

INTERVIEW

'Contractors? That Means Pilferage'

The Planning Commission has strong reservations about offering "packaged fortified food" to poor children instead of hot cooked meals.

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The Planning Commission has strong reservations about the Union ministry of women and child development's plan to tackle malnutrition by offering "packaged fortified food" to poor children instead of hot cooked meals. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, deputy chairman of the commission, spoke to Outlook. Excerpts:

Hot cooked nutritious food vs packaged food. What is the Planning Commission's stand?

We are against centralised purchase of packaged food to tackle malnutrition. In the commission, we have received complaints from several experts on leakages in centralised procurement of packaged food which is difficult to monitor and check.

"Food habits are local, so it's best for communities to decide issues themselves. Why impose?" **Montek Ahluwalia**, Planning Commission

It has been brought to our notice that if contractors are employed, then there is no way to check pilferage.

Does the Commission have a view on how to tackle malnutrition?

I believe the best way is to leave the decision to gram sabhas and village panchayats. Let them decide what they want, instead of us imposing

our views on them. If a conscious experimental method needs to be followed, then let the people decide. Food habits are local, so it is best left to local communities to tackle the issue. The decision-making must be wholly decentralised.

The women and child development minister, Renuka Chowdhury, maintains it is difficult to monitor the quality of hot cooked food...

A lizard can very well drop into the food we cook in our homes. (The reference here is to Renuka's misgivings about rodents and lizards falling into meals cooked in government-run creches). It could happen anywhere. The objective should be to serve nutritious food to malnourished children—which can be fulfilled best by local self-help groups and communities. For instance, in Punjab, communities may choose to feed their children milk and eggs as their cereal intake is taken care off. I think we should respect that decision.