

"Put Children First" in the National Budget and Planning

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On the eve of Budget session 2002-03 and the Xth Five Year Plan, Prayas organized a Consultation with the political leaders and policy makers, Members of Parliament and MLAs, NGOs and experts, to find out where the children figure in the national planning and programmes, particularly in the sectors of education, health and child protection. Somehow, in the intense pre-budget discussions and in the wish list for priorities, the social sector in general and the children in particular, don't seem to figure at all. Such indifference in a country inhabited by 375 million children (below 18 years), half of them severely under-nourished with majority being girls, IMR stagnating at 72 per one thousand, literacy being at best 60% among the 200 children in the age group of 6 to 14 years, 12 million disabled, 35 million children in the need of care and protection and 11 million being on the streets, is nothing less than pathetic.

Children in India do not create a constituency and the voluntary organizations have failed to lobby for their cause. Our national and international commitments which, appropriately, consider them as 'supreme assets' of the country, have remained wishful thinking and the efforts made have dispersed into multiple sectors, departments and ministries with no focus on the children who need it most, i.e., over 100 million of them who are out -of -school and hence deemed to be neglected and are in the need of care and protection. Despite India being one of the vocal signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of Child and, at least 10 legislations, 5 national policy papers and 5 national Plans of Action touching upon children, it is almost impossible to locate their share in the national resources.

An analysis of allocations in the Union Budget between 1990 to 1999 indicates 6.5% of GDP for the social sector and the exclusive budget for children ranging from 0.6% to 2.06% of the GDP. There has been significant increase in the budget for education, i.e., upto 3.6% of GDP, 50% being on elementary education and, now, we have major hope from the Ministry of HRD's programme of 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan'. With the 93rd Constitutional Amendment covering children from 6 to 14 years of age, 40% out -of -school, 54% drop-outs from elementary education, 40,000 schools without teachers, 17% schools without proper buildings and 60% rural schools without drinking water, perhaps we face the greatest challenge and we need to make the most emphatic demand in the current national budget. Whereas the increase in resource allocation on education is significant, it is very marginal on health in general, for children's health in particular, and so far, practically no increase in the crucial sector of child protection which would cover Children under Especially Difficult Circumstances (CEDC), street children, child labour, child prostitutes, etc. The reasons for the meager resources not being utilized and the non-participation of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and local self-governance in the process also needs to be highlighted. It is also known that most of the child -related programmes are centrally sponsored schemes with heavy dependence on external aid and, indeed, the share of children in the resources is depleting further. In a study conducted by a voluntary group, it was found that only 0.2% of Union Budget,

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i.e., 20 paise in every hundred rupee is allocated for children's health. Needless to mention here that the children's education, health and protection which may be the subject matter of the Department of Women & Child Development (MHRD), Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment or Ministry of Labour must be considered to be topmost national priority and given due recognition and share in the resources. The new Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act, 2000, raising the age limit to 18 years that covers different categories of disadvantaged children in its fold, necessitates a major enhancement of budget to provide them the basic care, protection and opportunities for development and rehabilitation.

A look at the expenditure trends on education shows that the goal of 6% National Income as envisaged in National Policy on Education 1986 is yet to be realized. The share of expenditure from all departments devoted to education declined from around 4.1% in 1990-1991 to 3.8% of GDP in 1998-99, pictures in the states is the same, but there has been an increase in Central Expenditure after 1995 to 1996. The education expenditure of the Centre increased from 0.25% of GDP in 1994-95 to 0.31% in 1995-96 and to 0.36% in 1998-99. The rise is almost completely due to increases in allocation on elementary education to some extent. The intra-sectoral allocations also show that there has been a shift towards elementary education in the 1990s. Despite the Constitutional obligation towards universalization, the share of elementary education has not been upto the required mark, though it has increased from 0.48% to 1.7% of GNP during the last five decades. This 50 years of under investment in education according to Dr. Amartya Sen is at the root of all developmental ills of India today. Educational expense of India has never been more than 3.5% of GDP. Against the world average of expenditure on education at 5.2 % of the GDP, our expenditure on education does not exceed 3.5%.

As far as health is concerned inter-sectoral allocations show that there has been a shift towards public health, maternal and child health. Our country has been still facing serious problem of high infant mortality (63.19% as per 2001 estimates, with inter-sectoral variations and target of below 60) and high morbidity due to avoidable and controllable diseases. Official statistics show that close to 2 million infants die every year, an almost the same number as in 1960. While 53% children under five years remain moderately undernourished. In the second half of the 1990s the average per capita real expenditure on health by States increased but there was no increase as a proportion of GDP

The participation in the said Consultation which included the leaders, NGOs, experts and other stakeholders, including the activists and Govt. officials, strongly advocated about the children to be brought in the centre of the development process. Logically, for over 100 million children, i.e., India's 10% most vulnerable population, the allocation should be 10% of the GDP. In terms of the Govt's own commitment and vision, all children have to be in schools with proper infrastructure by 2003 and have to complete 5 years schooling by 2007. The alternative modes of education, particularly job and entrepreneurship related programmes, have to be expanded. Like education, child health should also be made a fundamental right. The IMR must reduce to 45 per 1000 by 207 and all villages should have access to clean drinking water. For the street children and destitutes and 35 million neglected children, proper shelters and other

infrastructure policies and programmes have to be drawn up. All this would be possible if the children are indeed considered as our supreme assets under a focused vision to `put the children first' in our national priorities.

A decade after India became a signatory to the UN Declaration, on the Survival Protection, Development and Participation of children, the country's track record on child welfare has been a dismal tale of failed opportunities. The wide gap that exists between the noble ideal enshrined in the Constitution and the cruel reality, which envelops the Indian children today, cannot be overlooked. The welfare and development of this vulnerable section of population constituting 40% of the total population is of utmost importance in a developing country where human resources form a major potential for development.

Programmes and policies relating to the children are supposed to be reviewed at the time of formulation of the Tenth Five-Year Plan. While the focus of the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) was on human development through `Advocacy, Mobilization and Community Empowerment', the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) placed the young child at the "top of the country's agenda with the special focus on the girl child". However, despite many positive measures implemented by the Indian government violation of children's rights continue to occur. Children who comprise almost 40% of the total population, 25% of them living in the most neglect, exploited and vulnerable situations, do not figure in the National priority and plans. As a percentage of GDP overall public expenditure has also declined in 1990s. When the Government is in the process of compiling data and budget making for the Tenth Five Year Plan, Prayas visualizes that for prioritizing children's needs or policy making, public allocations and service delivery activities of Government must adopt "Putting Children First Norm". This can be done by making the whole process participatory and democratic, with the better coordination in all aspects of planning, monitoring, reviewing, programme development and implementation. The State intervention must be in terms of funding and the ownership or the management needs to be in the hands of the community.

There is an urgent need to ensure that allocated resources are fully and properly utilized and that services are reached to children in an integrated, holistic manner that is sensitive to the psychological, emotional needs of the children and their social and economic rehabilitation and integration. Atleast from now onwards, our policy makers should bridge the gaps and remove the inadequacy in the national budget planning process.