



Revisiting Public Provisioning for Child Nutrition During and Beyond the Pandemic

22nd January 2021 (Friday) | 2:30 pm – 4:30 pm (IST) | Zoom

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected children of all ages across the country in multiple ways. The pandemic has intensified children's vulnerabilities and development challenges, including hunger and undernutrition. As undernutrition impacts children's overall development, including their immune system, making them more vulnerable to infections, the nutrition crisis is also translating into a health crisis. This is emerging as a formidable challenge before the country as India already accounts for a disproportionately high share of the global burden of undernutrition. The available statistics show that one in every three children in India is malnourished (CNNS, 2016-18) and only 9.6 percent of children between 6 to 23 months in the country receive an adequate diet (NFHS-4, 2015-16). The recently released NFHS-5 (2019-20) indicates that in some of the States the prevalence of undernutrition among children has deteriorated; the COVID-19 crisis is likely to have aggravated these challenges further.

India's policy and public provisioning framework includes several nutrition interventions. The Union Government funds large-scale programmes and schemes meant to address food insecurity and undernutrition such as, the Public Distribution System (PDS), the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and POSHAN Abhiyan. However, the pandemic and the consequent restrictions on mobility have led to disruptions in these schemes since March 2020. The distribution of dry ration or cash transfers in lieu of MDM and PDS has not covered everyone. Further, a number of direct nutrition interventions have got neglected as the public healthcare systems have been hugely overburdened; these include immunization, antenatal care and micronutrient supplementation, among others. The widespread loss of livelihoods, coupled with the rise in food prices has led to food insecurity and reduced dietary quality of meals especially for the poor. Migrants and children from the marginalised sections, especially girls, have been the most vulnerable during this crisis.

In such a context, the Union and State Governments need to provide adequate fiscal support to strengthen the ICSD system, improve public sector healthcare infrastructure, enhance health and nutrition services and ensure that they reach all children especially adolescent girls. In this regard, the New Education Policy's recommendation for provisioning of breakfast along with MDM needs immediate attention. Moreover, fiscal support for the frontline workers delivering the health and nutrition services also needs to be stepped up significantly. In order to ensure effective and inclusive provisioning of health and nutrition services to children, the administrative and procedural bottlenecks in flow and utilisation of budgetary resources as well as the gaps in fiscal transparency at the grassroots level also need to be addressed.

Against this backdrop, Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) and Child Rights and You (CRY) will organise a Webinar on 22nd January 2021 (2:30 pm to 4:30 pm). The Webinar will bring together academics, policy experts, practitioners from the grassroots and NGOs focusing on child nutrition and health to discuss the aforesaid issues and challenges in the context of the approaching Union Budget and State Budgets for 2021-22.