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Q8

Hunger and Poverty are the biggest challenges for good governance in India still today. Evaluate how far successive governments have progressed in dealing with these humongous problems. Suggest measures for improvement.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · GS II · 10 marks · Poverty and Hunger

Issues relating to poverty and hunger.

Core demand of the question

- Evaluate how far successive governments have progressed against hunger and poverty, still described as the biggest challenges for good governance in India, and suggest measures for improvement
- Use [Article 47](#), the NFSA, MGNREGA, PDS and nutrition missions, and name remaining gaps

Revision summary

[Article 47](#) and [Article 21](#) frame nutrition and a life free of starvation as State duties.

[MGNREGA \(2005\)](#) and the [NFSA \(2013\)](#) are the main legal steps beyond older poverty schemes.

Famine-type hunger has fallen; NFHS undernutrition and weak targeting show the job is unfinished.

POSHAN, sanitation and health must join grain schemes if hunger is to fall in the body, not only in the ration shop.

Improvement needs better lists, timely wages, a more diverse food basket, and women's control of entitlements.

Introduction

[Article 47](#) asks the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living as among its primary duties. Hunger and poverty are therefore not only welfare themes; they are tests of good governance. Successive governments have built a large rights and scheme architecture. Extreme destitution has fallen, yet undernutrition and insecure livelihoods remain wide enough that the statement is still fair.

Body**Progress against poverty**

- Planning-era programmes - Integrated Rural Development, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, and later Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar - treated poverty as a subsidy and self-employment problem; leakage was high, which the Tendulkar and earlier expert groups documented in consumption data.
- The [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005](#), turned wage work into a legal entitlement for rural households, which the World Bank and Indian evaluations link to a

rural wage floor and distress migration control, even with delays in payment and incomplete social audit.

- The **National Food Security Act, 2013**, made a legal claim to subsidised grain for a large share of the population, building on the targeted PDS and on **PUCL v. Union of India**, where the Supreme Court treated hunger as an **Article 21** issue.
- Housing (IAY then PMAY), rural roads (PMGSY), NRLM self-help groups, and Direct Benefit Transfer with Aadhaar reduced some duplication, though exclusion errors remain a governance failure of their own.
- Official poverty ratios under the Tendulkar method fell over the 2000s; the Rangarajan committee proposed a higher line and a larger poor population, which shows that "progress" depends on the line one uses, not only on scheme names.

Progress against hunger

- ICDS, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (after the 2001 Court orders in the PUCL litigation), and the PDS cut starvation deaths of the 1960s-80s type in most States; that is real progress in famine prevention.
- Stunting, wasting and anaemia in NFHS rounds remain high; India still ranks poorly on global hunger indices, which means calorie access through cheap grain has moved faster than diet quality, sanitation and care.
- Antyodaya Anna Yojana and State extras (eggs, pulses, fortified food) show that the Union floor can be raised; implementation still varies by State capacity, which is a federal governance fact.
- The National Nutrition Mission (POSHAN Abhiyaan was approved in 2017) tries to join ICDS, health and sanitation; it is an admission that foodgrain schemes alone do not end hunger.

Why they remain a governance challenge

- **Identification:** SECC, older BPL lists, and NFSA coverage still leave out migrants, the urban homeless, and some tribal hamlets, while including better-off households in leaky rings.
- **Nutrition is multi-sectoral:** water, sanitation (**Swachh Bharat**), women's anaemia, and child feeding sit in different ministries, so good governance is coordination, not one more scheme.
- Farm incomes, informal urban work, and inflation of pulses and milk can recreate hunger even when the poverty ratio on a past line looks better.

Measures for improvement

- **Complete NFSA reforms:** doorstep delivery, transparent FPS automation, and inclusion of the actual hungry (migrants, urban poor) rather than only a percentage ceiling.
- Pay MGNREGA on time, strengthen social audit under the Act, and expand urban wage or employment support for the informal poor.
- Shift from grain-heavy PDS toward a more diverse basket or DBT where markets work, without abandoning the food-security floor in deficit districts.
- Treat POSHAN, SBM, NRDWP and NHM as one child-outcome mission at district level, with a collector-level dashboard on stunting and anaemia.
- Raise women's control of entitlements (ration cards, wages, land records), because intra-household hunger is a governance blind spot that household surveys undercount.

Flow diagram

Article 47 and Article 21 -> NFSA PDS MDM ICDS

Article 47 and Article 21 -> MGNREGA NRLM PMAY

NFSA PDS MDM ICDS -> Less famine still high undernutrition

MGNREGA NRLM PMAY -> Poverty ratio down insecure work remains

District nutrition dashboard -> Better governance outcomes

Conclusion

Successive governments have moved from charity and IRDP-style subsidy to legal entitlements under MGNREGA and the NFSA, and mass starvation has receded. Hunger and poverty are still the biggest governance tests because undernutrition, bad targeting and insecure work remain. Improvement now means accurate lists, on-time wages, diverse diets, and one district outcome for the child, not another overlapping scheme name.

Facts & figures

National Food Security Act, 2013

Legal entitlement to subsidised foodgrain for eligible households, with maternity benefit and a child-nutrition frame, building on PDS and MDM.

MGNREGA, 2005

Guarantee of 100 days of wage employment to rural households; a rights-based poverty and distress-migration tool.

PUCL v. Union of India

Right-to-food litigation in which the Supreme Court issued continuing orders on PDS, MDM and ICDS, linking hunger to [Article 21](#).

Tendulkar and Rangarajan lines

Official and expert poverty lines; Tendulkar showed a decline in the 2000s, Rangarajan a higher poor population on a different basket.

ICDS and Mid-Day Meal Scheme

Core nutrition programmes for children and, for MDM, school enrolment; both were strengthened by Supreme Court orders in the 2000s.

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