

Social Audit of Midday Meal Scheme in AP

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Studies of India's midday meal scheme have emphasised the need for community monitoring. A social audit was recently initiated for this purpose by the government of Andhra Pradesh. This article presents an account of the audit in Adilabad and Kurnool districts. It brings out various problems like corruption, misuse of power and mismanagement of funding. However, the audit did also bring out the many positive effects of the midday meal scheme – in increasing enrolment, averting “classroom hunger” and reducing social discrimination. It also showed that active community monitoring can significantly enhance the quality of the scheme.

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In November 2001, an interim order of the Supreme Court of India directed that cooked meals must be provided in all government and government-aided primary schools.¹ By converting the provision of a midday meal into a legal entitlement for all school-going children, the Supreme Court order recognised school meals as an important means of protecting children's right to food.

Following pressure from the Supreme Court as well as from popular mobilisation, the government of India introduced a revised midday meal scheme (MDMS) in 2004. This scheme was further revised in 2006, increasing the calorie content of the meal to 450 calories (from 300 calories) and protein to 12 grams (from 8-12 grams). Currently, the government of India contributes grain for the midday meal (100 gms per child per day) free of cost through the Food Corporation of India and a sum of Rs 1.50 per child per day towards cooking costs, on the condition that state governments contribute at least 50 p per child per day. Additionally, the government of India contributes some amount towards transportation charges and monitoring and evaluation [GOI 2006]. The scheme was recently expanded to cover children in the upper primary schools.

The MDMS is widely acknowledged to be one of the most successful schemes of the government of India. The scheme is operational in almost all the states in the country [Commissioners of the Supreme Court 2007]. It is the largest school lunch programme in the world, covering almost 12 crore children with a current budget of Rs 8,000 crore per year [Budget Speech 2008].

Many independent studies have been done on the MDMS by researchers and civil society organisations. These studies suggest that this scheme has many benefits such as increasing enrolment and attendance in schools, especially of girl children, and

addressing the issue of classroom hunger, thereby also increasing learning ability [Drèze and Goyal 2003]. The MDMS also has large socialisation and educational benefits. However, these studies have also found that there is still a lot to be achieved as far as the quality of the midday meal is concerned. For instance, in many places the same menu is given every day (usually roti or rice and a watery dal or sambar) with no vegetables, eggs, fruits and so on [Khera 2006].²

Studies have suggested community monitoring as one of the means of improving the quality of the midday meal. Therefore, the government of India has specifically requested all state governments to think of ways in which the community, especially mothers, can be involved in monitoring the MDMS [GOI 2006].³

About 55 lakh children are beneficiaries of the midday meal programme in Andhra Pradesh and Rs 240 crore was allocated by the state towards the MDMS in 2006-07 [GOAP 2007]. To increase community monitoring of the MDMS, the government of Andhra Pradesh recently initiated a social audit in five districts of the state, in partnership with civil society organisations.

In this process, the M V Foundation⁴ facilitated the social audit of the MDMS in Adilabad and Kurnool districts. This social audit was conducted during the period January to April 2008 in 111 schools – 54 schools in Adilabad (in Narnoor, Ichoda and Boath mandals) and 57 schools in Kurnool (in Sanjamula, Uyyalavada, Halaharvi and Alur).⁵ A team of resource persons was formed in each mandal to mobilise and train the local community to conduct the social audit. Through an initial gram sabha, the mandal resource persons formed a village social audit team of five to eight members in each village. The village social audit teams included parents of schoolchildren, gram panchayat members, local leaders, youth, women's group members, etc. They were given training at the mandal level on the conduct of social audit of the MDMS. On the whole, 799 village social audit team members (on an average about seven members in each village) and 40 mandal resource persons (who moved from village to village in two teams) participated in the social audit process.

The team of resource persons and the village social audit team members visited the school and examined the records related to the MDMS. They observed the midday meal process, spoke to the cooks, the headmasters, teachers and children. The entries in the official records were compared with actual verification of attendance, rice stock, quality of meal, and so on. Further, the team also examined the provisions made for the midday meal in the form of a kitchen shed, storage space, plates, cooking gas, systems of payment for the cooks, etc.

At the end, the team prepared a village report and presented it in the gram sabha. The gram sabhas were specially convened for this purpose by the gram panchayat (usually the sarpanch) on the request of the social audit team. The gram sabha was attended by parents, gram panchayat members, other interested persons of the village and the school headmaster and the cooking agency representatives. On average, about 80 to 150 people attended each gram sabha.

The village communities participated enthusiastically in these gram sabhas and in most villages questioned the headmaster and cooking agency when any discrepancy was revealed. At the same time, many positive decisions were also taken, such as immediately shifting the rice from the cook's house to the school, minimising the role of the ration dealer, arranging for water facility in the school, and contributing plates and/or glasses for the children. In some villages even major decisions such as changing the cooks were also taken. Since the community was now aware of the official provisions of the MDMS they decided to be more vigilant and usually encouraged the social audit team to monitor the midday meal in a continuous manner.

This paper presents the process and findings of the social audit and some policy recommendations that emerged from the audit.

Attendance Verification

The social audit team visited the schools (unannounced) during lunch time and did a physical verification of the number of children eating the midday meal (headcount). This was then compared with the number that was recorded as having the meal in the attendance register. While on

the day of the social audit an average of 6,755 children were found to be having the midday meal, the attendance registers showed 8,016 children as eating the meal, i.e., 1,277 "extra" children. On tracking the names of those children who were marked present but were not seen at the midday meal, it was seen that most were in fact not even present in school. Further investigations on over-reporting of attendance revealed that while some of it might have been plain corruption, in some cases school authorities were forced to show higher attendance because of a shortage of funds for cooking. Moreover, in many schools anganwadi children were also coming for the midday meal and teachers found it difficult to refuse them food. This was accounted for by showing excess attendance of school children.

For instance, in Bollagutta village, Kurnool district, on an average only 25-30 children came to school, but 70-80 children were marked present. Even the rice stock register showed that nine kg of rice was cooked, whereas the headmaster gave only three-four kg to the cook each day. When this was reported in the gram sabha, the headmaster confessed to committing fraud and immediately gave the sarpanch money for 50 kg of rice. This money was put in the school fund account.

Utilisation of Rice

The Andhra Pradesh State Civil Supplies Corporation (APSCSC) is the nodal agency for lifting the foodgrains allocated by the government of India from the Food Corporation of India depots. The APSCSC then transports the grain to its own godowns and from there to fair price shops. The implementing agencies (cooks) lift the foodgrains from the fair price shops. Storage of foodgrains, at the school level, is the responsibility of the headmaster and the implementing agency. The headmaster certifies the attendance of the children and the quantity of rice utilised [GOAP 2007]. In many of the schools visited it was found that the rice was stored at the cook's or dealer's house, with no accountability to the school either because rice did not reach these schools directly or there were no storing facilities. Only about 40 per cent of the schools visited (45 out of 111 schools) had a storing facility in the school.

It was also seen that the headmasters in many schools were not properly monitoring the utilisation of rice. The stock registers were only filled at the end of the month without checking the actual number of children eating or the actual amount of rice cooked. Release orders (ROs) were not available in most schools; stock registers were updated only at month end; rice was not stored in the school making it almost impossible to verify whether the rice supplied for the midday meal was being properly utilised. However, in many schools the social audit team conducted enquiries by visiting the dealers, cooks, school authorities and all concerned, uncovering leakages in the rice supplied for midday meal.

In Puchchakayilapalli village, Kurnool district, the team found that there was a leakage of 50 kg of rice. The rice was stored with the cooks and they were dealing with it on their own. This issue was reported in the gram sabha. The cooks were asked for an explanation and they confessed that there was indeed a diversion of some of the rice that came for the midday meal. They apologised and asked for a month's time to return the rice. The gram sabha then decided to store the rice in the school and the headmaster was given responsibility to monitor its usage.

In Dannoor village, Adilabad district, the rice that comes for the midday meal was stored in the cook's house. When the social audit team visited the school, the headmaster reported that there was a shortage of rice and they had to take rice on loan from the ration dealer to feed the children. However, the team found 10 bags of rice which belonged to the midday meal in the cook's house. This issue was discussed in the gram sabha and it was decided that the 10 bags of rice (500 kg) should be shifted to the school immediately.

After the social audit, in many schools, the storage of rice was shifted to the school and the headmaster began monitoring utilisation on a day-to-day basis.

Cooks

In most of the schools the implementing agency (cooks) was a women's self-help group (SHG). Usually one or two women took the responsibility of cooking and the

bank account was opened in their name. Although these women were normally also members of a SHG there was no formal relation between the SHG and the cooking agency as such. In some places it was also seen that while the formal records were in one person's name, they had employed another person to do the cooking and were paying him/her a daily or monthly wage.

In Narnoor mandal (Adilabad district), although the agency was in the name of local women in all the schools, it was actually under the control of the headmaster, who used to pay the women a wage of Rs 500 a month. In many schools in Kurnool, the agency was given to persons who were close to those in power, the factional leaders or sarpanches, making it difficult for the community to monitor them.

The state government states, "SHGs, like the (DWCRA) Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, (DWCUA) Development of Women and Children in the Urban Areas, Mahila Mandal Samakhya and charitable trusts are participating in the implementation, voluntarily. Only conversion costs are allocated to them" [GOAP 2007]. During the social audit it was seen that most of the cooking agencies were given to poor illiterate women for whom this was the main source of livelihood. There was no system of account maintenance by these women although the guidelines state that a cashbook and a stock register should be maintained. They spent some amount on cooking costs such as pulses, vegetables, oil, etc, and saved some for themselves. Many felt that the present allocations were not enough to provide a good quality meal, including eggs twice a week, while also making a decent living for themselves. Little did they know that they were expected to be cooking in the school on a "voluntary" basis.

Another problem was the delay of about four months in the payment of bills. Because of this the cooking agency had to take a cash loan or buy the ingredients on credit, sometimes at high interest rates. These efforts of the cooking agency in not interrupting the meal in spite of long delays in payment are worth highlighting. Many were taking loans, investing from their own pockets just to ensure that children

do not go hungry even on a single day. While the agencies made arrangements to ensure that there was no disruption in the meal, the delay in payment affected the quality of the meal.

An important aspect linked to this is the lack of training and guidance to the cooking agency. Neither the cook nor the headmaster was aware of what the guidelines for the menu were, how the cooking costs were to be allocated among different ingredients and so on.

Infrastructure

A kitchen shed was available in only about 40 per cent of the schools (45 out of 111) visited and only in 19 per cent of the schools was the cooking done in the kitchen shed. Even in schools where kitchens were available, they were of bad quality with poor ventilation. In other schools, the cooking was done either out in the open or in the cook's house. Fifty-two per cent of the schools (58 of 111) had drinking water available in the school premises. In none of the schools were utensils provided by the government. In fact, the government policy is that the cooking agency must buy the cooking utensils by investing themselves or taking a loan from the bank [GOAP 2007]. In some schools the community had donated cooking utensils. In most schools children were not even provided with plates for the meal. Children had to go home during lunch time to bring their plates and this wasted a lot of time. In many villages when this was reported in the gram sabha, members of the community came forward to donate plates for the children.

In Sarvayapalli village, Kurnool district, the midday meal was being implemented quite well. The food was very tasty, the children were given vegetables every other day and also bananas and eggs once a week. The only problem was that there were no plates in the school for children. When this came up in the gram sabha the vice-sarpanch immediately donated Rs 1,000 for plates for the children. Members of a women's SHG came forward and said they would buy glasses. In some schools such as Thadihatnoor in Adilabad and J'hosalli in Kurnool the community made arrangements in the form of drums or tanks to make drinking water available for children in the school itself.

Quality and Hygiene

Investigations were made into whether the food being given was adequate in quantity, quality (including pulses, oils, vegetables and weekly eggs/fruits) and variety. The opinion of children on the taste of the meal was taken. In most of the schools, children were only being served rice and dal/sambar without many vegetables. Provision of eggs once or twice a week was seen in less than 5 per cent of the schools. In schools that provided eggs to children, it was done once in two weeks or once a month. There was no weekly menu followed. In some schools the quality of the meal was so poor that many children preferred to eat at home. This was discussed thoroughly in the gram sabhas. Menus were drawn up with the cooks, taking into account local availability. These menus were then displayed on the walls in all the schools. Alongside the menu for the day, the name of the social audit member who took on the responsibility to monitor this was also displayed.

Further, in most schools there was no organised way of serving the midday meal. Usually the cook sat in one place and served the meal while the children stood in a line with their plates taking turns. Once their plates were filled, the children sat in small groups in the open ground and came back individually if they wanted a second helping. This system resulted in a lot of food being dropped while the children walked up and down, dirtying the place, and even mud getting into the food because of all the movement. In some schools (about 15 per cent), especially in those where the teachers took an active interest in the meal, it was more organised with all the children sitting in a line in the veranda, and cooks serving the meal and cleaning up after the meal.

In schools with poor water facility cleanliness suffered because of the difficulty in washing plates (children took back dirty plates to wash in their homes or in one case washed in a dirty stream nearby). Issues related to hygiene were also reported in the gram sabha, but no solution emerged.

Social Discrimination

The MDMS also aims at generating livelihood opportunities for poor women in rural areas, and at breaking caste prejudices by giving preference to women from

disadvantaged communities as cooks. The Supreme Court order dated April 20, 2004, states that preference should be given to dalits, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the appointment of cooks. While in Adilabad 29 (54 per cent) of the cooks belonged to the ST community, 13 (24 per cent) were backward castes (BCs), 8 (15 per cent) SCs and 4 (7 per cent) from other caste categories (OCs). On the other hand, in Kurnool 39 (68 per cent) of the cooks were BCs, 4 (7 per cent) SCs, 12 (21 per cent) OCs and 2 (4 per cent) Ocs. Clearly, there is a violation of the norm of selecting cooks from SC/ST groups.

When the issue of selection of cooks came up in the gram sabha, women from the SC communities in many villages reported that they were also willing to cook only if the payments came on time and were sufficient. In the present system, where the amounts are not enough to provide a quality meal and cooks have to advance money for ingredients, many SC women felt that they would rather not take up this work. Therefore, while there was resistance to appoint SC cooks initially,

the implementation related issues that continue to exist also discourage SC women from taking on the task.

Although in most schools there was no evidence of caste-based discrimination during the serving of the meal, this was seen in a few schools in each district. For instance, in Viripapuram village, Kurnool district, it was seen that children of the Reddy caste were not eating the MDM in school because the cook belonged to a backward caste. In Halur village, Kurnool district, about 24 children belonging to the forward caste did not eat the MDM because the cook was from the SC community. Where caste discrimination was found (this happened in about 10 per cent of the schools), it generally took the form of upper caste children not eating food cooked by lower caste cooks rather than of lower caste children being made to sit separately or treated badly during the serving of the meal.

The impression of the social audit teams based on discussions with parents and children was that, while initially there were issues related to all children sitting together and eating, over time these had

been resolved. In fact, many reported that even those children who did not eat would begin eating if the quality of the meal improved, irrespective of who the cooks were. In schools where it was noticed that some children were not eating the MDM because of reasons related to caste, it was not as if all children of that particular caste kept away, rather it was only some who did. Therefore, while caste continues to be an issue in different forms, the MDMS seems to have overcome many of the initial differences and is probably moving towards serving one of its important objectives, i.e., instilling values of social equality among children.

Conclusions

One of the most positive findings of the social audit was that a cooked midday meal was served regularly in all the schools. The only exception was Thadihatnour Upper Primary School, Adilabad district, where even though there was no MDM served for four months the headmaster continued to send bills to the MEO. In this school too, the MDM resumed after the social audit. It was seen that the MDMS

was one of the few programmes of the government which seemed to be reaching even the remotest of villages.

The social audit process also showed that the community can be mobilised on the issue of children's rights, more specifically around the MDM. In each village around seven people participated by voluntarily giving a few days of their time, the gram sabhas were well attended by all sections of the village and immediate decisions such as contributing towards plates, utensils, repairing of taps, fixing of responsibility were taken.

Further, although there were instances of corruption related to the utilisation of rice in some places, and also with regard to the amount actually spent on conversion costs the "scale of corruption" in the MDMS is relatively low, at least compared to other rural development schemes. This could be because of many reasons. One is that although there is no regular, formal monitoring of the scheme by the community there is a general awareness that a cooked meal must be served in school everyday and this is a popular programme. The dilution in the quality of the meal is not only due to individual corruption but also in large part due to poor management, low allocations, no payment for cooks and so on.

Secondly, since the scheme is decentralised to the lowest level possible the amount involved is small and also the cooks are accountable to the community. The social audit itself was possible because the delivery of MDM is decentralised. The community was able to participate in reviewing the quality of the programme and contribute to improving it precisely because this could be done at the village level. Shifting to centralised systems of providing MDM (through large centralised kitchens run by NGOs or private contractors) would make it almost impossible for the community to monitor and control the programme.

Although the aim of the social audit was not to evaluate the MDMS in terms of its impact on either enrolment and attendance of children in school or its nutritional benefits, the overwhelming response from the community, the parents and the children was that the midday meal was greatly sought after, it has definitely contributed to keeping children from being hungry while in school and made school

more attractive. There are however serious concerns related to quality and quantity of the meal in almost all the schools, with a lot of scope for improvement.

As seen above, some of the issues were exaggeration of attendance rates, improper maintenance of accounts related to rice and other cooking costs, poor infrastructure facilities, lack of a varied menu, poor quality of food, etc. There were also problems related to the selection of the cooking agency, delay in payment and so on. However, many of these were rectified once the community became involved in monitoring the MDMS. Once the community was made aware of the provisions of the scheme and was mobilised to monitor it, the cooking agency and the headmaster also became more accountable.

While many of the problems related to the midday meal that came to light during the social audit were resolved at the village level, there were others that require a policy response. The following are some recommendations:

(i) The rice for the midday meal should be directly supplied to the school with no role for the ration dealer. (ii) A system must be put in place to ensure that cooking agencies are paid in advance. (iii) There should be a separate provision for the wage cost of the cooks. Systems such as paying the cooks a fixed monthly wage, seen in many states, may be considered. The cooks should be paid the minimum wage applicable in the state. (iv) Proper guidelines with regard to a weekly menu, cost norms, etc, must be made available and displayed in all the schools. (v) The headmasters and the cooks must be given training on aspects related to organising and managing the MDM. (vi) A proper supportive supervision system at the mandal level should be established. For this, systems in other states such as the existence of noon meal organisers and supervisors in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat may be studied. Having a separate line of staff for the MDM would also ease the pressure on the teachers' time. (vii) The allocation for cooking cost should be enhanced making it possible for a better quality meal including vegetables, eggs, etc. (viii) The MDM should be linked with the school health programme. It can be a useful opportunity for teaching children hygiene, nutrition and health

education, etc. (ix) The required infrastructure such as kitchen sheds, utensils, water facilities should be provided. Funds for these can possibly be mobilised from other rural development programmes such as under the NREGA. (x) Finally, an institutional mechanism must be put in place for the community to monitor the midday meal.

In Amruthapuram village, Kurnool district, eggs were given for the first time in the local school after the social audit. A fifth class sc girl dropped a letter in the school's "complaints and suggestions box" saying that she was very happy that day because she got a boiled egg at lunch!

Many such letters are being written by children on the MDMS since the process of social audit. It is hoped that the required reforms in the midday meal scheme are carried out immediately so that all the children of the state are as excited about the food they get in school.

NOTES

- 1 The Supreme Court (dated November 28, 2001) states: "We direct the state governments/union territories to implement the Midday Meal Scheme by providing every child in every government and government-assisted primary schools with a prepared midday meal with a minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school for a minimum of 200 days. Those governments providing dry rations instead of cooked meals must within three months..." (in the case PUCI vs UOI & Ors (CWP 196/2001)). For further details see www.righttofoodindia.org
- 2 See Khera (2006) for a comprehensive review of the MDMS and of field studies on the MDMS.
- 3 Letter numbers D O NO F 13-10/2005-EE-5 (MDM) (Pt) dated December 29, 2005 from the minister Arjun Singh to all chief secretaries and D O NO F 13-10,2005-EE-5 (MDM) (Pt) dated December 27, 2005 from secretary to the ministry Sudeep Banerjee to all district collectors urge the state government officials to think of ways of mobilising community to add value to the midday meal programme [GoI 2006].
- 4 The M V Foundation is a voluntary organisation working on child rights.
- 5 A mandal in Andhra Pradesh is an administrative unit consisting of about 30-40 villages and an average population of around 50,000.

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