



NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT (NFSA) IN INDIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 is a landmark initiative by the Government of India aimed at ensuring food security and reducing hunger, particularly among vulnerable populations. The key features of the Act include provision of subsidized food grains, inclusion of vulnerable populations, empowerment of women, and strengthening of the public distribution system (PDS). However, the NFSA faces several implementation challenges, which include accurate identification of beneficiaries, urban-rural coverage disparities, inadequate infrastructure and manpower in Anganwadi centers, and poor storage facilities leading to food grain losses. Moreover, governance issues, corruption, and lack of coordination among agencies further complicate implementation, while environmental and agricultural factors such as climate change, water scarcity, price fluctuations, and limited crop insurance also affect food production and supply. In this context, this study highlights that addressing these structural, administrative, and environmental challenges is essential for making the NFSA effective and ensuring equitable and sustainable food security for all citizens in India.

Keywords-Food Security, NFSA, Right to Food, Challenges, Governance, Climate Change.

INTRODUCTION

The eradication of hunger and poverty has been a central and foundational objective of both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The issue of hunger and food insecurity continues to concern policymakers, administrators, social researchers and academics, particularly in developing countries. Access to adequate and nutritious food is a basic human right and an important aspect of human dignity. According to World Food Summit, "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

The Indian Constitution provides the right to life to all its citizens, including the right to food and directs the state to take measures to raise the nutritional level and standard of living of its people and improve public health. In fulfillment of these constitutional obligations, ensuring food security for all citizens has remained a central focus of government plans and policies. The National Food Security

Act (NFSA) is the latest and landmark initiative by the Government of India to achieve food security through rights-based legislation. While the Act offers significant opportunities to strengthen access to food, it also poses many challenges in its implementation. In this context, it is important to review the features of the National Food Security Act and highlight the issues and challenges encountered in its implementation.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine and highlight the key features of the National Food Security Act (NFSA).
- To identify and analyze the issues and challenges in implementing the NFSA.

METHODOLOGY

In line with the objectives of this study, an exploratory research design has been adopted. Exploratory research primarily interprets existing information, placing particular emphasis on analysis and interpretation of available data. This study relies on secondary data collected from various sources, including government reports, magazines, journals, published books, and official websites.

THE NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT (NFSA), 2013

The National Food Security Act (NFSA), a legislative landmark, was enacted on July 5, 2013, by the Government of India, marking a paradigm shift in the approach to food security from a welfare-based approach by the government to a rights-based approach for citizens. The Act legally entitles up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population to receive highly subsidized foodgrains under the Targeted Public Distribution System. Therefore, about two-thirds of the population is covered under the Act to receive subsidized foodgrains.

Following a life-cycle approach, the NFSA aims to ensure food security for identified people across different age groups, financial backgrounds, and nutritional needs. The NFSA covers up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population under the Priority Households category and the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). While AAY households, which constitute the poorest of the poor, are entitled to 35 kg of foodgrains per family per month, Priority Households are entitled to 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month. The Act also entitles pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children aged six months to fourteen years to receive nutritious meals free of cost under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme and the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme. Additionally, pregnant women and lactating mothers are entitled to receive cash maternity benefits during the period of pregnancy.

The Act is the largest experiment in the history of food-based welfare schemes undertaken by any government in the world. By ensuring that a majority of the Indian population has access to an adequate quantity of food at affordable prices, the Act is regarded as a vital mechanism for addressing the persistent challenges of food and nutritional security in India.

SALIENT FEATURES OF THE NFSA, 2013

The significance of the Act lies in its various features and provisions. Some of the significant features are discussed here.

Right Based Approach

The Act aims to provide a legal entitlement of five kilograms of wheat, rice, and millets per person per month at subsidized prices of Rs. 3 per kg, Rs. 2 per kg, and Rs. 1 per kg, respectively, to priority households identified by state governments in accordance with guidelines issued by the Government of India under the Targeted Public Distribution System. This legal entitlement to receive food grains grants beneficiaries a statutory right to minimum food security.

Life Cycle Approach

The NFSA adopts a life-cycle approach; that is, it represents an integrated effort to address the food requirements at every stage of the human life cycle, from infancy to adulthood and parenthood.

Food Security Allowance

If the State fails to supply the entitled quantities of foodgrains to entitled person, then in such case the individuals shall be entitled to receive food security allowance by the concerned State Government. The timing and manner of such allowance shall be determined by the Central Government.

Nutritional Support to Women and Children

The Act provides free meals to pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children aged 6 months to 14 years through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) schemes to address infant and maternal mortality, as well as child malnutrition.

Women Empowerment

In a significant shift from the past, the eldest woman in every eligible household, who is not less than eighteen years of age, shall be recognized as the head of the household for the purpose of issuing ration cards. This provision ensures that the person responsible for feeding the family has the first claim to food grains, rather than male members, who in many cases might divert the grains.

Grievance Redressal Mechanism

Each State Government is required to set up an internal grievance redressal mechanism, which may include call centres, helplines, the appointment of nodal officers, or any other methods prescribed. Under the Act, the State Food Commission and the Central Food Commission will be established to monitor its effective implementation. At the district level, the District Grievance Redressal Officer will look after and redress public grievances.

Reforms in TPDS

The Act empowers the Central and State Governments to make necessary reforms in the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). Key reforms include doorstep delivery of food grains, use of ICT for full computerization and transparency, leveraging Aadhaar to prevent diversion, prioritizing Fair Price Shops, diversifying distributed commodities, and introducing schemes like cash transfers or food coupons to the targeted beneficiaries in order to ensure their food-grain entitlements.

Social Audit and Penalty Provisions

All records of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) must be placed in public domain and kept open for inspection, and periodic social audits of TPDS, fair price shops, and other welfare schemes must be conducted by local authorities or independent agencies. To ensure transparency and accountability, State Governments must establish Vigilance Committees to supervise the implementation of all schemes under the Act.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING NFSA

Although, the NFSA appears to be ambitious and holistic in its approach, its implementation faces many challenges and uncertainties that could impact its success. Some of which are discussed below.

Population increase and availability of food grains

For the successful implementation of NFSA, it is necessary to analyze the impact of the rapidly growing population. The projected population of India in the years 2030 and 2050 will be 1.52 billion and 1.66 billion respectively. The Act covers up to 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population, totaling approximately 81.35 crore people as per the 2011 Census. Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households receive 35 kg of foodgrains per family per month, while priority households receive 5 kg per person per month. The total annual requirement of food grains is expected to reach 93.6 million tons by the year of 2050. In order to meet the estimated food grain demand for projected population

growth, it is important to assess the future availability of food grains, considering factors such as changing climate conditions and the availability of agricultural land and water resources. With climate change, the world is likely to witness extreme heat, floods, cyclones, and droughts, which could disrupt existing food security plans.

Identifying the beneficiaries

The existing Indian PDS has long been criticized for its urban bias, frequent inclusion and exclusion errors and its poor performance in targeting beneficiaries. The success of the NFSA depends fundamentally on the proper identification of eligible beneficiaries. Identifying beneficiaries under the scheme involves several key issues. There are no specific guidelines or scientific method laid down by the government for identifying priority households. Identifying vulnerable groups such as the homeless, migrants, destitute people, and tribal communities is particularly challenging due to the complexities involved in the process. Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity regarding the criteria used to determine rural and urban coverage under the NFSA. The current NFSA coverage, which favors rural areas (75%) over urban areas (50%), creates a structural disadvantage for urban residents. As urban populations grow rapidly, this bias could leave many deserving urban beneficiaries without support, making it a key challenge for the policy's fairness and effectiveness.

Inadequate Storage Infrastructure and Wastage of Food Grains

The Food Corporation of India (FCI) is responsible for proper storage of foodgrains after procurement. However, there are major issues with both the storage capacity and the methods used. Currently, the quantity of stored grains far exceeds the capacity of the FCI, which increases the risk of fungal and rodent infestation, as well as the risk of theft. If this disparity is not addressed, the smooth functioning of the NFSA will be affected. The large-scale wastage of foodgrains at FCI due to inadequate storage and unscientific management is a major challenge to the success of the NFSA. Ensuring a steady flow of fresh procurement, scheduling regular breaks after the harvest season, and maintaining continuous collection from FCI godowns are key measures to minimize losses at storage points.

Challenge of Mitigating Corruption

Corruption remains a major concern in almost every government welfare initiative. While the purpose and intent of these schemes are generally not in question, the way they are implemented and the strategies used to achieve results are often criticized. In such an environment, the smooth and effective implementation of the ambitious NFSA is far from guaranteed.

Insufficient Anganwadis and Their Status

Anganwadi facilities are not reaching many children across the country, and in some states, coverage is particularly poor. This raises a critical challenge: how will the benefits of the NFSA reach children and pregnant women in these areas? Therefore, establishing new Anganwadis must be treated as a priority to ensure access for underprivileged communities. At the same time, the conditions of many existing Anganwadis are inadequate, creating an environment where children are highly susceptible to infections due to unsanitary and unhygienic conditions. Addressing both access and quality is essential for the Act to achieve its intended goals.

Agricultural pricing and crop insurance issues

Farmers in India often struggle to get fair prices for their crops after harvest, making it difficult for them to earn a sustainable livelihood. Natural hazards such as floods and droughts regularly threaten crop productivity and overall food security. To protect farmers from such uncertainties, comprehensive crop insurance policies are essential, providing compensation in the event of unexpected climatic calamities like cyclones and floods.

Climate change

Food security is being seriously affected by climate change. Changes in rainfall patterns can lead to moisture deficits, such as droughts, or excess water, such as floods, while extreme temperatures can alter the length of the crop-growing season. These climate variations directly affect crop productivity and farmer's incomes, making it essential to promote climate-resilient agricultural practices. This challenge is relevant not only globally but also for countries like India, where agriculture remains highly climate-sensitive.

Mismatch between water demand and availability

Freshwater scarcity, driven by rising demand, is likely to pose a major challenge to sustaining agricultural growth and ensuring food security. Growing mismatches between water supply and demand, occurring across regions and seasons, could seriously hinder India's ability to meet food production targets and ensure food security.

Governance and Food Security

Effective governance is crucial for the success of the NFSA. It encompasses providing the necessary infrastructure, such as adequate space or buildings for Anganwadi centers, access to clean drinking water and toilets, and the supply of essential equipment for health check-ups, teaching materials, and cooking utensils. The timely supply of food grains and medicine stock in adequate quantity are the most basic requirements. The most important thing is to provide manpower, which requires fair and transparent selection, training of staff, proper remuneration and mobility. All this requires adequate planning, allocation of resources, their transfer to field organizations, and coordination among agencies. These steps should be taken quickly to avoid obstacles in the implementation of the Act.

New trends in globalization

Globalization has undoubtedly brought about several positive changes such as the development and transfer of technology, faster communication and transportation, and higher growth in the service sector, but it has also created challenges such as greater volatility in financial markets, intense competition among entrepreneurs, and disparities in growth between different segments. One of the consequences of globalization in Indian society is openness to trade. As a result, the rich have access to start global enterprises, while the poor limit themselves to local operations. As protectionist policies are discouraged in the post-globalization world, the poor have little opportunity to compete with the rich, leading to inequality and concerns about food security in India.

CONCLUSION

To ensure food security and fight against hunger in the country, the Government of India has taken an initiative through NFSA. With its unique features like taking care of an individual for the entire life cycle, including vulnerable sections of society, empowering women, and strengthening the public distribution system, NFSA stands out as a significant reform in India's approach to food security. However, implementing the NFSA faces several challenges rooted in India's existing PDS. Identifying beneficiaries and ensuring proper coverage of target populations remain major challenges. In conclusion, achieving food security in India requires greater focus on issues such as climate change, integrated water management, fair agricultural pricing, and effective crop insurance. While globalization has had both positive and negative effects on agriculture, it is important to regulate related policies to minimize its adverse impact on food security. The challenges and obstacles in the implementation of the NFSA must be properly addressed to make the Act more efficient and impactful. India's dream to become a global superpower cannot be fulfilled until the hunger of all its citizens is eradicated. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) - though introduced later than needed, is a significant and crucial step toward achieving food security in India.

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