

## Too many cooks

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The controversy over whether the government should mandate cooked food or pre-packaged meals at child care centres (anganwadis) and for the mid-day meal scheme in primary schools under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) misses the wood for the trees. The fact that the debate is taking place actually reflects a greater failure of operational efficiency, to which Renuka Chowdhury, the minister for women and child development, would do well to turn her attention.

To be sure, both sides of the argument have merit. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's letter to the Prime Minister to dissuade Ms Chowdhury's ministry from serving biscuits and other packaged foods in government schemes suggests that any change, especially under pressure from commercial interests, could jeopardise children's health. The point is well taken and, indeed, within some sections of government and the NGO circuit reservations have been voiced about the scheme falling prey to the large and powerful packaged foods companies in the private sector. As the mushrooming of "corporate" hospitals has demonstrated, private delivery of public services is not always an efficient and optimum solution. Also, it cannot be anybody's claim that packaged food is necessarily more hygienic or more nutritious than a freshly cooked meal. There is sufficient evidence of contaminated packaged water and worms in confectionary — both produced by multinational companies — to contradict Ms Chowdhury's assertion that pre-cooked food is a healthier option for needy children.

At the same time, it is true that the practice of serving cooked food clearly needs improvement. There are regular reports of children falling ill after partaking of mid-day meals under such schemes. As for hygiene, this too can scarcely be vouched for, given the conditions in which the meals are cooked. As importantly, storage methods for the grains and pulses that go into these meals are often sub-standard, closely aligned to Food Corporation of India godowns where rodents and other related wild-life run at large. Further, as a recent experience with the mid-day meal scheme in Karnataka shows, contracting out the cooking can be fraught with organisational problems. In Karnataka's case, it is the threat of unionisation — the bane of government employment — that has put the scheme in jeopardy. On March 15, cooks from the state's mid-day meal scheme, under the aegis of a union affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress, went on strike demanding better wages and regularisation of their services.

It would seem, therefore, that the solution for the government does not lie in an extreme "either-or" choice. For poorer children, mid-day meals are an important supplement and, handled well, can play a critical role in improving child health. In West Bengal, for instance, government schools have long provided a prescribed mix of packaged and cooked food that optimises nutrition — the standard pack has been a boiled egg, banana, two slices of bread and butter and a sweet, for hundreds of children in state schools. Like all good ideas — and the ICDS is certainly one of the better conceived — the proof of success lies in the implementation. In this case, it lies in more efficient monitoring mechanisms that optimise efficient delivery and cost without compromising on the social objectives. Whether this means serving packaged food or cooked meals is not the issue.

Minister for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury said on Tuesday that her Ministry would launch a nationwide campaign on nutritional awareness soon.

State level nutritional reviews will be held annually and efforts will be made for District- wise mapping of high malnutritional areas, she added.

Briefing members of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee attached to her Ministry, Chowdhury said that her Ministry has proposed nutritional education as a part of the school curriculum, the inclusion of a core module on nutrition in the induction training programmes of all Government officers, including Indian Administrative Services (IAS).

She also emphasised that breast-feeding should be recognised as food security for infants and breast-feeding education should be considered a priority programme like immunization in both health and nutrition sectors.

Chowdhury also expressed concern over the prevalence of malnutrition, especially among women and children. She said the Government is working on a multi-sectoral approach for its prevention and control.

Nutritional awareness in the rural and urban slums would be created through the field units of Food and Nutrition Board (FNB) by using local dialects and regional languages. Capacity building and programmes would be run for village workers, Panchayat members and Anganwadi workers, she added.

The Ministry was also recasting the Integrated Child Development Programme and nutrition counselling to take care of supplementary nutrition of children and lactating mothers and now Anganwadi would be sanctioned on demand, she said.

Members of Parliament (MP) who were also participating in the meeting stressed the need of continuous monitoring of ICDS and other Government's programmes related with nutritional support and health.

They said that District level officers should be made responsible to check incidents of malnutrition in their areas. Member participated in the meeting include: Priya Dutt, Viplov Thakur, Supriya Sule, Srinivas D. Patil, Laxminarayan Sharma, C.K. Chandrappan, P. Satheedevi and S.I. Shervani. (ANI)