

Renuka pushes for pre-cooked meals, Plan panel says no, open to misuse

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Worried that contractors and traders may take undue advantage, the Planning Commission has shot down a proposal by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, headed by Renuka Chowdhury, to dish out ready-to-eat meals at Anganwadi centres to children in the age group 3-6 years under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS).

Syeda Hameed, Planning Commission member who handles the ICDS, told The Indian Express: "Many manhours have been spent in hearing experts promote both view points (for and against ready-to-eat meals) and we are convinced there is no case for a shift to a centralized system of packaged food. We have given our recommendations to the WCD Ministry and the ball is in their court. I am seeking a meeting with Minister Renuka Chowdhury to discuss what steps can be taken to push things towards a logical conclusion and have a road map for an expanded ICDS."

Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia said: "As of now, states can still exercise a choice though our preference certainly is for hot cooked meals prepared by women's groups and members of the local community. Personally, I would also like to have the panchayats involved. But we have noticed that in many states where processed foods are being given to children under the ICDS, supplies get centralized with large contractors and traders taking advantage and giving the children what they want."

The Planning Commission has reasons to worry. The allocation for the ICDS has been hiked from Rs 13,000 crore in the Tenth Plan to Rs 51,400 crore for the Eleventh Plan period. But implementation of the ICDS has been appalling and malnutrition in the age group 0-6 years declined only one per cent in the last eight years.

The reason why N C Saxena, National Advisory Council member, says there is no scope to experiment with Western concepts of supplying fortified foods to children. "My view is clear: I am not in favour of either centralizing distribution of food to children under the ICDS nor supplying under-nourished children packaged food in any form."

In the last few months, even Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was pulled into the debate on freshly cooked versus ready-to-eat meat with more than one meeting being held at the PMO between the Planning Commission and Ministry officials. Last Friday, the Prime Minister met a group of academics, NAC members and representatives of the Right To Food Campaign on the same subject. His direction was clear: differences in approach should be quickly resolved and malnutrition among children brought down.

Though the Planning Commission is ready with its views, the WCD Ministry has been pushing the proposal. On December 28, the Ministry commissioned a "quick assessment" in selected states — as mentioned in its letter — "to have a comparison of the strength and weakness of the two alternative modes of nutrition programme being implemented under the scheme of ICDS."

While Planning Commission officials said they have no knowledge of the survey, Minister Renuka Chowdhury said the results were awaited.

Told of the Planning Commission's reservations, Chowdhury said: "It is not as if I am obsessed with the idea of pre-packaged food under the ICDS. But at present, it is logistically impossible to provide healthy, cooked meals to children in 11 lakh Anganwadis. Where is the infrastructure? Where is the clean water for cooking? Where are the store rooms? What is to be done with left-over cooked food? The challenge is providing an answer to all these questions, to improve infrastructure and then talk about bringing down malnutrition in children."

But experts disagree. The Kolkata Group Workshop, chaired by Professor Amartya Sen, said last month "we were appalled to hear of the proposed displacement of cooked meals by pre-packaged foods and biscuits in the ICDS programme... any change of course, especially under pressure from commercial interests, would be a serious regressive step against the best interests of children."

The Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health at JNU said "we are apprehensive that many of the recent debates about introducing packaged foods is driven by business interests and lobbies rather than any serious concern about addressing poverty, hunger and poor health of majority of children... This is unacceptable and goes against the fundamental rights of children."