Addressing the Nutrition Crisis

What is the issue?

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There is no definite solution yet on what to feed children in anganwadis, to address poor child nutrition in India.

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What is the nutrition scenario?

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- The National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4) shows a drop in underweight and stunted children under five years of age.
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- But the absolute numbers are still high.
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- Around 35% children are underweight and 38% are stunted in that age group.
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- Many children have died of malnutrition in India.
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- The body mass index of around 22% women aged 15-49 indicates chronic energy deficiency.
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- NFHS data show several States performing worse than the national average.
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- 'Nourishing India', NITI Aayog's recent report, refers to acute malnutrition levels of about 25% in some States.
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What is the recent tussle?

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- Minister of Women and Child Development has recently made a proposal in this regard.

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- It suggested replacing ready-to-eat food as take-home dry ration with energy-dense nutrient packets.
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- It suggests offering packaged/processed fortified mixes to children.
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- These can be in powdered form and mixed with food for anganwadi beneficiaries.
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- Instead of take-home ration, 30 such packets could be dispatched to a beneficiary for a month through the postal department.
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- However, hot-cooked meal is put forth by many as unsubstitutable to address poor child nutrition.
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- These include the officials of the Ministry themselves.
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What are the Nutrition Council's decisions?

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- The *National Council on Nutrition* (NCN) has unanimously **rejected the proposal** to replace ready-to-eat food.
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- Existing practice of hot cooked meals for children (3-6 years) age group would be continued.
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- Take-home ration (THR) would be continued for children (6 months-3 years), and pregnant women and lactating mothers.
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- This would be as decided by the State governments in conformity with
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1. the National Foods Security Act, 2013
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2. the Supplementary Nutrition Rules, 2017
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- It was also agreed to involve mothers of anganwadi beneficiaries.

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- They would take part in preparation of meals, to ensure quality and encourage public participation.
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- The council has also directed that pilot projects be conducted in 10 select districts on cash transfers instead of take-home rations.
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- The Minster has however opposed the idea saying that there is no guarantee that beneficiaries would use the money for food.
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What should be done?

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- Tinkering with the existing ICDS scheme (Anganwadi Services Scheme) is seen to be fraught with danger.
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- Attempts to substitute meals or rations with factory-made nutrients will inject commercialisation into a key mission.
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- This could upset the fundamental nutritional basis of the scheme.
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- Instead, anganwadi workers have to be empowered to ensure proper delivery of existing services.
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- Provision of physical infrastructure and funding, besides closer monitoring of anganwadi services, could be ensured.
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- Local self-help groups could be engaged to ensure “region-location based recipe and dietary diversification.”
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- Theoretically, the mission covers every child, but in practice it is not accessible to all, and this needs redressal.
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Source: The Hindu

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Quick Fact

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POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission)

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- POSHAN Abhiyaan envisages undertaking activities to improve
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i. the service delivery system
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ii. capacity building of front line functionaries
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iii. community engagement for better nutritional outcomes
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- An Executive Committee is set up under the Chairpersonship of Secretary, Ministry of Women & Child Development.
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- It provides policy support and guidance to States/ UTs from time to time.
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- A **National Council on India’s Nutrition Challenges** is set up under the Chairpersonship of Vice Chairman, NITI Aayog.
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National Council on India’s Nutrition Challenges

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- The National Council on India’s Nutrition Challenges is headed by Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog.
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- It was constituted to provide policy directions to address nutritional challenges in the country.
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- It ensures effective coordination and convergence between Ministries which have a sectoral responsibility for the nutrition challenge.
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- It is also tasked to review programmes on a quarterly basis.
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