

A Budget that Fails to Address the Hunger Pandemic*

Dipa Sinha

While the country continues to grapple with the health and economic crisis as a result of COVID-19, widespread hunger and food insecurity is a silent emergency that has not been getting sufficient attention. Unfortunately, the Union Budget also does not include any significant measures to address this.

The partial National Family Health Survey-5 results released recently showed that child malnutrition levels in 2019 were higher than in 2016 in most States. The fall in incomes witnessed by most poor and working-class households in the last one year would have made this situation even worse. Recent field surveys conducted by Hunger Watch and the Azim Premji University between October 2020 and December 2020 found that for two-thirds of the respondents, food intake was still not back to pre-lockdown levels. Malnutrition has multiple determinants with access to food, health and care being the immediate. A global pandemic and an economic slowdown, which has come on the back of years of jobless growth and stagnant rural wages, has hit household food security hard. Data show that even before COVID-19, nutritious diets for most Indians were unaffordable.

No greater allocation

In this context, direct nutrition programmes such as the anganwadi programme and school mid-day meals make a crucial contribution to the diets of children and pregnant and lactating women. The 2020-21 revised estimates for anganwadi services is ₹17,252.3 crore, compared to a Budget estimate of ₹20,532.4 crore, which was itself less than the projected demand of ₹24,810 crore. This shows that the anganwadi services have been badly affected by the closure of anganwadi centres. There are large gaps in delivery of supplementary nutrition. It is not clear whether the revised estimates reflect a true picture, because data of the Controller General of Accounts show that the expenditure of the entire Ministry of Women and Child Development (which implements anganwadi services among other things) up to December 2020 was only ₹14,607.1 crore (49% of Budget estimates).

In the current Budget, different schemes have been clubbed together and anganwadi services are now part of something called 'Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0' which has an allocated budget of ₹20,105 crore. The total budget allocation of the schemes that were included in Saksham in 2020 was higher at ₹24,557.4 crore.

Two other important nutrition-related interventions of the Ministry of Women and Child Development also saw major underspending with the revised estimates for the national nutrition mission (Poshan) for 2020-21 being only ₹600 crore compared to a Budget estimate of ₹3,700 crore. For maternity benefits under the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (a cash transfer of ₹5,000 for pregnant women), the revised estimate is ₹1,300 crore compared to the Budget estimate of ₹2,500 crore. This scheme is now part of Samarthya, along with other schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mahila Shakti Kendra. These schemes have also seen a reduced allocation compared to last year (₹2,522 crore vis-à-vis ₹2,828 crore). The allocation for the mid-day meal scheme for 2021-22 is ₹11,500 crore which is lower than the revised estimate of ₹12,900 crore for 2020-21. Nutrition schemes, which have been suffering

from poor budgetary support for many years now, therefore do not see greater allocations despite the increasing prevalence of malnutrition.

Other social protection programmes such as old age, widow and disability pensions, which could also contribute to better nutrition, also do not see any increase compared to last year. Even for migrant workers, other than setting up a portal, there is no announcement of any special measures. The One Nation, One Ration scheme has not taken off and is mired in complications.

Food subsidy

While the food subsidy seems to have increased by more than three times, it must be understood that this does not reflect higher distribution of subsidised grains. This only reflects a correction in the Budget books, where the government is paying back Food Corporation of India (FCI) arrears rather than forcing the FCI to take loans. The total FCI debt as on December 31, 2020 was ₹3.7 lakh crore (accumulated over the last few years because adequate amounts were not allocated for food subsidy), and the additional amount being shown in the revised estimate over last year's Budget estimate is ₹3.1 lakh crore which matches the debt that FCI has with the National Social Security Fund. The food subsidy allocation for 2021-22 (₹2.4 lakh crore), while much higher than last year's Budget estimate, is more realistic in terms of what is required to meet the National Food Security Act entitlements. But it is clear that there is no provision for an expanded or universal PDS which many have been recommending.

In fact, it is shocking that even the health budget has not been increased, with the allocation for health this year being lower than the revised estimate for 2020-21 (₹74,602 crore versus ₹82,445 crore). The only increase here seems to be in the allocation for the COVID-19 vaccine which is a one-time expenditure and does not contribute to strengthening the health system.

Missing the mark

Overall, from the point of view of addressing hunger or providing a demand stimulus, this Budget misses the mark. The total expenditure of ₹34,83,236 crore is only ₹32,931 crore above last year's revised estimates. While it is ₹4,00,000 crore more than previous year's budgetary allocation, much of this difference is because of the correction in the food subsidy numbers. What we have been presented with in a year of economic slowdown and growing inequality is a stingy budget that fails to ensure the 'bare necessities' for all.

Dipa Sinha teaches at Ambedkar University, Delhi

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