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Q3

What are the major challenges of Public Distribution System (PDS) in India ? How can it be made effective and transparent ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS III · 10 marks · Farm Subsidies and PDS

Issues related to direct and indirect farm subsidies and minimum support prices; Public Distribution System - objectives, functioning, limitations, revamping; issues of buffer stocks and food security; Technology missions; economics of animal-rearing.

Core demand of the question

- Identify major challenges of the Public Distribution System in India
- Suggest how to make PDS effective and transparent

Revision summary

PDS under **NFSA 2013** is a legal grain entitlement, not a discretionary dole.

Main challenges are wrong lists, diversion, poor quality, weak last-mile shops, and a rice-wheat nutrition gap.

Migrants lose access when the card is locked to one State.

Effectiveness needs computerised supply chains, **e-PoS**, **One Nation One Ration Card**, social audits, and exception rules when biometrics fail.

DBT can complement urban PDS; it is a poor substitute where food markets are thin.

Introduction

The **Public Distribution System (PDS)** is the State's grain pipeline from the Food Corporation of India and State agencies to the ration shop. Under the **National Food Security Act, 2013** it is a legal entitlement for a large share of households. Leakage, exclusion and poor quality have dogged it for decades. Reforms now run through Aadhaar, digitised records and, in some States, **One Nation One Ration Card**.

Body

Major challenges

- **Inclusion and exclusion errors:** deserving households missing from the list; better-off names remaining. Migration breaks the old State-bound ration card.
- **Leakage and diversion:** grain siphoned between the godown and the shop; ghost cards; under-weighing at the counter.
- **Quality and nutrition:** wheat and rice dominate; coarse grains, pulses and oil are uneven; storage pests and moisture spoil stocks.
- **Last-mile shop:** irregular hours, poor weighing, and a dealer who is also a local power-holder.
- **Fiscal and logistics load:** high economic cost of procurement, carrying and storage; yet the poor still face **out-of-pocket** if the shop is shut.

- **Intra-household and gender:** the card is often in a male name; women and the aged may not actually receive the grain.

Making PDS effective and transparent

- **End-to-end computerisation:** digitised beneficiary lists, electronic weighing, and GPS or e-PoS at the **fair-price shop** so off-take matches Aadhaar authentication.
- **One Nation One Ration Card** so a migrant can lift grain in the destination State against the same entitlement.
- **Grievance and social audit:** recorded complaints, display of stock, and panchayat or urban ward audits; the NFSA already requires transparency machinery.
- **Cover the genuinely poor:** use Socio-Economic Caste **Census**-type lists with periodic revision; do not punish a failed biometric with a starved month-keep an **exception** protocol.
- **Diversify the basket** where fiscally possible (millets, pulses) and improve **scientific storage** to cut wastage.
- Direct Benefit Transfer of the food subsidy is an option in some urban settings; it should not replace physical grain where markets are thin or prices spike.

Balance

- Technology cuts ghost cards. It does not by itself put grain in a remote hamlet. Effectiveness is **stock plus shop plus list**, not a portal alone.

Flow diagram

NFSA 2013 entitlement -> PDS pipeline
 PDS pipeline -> Challenges leakage exclusion quality
 Challenges leakage exclusion quality -> e-PoS Aadhaar lists
 Challenges leakage exclusion quality -> ONORC portability
 Challenges leakage exclusion quality -> Social audit grievance
 e-PoS Aadhaar lists -> Effective transparent PDS
 ONORC portability -> Effective transparent PDS
 Social audit grievance -> Effective transparent PDS

Conclusion

PDS fails when lists are wrong, grain is diverted, and shops are unaccountable. **NFSA 2013** made food a right; digitisation, **One Nation One Ration Card**, social audit and a nutrition-wider basket are how that right becomes a transparent monthly lift. Biometrics must aid the entitled, not lock them out.

Facts & figures

NFSA 2013

National Food Security Act: statutory PDS entitlements for eligible households, with grievance and transparency duties on States.

FCI

Food Corporation of India: central agency for procurement, storage and movement of grain into the PDS pipeline.

One Nation One Ration Card

Portability so a migrant household can draw the NFSA ration outside the home State.

e-PoS

Electronic point-of-sale at fair-price shops, typically with Aadhaar authentication and electronic weighing.

Fair-price shop

Licensed last-mile outlet of the PDS; the usual site of under-weighing and irregular hours if unmonitored.

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