

Brief Review of Food Supply to ICDS programme in Jharkhand

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I visited Ranchi and the neighbouring district of Lohardaga from 11th to 14th March, 2004. I was fortunate to meet the top officials, including the Chief Secretary, Finance Secretary, Social Welfare Secretary and Director ICDS.

Out of 211 blocks of the state, ICDS is operational in 152 centres. GoI has sanctioned another 52 projects, but no effort has been made to appoint the required new CDPOs and Supervisors. It is also not known whether these vacancies will be filled up at all by the state government, and if so by when. As regards AWWs and AWHs, I was told that recruitment for 7728 centres is being done by the gram sabhas (there are no panchayats in Jharkhand), and substantial progress would be reported by the year end. I will review this issue during my next visit.

After the withdrawal in August 2002 of CARE, who was looking after the entire nutrition program of ICDS for the state, the Jharkhand government released 7.51 crores for the feeding program in 2002-03, but expenditure was reported to be only 1.92 crores. This year too, the state government has released 11.56 crores, but expenditure has been only 3.17 crores. What is most shocking is the fact that though Government of India had allocated Rs 37.3 crores out of PMGY funds for 2003-04 for ICDS feeding, so far not a single paisa has been released by the Social Welfare Department. On the other hand, about 80 per cent of the allocation has already been surrendered by the Social Welfare Department, thus depriving growing children from a vital source of energy. I have already sent a letter to the Chief Secretary (enclosed) requesting her to release at least the balance 7.5 crores immediately.

These funds are best spent in a decentralized manner by making village committees (self-help groups, Mahila Mandals, etc.) buy grain etc. and prepare meals for the village children. If such groups take time to mature and gain confidence, the present system of District Purchase Committees may continue as an interim measure, but with clear directions that in a given period (say eight months) almost all projects should transfer funds to the village groups and make them accountable for providing supplementary nutrition to the ICDS centres, and the system of district purchase should be wound up in a phased manner.

Rather than decentralize further to the villages, the state government seems to be under pressure to centralize the purchase system through a state-level contractor! This obviously is the worst option, as it will lead to massive state-level corruption and thus bring bad name to the reputation of the state government, besides resulting in delays and poor quality of food. It will deprive thousands of women's self-help groups from a legitimate livelihood source, and will mean massive interruptions in nutrition to children.

I urged the Chief Minister and the Chief Secretary to ensure that the state government is not pressurized by contractors and funds are spent through women's groups. The success of such groups in several districts, such as East Singhbhum and Lohardaga has clearly demonstrated that decentralization is the best option. This will also enable the state to receive free oil from CARE worth about Rs 9 crores, but they would make this available to the state only when mixing is done at the village level and not by a centralised contractor.

I also called on the Governor, and briefed him about the delay in release of funds. I requested him to prevail upon the state government to release the entire PMGY funds to the districts/projects without routing it through a centralised contractor.

It may be relevant here to mention that the Development Commissioner had convened a meeting on the 7th January 2004, and it was decided that the ICDS feeding programme should be handed over to village level women's groups, just as it is done for mid-day meals scheme where meals are prepared by Mothers' Groups at the village level. However, despite this clear

recommendation, I was told that the file regarding release of PMGY funds to the districts was pending in the Minister's office. This indifferent attitude of the state government has resulted in the denial of nutrition to about 12 lakh children.

The meeting chaired by the Development Commissioner listed the following irregularities that take place when contractors at the district level supply nutrition to the Project godowns:

- The actual content and weight of packets supplied by contractors is less than the prescribed norm;
- Supply is erratic and irregular;
- There are frequent complaints of black-marketing and profiteering;
- Goods of inferior quality are supplied to Projects;
- Other grains are mixed in Sattu, which is to be made only out of gram; and
- These irregularities affect children's health and nutrition adversely.

Another issue is about the uniformity in the rations prescribed for ICDS. Food habits vary from district to district. It may be worthwhile to give a choice of four or five options to the districts in deciding the mix of food that will ensure that the requisite amount of calories and protein reaches each beneficiary. Unicef and CARE may like to take the lead and appoint a technical committee on this subject, as was done for Bihar. At present the ration prescribed does not give the requisite quantity of nutrients to the beneficiaries, and therefore modifications are needed. Moreover, puffed rice is neither popular throughout the state, nor has good retention capacity as far as its long term storage is concerned. Its calorific value is also low.

Next we come to the scale of rations. According to instructions from the Supreme Court (also supported by GoI) malnourished children, pregnant women, nursing mothers and adolescent girls are to get enhanced rations, but these orders are not being followed in Jharkhand. Since the State does not suffer from financial problems of deficit faced by other poor states, there is no justification for denying the deserving malnourished category of people from prescribed enhanced rations. However, adequate publicity should be made after revising the entitlements so as to minimise the risk of leakages. The total fund requirement on the scale recommended by GoI in Jharkhand will come to about Rs 123 crores. I will urge the state to ensure sanction of the entire amount and disburse it in time, to be spent through decentralised purchases by village-level women's groups.

CARE was supplying nutrition to the entire state upto July 2002. After its withdrawal, the first budget allotment was issued only in January 2003 for two months. During the current financial year allotment has been issued only in September and then November, in all for three months. As it takes time for district authorities to invite tenders, in most districts there was no feeding between May and December. I was told that the financial procedure is such that it requires clearance from the Finance Department. This raises two questions. First, why should budgetary sanction for a continuing scheme require approval from the Finance Department? I checked up with Sri Rahul Sarin, Principal Secretary Finance, Government of Jharkhand, who clarified that there was no requirement of approval from FD for continuing schemes. Despite such clear assurance from the Finance Secretary (Mr Nayak, Secretary Social Welfare was present when this discussion took place), the practice seems to be to route files to the FD which delays matters. In fact, in UP, once the budget gets the approval of Governor, Departments are free to spend money on the continuing schemes without waiting for any financial sanction, not even from the Administrative Department. District-wise breakup is issued by the HOD, and even Ministers are not troubled at this stage.

Chief Secretary may like to call a meeting and reiterate the procedural simplifications that the State has introduced, so that the old habits of referring every file to the FD are not continued.

Now that the Jharkhand government has passed budget for the entire year, the new liberalised procedure should ensure that financial sanctions are issued in April itself.

Secondly, why should the districts take almost three months after budgetary sanctions in ensuring that grain reaches the centres? Director Social Welfare, who impressed me as a very dynamic and result oriented officer, should examine in a few districts the reasons for delay by tracking the movement of budgetary sanction from the day of its receipt in the district to actual lifting of grain by the Sewikas, so that procedural delays are eliminated. Of course, once the state government decides to empower the village level women's groups, and funds are drawn by the CDPO (rather than the district head) and transferred to a bank (or post office) account of the village level purchase committee, such delays will be considerably minimized.

The entire staff of ICDS, including CDPOs, Supervisors and Sewikas/helpers get their salaries only twice in a year. This encourages corruption, besides giving an excuse to the staff for not doing their duties. Here again, the Finance Secretary clarified that salaries and honoraria can be disbursed without waiting for GoI's allotment, as GoI has already committed to support administrative expenditure for the entire plan period. Therefore I will urge the Social Welfare Department to ensure monthly disbursement of salaries, which will go a long way in improving staff satisfaction and efficiency, besides reducing petty corruption. The orders should clearly state that salaries should be disbursed without waiting for allotment either from GoI or the state government

GoI has sanctioned 52 new centres, but neither has the Public Service Commission been moved for recruitment of CDPOs, nor has any effective step been taken for appointment of rest of the staff. On the whole, there were about 70 vacancies of CDPOs and 100 of Supervisors. Although orders were issued in October 2002 for initiating contractual appointments, nothing has happened in the field for lack of clarity. Roughly six lakh additional children and other deserving categories of people are thus being denied the benefit of supplementary nutrition in a poor state.

I went through the inspection notes recorded by Ms Himani Pande, Director Social Welfare, and was very impressed by her attention to detail. She covered a large number of issues, including SNP. For instance, at Chanho (Ranchi) in December 2003 she observed that the supply of nutrition had begun only in October 2003, but the entire allotment of Rs 4.62 lakhs had been exhausted by December. At Torpa on 16th September there was no stock. At Hazaribagh in November 2003 there had been no distribution for the past two months. At Barganwa Khurd (Ranchi) there was no stock of SNP on 30th Sept 2003. These examples show that the interruptions in SNP were frequent and widespread through the state.

Mid-day meals

There are two problems here. One, the scheme has been sanctioned only in seven districts and that too for 200 schools per district. Two, supply of foodgrain is highly erratic and administration has not been able to ensure continuity of supply. At the Nini centre in district Lohardaga, I was told that cooked meals could be served only for seven days, as there was no stock after that. Moreover, the Bank did not permit them to withdraw funds and insisted on a seal of the Mothers' Purchase Committee. The Committee had to borrow 300 Rs from shopkeepers to run the show for the week foodgrains were available.

TPDS

Similar problem of insufficient supplies was noticed here too. There seems to be complete lack of coordination between FCI, SFC and the state government officials. My suggestion is to do away with SFC, so that the state can deal directly with FCI. Secondly, sufficient godown capacity needs to be created in each district so that there is no interruption for essential schemes. The state was surrendering about half of its quota of BPL card holders because of lack of coordination and insufficient movement of rakes to the State.

Field notes

I visited Khunti with Director Social Welfare and PO, Unicef on the 12th morning. The CDPO, Mr S.C. Srivastava was aware of my programme and was present to receive me. However, none others from his office had turned up, and the office was closed when I reached there at about 10 AM. He informed us that though financial sanction was received in the district in September itself, actual nutrition distribution started only in December. Such procedural delays should be avoided in future. Now the supplies had exhausted in most centres and therefore there was no feeding. In many centres the Anganwadi Sewika stores grain in her house, as the centre premises taken on monthly rent of Rs 50 (it used to 25, and still is at that level in Bihar) does not have capacity for storage.

I visited centres at Bhandarwan, Mangru Toli, and Chikor. About 12 children of age group 4-8 were present at Bhandarwan. The centre was being run in a large spacious cemented room with an attached godown. However, only 28 out of 129 centres in this project were in a cemented building, rest were in huts. There was no arrangement of potable drinking water in most of the centres.

Some stock of Sattu and Mudhi was still available at the centre. Children in the age group 6 months to 3 years were being given THR once a fortnight. This was being done as mothers go for daily wage work, and they cannot bring small children for feeding at the centre. I suggest that though THR may not be totally abolished, keeping in view the high rate of migration in Jharkhand, effort may be made to persuade small children to come to the centre with their elder siblings and given feed appropriate to their age.

The Mangru Toli centre was closed, although a few children with bowls had turned up. At Chikor there were about 5 children, although the Sewika said that 25 had turned up but many left finding that there was no SNP.

I saw the Nawati centre of district Lohardaga. There were 15 children at the spot. SNP was given during the current financial year only for three months. Another centre at Kaimi was being run very efficiently. The Sewika Biraj Kumari was highly motivated and was rewarded too for her excellent work. Here too, there was no feeding between May to November.