

Dr. Manmohan Singh
Prime Minister of India

Dear Prime Minister,

Neglect of Children Under Six in the Union Budget 2007-8

We are writing to express our deep concern about the neglect of children under six in the Union Budget 2007-8.

You may remember meeting some of us on 19 December 2006 (just after "Bal Adhikar Samvad"), when we discussed the FOCUS Report, the rights of children under six, and the recent Supreme Court judgement on ICDS. At that time you had assured us that the UPA Government was committed to the universalization of ICDS, as stated in the Common Minimum Programme (CMP), and also to the implementation of the Supreme Court judgement. We are, therefore, startled and dismayed that this commitment is not reflected at all in the Union Budget 2007-8. The allocation for ICDS (Rs 4,761 crores) has barely increased in real terms, and is virtually unchanged as a proportion of GDP.

It is a mystery to us how the CMP commitment and Supreme Court judgement can possibly be implemented within such meagre budget allocations. The Supreme Court judgement requires an increase in the number of Anganwadis from the present 9.4 lakhs to 14 lakhs at the very least by December 2008. Higher allocations are also required to enhance the quality of ICDS services. Based on fairly conservative calculations of the requirements of "universalization with quality", the National Advisory Council had recommended (in November 2004) an allocation of at least Rs 9,600 crores for ICDS in 2007-8. This figure needs upward revision in the light of the Supreme Court judgement, yet the actual provision in the Union Budget 2007-8 is not even half of this conservative estimate.

As per this Budget, the Government of India will be spending less than Rs 5,000 crores this year on children under six, who represent more than 15 per cent of India's population. This compares with Rs 96,000 crores to be spent on "defence". This is a staggering and unacceptable imbalance in Budget priorities. The contrast is all the more shocking at a time of growing evidence (particularly from the National Family Health Survey) that there has been no substantial improvement in infant and young child nutrition, including optimal breastfeeding practices, during the last eight years, in spite of runaway economic growth.

We urge you to intervene and ensure a fairer deal for children in the Union Budget 2007-8 as well as in the 11th Plan. We also take this opportunity to reiterate our appeal for more active political leadership on children's issues, including the universalization of ICDS.

Yours Sincerely,

Jean Dreze
(Allahabad University)

N.C. Saxena
(former Secretary,
Planning Commission)

Shantha Sinha
(M.V.Foundation)

Aruna Roy
(National Campaign for
People's Right to Information)

Kavita Srivastava
(People's Union
for Civil Liberties)

Harsh Mander
(Centre for Equity
Studies)

Vandana Prasad
(Jan Swasthya Abhiyan)

Arun Gupta
(Breastfeeding Promotion
Network of India)

Mridula Bajaj
(Mobile Crches)

Annie Raja
(National Federation
For Indian Women)

Veena Shatrugna
(National Institute
of Nutrition)

Sudha Sundararaman
(All India Democratic
Women's Association)

cc: Mrs. Sonia Gandhi (Chairperson, UPA), Shri P. Chidambaram (Finance Minister),
Dr. Montek S. Ahluwalia (Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission)