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## Govt crosses sword with Unicef over serving packaged food

Rema Nagarajan , TNN 3 August 2009, 10:13am IST

The debate over hot-cooked meals versus nutrient enriched supplements has reached a new level with the ministry for woman and child development (WCD) saying that the government may need to re-examine whether international bodies like the Unicef should be allowed to operate in India if they do not abide by its guidelines.

The escalation comes as a result of Unicef going ahead distributing packaged imported food last year for severely malnourished children in several states. This despite the fact that the Prime Minister's Office, the National Advisory Council, the Planning Commission, SC, nutrition experts and even the President in her recent speech have all strongly advocated locally prepared hot cooked meals through anganwadis to fight malnutrition.

The government's charge is that disregarding this policy, Unicef imported and distributed packaged food in an unauthorized manner without the knowledge of the government. Hence, the government has now asked Unicef to ship the imported commercially produced packaged food out of the country and to restore to the country programme, the \$2.4 million spent on the supply.

According to the WCD ministry, Unicef has apologized for its unilateral decision and has offered to ship the emergency stock of imported nutrients to other countries. However, when contacted, Unicef justified its intervention with ready-to-use therapeutic food in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh saying it was a proven, life-saving intervention according to WHO's globally recommended protocols and products.

Joint secretary of WCD ministry, Shreerajan, insisted that the ministry's displeasure has been communicated firmly. "We are examining whether there is a need to re-examine the agreement which exists between us and agencies such as Unicef, making it conditional to their following our guidelines. We have already informed the relevant section of the ministry of external affairs that looks after international agencies such as Unicef," explained Shreerajan.

The debate over locally available and locally produced products versus imported products is not new internationally, but it has acquired steam in India with Unicef introducing Plumpy Nut, a product of Nutriset, a company in France.

Is this just an ego clash between the government and Unicef? Not really. The decision to not depend on imported nutritional supplements has solid academic backing. A paper by nutrition and public health experts Dr Vandana Prasad, Radha Holla and Dr Arun Gupta, for instance, advocated developing community-based treatment rooted in locally available foods for addressing severe malnutrition. Such an approach would promote local agricultural practices, as it would use locally available foods and promote local livelihood, thus conferring more than food supplementation: an opportunity to raise economic status, argued the paper.

The paper gives examples of various mixes used to treat acute malnutrition in different states for many decades by institutions such as the Jodhpur Medical College, Medical College Davangere in Karnataka and the Direct Nutrition Programme of Tamil Nadu. It is hard to explain why it has been permitted for a somewhat alien product (Plumpy Nut) to be introduced at such large scale without investigating the relative merits and demerits of the ready to use foods that we have been using, says the paper.

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