

Review of ICDS Programme in Bihar (14-17 March 2004)

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During my last visit to Bihar (November and December 2003) I had observed a large number of shortcomings in the design and implementation of the ICDS programme in the state. Fortunately, Bihar government was good enough to take prompt action on my suggestions and issued several circulars to the field to initiate improvement. This note describes the latest situation and is based on discussions with Sri Kang, Principal Secretary Social Welfare Government of Bihar, and Ms Vandana Kinni, Director ICDS, and on my field visit to some centres in Patna and Jahanabad districts in March 2004.

Coverage

As stated in the last note in December, Bihar lagged behind other states in all the three elements of coverage; number of covered blocks, enrolment for feeding, and actual feeding. ICDS is operational now in about 75% of the Blocks in the country, but for Bihar this percentage was only 44. There are 533 blocks in the state, out of which the programme was operational in only 233 blocks, but by February 2004 the number had marginally increased to 244. GoI has sanctioned another 161 projects for the state, but these are not yet operational. However, during the current year state government has recruited 13,976 AWWs and 13,761 AWHs, taking their number to 39,635 and 38,396 respectively. This has been possible because the state government has delegated the powers of selection of Anganwadi Workers & Anganwadi Helpers to the Gram Panchayats. However, still more than 20,000 vacancies continue in each of these cadres. Secondly, mere recruitment is not enough. The Anganwadi staff can be operational only after they are trained. The state government is solely relying on institutional training, and although the number of selected training centres has been increased (including 46 NGOs) but the number of trainees is so huge that it might take more than two years before the entire new staff can be trained. Therefore I suggested to Sri Kang and Director Social Welfare that in addition to tapping new training centres, they may consider 'on the job training' by CDPOs and other field staff. I shall review this issue in detail in my next visit.

I was told in November 2003 that the proposal for filling up vacant posts of CDPOs and Lady Supervisors on Contract basis through PRIs is under active consideration of State Govt. It has remained under their 'active consideration' even after three months. I will seek orders of the Court to direct the state government to recruit the staff on a contractual basis by empowering panchayati raj institutions, so that the centres can be made operational in the next financial year itself. The establishment costs of staff salaries, etc are cent per cent borne by GoI, and therefore there is no justification for such substantial shortages to continue. The staff position up to end February is as follows:

Table 1: Staffing Position in Bihar for ICDS

Functionaries	Sanctioned	In position	Vacancies as % of sanctioned strength
CDPO	394	189	52
Lady Supervisor	2489	361	85
Anganwadi Worker	60813	39635	35
Anganwadi Helper	60813	38396	37

Enrolment

The state government needs to be complimented for increasing the number of beneficiaries from 57 to 96 units per centre vide letter no 1564 dated 21st Nov 2003. I am happy to report that the field staff were well conversant with these revised norms and were following the new orders at all the centres that we visited. Thus about 12 lakh additional children would receive nutrition now. The state government may like to publicise this fact after the elections.

Feeding additional children would however mean that the budget provision for SNP has to be substantially increased in 2004-05, so as to meet the requirement of the enhanced number of beneficiaries. Sri Kang's strategy was to tap the unutilised resources of the past years (that were put in civil deposit) and the current year to meet the new demand. However, this could at best be a short term solution and may not work from 2005-06 onwards. Hence the state government should increase allocations on a permanent basis. I will check on this point in my next visit to the state.

The enrolment of children in Bihar at each AWC which was just about half the norm fixed by GoI, has now been increased after my last visit, as seen in the following Table:

Table 2: Number of potential beneficiaries in an Anganwadi Centre (total population =1000)

Group	Approximate number	Beneficiaries as fixed by GoI	Beneficiaries as per state government norm before Nov 2003	Beneficiaries as per state government norm after Nov 2003
Infants 0-3	Normal	80	28	28
	Severely malnourished	20	12	12
Children 3-6	Normal	80	28	28
	Severely malnourished	20	12	40
Pregnant & lactating mothers	40	16	5	16
Total	260	96	57	96

Vide its order dated 15th January, the state government has stated that if funds are available at the project level, the village could even select more than 96 units for feeding. Though these orders are well meaning, they would require adequate backup of funds in the long run, because children once selected cannot be turned away the next month when funds are inadequate, which would cause confusion and heartburning.

Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP)

During my last visit to the centres of Vaishali district I had noticed there was no arrangement for supplementary nutrition on the day of the visit. This was despite the fact that sufficient funds had been made available to the district by the state government to last for at least four months. The problem lay with financial practices followed in the field. According to the circular dated 1st September 2003 from Social Welfare Department, the CDPOs are authorised to draw an advance of Rs 10,000 per centre that should easily be sufficient to meet the requirement of supplementary nutrition for each centre for two months (the requirement per month per Centre was about 2,650 Rs before Nov 2003 and is now around Rs 4,700). The order also says that the next advance should be drawn only after the previous advance has been accounted for with vouchers.

However, the CDPOs in Vaishali district was drawing only one month's advance, and after the rations for that month are exhausted, records were summoned to the CDPO office through Mukhia for verification. That took from two to four weeks, and during this period there was no distribution of supplementary nutrition at the centre.

Luckily, the problem has been sorted now, as vide order dated 18th November it has been decided that the moment stock register etc is submitted by the AWW to Mukhia, she will be entitled to another advance. It does not have to wait for verification. Moreover by order dated 15th January 2004, the period of two months has been increased to four months and the limit of maximum amount of advance has been waived, meaning that the advance could even be higher than Rs 10,000. I noticed in the field that the AWWs were confident that there would be no interruption in feeding programme with these relaxations.

Prompt payment of honoraria and salaries

It was observed that staff did not get their salaries every month. Orders for timely payment of honorarium to Anganwadi workers and helpers were issued vide letter no 1659 dated 9th Dec 2003. I found in the field that most workers had been paid their salaries upto February 2004. However, this was possible because the budget had been received from GoI. My request to the state government is to release salaries from the state budget in anticipation of budget from GoI, otherwise again from March to July the salaries will be held up. I shall check up this issue in my next visit to Bihar.

Seeking support of donors

It was suggested that the state government may rope in donor agencies, such as CARE and WFP, to help in augmentation of supplementary nutrition. Unicef has already started covering the district with fortified candies and soon the entire state will be covered. CARE has agreed to provide 942 MT of RVSO to 5117 Anganwadi Centres of 36 ICDS projects pertaining to Patna, Nalanda and Nawada districts. But the latest picture was not very encouraging as the contractor appointed by the state government was not lifting the consignment from Calcutta (where CARE supplies had already arrived) because he was not paid his earlier dues by the Bihar government. I requested Director ICDS to look into this, as arrears too pertained to her department. CARE may be quite happy to extend the scheme to other districts, therefore the state government should send a proposal to them, and at the same time show greater efficiency in lifting the existing quotas from Calcutta.

Links with Food Department

There were two suggestions here. One, the norm relating to prices of cereals and pulses was fixed in 2001, and needs to be modified. The price of gram fixed at Rs 18 is unrealistic and needs upward revision. Two, I had suggested that each centre may be given a ration card, so that the village purchase committee has the freedom to buy foodgrains from the ration shop, and thus save money that could be used to feed more units. However, there should be no compulsion, as in many villages the present ration shop system is not well developed. The committee should have discretion to buy from the open market as before, or from the PDS shop.

These were referred to the Food Department in December itself, but there has been no followup. I requested the new Director ICDS to take it up with the Food Secretary on a priority basis. I spoke to Sri Shishir Sinha, Food Secretary, who too promised to sort this out.

Problems noted during the field visit

During my field visit I found that in many centres there were no utensils either for cooking or for feeding. Although orders were issued by Sri Kang on the 15th January, 2004 to buy new utensils for Rs 1200 per centre (this was an administrative order but without financial sanction), not much had happened in the centres that I had visited because of lack of budget. Sri Kang said that he had sent a proposal for Rs 1=46 crores to the FD for buying such utensils for all the centres. I will check on this in my next visit.

Secondly, many centres were being run in very tiny kuchha huts where hardly 20 children can sit. This was because of a limit of Rs 25 on the monthly rent for ICDS premises. This needs to be immediately enhanced to atleast Rs 100 per month. Sri Kang agreed with me and promised to get government approval on this.

At one centre the AWW complained that she faced problems in getting a certificate from the Mukhia about her attendance. Although it was clarified in Sept 2003 that in case no certificate is received from the Mukhia by the 25th, salaries may be distributed, but these orders were not very well known in the field, and therefore need to be reiterated.

I visited Masaurhi centre of district Patna, which was just before the Jahanabad border. The centre was being run in the house of the Sewika. Sewika was told to be on election duty. There was no feeding for the last 5-6 months, which is surprising as sufficient funds have been released to all the districts.

I visited five centres of Jahanabad rural project. These were Sewanan, Karauna, Ammain, Nairu A and Nairu B. Everywhere Khichri and sayabean was being cooked. Problem of the sitting place being too small and absence of utensils was noticed in most of the centres. Centres had inadequate ventilation because of which the smoke from the chulha was hurting the children's eyes. The Collector informed me that he had sent a proposal for construction of new 167 ICDS centres with funds under the Sam Vikas Yojana of the Planning Commission, but sanction had not been received.

Checking up the registers I noticed that children's weight was not being recorded properly. There was no documentation as to how nutrition status was improving or deteriorating.

The number of registers that are being maintained in Bihar is too large. I believe this has been reduced in Jharkhand. Unicef could perhaps guide Bihar as to how they can reduce paper work at the Anganwadi level.

Outstanding issues

The following issues noted in the last visit (November-December 2003) are still outstanding. These need to be attended to.

CDPOs are required to inspect at least 50% of the centres every month, as prescribed in the above order dated 30th March 2001. This is not being observed for want of supervision, and sometimes vehicles. Even when there are vehicles these are either requisitioned for law and order (Collector Jahanabad said that in view of Naxalite problem it becomes unavoidable), or stay idle for want of timely release of POL/maintenance funds, or their shortage. The Secretary Welfare suggested that CDPOs may be given Rs 400 per day for touring, and they can either hire a vehicle or drive their own car. This idea is worth pursuing.

Most CDPOs and Supervisors in the State are young, and should be asked to learn riding motor bikes and mopeds. There should be a government scheme for sanction of interest-free loans to them for buying mopeds, and lady staff members should be asked to take advantage of this scheme. Many may not be even having a driving license. Most women workers in India would need to be trained in driving before they can be persuaded to buy a motorbike. It may be a good idea to include driving in their training programmes. If they do not have their own means of transport they get dependent on other people's vehicles, and that explains why Supervisor's visits to AWCs are so inadequate.

Service Rules for Supervisors were drafted, but not finalised. These should be finalised soon, and have some promotional opportunity for good AWWs. Government may also consider circulating these draft rules among the stakeholders so as to take their views into account before finalising the same. Service Rules for CDPOs should also be drafted with adequate promotional opportunities for Supervisors.

The draft Bihar Nutrition Policy has been under consideration in the State for almost two years now. It states *inter alia* that all adolescent girls from vulnerable sections should be covered through the ICDS by 2005 in all the blocks of the State and in 50% of the urban slum pockets. Early action should be taken to finalise the policy.

Bihar suffers from excessive centralisation, it must know what delegations exist in other states, and delegate secretariat powers to the field. Rule 35 of Third schedule of Rules of Executive Business in Bihar provides that all new plans schemes and even on going plan schemes exceeding Rs 25 lakhs are to be brought before the Cabinet. There is no such parallel provision in the Transaction of Business rules of the Government of India, nor is there any such provision in other states. The whole process is very time consuming resulting in delay ranging from 4 to 6 months. Doing away with this Rule in itself will expedite financial releases, giving more time to the field to spend and then claim second instalment. The present practice of requiring each scheme with an outlay of more than Rs 25 lakhs to seek the approval of the Empowered Committee and then the Cabinet should be restricted to only new schemes, and approval for continuing schemes should be needed once in five years.

I learnt through informal discussions that the state government does not have the will to give up centralised control. This matter should be brought to the notice of the Supreme Court.