

NOTE

## MID-DAY MEALS AND DROP-OUTS

**Madhu and Bharat Dogra write:**

The recent decision to expand the mid-day meals scheme to upper-primary schoolchildren onwards and provide an additional allocation of Rs 2500 crore for this purpose is welcome. Keeping in view the alarming high levels of malnutrition in Indian children, any proposal to expand this scheme deserves praise, but at the same time there is a clear need to reform this scheme. The phase of expansion should be accompanied by long-overdue reforms.

In the course of the implementation of mid-day meals scheme, one problem that has been repeatedly reported from many schools is the difficulty in organising daily cooking in or near schools. The cook provided for this is generally poorly equipped to handle large-scale cooking. There are many problems like delayed delivery of raw materials, inadequate quantity and poor quality of raw materials, absence of proper cooking place, even lack of clean water, lack of safe storage of grain and fuel etc.

In various parts of India different dry nutritious food items have been traditionally prepared combining cereals, pulses, oilseeds, jaggery etc. in such an ingenious way as to give great nutrition value (without any artificial supplements) as well as great taste. Children relish these foods so much that mothers have a tough time preventing them from consuming the entire stock immediately! It is these traditional dry foods which should be included in mid-day meals.

The second component of the mid-day meal should consist of seasonal fruits and salad vegetables. No cooking is needed for this component.

The entire menu can keep changing to provide diversity of taste.

While the idea of this reformed mid-day meals scheme deserves wide support it is difficult to agree with the official view which sees mid-day meals as a means of reducing drop-out rates. It speaks poorly of an educational system which has to use food to attract children. The education system by itself should be so good as to involve and retain children. Mid-day meals should not be seen as a means or a pretext for delaying badly needed reform in school education. The education system should be good enough to attract and retain children. If it has to use meals to retain children, then it is clearly a bad system and needs to be thoroughly reformed. □□□