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Free Lunches Come at an Environmental Cost

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By Keya Acharya

Cooking for a midday meal in Bangalore. Credit: Keya Acharya/IPS

BANGALORE, India, Sep 18 (IPS) - In spite of India's much-publicised national renewable energy policy as part of its international commitments to reduce carbon emissions, its Mid Day Meal (MDM) Scheme, the world's largest school lunch programme, has no energy conservation or even a fuel policy in its workings.

Approximately 120 million children in 12.65 million schools around the country get a hot, cooked meal at lunch time every day.

The ruling Congress coalition government's flagship MDM Scheme, and one that it counts as a voter's favourite in the upcoming national elections in May 2014, has a central government budget of more than two billion dollars, with each state adding its own finances to its allotted amount.³

The central government in New Delhi also gives foodgrains to each state, mandating 100 grams of uncooked rice per primary school child and 150 grams for higher classes.

Accompaniments of "dal" or lentils, vegetables and yoghurt are standard menu in southern states, whilst northern schools have "chapatis", the Indian wheat flatbread.

The food, over 24 million killogrammes of it, is currently being cooked mainly through fuel wood cookstoves and some amount of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG).

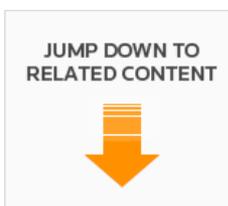
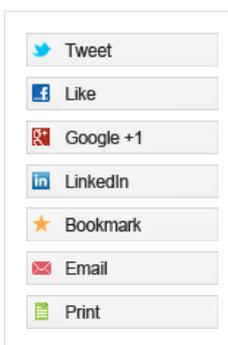
Along with the firewood, LPG is used as a supplementing energy source, subsidies on which were removed in 2012, costing the government, and the exchequer, a further 117 million dollars.

There are 577,000 kitchens employing 2.4 million cooks, mostly women and in rural areas, cooking in "smoke filled rooms", by the government's own admission.

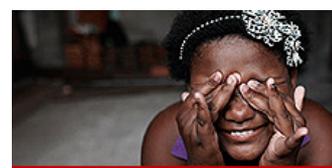
And yet, in spite of the magnitude and scale of operations, there is almost zero research on the amount of firewood being used daily to fuel the midday meals, and no attention as yet on the impact this is having on deforestation, soil conservation, women and children's health and a host of related factors, including climate change.

While the Ministry of Human Resource Development in charge of the MDM Scheme has made no public mention of the matter, India's Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) says it is taking steps to spread the use of biomass-based, smokeless cookstoves in the midday meal scheme.

In 2009, a government initiative to create better technology for cookstoves produced a few improved versions, but the stoves did not end up in the MDM Scheme.



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"They're not used," says Professor Rajendra Prasad of the Centre for Rural Development Technology at the premier Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, which collaborated with the government on improved technology for cookstoves.

"Unless someone tells the schools to use biomass cookstoves, there's no awareness," Prasad tells IPS.

"Unlike the fuel energy sector, there is no lobby to push this; all the attention is given to subsidising conventional fuels," says Tejaswini Ananthkumar of the Adama Chethana Trust Bangalore.

Adama Chethana cooks 200,000 government-aided midday meals for 300 schools in Karnataka state, over 75,000 of them catering to children in Bangalore city alone.

In 2012, the trust converted from diesel generator power to biomass briquettes for gasifier energy used for steam generation for its giant cooking vats. Energy costs have since then come crashing down from 60 paise (approximately one cent) per meal to eight to nine paise per meal in 2013.

Another well-known organisation, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness's Akshaya Patra scheme cooks using biomass gasification in 12 of the 19 midday meal kitchens it has set up in nine Indian states.

Both Adama Chethana and Akshaya Patra are now working on methods to reuse, reduce and recycle water, effluents, kitchen waste and energy in its midday meal kitchens, but these two organisations remain a rare species inside the MDM Scheme.

Though midday meal cooking in cities constitutes less than a quarter of all midday meals in India, turning to low-consumption methods in urban kitchens too works out to significant savings in India's huge petroleum imports (diesel and gas), which leapt to a record 140 billion dollars in 2011 to 2012 due to globally high petroleum prices.

Dr. B. S. Negi, in charge of the government's cookstove programme in the MNRE in Delhi, thinks everybody needs a little patience.

"We can't go ahead for the sake of the public without competent approval first," says Negi, speaking of measures the government is currently taking to standardise and push gasifier cookstoves in the market.

But the dissatisfaction amongst those involved in the midday meal scheme continues.

"Ask the government what is being done about fuels for these stoves," says Dr. H.S. Mukunda from another premier institute working with the government on gasification, the Bangalore-based Indian Institute of Science's Gasification and Propulsion Laboratory.

Mukunda, who is in charge of working with the MNRE for gasifier technologies, says the technology has been available for over a decade now, but lacks political and administrative push. "This field is so disorganised," he says.

Biofuel, mostly from agri-residues in compressed briquette and pellet form for large-scale applications in India, is currently hampered by irregular supply, with manufacturers complaining that lack of government help for collection, storage, transportation and marketing has resulted in exploitative middlemen taking advantage of the situation.

Manjunath Oli of Bangalore-based Alternative Fuels says the lack of government controls on pricing has led to de-husking mills (for biomass from agricultural produce) stamping "any old price they want".

Ritesh Mehta of Sri Biofuels based in interior Karnataka state says most biofuel manufacturers now try to stock their agricultural resource when in season, but Oli says the field is so neglected that the technology in the market too is inadequate.

"We are now making our own briquette-making machines," says Oli.

Negi seems unhurried. "We will now hold consultations with industry to bring down fuel costs, and we are now trying to decentralise pellet-production to make them locally available," he says.

"Talk to me in 2014, lots will have taken off by then," Negi tells IPS.

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