



P.L.RAJ IAS & IPS ACADEMY

Building Bureaucrats Since 2006

1. Sarthak-PDS Scheme – Policies

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has approved the continuation and integration of two key food distribution schemes under a new umbrella programme titled "Scheme for Assistance in Ration Transport and Handling-Income with Automation in PDS" (SARTHAK-PDS). This integration represents a strategic consolidation of food security mechanisms to strengthen implementation of the National Food Security Act through technological modernization. SARTHAK-PDS reflects India's commitment to addressing persistent PDS challenges including food grain leakages, corruption at Fair Price Shops, and inadequate nutritional diversity.

1.About SARTHAK-PDS Scheme

Integrated Framework

1. The SARTHAK-PDS scheme integrates two existing initiatives – Assistance to State Agencies for intra-state movement of foodgrains and FPS dealers' margin under NFSA, and the Scheme for Modernization and Reforms through Technology in Public Distribution System (SMART PDS).
2. The integration aims to strengthen implementation of the National Food Security Act by consolidating resources and reducing administrative fragmentation.
3. The unified framework creates seamless coordination between food grain movement and point-of-sale modernization.

Technological Modernization

1. The scheme proposes the use of advanced technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), Natural Language Processing (NLP), and Blockchain to modernize and optimize PDS operations.
2. AI enables predictive analytics identifying leakage patterns and irregular distribution.
3. Machine Learning algorithms can optimize distribution routes and inventory management.
4. Blockchain ensures transparent tracking of foodgrains from FCI warehouses to Fair Price Shops, preventing diversion and ensuring accountability.
5. NLP facilitates citizen grievance redressal and complaint categorization.

2.What is the Public Distribution System?

Definition and Scope

1. The Public Distribution System is a food security mechanism in India through which essential food commodities are distributed to eligible beneficiaries at subsidized prices through Fair Price Shops (FPSs).
2. The system primarily distributes rice, wheat, and coarse grains to economically weaker sections of society, ensuring basic nutritional security.
3. The PDS is a joint responsibility of the central and state governments, requiring coordination across multiple levels.

Institutional Framework

1. The central government, through the Food Corporation of India (FCI), procures, stores, transports, and allocates foodgrains to the states.

2. State governments manage the system at ground level, including allocating food within the state, identifying eligible families, and issuing ration cards.
3. Fair Price Shops serve as the final retail interface, delivering subsidized foodgrains directly to entitled households.

3. Evolution of the Public Distribution System in India

Historical Development Phases

1. PDS in the 1960s – The modern PDS emerged during the food shortages of the 1960s and expanded significantly after the Green Revolution, when the system extended to tribal, remote, and poverty-prone regions during the 1970s and 1980s.
2. The Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) was launched in 1992 to strengthen food distribution in remote, hilly, and tribal areas where market mechanisms fail.
3. The Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) was launched in 1997 to direct food subsidies specifically toward Below Poverty Line (BPL) families, improving targeting efficiency.
4. The Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) was launched in 2000 to provide highly subsidized foodgrains to the "poorest of the poor" households including destitutes and abandoned elderly persons.

4. Constitutional and Global Commitments

Right to Food Under Article 21

1. The Supreme Court has interpreted the Right to Food as an essential component of Article 21, which guarantees the Right to Life.
2. This judicial interpretation establishes that adequate nutrition is fundamental to human dignity and survival.

Sustainable Development Goals Alignment

1. SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) aims to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture globally by 2030.
2. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
3. PDS directly contributes to both goals through ensuring food access and improving nutritional outcomes.

5. Challenges with the Current PDS System

Food Grain Diversion and Leakages

1. A significant portion of foodgrains is leaked during transportation or diverted to the black market, with estimates suggesting 30–40% leakage in some states.
2. Corrupt officials, transporters, and FPS dealers facilitate unauthorized diversion reducing reach to intended beneficiaries.

Exclusion Due to Biometric Verification

1. Many eligible people lose access to their monthly rations as their names are struck off PDS rolls after biometric verification failures.
2. Beneficiaries forced to apply for new ration cards face administrative delays causing nutritional gaps.
3. Exclusion disproportionately affects marginalized groups including homeless persons, internal migrants, and the elderly.

Inclusion and Exclusion Errors

1. Non-eligible households receive benefits, burdening the system and reducing resources for genuine beneficiaries.

2. Genuine beneficiaries are excluded due to flaws in the identification process including administrative errors and technology failures.
3. Targeting errors reduce the scheme's effectiveness and create inequitable distribution.

Corruption at Fair Price Shops (FPS)

1. Corruption mechanisms include under-weighting foodgrains, selling poor-quality goods, charging higher prices, and restricting availability to manipulate demand.
2. FPS dealers employ various tactics to reduce distribution and increase personal profit margins.
3. Weak monitoring and accountability enable persistent corruption across the system.

Inadequate Warehousing Facilities

1. Inadequate warehousing facilities lead to spoilage and wastage of foodgrains reducing the amount reaching beneficiaries.
2. Poor storage conditions including moisture, pests, and temperature fluctuations cause grain quality degradation.

Nutritional Limitations

1. The PDS largely focuses on cereals and does not adequately address nutritional diversity through pulses, millets, and protein-rich foods.
2. Dependence on cereals alone fails to address micronutrient deficiencies particularly among women and children.

6.Reforms and Modernization Efforts

National Food Security Act, 2013

1. Enacted to provide legal entitlement to subsidized foodgrains to two-thirds of India's population, ensuring food security as a fundamental right.
2. Ensures coverage of 75% of rural and 50% of urban population, prioritizing economically weaker sections.
3. Creates enforceable entitlements enabling beneficiaries to seek grievance redressal.

Targeted Public Distribution System (Control) Order of 2015

1. Issued by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution to establish clear responsibilities.
2. It established responsibilities for the Centre and States, setting up a grievance redressal mechanism addressing beneficiary complaints.

Digital Ration Cards and Biometric Authentication

1. Introduction of digital ration cards and Aadhaar-based biometric authentication aims to eliminate fake and duplicate ration cards.
2. Digital systems reduce opportunities for fraud and enable real-time tracking of distributions.

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)

1. In some regions, DBT has been implemented where money is transferred directly to the bank accounts of beneficiaries instead of providing foodgrains.
2. DBT reduces leakages and enables beneficiary choice in purchasing foodgrains from open markets.

Citizen-Centric Applications

1. Applications such as Mera Ration, Anna Mitra, Rightful Targeting Dashboard, and Anna Sahayata have been introduced to improve access and transparency.
2. Digital platforms enable beneficiaries to track rations, file complaints, and access information.

7.Way Forward

1. **Infrastructure Expansion** – Strengthen storage and transportation facilities to support the growing scale of operations and reduce spoilage through improved warehousing infrastructure and cold chain development.
2. **Technological Integration** – Leverage artificial intelligence and blockchain for real-time tracking and reducing inefficiencies in food grain movement from FCI to final beneficiary.
3. **Social Audits and Grievance Redressal** – Implement social audits and public grievance redressal mechanisms to hold PDS stakeholders accountable and address issues like corruption and leakages through transparent performance monitoring.
4. **Expanding Nutritional Basket** – The government should include pulses and fortified food items in the Public Distribution System to improve nutritional security and address micronutrient deficiencies.
5. **Strengthen Last-Mile Monitoring** – Deploy technology and personnel for real-time monitoring of FPS operations to prevent underweighting, quality degradation, and pricing irregularities.
6. **Financial Inclusion** – Link PDS beneficiaries with Jan Dhan Yojana accounts enabling direct cash transfers and reducing dependency on physical food grain distribution.
7. **Capacity Building** – Provide training to FPS dealers, state officials, and grievance officers on modern PDS operations and beneficiary rights.

Source – <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/cabinet-approves-rs-25530-crore-sarthak-pds-scheme-to-modernise-public-distribution-system/>