STRENGTHENING AND RESTRUCTURING OF ICDS SCHEME

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), scheme run by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, is all set for a major strengthening and restructuring with an accent on convergence of the scheme with nodal ministries and Panchayat raj Institutions. There were various reasons why the need for strengthening and restructuring was felt. The rapid universalisation did not match the human and financial resource. There were also several programmatic gaps: absence of building and facilities at the Aanganwadi level, shortage of quality human resource. There was also an inadequate focus on children under the age of three and early childhood education. The AWCs were perceived as merely feeding centres. There was inadequate convergence and low involvement of states in programme planning.

There were also several operational gaps like insufficient accountability, irregularity in the functioning of AWCs and fund transfer mechanism marked with delays, weak concurrent monitoring and a single Aanganwadi worker at AWC burdened with non-ICDS functions.

The ICDS is going to be set in a mission mode with institutional mechanisms at the central, state, district and block level as well as adequate human and financial resources being linked to accountability and outcomes. It will be in mission mode as is the case with other flagship programmes like National rural Health Mission (NHRM) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

A senior official in the ministry said that they were putting up the entire thing in the public domain. There would be programmatic change, managerial intervention and institutional changes. The reforms have been planned on these lines and they would give certain flexibility to the state so that they submit their annual plan based on their local needs. The state could suggest any innovation or funding or any pilot to be done.

One of the major weaknesses of ICDS was that there wasn’t any support for the functioning of Aanganwadi Centres (AWCs). This is going to be addressed
through the restructuring. A strong convergence with other programmes like NREGA and NHRM and is being envisaged. For instance water and sanitation problems will be solved by convergence with the water and sanitation department.

The official added that over the next five years, they had a target to fill up the maximum gaps. They were experimenting for setting up AWC cum day-care centres. About 70,000 AWCs are going to be converted into crèche day care centres. The focus is hence going to be redefined, the official added. Additional workers will be sent into nearly 200 districts, which would be high-burden districts. For instance, if a district had burdened with under nutrition, it would get more workers. On a cluster of three to four AWCs would be a link worker. There would be a decentralized approach; states would be left free to devise their own strategies.

The focus will be on making ICDS a vibrant institution. The accent would be on pre-school non formal education, the age group of 3-6 years. The ministry is taking steps for policy finalization quality and standards. This, coupled with training and capacity building of workers, would improve the situation. There would be an interface with parents and elders for focus on early childhood education.

The ICDS has come under fire for siphoning off of funds and not letting them reach the concerned beneficiaries. The official asserted that they had a social audit in place to check this. The effort was being made to take measures to stop this corrupt practice.

There would be vigorous monitoring and more community mobilization.

The infrastructure would be developed to make the services more child-friendly. More space would be provided and play facilities would be enhanced for the children. Even the curriculum would be revised to make it more child friendly.

There is a plan to roll out Strengthened, and Restructured ICDS in three years beginning with 200 High Burden districts in the first year 2012-13; additional 200 districts in second year (2013-14) including districts from special category States namely Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand
and North East Region and remaining 243 districts in the third year (2014-15) of the 12th Five Year Plan.

The financial implications during 12th Five Year Plan is estimated at Rs. 1, 23, 580 crore.

Programmatic, management and institutional reforms will be initiated with widened and revised package of services to focus on under-3 children, maternal care, and Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) as per the broad framework for implementation with necessary changes in financial norms/allocations and outcomes along with flexibility to the States with scope for innovations.

There will be continued implementation of ICDS Scheme in 12th Five Year Plan and ICDS in Mission mode.

For greater focus and reaching children under three and pregnant and lactating mothers, a package six services has been redesigned new components.

There will be new childcare and nutrition counselling services. There will be increased investment in infrastructure and childcare facilities. To enhance nutritional impact additional nutrition counselor will be added to the AWCs. States will be given flexibility to provide community based care to moderately and severely undernourished children. The mission mode will allow improved growth monitoring and community participation through use of joint Mother and Child Protection Cards. It ensures a better health care by ensuring a continuum of care from family to AWC to community to health sub-centres and so on. It will strive to improve the quality of early leaning through a comprehensive training and curriculum framework.

The objectives of the ICDS mission would be to institutionalise essential services and strengthen structures at all levels. It will also enhance capacities at all levels. Other objective include ensuring proper inter-sectoral response, raising public awareness and participation, and creating a data base and knowledge base of child development services.

The strengthening and restructuring of ICDS Scheme will prevent and reduce young child under-nutrition by 10 percentage points in 0-3 years. Enhance early development and learning outcomes in all children below six years of age.
improve care and nutrition of girls and women and reduce anaemia prevalence in young children, girls and women by one-fifth.

ICDS is a universal programme for children under 6 years and pregnant and lactating mothers. Currently it is benefitting 9.65 crore beneficiaries of which 7.82 crore are children under -6 and 1.83 crore are pregnant and lactating mothers. With improved services, the number of beneficiaries is likely to increase.

ICDS introduced in 1975, has been universalized mainly after 2005-06 and finally in 2008-09 through 7076 approved Projects and 14 lakh AWCs across the country. The universalisation, however, did not match with the concomitant human and financial resources as a result of which programmatic, management and institutional gaps have crept in. this necessitated the strengthening and restructuring of ICDS.