

CAN WE ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS BY MID-DAY MEALS?

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ABSTRACT

From January 1st, 2016, the world has adopted the Sustainable development goals. These goals are aimed at ensuring a better future and essentially act as a reference framework for making policies for the next 15 years. One of the goals is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. There are certain schemes in our country which are aimed at achieving such ambitious goals. However it is necessary to understand that whether actually such schemes are good enough, that they can help us in achieving these goals?

It is in this context, that the present paper analyses the mid day meal scheme, which is one such scheme that helps in ensuring quality education to the children in our country. In all these years there have been mixed responses over the mid day meal scheme. People have time and again highlighted the problems in this scheme and have questioned its effectiveness. It is hence necessary to rethink this scheme in the light of the Sustainable development goals, so that we can improve its implementation in the coming years.

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2012 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), nearly 97 percent of children in rural India ages 6-14 years are enrolled in school.² However, many of these children are absent more than 25 percent of the time. Even among those who show up for class, learning levels

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² ASERCentre2012ASER2012(Rural)Findings. Referred From: http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Publication/s/ASER%20Reports/ASER_2012/ful. Accessed May 6, 2015

remain low over 60 percent of rural Indian children in third grade cannot read at a first grade level, and this number has increased 8 percentage points in the last three years.³

It was because of such indicators which were responsible for the initiation of the mid-day scheme with the objective of achieving universal primary education of satisfactory quality for all school children below the age of 14 by increasing enrolment, improving attendance and decreasing dropout rate, and simultaneously improving nutritional status. India's Mid Day Meal Scheme is one of the largest food assistance programs in the world with a 2013-2014 budget of Rs 30 billion i.e. \$490 million.⁴ Primarily, this scheme is aimed at overcoming classroom hunger, caused primarily by widespread poverty because poverty and classroom hunger reinforce each other and can be seen to be locked in a vicious cycle.⁵

Further, this scheme also aims to provide sufficient nutrition to the children and thus assure that concentration level in the class improves since poor learning abilities and greater exposure to disease are directly related to hunger and under nutrition.⁶ The scheme has come up with a positive intervention to overcome difficulties such as malnutrition and under-nutrition among young children and to improve learning abilities.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND BEHIND MID DAY MEALS IN INDIA

It was in the mid-1995, when the then government of India came up with a new 'centrally-sponsored scheme', the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education.⁷ The scheme initially focused on children at the primary stage (class I to V) in government, local body and government-aided schools. In October 2002, it was extended to cover children studying in the centres under Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative & Innovative Education (AIE). Central support was provided by way of free supply of food grains through the Food

³ Ibid

⁴ Problems With Mid Day Meal Scheme in India Eleni Lentz-Marino on august 20, 2014 Referred From: <http://www.borgenmagazine.com/problems-mid-day-meal-scheme-india/>

⁵ An Empirical Study of the Mid-Day Meal Programme in Khurda, Orissa ANIMA RANI SI, NARESH Economic & Political Weekly Review of Agriculture December 29, 2007 Referred From: <http://www.jstor.org.elibrary.nirmauni.ac.in/stable/pdf/40277588.pdf>

⁶ 'Health Status of the Children in India - An Overview', Health for Millions, Vol 28

Corporation of India (FCI) at the rate of 100 grams per student day, where cooked meals were served and at the rate of 3 kg per student per month, where foodgrains were distributed and subsidy for transport of foodgrains from nearest FCI depot to the primary school subject to a maximum of Rs. 50 per quintal. It is also necessary to note that, under this programme, cooked mid-day meals were to be introduced in all government and government-aided primary schools within two years. However, state governments were allowed to distribute monthly grain rations to schoolchildren, instead of cooked meals in the intervening period. Six years later, it was seen that most state governments were yet to make the transition from dry rations to cooked meals. The Supreme Court gave them a wake-up call on November 28, 2001, in the form of an order directing all state governments to introduce cooked mid-day meals in primary schools within six months.⁸ Once again, most state governments missed the deadline, and even today, some states are yet to comply.

Nevertheless, the coverage of mid-day meal programmes has steadily expanded during these years, and cooked lunches are rapidly becoming part of the daily school routine across the country. The scheme initially focused on children at the primary stage (class I to V) in government, local body and government-aided schools. It was extended in October 2002 to cover children studying in the centres under Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative & Innovative Education (AIE).⁹ Central support was provided by way of free supply of food grains through the Food Corporation of India (FCI) at the rate of 100 grams per student day, where cooked meals were served and at the rate of 3 kg per student per month, where food grains were distributed and subsidy for transport of food grains from nearest FCI depot to the primary school subject to a maximum of Rs. 50 per quintal.¹⁰

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF MID DAY MEAL SCHEME

⁸ PUCI vs Union of India and others, Civil Writ Petition 196 of 2001, referred form:<http://www.hrln.org/hrln/right-to-food/pils-a-cases/1262-2012-pucl-vs-union-of-india-and-others-civil-writ-petition-196-of-2001.html#ixzz4Gu4aBFx4>

⁹ Mid Day Meal Scheme and School Education: Planning Implementation and Effectiveness Concept Publishing Company, 2011 ISBN 9788180697876

¹⁰ Fighting“Classroom Hunger”- Achievements of “Mid Day Meal Scheme” Dr.Gracious James Referred From:
<http://yojana.gov.in/mid-day-meal-scheme.asp>

The MDM scheme was launched with the aim of attracting children to schools and, thus, bringing about improvement in enrolment. However, the objective related to enrolment was consequently not mentioned in the scheme objectives of 2006. No basis for omitting the objective was either available in the Expenditure Finance Committee's (EFC) memorandum or the Cabinet Note. The Ministry neither analyzed/ used the available state level data to assess the impact on enrolment nor fixed any measurable target to improve the coverage of children. An analysis of the data by audit revealed that the aggregated enrolment for the whole country displayed a consistent increase during 2002- 03 to 2006-07, which was accompanied by a corresponding increase/spread in the number of schools. While the increase in enrolment could not be conclusively established as a consequence of the MDM scheme, it can be concluded that stated that the increase reflected in the data was attributable to various interventions, MDM being one of the major factors.¹¹

Similarly, the scheme also envisaged in 1995/2004 the decrease in the dropout rate as one of its outcomes. Undoubtedly, the dropout rate declined from 34.89 per cent in 2002-03 to 29 per cent in 2004-05. Though overall dropout rates appeared to be declining in most states, the decline could not be directly attributed to the MDM Scheme, as Ministry had not established any system of measuring a relationship between decrease in dropout rate and MDM Scheme.¹²

LIMITATIONS IN PROPER IMPLEMENTATION OF MID DAY MEAL SCHEME

It is necessary to note that even after more than a decade of implementation of the scheme, the Ministry had not designed the scheme guidelines or to meet its own objective in terms of assessing increased enrolment and attendance rates of children. Besides, neither the Ministry nor the state governments had established any system to ensure accurate reporting of enrolment and attendance figures by state governments.¹³ Nor was there a mechanism for cross checking the data at various levels to establish integrity of data reporting. Similarly, neither the Ministry nor

¹¹ Report No. PA 13 of 2008 10 Ministry of Human Resources Development

¹² Ibid

¹³Reetika Khera Mid day meals in Primary Schools Referred From :
https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418915?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

the states compiled and analyzed the dropout rates of children covered under MDM scheme so as to assess the impact of the scheme. MDM had thus not been used and monitored as a targeted intervention. Sample checks by audit of the enrolment, attendance and retention rates of children in selected schools indicated that the scheme had not brought about perceptible improvement in these parameters.¹⁴ Further, a major drawback found in this scheme is that the teachers have to spend 2 or 3 hours for the implementation of this scheme. Because of the involvement of the teachers in the scheme, the study time of students and quality of education suffer. It is because of this provision, because which the ulterior motive of having this scheme i.e. giving good quality education, suffers immensely.¹⁵

As stated earlier, the supply of food for implementation of this scheme was to be done by the PDS Scheme. However, at several instance it was seen that since the states do not follow the guidelines of Government of India to deliver food grains at the school point by PDS dealer, there comes a leakage of supply chain. In such cases, food grain supplied gets adulterated and pilfered.¹⁶ This essentially affects the quality of the food grains supplied and hence hampers the health parameters that are required for the proper implementation of this scheme. A case from Uttar Pradesh 2013 shows that disruption of supply of food grains due to which for number of days. Meal is not cooked in the school which adversely affects the nutrient intake of children.¹⁷ Different survey also revealed the fact that in most of schools, the basic infrastructure for preparing meals was not available as per requirements. Some schools lack proper kitchen, store rooms and source of clean water supply which affected the quality of meal adversely.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

¹⁴Stephanie Bonds Food for Thought: Evaluating the Impact of India's Mid-Day Meal Program on Educational Attainment May 2012 Department of Economics University of California, Berkeley Referred From : <http://econ.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Bonds.pdf>

¹⁵ Farzana Afridi, The impact of school meal on school participation: evidence from rural India, July 2011 Referred From: <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ind/isipdp/10-02.html>

¹⁶ PEO Report No 202 Planning Commission Report on Performace Evaluation of the Mid Day Meal Scheme Referred From: http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/peoreport/peoevalu/peo_cmdm.pdf

¹⁷Report of 5th joint Review mission on Mid-Day Meal Scheme Referred From: http://mdm.nic.in/Files/Review/Fifth_Review/_Report

¹⁸ Diagnostic analysis of mid day meal scheme in rural Punjab mdm.nic.in/Files/.../Study-DIAGNOSTIC-ANALYSIS-mdm-Report_Punjab.pdf

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) are a new, universal set of goals, targets and indicators that UN member states will be expected to use to frame their agendas and political policies over the next 15 years.¹⁹ The fourth goal of this UN Policy is the goal to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. It aims at creating a world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels. It is necessary to assess that whether the scheme of incentivizing education by providing free meals to the children in their elementary education, in the way it is presently being implemented, will help us in achieving this goal. Till now it can be concluded that the impact of mid day meal has been very little. However, its impact can be improved by taking certain steps.

One of the steps that may improve the implementation of this scheme is that the representatives of Gram Panchayats/Gram Sabhas should be asked to monitor the regularity and wholesomeness of the mid day meal served to children, cleanliness in cooking and serving of the mid day meal, etc., on a daily basis. By involving them in the affairs of the panchayati system, it will make them accountable and will help in maintaining a good standard of mid day meals. Further, this scheme should also take benefits of the NREGA Scheme. There should be a provision for appointing cooks –cum helpers through NREGA, and training them on aspects of hygiene, health, sanitation, cooking and serving. This will ensure better implementation of both the policies and will ensure in empowering the villages of this country.

It is essential also essential that the children and the parents are given nutrition education, so that they can check that whether the quality of food being served to the children is good or not. There should also be grievance redresser mechanism on the Panchayat level that should register all such complaints and spread awareness about education on the level of the village. It is vital to understand that we cannot strengthen the grassroots without involving them in the process. There exists a very high value of mechanical solidarity amongst the people of the villages. Education as an idea should be inscribed in their social fabric. It is only then, that the scheme of mid day meal can help in achieving its ulterior motive, i.e. to provide quality education to the children.

¹⁹ Liz Ford Sustainable development goals: all you need to know Published on: Monday, 19 January Referred From: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/19/sustainable-development-goals-united-nations>