

September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Dr.Manmohan Singh  
Prime Minister  
South Block, Raisina Hill,  
New Delhi,  
India-110 011.

**Subject: Corruption in the ICDS.**

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing to share our deep and urgent apprehensions regarding the vastly expanded scope for centralised corruption in the implementation of the ICDS programme, which we fear is likely to result from moves afoot to further centralise purchases by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, not just for supplementary feeding but also of pre-school kits and medicine kits.

Whereas we write in our personal capacities, we have been assisting the Supreme Court of India as Commissioner to the Supreme Court and Special Commissioner (Writ 196/ 2001), with a mandate to monitor food and employment schemes of the Government of India. The schemes we monitor include the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) and the National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS).

The Government of India is committed to universalising ICDS as an important instrument to combat child malnutrition, which is among the highest in the world. The recent round of NFHS survey (NFHS 3) shows us that we have been able to reduce malnutrition by just one percent (from 47% to 46%) in the eight years since the NFHS 2 survey.

Our understanding is that one major reason why the supplementary feeding has not had significant impacts is the fact that the entire feeding programme over the years is riddled with corruption and leakages, so that very little of the earmarked food reaches the mouths of the children who most need it. This has been facilitated and aggravated because the entire supply of food had passed into the hands of private contractors who supplied ready to eat food powders, that were not only culturally inappropriate and calorifically inadequate, but in many cases never reached the ICDS Centre at all. In view of the vested interests and the rampant corruption in the present system, the Supreme Court of India accepted our advice and banned all contractors in the ICDS programme three years back (vide an order dated October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004).

Yet many State Governments have largely ignored the directive of the Supreme Court and continued to renew these contracts. We have been strongly advocating that one of the ways to strengthen the programme would be to provide locally cooked, culturally appropriate, hot cooked meals, as is being provided to primary school children under the Mid Day Meal Scheme. Despite innumerable meetings with the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Planning

Commission over the past few months, we do not seem to have made much head way in this regard and the supplementary feeding programme continues to be plagued with the problems of rampant leakages and diversions.

We have learnt recently about attempts being made to further centralise purchases by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, not just for the Supplementary feeding but also of pre-school kits and medicine kits. As you are aware, such centralisation of procurement can only result in more rampant corruption and leakages. It would also be a blatant violation of Supreme Court orders. We have been urging the Ministry to therefore desist from centralising procurement and we have personally written to them not to go ahead with it. But there is determination to go ahead.

We urge therefore intervention at the highest level to ensure that the enormous scarce resources that the government is rightly choosing to invest in ICDS is not frittered away in the nexus of contractors with corrupt politicians, officials and contractors, but instead is provided to every ICDS centre for decentralised and locally accountable purchases and locally prepared culturally appropriate hot cooked meals.

With Warm regards,

Dr. N.C. Saxena  
Member, National Advisory Committee.

Harsh Mander