

Report 2024: Mid-day Meal Program Impact Study

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Author: Manus AI

1. Introduction

This report presents an impact study of the Mid-day Meal Program, now known as the Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) Scheme, for the year 2024. The PM POSHAN Scheme is a pivotal initiative by the Government of India aimed at enhancing nutritional levels among school-going children while simultaneously boosting school enrollment, retention, and attendance. This study synthesizes recent findings and data to evaluate the program's effectiveness, identify key areas of impact, and highlight challenges and opportunities for future improvements. The analysis draws upon various reports and studies, including a comprehensive landscape analysis by the World Food Programme (WFP) published in November 2024 [1].

2. Program Overview

The PM POSHAN Scheme stands as the world's most extensive school meal program, providing crucial nutritional support to approximately 118 million students across India [1]. The scheme targets children aged 6-14 years enrolled in Government, Local Body, and Government-aided primary and upper primary schools. With a substantial financial outlay of ₹1,30,794.90 crore allocated for the period 2021-22 to 2025-26, the program underscores the nation's commitment to child welfare and education [2]. The program's design aims to address the multifaceted issues of hunger and malnutrition, which significantly impede children's educational attainment and overall development [1].

3. Impact on Education

The PM POSHAN Scheme has demonstrated a profound positive impact on various educational outcomes. Studies indicate that sustained exposure to mid-day meals for nearly five years in primary school can lead to a significant improvement in learning achievement, with test scores increasing by 18% for reading and 9% for mathematics [1]. This suggests that the program not only alleviates hunger but also contributes directly to enhanced cognitive function and academic performance.

Beyond academic achievement, the scheme plays a crucial role in improving school enrollment, retention, and attendance, particularly among children from marginalized communities [3]. By providing a regular, nutritious meal, the program acts as a strong incentive for parents to send their children to school, thereby reducing dropout rates and promoting educational equity. Furthermore, the provision of meals helps reduce classroom hunger, allowing students to concentrate better and actively participate in learning activities [4].

4. Nutritional Impact and Norms

The PM POSHAN Scheme is meticulously designed to meet specific nutritional standards, aligning with recommended dietary allowances (RDA) to combat malnutrition among school children. For primary school children, the meals are intended to provide 450 Kcal of energy and 12 grams of protein. For upper primary children, these norms are elevated to 700 Kcal of energy and 20 grams of protein [1]. A significant initiative within the program is the use of fortified rice, which helps address micronutrient deficiencies, particularly iron, folate, and Vitamin B12, crucial for the healthy development of children [1].

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. While the program effectively addresses calorie and protein requirements, there is a noted disparity in the intake of vegetables and fruits compared to the RDA. Additionally, there is a continuous need for better quality protein sources, such as animal-source protein or soy, to ensure comprehensive nutritional benefits [1]. The prevalence of malnutrition remains a concern in India, with statistics indicating that one in three children suffers from chronic undernutrition and one in five from acute malnutrition (wasting) [1].

5. State-level Variations and Best Practices

The implementation of the PM POSHAN Scheme exhibits diverse practices across the 36 States and Union Territories (UTs) of India. This variation is evident in meal planning, preparation, and distribution methods, often tailored to local food preferences and the availability of local ingredients [1]. Some states have gone further by providing additional nutritional supplements, such as eggs, milk, fruits, or sweets, to enhance the overall nutritional value of the meals [1]. These localized approaches demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness to regional dietary habits and nutritional needs. The WFP's landscape analysis highlights the importance of documenting these diverse practices to identify and disseminate best practices that can be adopted nationwide to improve menu diversity and nutritional content [1].

6. Challenges and Recommendations

Despite the significant achievements of the PM POSHAN Scheme, several challenges need to be addressed to maximize its impact. One notable concern is the decreasing number of schools covered under the scheme, which has seen a reduction from 11.19 lakh schools in 2020-21 to 10.35 lakh recently [5]. This trend suggests a need for re-evaluation and potential expansion to ensure broader coverage.

Recommendations for enhancing the program include:

- **Enhancing Menu Diversity and Nutritional Standards:** While fortified rice addresses some micronutrient deficiencies, there is a need to increase the inclusion of vegetables, fruits, and higher-quality protein sources to meet the RDA comprehensively [1].
- **Addressing the Digital Divide:** Leveraging technology for better monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms can improve program efficiency and accountability.
- **Strengthening Performance Management:** Robust performance management and accountability frameworks are essential to ensure consistent quality and effective implementation across all states and UTs [1].
- **Promoting Local Sourcing:** Encouraging the use of locally available and seasonal produce can enhance the freshness and nutritional value of meals while supporting local economies.

- **Community Engagement:** Greater involvement of parents and local communities in the planning and monitoring of the program can foster ownership and improve outcomes.

By addressing these challenges and implementing the recommendations, the PM POSHAN Scheme can further solidify its role as a transformative force in improving the health and educational prospects of millions of children in India.

7. References

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