receive 5 kg of food grains per person per month at highly subsidized prices (₹3/kg for rice, ₹2/kg for wheat, ₹1/kg for coarse grains).
2. Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households to receive 35 kg per month.
3. Pregnant women and lactating mothers to receive free meals and maternity benefits.
4. Children aged 6 months to 14 years to receive free nutritious meals through ICDS and schools.

The Act also mandates the identification of eligible households by state governments, transparency and accountability mechanisms, and the establishment of grievance redressal systems at various levels. In cases where food grains are not supplied, beneficiaries are entitled to a food security allowance.

The conceptual foundation of the NFSA aligns with the global understanding of food security, which includes availability, access, utilization, and stability. However, the Act primarily addresses availability and access, with limited focus on nutritional diversity and utilization. While it has significantly expanded food coverage, challenges remain in terms of leakages in the PDS, exclusion errors, regional disparities, and inadequate nutritional outcomes.

In essence, the NFSA is a critical instrument in India's fight against hunger and undernutrition. Its success depends not only on efficient implementation but also on its integration with broader nutrition-sensitive programs, public health initiatives, and livelihood support systems.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several studies have examined the role of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, in reducing hunger and malnutrition across India, with growing attention to its implementation in Karnataka. Venkatesh Naik and Dr. Rajendraprasad (2019) evaluated the Anna Bhagya scheme in Ballari district, noting that while it reached over 40 million beneficiaries, its nutritional impact was limited due to the narrow food basket consisting mainly of rice and wheat. Rashmi Shetty (2023) emphasized that despite legal entitlements and surplus food stocks, India continues to face severe undernutrition, and Karnataka reflects similar challenges in translating food access into nutritional gains. These findings suggest that while NFSA has expanded coverage, its ability to improve health outcomes remains constrained by the lack of dietary diversity and micronutrient-rich provisions.

A working paper by Malini L. Tantri et al. from the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) titled Food Security in Karnataka: Paradoxes of Performance highlights that although Karnataka has made progress in food access through the Public Distribution System (PDS), it has not adequately addressed the dimensions of utilization and stability. Malnutrition indicators such as stunting and wasting remain high, particularly in rural districts, indicating that food availability alone is insufficient to ensure nutritional security. The Takshashila Institution (2022) supports this view, reporting stagnation in Karnataka's nutrition outcomes over the past decade, with NFHS-5 data showing only marginal improvements in child health indicators. These studies underscore the need for a more integrated approach that combines food access with health, sanitation, and education interventions.

The State Nutrition Profile by NITI Aayog (2022) provides district-level dashboards that reveal significant disparities in nutrition outcomes across Karnataka. It recommends integrating NFSA with POSHAN Abhiyaan and strengthening monitoring mechanisms to better target high-burden districts. Dr. Wajeeda Bano (2021) further argues that food security must go beyond grain distribution to include affordability, dietary diversity, and nutrition awareness, especially for economically vulnerable households. In response to these gaps, the present study undertakes a comprehensive evaluation of NFSA's effectiveness in reducing both hunger and malnutrition, with a focus on identifying implementation challenges and proposing policy recommendations to enhance the Act's nutritional impact.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study has been undertaken with the following specific objectives

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013.
2. To assess the impact of NFSA on hunger and malnutrition.
3. To identify implementation challenges of the National Food Security Act (NFSA).
4. To propose policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of the National Food Security Act.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data to evaluate the effectiveness of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, in reducing hunger and malnutrition in India, with a focus on Karnataka. Data sources include government reports, NFHS-5 findings, NITI Aayog's State Nutrition Profile, and published research articles that provide insights into food access, nutritional indicators, and implementation challenges. District-level statistics on stunting, wasting, underweight prevalence, and Public Distribution System (PDS) coverage are analyzed to identify regional disparities and trends. The study also reviews policy documents and scheme evaluations to understand how NFSA interacts with complementary programs such as POSHAN Abhiyaan, ICDS, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. Through this approach, the research aims to generate evidence-based recommendations for improving the nutritional sensitivity and policy integration of NFSA.

FUNCTIONS OF NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT ON REDUCING HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION

The following functions of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 in reducing hunger and malnutrition across India:

1. **Collaboration with other schemes**– As mentioned above, distribution slabs are decided on the basis of two schemes, Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) targets the “poorest of the poor.” These are households judged to be in extreme deprivation, landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, elderly with no regular support, rural artisans with no assured income and similar groups. AAY households receive 35 kg of foodgrains per family per month at highly subsidised central issue prices. Priority Households (PHH), falling within the broader NFSA coverage but not in the AAY bracket, receive 5 kg per person per month. The precise criteria for inclusion in PHH are determined by state governments and often draw on a mix of socio-economic indicators, asset ownership exclusions, and local vulnerability assessments.
2. **Procurement, Storage and Distribution**- The Food Corporation of India (FCI), along with state agencies, procures grains at Minimum Support Prices (MSP), transports them to warehouses, and releases monthly allocations to Fair Price Shops (FPS). Beneficiaries use Aadhaar-linked digital ration cards to claim entitlements through electronic Point of Sale (ePoS) devices, ensuring transparency and recordkeeping.
3. **Ration Card Digitisation and Targeting**- As of early 2023, nearly 19.8 crore NFSA ration cards have been fully digitised, with 99.8% of 5.33 lakh fair price shops equipped with ePoS machines. Around 95% of foodgrain deliveries pass through

these digital channels, modernising processes and reducing fake cards via Aadhaar seeding and eKYC.

4. **Aadhaar-Based Biometric Authentication (ABBA)**– Since 2015, many states have mandated biometric verification for ration collection. While it was intended to stop identity fraud, there have been mixed outcomes, studies in Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and UP indicated marginal impact on reducing corruption but higher exclusion of genuine beneficiaries due to authentication failures.
5. **Full PDS Computerisation and Portability with ONORC**- By mid-2021, transaction logs, Aadhaar seeding, and unified beneficiary databases covered nearly all states and union territories. ONORC (One Nation, One Ration Card), launched in 2019, adds national portability: beneficiaries can access their food entitlements in any state using their Aadhaar-linked card. As of FY 2022–23, ONORC has been enabled in all States and union territories covering close to 80 crore NFSA beneficiaries.

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT ON REDUCING HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION

The National Food Security system in India has seen major budgetary shifts over recent years. For the financial year 2024–25, the Department of Food and Public Distribution was allocated ₹2.13 lakh crore, with a staggering 96% of this budget directed toward food subsidies. This maintains the post-pandemic pattern, as there was a steep surge in government's subsidy burden due to the launch of Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) and removals of FCI loan waivers particularly during 2020–22.

Even while emergency relief measures phased out, the food subsidy budget stayed at ₹2.06 lakh crore in 2022–23 and remained the same in 2023–24. In that year, ₹1.46 lakh crore was spent on procurement through the Food Corporation of India (FCI), while the rest went to storage, logistics, and other nutrition programs.

Coming to food grain supply, in 2023 approximately 450 lakh tonnes of foodgrains were distributed under the combined NFSA and PMGKAY framework, averaging 40–41 lakh tonnes per month. Of this, around 80 lakh tonnes were delivered under the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) system which facilitated over 28 crore inter- and intra-state transactions freeing access to food entitlements for migrant workers more broad-based. India's grain transportability improved with ONORC, but the majority of grain nevertheless continued to move within states.

One of the most visible impacts of the NFSA has been the reduction in extreme hunger through the expansion of the Public Distribution System (PDS). According to the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, over 810 million people currently benefit from subsidized food grains under NFSA. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2023, while still ranking India at 111 out of 125 countries, shows a decline in the proportion of undernourished people from 15.2% in 2010–12 to 16.6% in 2020–22, indicating that while food access has improved, challenges remain. The NFSA has helped stabilize food availability during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when additional free rations were distributed under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY).

Despite improvements in food access, NFSA's impact on malnutrition has been modest. According to NFHS-5 (2019–21) data, 35.5% of children under five in India are stunted, 19.3% are wasted, and 32.1% are underweight. These statistics suggest that while hunger may be declining, malnutrition persists due to the limited nutritional diversity of the food basket, which primarily includes rice and wheat. The lack of protein-rich and micronutrient-

dense foods such as pulses, eggs, and fortified items—means that calorie sufficiency does not translate into nutritional adequacy.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING NFSA TO REDUCE HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 faces major implementation challenges—including exclusion errors, poor nutritional diversity, weak integration with health schemes, and regional disparities—that limit its effectiveness in reducing hunger and malnutrition.

1. **Exclusion Errors and Targeting Gaps:** Outdated socio-economic data leads to eligible households being left out and ineligible ones receiving benefits, weakening NFSA's reach to the most vulnerable.
2. **Limited Nutritional Diversity:** The food basket focuses on cereals, lacking pulses, fruits, and fortified items—addressing hunger but failing to combat malnutrition effectively.
3. **Weak Scheme Integration:** Poor coordination between NFSA and programs like POSHAN Abhiyaan and ICDS reduces their combined impact on nutritional outcomes.
4. **Infrastructure and Delivery Issues:** Inadequate storage, transport, and supply chains especially in rural districts—cause delays and spoilage, affecting food quality and availability.
5. **Corruption and PDS Leakages:** Despite digitization, ghost beneficiaries and grain diversion persist, undermining the efficiency and credibility of the Public Distribution System.
6. **Low Awareness and Weak Grievance Redressal:** Many beneficiaries are unaware of their rights, and under-resourced grievance systems fail to resolve complaints or ensure accountability.
7. **Regional Implementation Disparities:** States vary in NFSA performance due to governance and capacity gaps, leading to uneven progress in reducing hunger and malnutrition.

SUGGESTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following suggestions and policy recommendations to strengthen the implementation of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 in reducing hunger and malnutrition across India:

1. **Update and Digitize Beneficiary Lists:** Regularly revise socio-economic data using SECC and Aadhaar-linked databases to minimize exclusion and inclusion errors. Ensure portability through One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) for migrant workers.
2. **Diversify the Food Basket:** Include nutrient-rich items such as pulses, millets, fortified rice, edible oils, and eggs in the PDS to address micronutrient deficiencies and improve dietary diversity.
3. **Strengthen Convergence with Nutrition Schemes:** Ensure better coordination between NFSA and complementary programs like POSHAN Abhiyaan, ICDS, and Mid-Day Meal Scheme to deliver integrated nutrition and health services.

4. **Improve Infrastructure and Supply Chains:** Invest in modern storage facilities, cold chains, and last-mile delivery systems, especially in rural and tribal areas, to reduce spoilage and ensure timely distribution.
5. **Enhance Monitoring and Transparency:** Use real-time dashboards, GPS tracking, and social audits to monitor grain movement and delivery. Empower local communities and SHGs to oversee fair price shops.
6. **Strengthen Grievance Redressal Mechanisms:** Activate and adequately fund State Food Commissions, toll-free helplines, and online complaint portals to ensure timely resolution of beneficiary grievances.
7. **Promote Nutrition Education and Awareness:** Conduct community-based campaigns to raise awareness about entitlements, balanced diets, and the importance of maternal and child nutrition.
8. **Encourage State-Level Innovations:** Support states like Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh that have pioneered universal PDS or added pulses and oil to the food basket. Encourage context-specific innovations in states like Karnataka.
9. **Focus on Vulnerable Groups and Aspirational Districts:** Prioritize SC/ST communities, women-headed households, and malnutrition-prone districts like Raichur, Kalaburagi, and Koppal for targeted interventions.
10. **Periodic Impact Assessments:** Conduct district-level evaluations of NFSA's nutritional outcomes using NFHS and POSHAN Tracker data to inform mid-course corrections and policy redesign.

CONCLUSION

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, has played a pivotal role in expanding food access and reducing chronic hunger among India's vulnerable populations by legally entitling them to subsidized food grains. Its implementation has strengthened the Public Distribution System and provided a safety net during economic and health crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the study reveals that while NFSA has succeeded in improving food availability, its impact on malnutrition remains limited due to the narrow nutritional scope of the food basket, exclusion errors, and weak integration with health and nutrition programs.

Persistent challenges such as regional disparities, poor infrastructure, and lack of awareness continue to hinder the Act's full potential. To transform NFSA into a comprehensive food and nutrition security framework, policy reforms must focus on diversifying entitlements, enhancing convergence with schemes like POSHAN Abhiyaan and ICDS, and strengthening monitoring and grievance redressal mechanisms. In conclusion, NFSA is a foundational step toward food justice in India, but its long-term success depends on evolving from calorie sufficiency to nutritional adequacy. A more inclusive, data-driven, and regionally responsive approach is essential to ensure that the Act not only feeds the population but nourishes it.

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