

Nutrition Programmes and Children

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The study by Vimala Ramachandran, Kameshwari Jandhyala and Aarti Saihjee ('Through the Life Cycle of Children: Factors that Facilitate/Impede Successful Primary School Completion', *EPW*, November 22, 2003) is an explorative and illustrative study focusing on the children, their family, the community, the available education and health services in an effort to understand the causality and social processes that affect children's participation in schooling. A good number of findings of the study, like relatively poor utilisation of ICDS by children in 0-3 years age group, relatively low coverage of ICDS programme in tribal areas, etc, are in conformity with the findings of earlier studies. However, some others arouse serious concern and call for urgent attention of policy-makers.

Our major comment on the paper under discussion is in regard to the policy suggestion on delinking pre-school education component for the children of 3-6 year age group from ICDS and making it an integral part of primary schools. This proposal may hopefully facilitate in imparting formal education to the children. It is another question whether formal education must be imparted to children at such a tender age. It is for the educationists to answer this question. The proposal of Ramachandran et al, on the other hand, takes away the benefits received by children in this age group from various components of ICDS like monitoring of growth in the weight of the children, nutritional and health education imparted to children, rhymes and songs taught to the children, etc. It is surprising that the authors, even after observing the poor performance of primary schools, have suggested transferring PSE component from ICDS programme to primary schools. What is to be done in villages which do not have even primary school? The suggested remedy is more harmful than the disease itself. Instead of the proposal

suggested by Ramachandran et al, it would be wise to strengthen the ICDS by including formal education as another component. In fact, in Andhra Pradesh on an experimental basis early childhood education (ECE) component has been introduced in a limited number of anganwadi centres. The ECE classes are conducted in the afternoon generally by the same anganwadi worker. This programme not only supplements the income of the anganwadi worker but also provides relief to the parents of the children who will be away from the home and are busy in field work during the afternoon.

There are studies which bring out the effectiveness of the ICDS in reducing malnutrition among children. A study by National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (1992) reveals that the percentage of malnourished (grade III and IV) in the ICDS areas is less by 1.8 points for children under three years and by 1.5 points for children in 3-6 years old and moderately malnourished by 2.5 and 3.4 percentage for the two sub-groups, respectively. Radhakrishna et al (1998) have estimated that in the absence of ICDS programme the percentage of malnourished children (1-5 years) in 1988-90 would have been 9.2 per cent as compared to the observed figure of 8.7 per cent and the percentage of moderately malnourished children would have been 44.5 per cent as compared to the observed figure of 43.8 per cent.

Further, it has been shown that ICDS programme is cost effective. Based on a study of five ICDS projects (three in AP and two in Orissa) Radhakrishna et al (1998) have estimated that the cost of transferring 100 k calories in 1997, without any leakages, ranges between 68-85 paise. In the case of 40 per cent leakage in the distribution of supplementary nutrients, the transfer cost of 100 k calories varies between Rs 1.14-1.43. What is more important is that the ICDS programme is cost effective in transferring income to the beneficiary when compared to others like

the mid-day meal programme and distribution of food grains under PDS. The cost of transferring a rupee to an individual under ICDS programme is only Rs 1.76 while it is Rs 2.38 under mid-day meals programme and Rs 4.26 in case of PDS. It is true that even now the unrealised potentialities of ICDS programme could be realised by strengthening its various components.

With regard to the pre-school education (PSE) component of ICDS programme, Ramachandran et al comment that the component was evident only on paper but non-existent in reality. However, a study covering Andhra Pradesh and Orissa reveal a different picture [Radhakrishna et al 1998]. PSE is one of the most common and popular component of ICDS programme. In fact, it is observed that children from anganwadi centres perform better at primary school than those children who did not attend anganwadi centres. The children from anganwadi centres are more active, bold and social. In regard to playing materials Ramachandran et al observe that in most anganwadi centres these materials are locked up in cupboards. They are displayed only during inspection by the supervisory staff. Another study on Medak district in Andhra Pradesh throws more light on this issue [Indrakant 2002]. In anganwadi centres housed in own building with compound wall, the playing kits are given to the children. Children take immense interest to play with them. They learn while they play. Here it is worthwhile to mention an interesting incidence witnessed at the time of a visit to an anganwadi centre. A child was crying as he wanted to accompany his mother to the market. When a playing kit was given to him, the child started playing, forgetting his earlier demand of wanting to go to the market with his mother and other children joined him. This only highlights the need for providing playing kits and for good and own accommodation for anganwadis.

In the study under discussion and in other studies, it is observed that the location of AWCs and the caste of AWW are important determinants of accessibility to supplementary nutrients to the poor children. To improve the accessibility to ICDS programme in Andhra Pradesh many villages have more than one AWC. To

provide the accessibility to SNP to children residing in hamlet, sub-centres with SNP have been established. Ramachandran et al point out that the quantity and regularity of the distribution of supplementary food remains a major source of worry in UP. A most disturbing finding was that in UP the fortified 'dalia' meant for AWCs was being sold in the local shop with people buying it both for their consumption as well as to feed their cattle. Such leakages are not specific to UP. However, these can be reduced, if not totally eliminated, by strengthening supervision elements in the programme. The important consideration here is not the existence of leakages but how these leakages compare with those in other welfare programmes. It is generally found that ICDS is self-targeting. Most of the beneficiaries are generally, poor. They may not be poorest of the poor. Further, the magnitude of leakages is relatively low, in the ICDS. In this context, NGOs have an important role to play. In a study on working of voluntary organisations in Kamarup district of Assam [Bhatia 2000] it was found that the voluntary organisations had firm roots in their respective areas and had a good rapport with local people, which enabled them to organise women and mobilise community resources with relative ease. However, some of the organisations excessively depended upon government grants and had become complacent in mobilising their resources. In another study it was found that the government-managed ICDS projects could not reduce their delivery cost due to rigid rules and insufficient interdepartmental coordination [Indrakant 2003]. However, projects managed by a voluntary organisation can reduce their delivery cost and improve their performance on account of convergence of services. Therefore, the government should not hesitate to seek wherever possible the cooperation of voluntary organisations. However, NGOs must be accountable to the government and to the people at large. [EPW](#)

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