

This post is based on the webinar “Increasing financial efficiency of Anemia Mukht Bharat: Lessons and Opportunities” which was fifth in the AMB webinar series organized by Institute of Economic Growth (IEG) and Centre for Policy Research (CPR) on 27th November, 2020. The webinar focused on importance of having a framework to assess financial efficiency of nutrition programs, results of application of such framework for AMB strategy and discuss the role of civil society and other partners in improving the same.

Dr William Joe, Assistant Professor and Principle In-charge for AMB technical unit at IEG welcomed the participants on behalf of organizers and appealed that it is imperative to look beyond the quantum of budgets, and focus on ways to efficiently plan, disburse and utilize the available resources. Dr Alok Ranjan, Country Lead Nutrition, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation highlighted the global evidences which recommend countries to integrate nutrition in health and develop costed plans. He acknowledged that AMB has followed systemic approach so far in both planning and implementation and having efficient financing as one of the major block is valuable.

Role of civil societies and development partners in supporting governments to plan, disburse and utilize funds was explored through discussion with an esteemed panel. Ms Uma Mahadevan, IAS, Principal Secretary, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Karnataka spoke about the importance of convergence across sectors at the primary level to influence and utilize nutrition funds efficiently.

Dr Luigi D’Aquino, Chief of Health, UNICEF India Country Officer, showed his concern over extreme pressure which health sector is already working due to pandemic. He acknowledged the financial tracking frameworks and appealed to civil society members to go broader and expand the application of frameworks both horizontally and vertically, showing linkages of improved financing results systematically with nutrition outcomes.

Dr Mita Chaowdhry, Associate Professor, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, emphasized that partners can help state governments in efficiently planning budgets in such a way that they can be utilized optimally, smoothen the procedures of releases of funds in timely manner, reduce implementation bottlenecks and maintain accountability.

A framework which can be used to track budgets and support government for improving financial efficacy (planning, allocation, disbursement and utilization) of program has been designed by Institute of Economic Growth (IEG) with support from UNICEF. Ms Avi Saini, Consultant, IEG on behalf of IEG, UNICEF and Centre for Policy Research (CPR) shared the findings of designing and application of Track-Act-Track-Act –Track (TATA-T) framework for AMB and presented the results of the first two analyzed phases i.e. planning and allocation. She explained that the major gap was found in the planning stage which significantly reduced in next year (FY 2020-21) after actions were taken in terms of tools, training and advocacy. She concluded that availability of disaggregated financial data, simple tools and working constructively with government proved critical in improving results for financial efficiency.

Further, state level experiences for improving disbursement and expenditures were discussed. Dr Rajeev Srivastava, Deputy Director, Child Health, National Health Mission, Madhya Pradesh, presented how state is ensuring timeliness and equity in disbursement of funds through an online portal e-vittprabha. Dr Srivastava concluded that while there were developmental, roll out and implementation challenges for e-vittprabha but much of them were addressed and is both sustainable and scalable.

Dr B K Misra, State Programme Officer, AMB, National Health Mission, Bihar explained that for a new program such as AMB, optimal utilization of funds takes time as the system builds up to new protocols and gradually start implementation. He mentioned the procedural delays such as finalization of rate contracts, network issues in online payments, incorrect entries, and delayed indenting from district level further shrinks the implementation time window.

Dr Sandeep Sharma, Senior Consultant, NHRSC, MoHFW, discussed on the scope and challenges in defining nutrition specific expenditures within health. He suggested that getting right estimates for nutrition while budgeting and integrating those interventions at primary health care level can be catalyst in transforming idea of leveraging health funds for nutrition in reality.

Dr Sila Deb, Additional Commissioner, I/C Nutrition, MoHFW concluded the webinar by acknowledging that defining nutrition in health plans is challenging, yet important. She informed that the allocations have improved for AMB in FY 2020-21, though interventions are required to enable states in improving uptake, systematically. She suggested to study the financial contribution and the impact of non-nutritional causes of anemia as well.