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### Towards upping the ante

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*Decentralising ration procurement in Odisha's anganwadis has yielded better results*



Flexibility for anganwadis: Effect of decentralisation. Photo: Pradeep Baisakh

Following the Rs. 700 crore pulses scam in Odisha in January 2011, the State government decided to decentralise the procurement of all the items in the supplementary nutrition programme (SNP) under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and the Mid Day Meal programme in schools, with the exception of rice which is supplied by the Food Corporation of India.

Two years since, the decision has brought colours in the villages. In the Kakringia anganwadi centre (in Kasinipur gram panchayat under Phiringia block) in the tribal-dominated Kandhamal district, about 10 children in the age group of 3-6 years arrive in the morning and stay till noon. In the morning, they receive snacks and have a hot cooked meal for lunch – both following the standard menu developed by the WCD Department.

Asked if they get a stomach full of food at the anganwadi, the senior children nodded in affirmative. They get vegetables and eggs regularly as per norms. The anganwadis are also tasked with providing 'Take Home Ration' (THR) for children in six months to three years group, for pregnant and lactating mothers and for severely undernourished children. Damayanti Kahanra, a pregnant woman from Babdingia village under Phiringia block, says she has been getting two packets of ground cereals every month.

Under the new dispensation, joint accounts have been opened in the name of the anganwadi worker and the ward member of the village who will purchase the ration. "This has fixed accountability on the anganwadi workers which they cannot escape. Therefore the delivery is better," says Rajkishor Mishra, State Advisor to Supreme Court Commission on Right to Food. The new system has dispensed with the contractor system which was a source of corruption. Odisha became one of the first States to implement the standing order of the Supreme Court to ban contractors in ICDS. The ground cereals are procured from local SHGs, thus providing rural women with entrepreneurial opportunities.

A study conducted by the Voice for Child Rights Organisation (VCRO), a civil society organisation working for children, in December 2011 in seven districts on the functioning of decentralised procurement shows that deliveries have improved in quality and regularity under the ICDS. Fifty seven per cent of the surveyed beneficiaries said that their children are getting regular cooked meals as per the menu chart; 58 per cent said that cooked food given under SNP is sufficient; 60 per cent said the morning snacks is as per norms; 87 per cent said that they have received dry ration regularly and as per norms. In 65 per cent cases, the standard menu chart is displayed in the anganwadi centres.

"Earlier there was delay in delivery of ration and rice near us. We could hardly give some lentils and rice to the children. However with money coming directly to our hands, we are trying to give best to the children," says an anganwadi worker in Nuapada district.

In Odisha, 71,000 anganwadi centres benefit about 45 lakh people, including children under 6 years and pregnant and lactating women. As per official figures, in 2012-13, Rs. 625 crore was released under the decentralised procurement process in SNP to the anganwadi centres and block levels. Apart from food, the government also provides uniforms for the students and books.

However, there is a complete mismatch between cost norms and nutrition norms. On an average, Rs. 2.33 is spent toward the food of each child excluding rice. This is too meagre in view of the inflationary trend in food prices. The rate

has not been revised for last five to six years. Secretary of the WCD Department, Arati Ahuja, says, “This amount is actually less but we have been able to manage due to localisation of purchase as this keeps the purchase cost low. Locally available seasonal vegetable and pulses could be procured keeping calorie requirement in mind. We have not fixed price for each item and we have made it a weekly costing system to give flexibility to the anganwadi worker to manage within the overall cost.”

*(The writer is a journalist based in Odisha and a media fellow of National Foundation of India [2012])*

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