

Full Meal or Package Deal?

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With lobbying going on to replace cooked meals in the mid-day meal programme with processed foods like biscuits, this article reports on a consultation earlier this year that saw academicians, medical professionals, and nutrition and public health experts discuss the impact of providing dry rations versus cooked foods.

The recent moves to replace cooked meals with processed foods in the mid-day meal (MDM) and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programmes have been opposed by networks and alliances of scientists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across the country. The importance of nutritional support for pre-school and school-going children has been highlighted by a long and sustained campaign by networks of individuals and organisations over the last decade. These campaigns have raised this issue within a rights framework and refocused on the persistence of chronic hunger among a significant proportion of children and its negative consequences for nutrition and health. Over the last few years many of the states have implemented these programmes by investing in infrastructure and human resources for its realisation.

Undernutrition Problem

The rationale for cooked meals arises from the unsatisfactory trends in improvements in levels of undernutrition. Based on the three rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), the all-India average reveals that there has been a stagnation in the percentage of children (0-3 years) who are underweight. The number has reduced in the stunted category and has registered an increase in the wasted category. While the reduction of the stunted category is positive, the increase in the proportion of the wasted category is worrying (see the figure, p 21). The all-India average presents variation across better and less developed states. For example, in Gujarat there has been a slight increase in all the three categories, while in Tamil Nadu, there has been a decline in the underweight and stunted categories but an increase in the wasted category. When we study the trends for Madhya Pradesh and Bihar the contrast with the better developed states is striking. In Madhya Pradesh the proportion of underweight has increased from 54 per cent to 60 per cent between

NFHS 2 and 3, those in the stunted category has declined but the percentage of wasted has increased from 20 per cent to 33 per cent. Similarly in Bihar the proportion of underweight has increased slightly; there is a slight decline in the stunted category, but an increase from 20 per cent to 28 per cent in the wasted category [IIPS 2007].

The proportion of children in the category of wasted is alarming and should be recognised as a public health disaster and the government needs to address hunger, nutritional adequacy and morbidity in order to be able to reverse these trends. Some of the evidence did get reflected in the present government's concern in the common minimum programme of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that resulted in increased financial commitments and the universalisation of the ICDS programme and the MDM programme.

Mid-day Meal History

The MDM has had a long and varying history across different parts of the country. Launched as a "centrally sponsored scheme" called the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NPNSPE) in 1995, to provide cooked meals it was found that most states continued with dry ration provisions. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) filed a public interest litigation by highlighting the paradox of widespread prevalence of chronic hunger and undernutrition when there was an excess of food supplies in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India. In response to this litigation, the Supreme Court decreed, in 2001, that every child was entitled to a cooked mid-day meal consisting of 300 calories and 8-12 gm of protein per day for a minimum of 200 days in a year. The Supreme Court order had listed eight different schemes (including the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)) on food security to be implemented with the MDM scheme. In the absence of a comprehensive set of food security programmes in many states the cooked MDM remains critical for schoolgoing children. In 2003, the court had to haul up the states that had fallen behind and not been able to implement the scheme. Dreze and Goyal (2003) observed that while MDM programmes have many flaws, the

The authors acknowledge and thank the participants of the consultation for their contributions. The authors also thank the Sir Ratan Tata Trust for the grant to the USRN School Health Project. A special word of thanks to Geetha Nambissan, project director, University School Resources Network and chairperson, Zakir Hussain Centre for Educational Studies.

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way to go is forward and not backward. With adequate resources and quality safeguards, mid-day meals can play a major role in improving school attendance, eliminating classroom hunger and fostering social equity. In our work with municipal schools in the south zone of Delhi, we have observed the value of mid-day meals for children, despite the administrative problems in its implementation. Therefore, we believe that the proposal to replace cooked meals in the MDM and ICDS with packaged food and biscuits will undermine the gains achieved towards the implementation of the programmes.

Dry Food Impact

The experience of dry rations and biscuits which were part of the NPNSPE prior to the Supreme Court order on cooked meals has shown that these were often not consumed by children and though they did push up enrolment it had little impact on attendance and retention levels. The nutritional impact of dry snacks has also been questioned and it is seen that this impact is likely to be far lower compared to a cooked meal. It needs to be pointed out that biscuits are processed foods that are low on fibre and high on trans fatty acids, both mono and poly unsaturated, that are seen as an important long-term risk factor for a range of emerging diseases like coronary heart disease and diabetes [Martin et al 2005]. A freshly cooked meal offers a better range of nutrients and packaged food is costlier in terms of per rupee nutrient yield. In both ICDS and MDM the evidence suggests that children often take the dry foods home and may or may not eat it later, and in contexts of poverty, this food often gets shared by the family.

The scientific evidence around these issues was debated in a consultation held under the auspices of the University School Resource Network, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, early this year. This consultation included academicians, scientists, medical professionals, educationalists, nutrition and public health experts who reviewed the available evidence from a multidisciplinary perspective. Based on this consultation, this group highlighted the following areas of concern that took a systemic approach to

strengthening the importance of cooked meals in child nutritional support programmes. At present the two major feeding programmes, the mid-day meal and ICDS, are designed and administrated independently of one another. These programmes clearly need to be integrated and informed by the causes, prevalence and forms of undernutrition among children. Recent research demonstrates the long-term effect of childhood undernutrition on adult well-being. This provides the rationale for a life course approach to understanding the relationship between childhood undernutrition and its long-term effects for adult nutrition and health [Barker 1992].

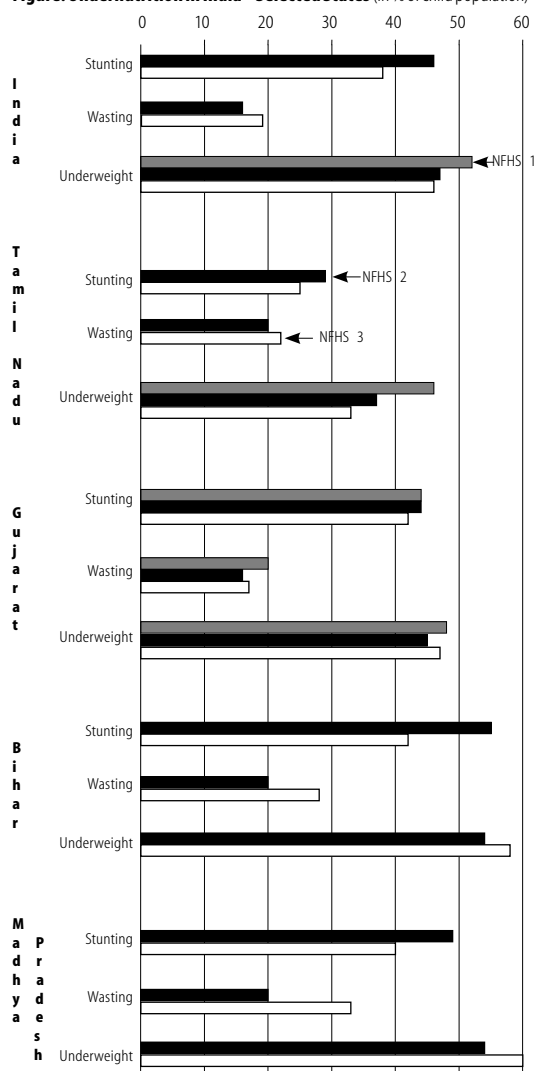
Models of MDM

Given the variations in the prevalence of undernutrition and programme functioning across states it would be useful to study models of delivery and innovations that are working effectively. For example, the Tamil Nadu feeding programme has a long history of effective intervention in the ICDS and mid-day meal. This is also the case in Karnataka, to some extent in Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. These varied state experiences can help to redesign these interventions in a more effective manner. The evidence from the states that are successfully running these programmes highlights the need for a decentralised approach that takes into account the regional and local specificities. It has been observed that enhancing the financial outlay for these feeding programmes would help in providing variety in the menu, increase its nutritional content and quantity to make it a full meal rather than a supplement. It would be useful to study the additional cost that would be incurred for shifting from a supplementary to a full meal. It is only the provisioning of a full meal, over a period of time, which is likely

to have a positive impact on reducing child undernutrition.

There are gaps in implementation as a result of poor infrastructure in schools such as water supply, toilets, kitchen area and lack of adequate personnel for cooking and serving of food. Very often these administrative lacunae are not adequately addressed and used as rationale

Figure: Undernutrition in India – Selected States (in % of child population)



for policy shifts. These challenges can be overcome with effective monitoring systems to check quality standard and possible corruption and leakages in foodgrain supply. In keeping with the spirit of the rights approach these programmes must ensure that the meals are served with complete consideration for the dignity of children irrespective of religion, class, caste and gender. This is an important aspect of programme

delivery that is often neglected and overtaken by bureaucratic obsessions regarding expenditures and coverage.

These various issues were articulated in a statement that was endorsed by several networks like Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine, Right to Food Campaign and Jan Swasthya Abhiyan. Several institutions like the Public Health Foundation of India, Nutrition Foundation of India, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health and Zakir Hussain Centre for Educational Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi and Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi also participated and endorsed the statement.

Subsequently, the statement was submitted and discussions were held with the prime minister and the union minister for human resource development. Following this the prime minister

reaffirmed his commitment to reduction of malnutrition and the Planning Commission has stated its position in favour of "hot cooked meals prepared by women's groups and members of the local community".¹ The union minister of state for human resource development, confirming that he had received a proposal from biscuit manufacturers for serving "biscuits in place of hot cooked mid-day meals", informed parliament that serving biscuits as part of the MDM scheme was not in the interest of school children since biscuits do not "fulfil the nutritional norms, dietary requirement and satiety of children and further it also deprives many intrinsic benefits that are being derived through present pattern of implementation"² [Dreze and Khara 2008].

This ongoing campaign with the involvement of a wide cross-section of civil society is an example of the role that such organisations can play in

influencing and even reversing policy. This kind of an effort requires sustained engagement and perseverance to engage with politicians who are often driven more by corporate interests rather than scientific evidence to inform policy decisions.

NOTES

- 1 *The Indian Express*, 'Renuka Pushes for Pre-cooked Meals, Plan Panel Says No, Open to Misuse', March 17, 2008.
- 2 <http://www.thaindian.com> 'Not Biscuits, Cooked Food in Mid-Day Meal Scheme: Minister', accessed March 17, 2008.

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Call for Papers

Conference on 'Towards Progressive Fiscal Policy in India'

The Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), a Delhi based organization analyses budgets and public policies from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized. The issues related to Progressive Fiscal Policy in India are of paramount importance at the current juncture. It would be worthwhile to have a Conference to address the relevant issues in this regard. It is proposed that for this Conference, some eminent economists and policy makers will be invited. Additionally, we hope to have other scholars working in the relevant areas and hence CBGA invites abstracts for the forthcoming conference on 'Towards Progressive Fiscal Policy in India' scheduled to be held on 7th and 8th November, 2008 in New Delhi.

The abstracts exceeding no more than 300 words should be submitted latest by 15th July, 2008. All abstracts will be reviewed based on the suitability to the Conference, following which detailed papers will be invited from the shortlisted abstracts. The contributors for detailed papers will be communicated latest by the end of July.

The writers are requested to contribute under the following broad themes:

- Relevant Macro Economic issues in general and those confronting Contemporary Indian Economy in particular
- Issues of Resource Mobilisation
- Issues of Fiscal Federalism
- Issues of Public Expenditure
- Issues of Subsidies
- Facing Economic Imbalances

The abstracts should reflect a judicious blend of theoretical rigour and compelling empirical evidence.

The abstracts may be either mailed at info@cbgaindia.org or posted at: **Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability**, A-11, Second Floor, Niti Bagh, New Delhi – 110049.

All expenses related to accommodation and travel will be borne by CBGA.