



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**REORIENTING PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION
SYSTEM (PDS): FROM FOOD SECURITY
TO NUTRITION SECURITY**

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Context

- Recently, 'The **State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2026**' (**SOFI 2026**) highlights a significant decline in hunger and the unaffordability of healthy diets worldwide.
- For India, the report provides an important opportunity to evaluate the performance of the **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013** and the **Public Distribution System (PDS)** in the context of changing socioeconomic conditions.

Major Findings of the UN SOFI 2026 Report

- The **SOFI 2026** report was produced jointly by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNICEF, World Food Programme (WFP) and WHO.
- Improved Affordability of Healthy Diets:** The report estimates that the share of Indians **unable to afford a healthy diet** declined from **59.8% (2017)** to **35.5% (2025)**.
 - That's a **decrease from 759 million to 589 million individuals**.
 - In this period, some **170 million people** were pushed below the affordability level.
 - It is a reflection of increasing household spending power and continued economic expansion.
- Decreased Poverty:** The actual **per capita income of India increased** by **around 78% during 2013-14 to 2025-26**. Poverty reduced from about 22% at the time of implementation of NFSA to approximately 5% in 2022-23.
 - Hence, only a small percentage of current PDS participants are considered to be below the poverty line, suggesting that the system has become more universal than poverty-targeted.
- Slow Declining of Hunger:** The share of undernourished people fell from 13% in 2013-14 to 9.8% in 2023-25.
 - While encouraging, the pace remains modest, suggesting that **free cereals alone cannot eliminate hunger or malnutrition**.

India's Food Security Framework

- India has one of the world's largest food security programmes, anchored by the **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013**, which made access to subsidised food grains a **legal entitlement**.
- NFSA supports 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population** (based on the 2011 Census), and provides 5 kg of food grains per person per month at subsidised rates, with **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)** families getting **35 kg per month**.
- These benefits have been supplied **free of cost** since 2020 under the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY)**.
- Today, the **Public Distribution System (PDS)** is the world's largest food-based social protection programme, providing **about 55 million tonnes of food grains** to **almost 800 million** individuals each year.
- Food subsidies in **2025-26 stood at ₹2.28 trillion**, or more than **4% of the Union Government's spending**, reaffirming India's strong commitment to food security.

Issues with the Existing System

- Wide Coverage:** Even after a substantial decline in poverty and better affordability of food, almost two-thirds of India's population still get free food grains.
- Rising Fiscal Burden:** Food subsidy has more than quadrupled from 2019-20 on account of increase in procurement cost and higher economic cost incurred by Food Corporation of India (FCI), prompting worries over budgetary sustainability.
- Calorie-Centric Approach:** PDS largely distributes cereals like rice and wheat, although India's nutrition problems are more about lack of proteins, micronutrients and dietary diversity.

- Persistent problems such as **anaemia among women, child stunting, wasting, and underweight prevalence** necessitate nutrition-specific interventions.

Government Initiatives & Efforts Supporting Nutrition

- **Nutrition Support National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013:** Legal right to receive food grains at subsidised rates.
- **PMGKAY:** Free food grains to all NFSA beneficiaries.
- **POSHAN Abhiyaan:** A convergence based mission to decrease stunting, wasting and anemia.
- **Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0:** Boosting supplementary nutrition and early childcare care.
- **PM POSHAN Yojana (Mid-Day Meal):** School-based Child Nutrition Support
- **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS):** Extra food for pregnant women, breastfeeding moms and youngsters.
- **Food Fortification Initiatives:** Providing fortified rice through government assistance initiatives to address micronutrient deficits.
- **Mission Poshan Tracker and Anaemia Mukh Bharat:** Digital surveillance and targeted interventions for maternal and child nutrition.

Suggested Reforms

- **Rationalise PDS coverage gradually** by linking beneficiaries to those truly unable to buy a decent food. Current estimates indicate that coverage may be cut back to 570 million or so, with huge fiscal savings.
- **Diversify the food basket** to include nutrient-rich foods such as pulses and, when possible, fortified foods and edible oils.
- Redirect savings **to fight hidden hunger**, especially nutritional deficits in women and children.
- Link PDS reforms with health, sanitation and behavioural change projects to improve nutrition outcomes, not just availability of food.

Way Forward: Towards Nutrition Security

- **Rationalise Beneficiary Coverage:** Focus gradually on the population that cannot afford healthy food, estimated to be roughly 35.5% of the population.
 - ♦ It could help cut subsidy spending and ensure that support reaches the most vulnerable.
- **Expand the Food Basket:** The savings from improved targeting can be used to provide protein-rich and nutrient-dense foods such as pulses, millets and fortified foods, especially to the nutritionally fragile households.
- **Tackle Hidden Hunger:** The persisting difficulties of anaemia, stunting, wasting and underweight among women and children need to be addressed by strengthening Government efforts like **POSHAN Abhiyaan, Anaemia Mukh Bharat, Mission Poshan 2.0 and the PM-POSHAN Scheme.**
- **Improve Dynamic Targeting:** The identification of beneficiaries should be updated frequently, utilising socio-economic datasets, instead of relying on the 2011 Census, so that the support is in line with current circumstances.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] The Public Distribution System (PDS) has played a pivotal role in ensuring food security in India. However, changing socioeconomic conditions call for a shift from food security to nutrition security. Examine.

Source: BS

