



Evaluating Mid Day Meal Scheme: Constraints Faced And Pathway For Improvement

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Abstract: Mid-day-meal scheme has been initiated by the government but its effectiveness depends in many ways on the involvement of community at large. School meals needed to boost to the advancement of elementary education, child nutrition, and social right. However, these achievements depend a great deal on the quality aspects of mid-day meals and therefore these issues need urgent attention if midday meal programme are to realize their full potential. In view of above, it is imperative to assess the constraints faced in implementation of the scheme and suggest remedial measure to overcome such constraints. For this investigation, samples were gathered using the cluster random sampling approach. In the Auraiya district (Uttar Pradesh), schools from Bidhuna Tehsil and Ajeetmal Community Development Block were chosen at random. Lack of clarity of objectives, inappropriate scientific and precise assessment of the impact of the scheme, huge gap between nutritional knowledge and normal health among teachers, students and parents were some of the constraints faced during investigation. With adequate resources and quality safeguards, mid-day meals can play a major role in improving school attendance, eliminating classroom hunger and fostering social equity. Qualitative improvements are urgently required to fill the gaps in a time bound manner if mid-day meals are to achieve their full potential. The benefits are intangible but beyond the preview of any measurement scale.

Index Terms - MDM, Child health, Elementary education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Famines may be a part of history now, but the battle against hunger has not been won. India has masses of food grains, while millions of its citizens remain hungry. The problem is clearly not of absolute food shortage, but that of distribution and poor governance. In the long run, education is the key to solving the problem of hunger. It empowers an individual to work in the society to fulfill his needs and aspirations. Hence only a few educated people go hungry. Yet, hunger is a stumbling block for education for poor children and locks them into a vicious cycle: hunger and poverty obstruct education as they are forced to drop out of school and take up menial jobs.

The three of the eight Millennium development goals (MDGs) emphasize on health which include reduction in child mortality, improved maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (Chhabra and Rokx, 2004). Even though India experienced improvements in overall nutrition in the 1990s, the advances in anthropometric measures are "slow relative to what might be expected in light of India's recent high rates of economic growth" (Deaton & Dr`eze, 2008). Statistics from the 2005-06 wave of the National Family Health Survey also show only slow improvements in childhood malnutrition: from 1998-99 to 2005-06, the proportion of undernourished (based on weight-for-age) children was essentially unchanged (47% to 46%), and the percentage of stunted (based on height-for-age) only declined about 1 percentage point per year from 45% to 38% (Citizens Initiative for the Rights of Children Under Six, 2006). This is especially true for girls, and for children in rural areas (Tarozzi & Mahajan, 2007; Tarozzi, 2008). Despite progress in terms of primary school enrollment, attendance and retention rates are low,

achievement levels are unimpressive, and teacher absenteeism is high (Kingdon, 2007 and Kremer, *et al.*, 2005). The 2007 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) shows some alarming statistics for rural Indian children: “Nearly 40% of children at class 5 level cannot read a class 2 text, while around 60% at that level are unable to carry out simple divisions. What should be more worrying though, is the fact that in class 2, only 9% of children can read the text appropriate to them, and 60% cannot even recognize numbers between 10 and 99” (Pratham, 2008).

Mid-day Meal in Uttar Pradesh is implemented with the joint efforts of the government of India and state government in September 2004. Mid day Meal Programme covers all the primary and upper primary schools of the state (DISE, 2008). Mid Day Meal Scheme had proved to be an effective means to check high dropout rates of children from economically weaker sections, while also addressing their nutritional needs. (Singh and Mishra, 2010) The objective of Mid Day Meal scheme was to give boost to universalization of primary education and to impact the nutrition of students in primary classes. The Mid Day Meal (MDM) scheme has been revised in 2004 and as per the Supreme Court directive it envisages provision of cooked, nutritious Mid Day Meal to Government and non government primary and secondary school children with minimum content of 300 calories of energy and 8-12 gm. of protein in each serving. From 2006, the food being served has been enriched by 450 calories and 12 gm protein in primary school and in upper primary school it is 700 calories and 20 gm protein (DPIR, 2008).

Mid-day-meal scheme has been initiated by the government but its effectiveness depends in many ways on the involvement of community at large. The observations of studies done in other parts of country reveal that community participation is one of the main factors that affects the functioning of the MDM scheme. Most parents know about the programme but they are unaware of its purpose or their entitlements (for example, for a student to receive a dry ration he/she must have attended school for at least 80 per cent of the month). Many parents perceive the programme more as an entitlement and responsibility of the government than something for which they might take ownership. Therefore, to make the MDM scheme successful in the schools, there is need to change this perception and more actively encourage the participation of parents because insufficient awareness and participation on their part not only disturbs the distribution of food within the community but also between teachers and parents. It also negatively affects the educational process at schools. Parents should be fully informed and consulted about their contribution and a clear system should be developed for distribution of responsibilities between all concerned (Meir, 2001). Study conducted in Birbhum district of West Bengal showed that the MDM programme was running most successfully in the schools, where parents' involvement was ensured (Kumar *et al.*, 2005). School meals needed to boost to the advancement of elementary education, child nutrition, and social right. However, these achievements depend a great deal on the quality aspects of mid-day meals and therefore these issues need urgent attention if midday meal programme are to realize their full potential. In view of above, it is imperative to assess the constraints faced in implementation of the scheme and suggest remedial measure to overcome such constraints.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this investigation, samples were gathered using the cluster random sampling approach. In the Auraiya district (Uttar Pradesh), Bidhuna Tehsil and Ajeetmal Community Development Block were chosen at random from among two Tehsils and seven Community Development Blocks. Twelve schools in all were chosen. From the Bidhuna tehsil, three government primary schools with MDM schemes and three non-government primary schools without MDM schemes were chosen at random from the same geographic area. Likewise, three government primary schools with MDM schemes and three non-government primary schools without MDM schemes within the same geographic area were chosen at random from the Ajeetmal block.

A proforma that had been previously created and tested served as a tool for gathering primary data. This study utilized secondary data collected from official and reliable websites to analyze effectiveness of the program. Secondary data was chosen as it provides a cost effective and time efficient means of accessing large datasets.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Constraints drawn regarding MDM scheme

Mid-day meal scheme was initiated on the basis of the philosophy that "when children have to sit in class with empty stomachs, they cannot focus on learning". The scheme is important for improving enrollment, attendance and retention of primary school children, while simultaneously improving their nutritional status. The following findings which reflect the constraints and bottlenecks are drawn on the basis of information gathered and analyzed. It is believed that these issues are limiting the reach of MDM to students in the fullest manner-

- There are evidences of lack of clarity regarding the objectives to be achieved by the scheme to most of the stakeholders as most of the teachers, Parents and Students were not aware of the baseline of MDM.
- Majority of stakeholders particularly parents felt that whatever they were receiving was free, and hence there was no reason of raising questions regarding its weaknesses in implementation process.
- Most of the teachers were lacking appropriate level of orientation regarding objectives of the MDM and hence felt it as wastage of the time and energy.
- MDM, which started with an aim to improve the status of primary education, is yet to have scientific and precise assessment of the impact of the scheme with respect to the increase in enrollment, attendance and retention level of children.
- One of the objectives of the scheme was to positively impact on the nutritional and health levels of primary school children; which was the main objective of the revised scheme in September 2006. Very weak linkages were felt with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for the health checks prescribed under the scheme followed up by the Ministry. In most of the children micro nutrient supplements and de-worming medicines were not administered.
- Lack of coordination between School secretaries and head teachers was found as a major hurdle in executing MDM effectively. In most of the cases Secretaries were found illiterates and appointed on political backing, thus creating problem in recording and sharing information.
- There is a huge gap between nutritional knowledge and normal health among teachers, students and parents.
- Provision of green leafy vegetables was not considered which a major mean to contribute in normal health.
- Cooking is done mainly by firewood which not only denudes the forests but also produces a lot of smoke which is hazardous for health.
- Most of the valuable time of teachers was spend in monitoring and maintaining mid day meal records thus leads to loss of teaching hours.
- In some cases, the quality of rice provided through FCI did not meet the satisfactory standards.
- Hygienic practices like washing of hands before and after meal were not initiated in masses by teachers.

Recommendations and suggestions

After observing various constraints and bottlenecks during the research study , there is an urgent need for a serious and sincere brainstorming for making headway in the effective execution of the programme.

Following recommendations and suggestions can be put forth as priorities for action for enhancing the efficacy of Mid Day Meal scheme in the state:

- MDM scheme should continue in the state as it has positive impact on enrollment and attendance of children. This would change the inclination of masses towards government schools and thus uplifting the enrollment.
- Meals should be more varied and nutritionally balanced to achieve desired health outcomes in the children and counteract the problem of undernutrition among children. The food should not only be sufficient to eliminate hunger but also counter micronutrient malnutrition in the state. Food based alternative means should be opted for fortification of mid-day meals with micronutrients. It is important that the meal should contain apart from cereals, a good quantity of vegetables particularly, dark greenleafy vegetables, as far as possible, every day because these are important to combat micronutrient deficiencies.
- Along with rice at least one type of dal should be provided at the schools through the main supplies of chain. The amount of pulses/dal should not be less than 20g/child/day for primary schools.
- Apart from the nutritive value, it is important to ensure the hygienic quality of the meal served. Even minor health problems following a school meal could vitiate the implementation of the scheme in the whole state or even the country as a result of adverse publicity that might follow such incidents. For this purpose, monitoring of the raw material and cooked preparation should be an important part of the evaluation system. Teachers as well as *bhojanmata* should be trained about importance of nutrition and to observe strict personal hygiene and to take adequate care with respect to the hygienic handling of foods during distribution.
- 'Food for health' chapter should be included in text books of schools in order to reinforce the importance of nutrition in improving quality of life and spread its awareness among all sections of society not only children.
- Community based nutrition garden may be built and importance of fruit trees needs to be popularized.
- Mid-day meal provides only about 1/3rd of protein and energy. Rest of the food and nutrients should come from the home diet. Therefore, it is very important that nutrition education is given to the children and parents. Teachers should also be made aware of the nutrient and food requirement of children. To curb hidden hunger of micronutrients, vegetables and fruits should be incorporated in the daily diets of school children.
- In order to bridge the gap of foods and nutritional knowledge for normal health and monitoring of preparation of MDM, it is desirable to have one additional person in the schools. The person, a B.Sc. Home Science graduate would take nutrition and health classes of children, monitor meal preparation, maintain records of foods purchased and utilized, arrange health and nutrition camps for parents and community. The person may also work as a link between education and health department.
- As the children get meal in schools, at least 30 minutes class for health should be conducted either within the school timings or school time should be increased and nutrition and health education be given to school children during the additional period. This shall be a long-term approach to mitigate hunger of protein and energy and hidden hunger of micro nutrients i.e. various minerals and vitamins.
- Proper kitchen sheds should be repaired, which should be separate from teaching area. Adequate infrastructure is particularly crucial to avoid the disruption of classroom processes and also to ensure good hygiene. Also each school should provide clean toilets and safe drinking water.
- It is important that apart from nutritive value, hygienic quality of food should also be ensured. This will imply that school should have access to safe drinking water and clean toilet facilities on one hand and also that the personnel involved in cooking and serving food strictly observe personal hygiene habits.

- The monitoring system needs to be refurbished. Feedback forms can be obtained periodically from the children and parents about quality, quantity and other parameters.
- Efforts should be focused on modulating the perception of teachers towards the MDM scheme so that they bear the objectives of the scheme in mind and not feel it as merely a job which needs to be done somehow.
- Community participation in the scheme is very important for effective implementation of the programme. The community members should be asked to take ownership of the scheme and monitor the scheme at the village level.
- Awareness should be created among children, teachers and community so that the school meal does not become a substitute rather than a supplement for the home meal, which is common in the case of children of poor households.
- A toll free number may be installed for lodging complaints and giving suggestions and it may be widely publicized.

Conclusion

The experience so far clearly shows that the impact of mid-day meals on health status of children and on the enrollment, attendance and learning achievement of the students has been quite significant but mid-day meal scheme certainly has much to contribute to the well-being and future of the children so it should continue. Important fact is that mid day meal scheme has positive effect on higher achievers which has been the result of short term effect of meals viz. better attention, memory and learning. As things stand, mid-day meal program has scope for improvement, but the way to go is forward and not backward. With adequate resources and quality safeguards, mid-day meals can play a major role in improving school attendance, eliminating classroom hunger and fostering social equity. Having said this, qualitative improvements are urgently required to fill the gaps in a time bound manner if mid-day meals are to achieve their full potential. The benefits are intangible but beyond the preview of any measurement scale. The program should not go down to the mechanism as a routine but should be undertaken with zeal of "Revolution".

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