



25 May 2025

Twelve years after approving the largest ever food security programme, India's food security challenge remains

India's National Food Security Act and the Public Distribution System (PDS)

In 2013, we had drawn the attention of our readers to the approval, in India, of the '**largest ever food security programme**' [\[read\]](#). This programme, that rests on the use of the Public Distribution System (PDS), was expected to benefit 800 million people (75% of rural and 50% of urban population) and to involve the distribution of more than 60 million tons of subsidised cereals¹ annually (India was then producing approximately 280 million tons of cereals every year). Its total projected cost was estimated at 1,250 billion rupees (equivalent to around \$20 billion, at the time).

The Act and related programme were to be the main tools for turning the **Right to Food** – included in India's Constitution in 2012 – into reality. They are designed according to a long tradition of food subsidies in India which goes back to colonial times.



Twelve years later, we felt the need to try and find out what happened and what lessons could be learned, if any, from the Indian experience.

¹ 5kg/person/month.

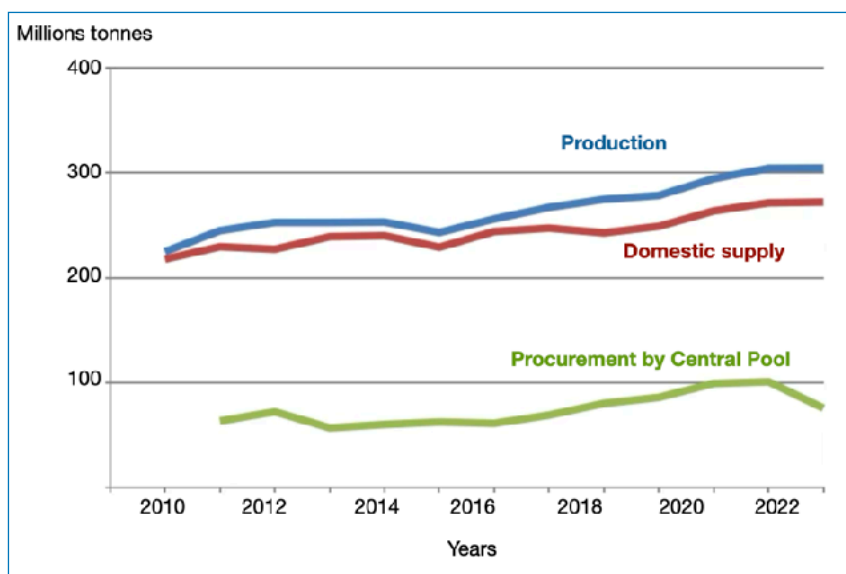
A problem-marred implementation

In 2013, the launching of the programme was criticised on the ground that it should have been preceded by a reform of India's preexisting Public Distribution System² – accused to be flawed and marred by corrupt practices – and should be supported by specific nutrition education for a diversified diet, safe water, sanitation and healthcare programmes that would ensure that the food distributed is well assimilated by the beneficiaries. As for the business community, it argued that the programme de facto nationalisation of the agriculture sector.

During the first years, the implementation of the programme was characterised by a **great diversity of modes of operation** (modalities, criteria for eligibility, methods for identifying beneficiaries, etc.), largely because it was managed by the states and not by the Central Government. Initial partial evaluations showed, however, that it did **improve the coverage of food distribution**, compared to preexisting programs [\[read\]](#).

Government procurement of food grain increased over the years to reach 25 to 30% of total food grain production (see **figure 1**), two thirds of which are distributed through the Public Distribution System. During the COVID pandemic period, food was actually distributed free and about 80% of households having ration cards did receive the food grains meant for them [\[read p. 41\]](#). In 2020–2022, public procurement achieved an **all-time maximum**, generating high food stocks and using up a large part of the public budget. In 2022–23, the programme provided food to 810 million people for a total cost of Rs 11.8 lakh crore³ [\[read\]](#).

Figure 1 – Production, domestic supply and procurement by Central Pool of Rice and Wheat (2010–2023)



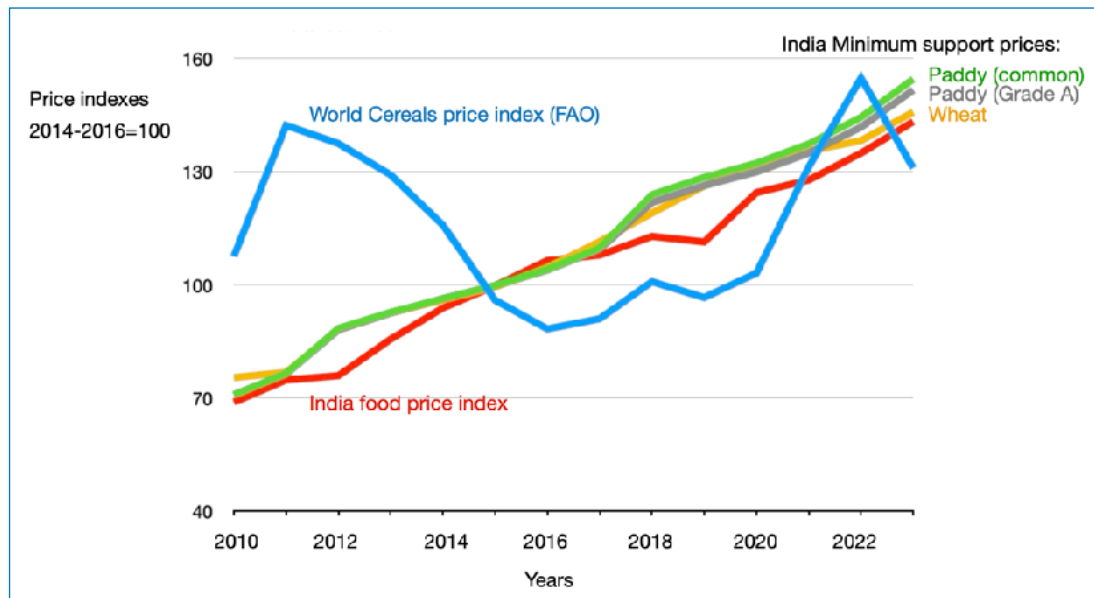
Source: based on data from [FAOSTAT](#) and [dataful](#).

² India's Public Distribution System (PDS) comprises more almost 500,000 Fair Price Shops.

³ or 11.8 trillion Rupees equivalent to 123 billion euros at the May 2025 exchange rate.

Figure 2 compares the evolution of global FAO cereal prices index, India's food price index and the Indian Minimum support price index for three cereals. It shows a regular increase of the Indian Minimum support prices, slightly faster than that of the Indian food price index.

Figure 2 – Prices indexes (2010–2023)



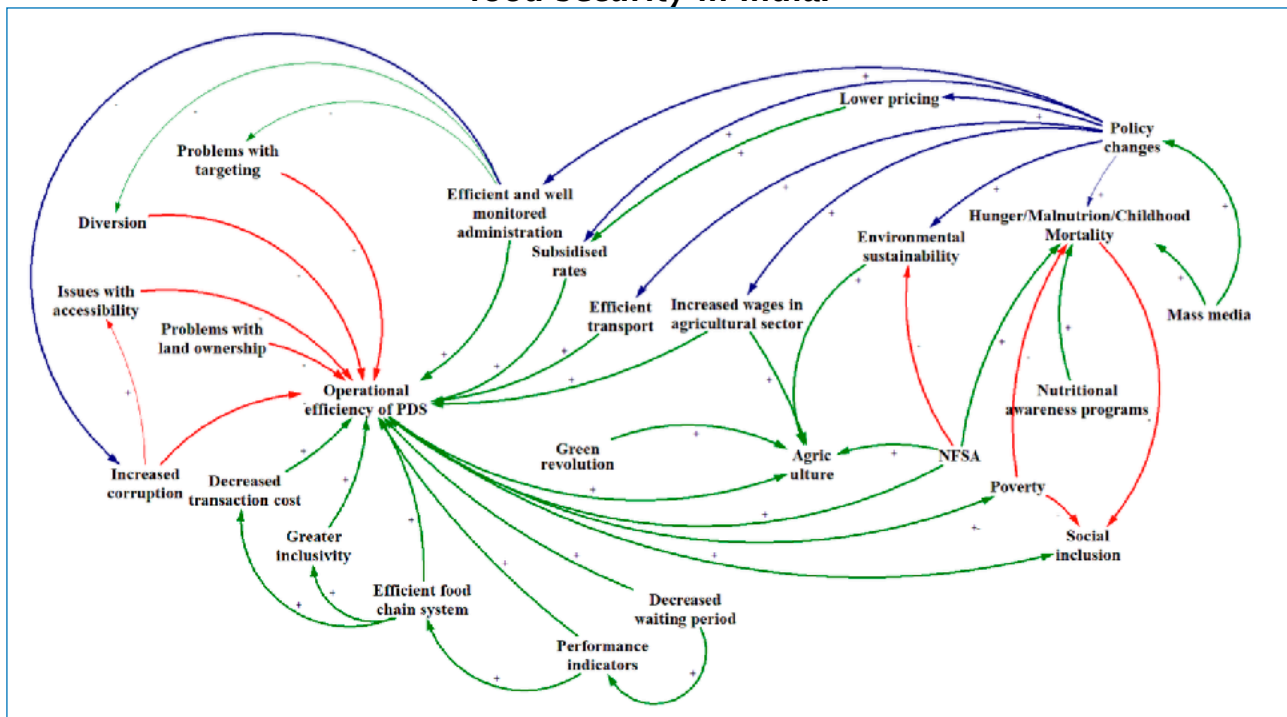
Source: data from [FAO](#), and [dataful](#).

Mixed results obtained in reducing food insecurity

While there are a number of studies analysing various aspects of India's food security programme in different states, many of them dating back to the initial years of implementation, hungerexplained could not find any recent overall evaluation of the programme and its results.

A review of 23 studies conducted in 2019 found evidence that the programme contributed to the **improvement of food security**, particularly by supplying more calories. However, it raises concerns regarding its inefficiencies and weaknesses in terms of miss-targeting and wastage, under-coverage, corruption, irregular supply of Fair Price Shops and diversion of food which have, in some cases, resulted in only a small part of the food mobilised actually reaching the intended beneficiaries and in some quality food provided was replaced by goods of a lesser standard [[read p. 6](#)] (see **figure 3**).

Figure 3 – Determinants affecting the effectiveness of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in addressing the food security in India.



Source: [George and McKay, 2019](#).

The **red arrows** and negative polarity indicate elements that act as barriers while the **green arrows** and positive polarity specify variables that act as enablers.

Another study [\[read\]](#) using data from 63,525 adults aged 45 and above from the Longitudinal Aging Study in India (2017–18), found that **severe food insecurity remained a major concern in India**, five years after the beginning of the implementation of the food security programme. Average prevalence in the country was 6.2%, ranging from 2% to more than 10%, depending on the states. Categories most prone to severe food insecurity were those living in a rural area, being widowed, belonging to a Scheduled Caste, and being Muslim. This level of prevalence is slightly below what was estimated by FAO for the total population of Asia in 2017 (6.9%) [\[read p. 4\]](#).

The persistence of food insecurity is not a real surprise as the provision of subsidised wheat and rice to hundreds of millions of disadvantaged people amounts to **transferring income** to them. It was found to contribute to **reduce poverty and inequalities** [\[read\]](#), but some studies indicate that distribution of food in kind **did not really increase food consumption** as savings made with subsidised or free food were used for other purposes [\[read\]](#).

This suggests that in kind food distribution may not be a very efficient way of proceeding, as its performance on food insecurity reduction is rather modest and because its implementation involves considerable spendings for maintaining and supplying the huge network of Fair Price Shops and as **only a part of the public expenditures incurred actually reaches intended beneficiaries**.

Despite the programme, chronic undernourishment too persisted in India. Yet, FAO estimates indicate that during the 2019–21 period, it affected 13.7% of the population, considerably lower than the 21.4% estimated for the 2004–06 period. Many factors may explain this improvement, among which, probably the implementation of the massive food security programme, as public food distribution is considered a major source of food in India.⁴



Conclusion

The experience of India's implementation of its National Food Security Act, started in 2013, demonstrates once more that **massive financial resources are not sufficient to ensure the success of a food security programme** whose objective is to improve access to food by the needy.

Based on the analysis of this experience, some argue that the adoption of the cash transfer approach by India – as is already the case in several other low- and middle-income countries – would help to avoid many of the shortcomings of the current food distribution system and reduce cost.

Others, however, believe that the experience in gained cash-transfer-based programmes launched for this purpose in India, in 2013 (e.g. the Direct Benefit Transfer system) is not conclusive enough [\[read\]](#) and shows that a number of challenges have yet to be met (need for telephones, poor connectivity in many areas, errors in identification of beneficiaries, lack of digital and literacy skills) that have the consequence of excluding some of the poorest and most marginalised population groups [\[read\]](#).

⁴ The attribution of the decrease of undernourishment to the food security programme raises major methodological issues [\[read pp. 18-26\]](#).

Yet, technological developments that have occurred in the Public Distribution System (introduction of electronic sales points and biometric identification [[read](#)]) indicate that technological challenges could rapidly be overcome. Moreover, cash transfer could create opportunities of **diversification of diet**, an issue that remains particularly important in large parts of India's population.

Finding the effective, best adapted and affordable solutions for eradicating food insecurity in a country of great social, cultural and ecological diversity like India, in which 26% of the total people who are suffering from chronic undernourishment in the world live⁵, is still a major challenge. **India's success in addressing it will be essential in achieving eradication of world hunger**, one of the prime Sustainable Development Goals.

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To know more

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⁵ 195 million food insecure people out of a world total of 722 million in 2022-23, according to FAO estimates [[read pp. 167-172](#)].

Selection of articles published earlier on [hungerexplained](#) and related to this topic:

- [India: bitter sugar](#), 2024.
- [Farmer demonstrations in India: poor farmers against pro-liberalisation leader?](#) 2021.
- [Facts and figures on world malnutrition](#), 2018.
- [India approves the largest ever food security programme](#), 2013.

Also consult articles on our thematic page '[Asia](#)'.