

Is India too wealthy for British aid?



Britain's decision to give £280m (\$457m) in annual aid to India for the next four years has prompted questions in the UK about whether India needs the aid these days. The BBC's Geeta Pandey travels to the northern state of Bihar to see where a sizeable chunk of the British money will be spent.

About two dozen children squat in a narrow lane separating mud and brick homes in Madhaopur village. It's a hot sunny afternoon and the children sit facing each other, hugging the wall where a thin sliver of shade keeps them out of direct sunshine. A woman puts steel plates in front of each child, another ladles out khichdi - a rice and lentil dish - onto each plate. Within minutes, the chattering ceases and the children begin to eat hungrily, scooping out khichdi with their hands and putting it in their mouths.

Ideally, the children should be served inside the Anganwadi (government sponsored child development) centre, but the pokey, window-less room that passes for the centre is too small to accommodate them all.

'Malnourished'

The building provides pre-school education to children between three and six years and gives them one cooked meal a day to supplement their nutritional needs. "Nearly 50% children here are malnourished," says Geeta Verma, who is part of the technical assistance team of DfiD (Department for International Development).



"They are given a daily meal by the Anganwadi workers. It's a naturally fortified meal - for proteins we use lentils, for micronutrients, we use leafy vegetables," she explains. Research has shown that the diet in Bihar leaves children with a 300-

calorie deficit and this meal aims to bridge that gap. "This meal provides each child with 300 calories and 10 grams of protein," Ms Verma says.

The team has helped prepare the menu and has been coaching the women in the important role nutrition plays in the physical and mental growth of their children.

In Madhaopur, DfiD is also supervising and assisting with immunisation of babies and has helped with a project to teach illiterate women.

'Too wealthy?'

Since being opened up in 1991, the Indian economy has grown rapidly. And at a time when most economies around the world are in recession, India's continues to grow at an enviable 9%. This has helped lift millions out of poverty.

This has led to some in the UK wondering if India is too wealthy to qualify for receiving aid. They say the £280m could be put to better use in Britain where the economy is ailing and many services are being cut back.

Critics also point out that India has 69 dollar billionaires; it has its own space programme; plans to send a man to the Moon; spends billions of dollars annually on defence; and even has its own overseas aid programme.

But India has its areas of darkness too - according to World Bank estimates, 456 million live on less than \$1.25 a day; tens of millions of children suffer from acute malnutrition; millions of Indians are illiterate; hundreds of thousands continue to die of totally preventable causes; and eight million children remain out of school.

And a visit to Bihar - one of the three states where DfiD will work - brings one face to face with poverty and deprivation.

The state is one of India's poorest and the number of people living in extreme poverty here is twice that of Ethiopia. It also figures low on human development indexes.

According to official statistics, 55% of children in Bihar under three are underweight, more than 85%

are anaemic, over a million children suffer from severe malnutrition, 60 million people have no access to toilets, and two in every three women are illiterate.

These factors weighed in when DfiD took the decision to continue with the aid to India.

In February, UK International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell said he was convinced India needed aid.

"Some people - in both the UK and India - have been asking whether the time has come to end British aid to India. In my view, we are not there yet.

"India's poorest states - each of them larger than most African countries - still face huge development challenges," he said.

'Welcome'



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh welcomed the aid, saying "India is still a poor country". But, he added, that if it was "not forthcoming, we will not collapse".

Many in India agree with that assessment. They say critics in Britain are making an unnecessary fuss about such a small sum of money which is not even 1% of what the Indian government spends on health and welfare schemes.

On the ground, though, those at the receiving end of the aid are more welcoming.

In Madhaopur, several dozen women who have benefited from the DfiD-supported adult literacy programme are happy to talk about how the learning programme has transformed their lives.

The village women do not understand what DfiD stands for, but they are grateful for the support they are getting from the team members. "These sisters have taught us a lot," says Manju Devi. "We've learnt that a baby should be breastfed within two hours of birth, we have learnt about vaccination. Earlier we did not have a vaccination centre in the village. We had to then go to town and sometimes we would miss the date," she says.

Bihar government official Sangeeta Kumari adds: "Bluntly speaking, we are struggling for existence, we are trying to perform our best in the midst of a crisis. We have very poor infrastructure."

DfiD's involvement in the area, she says, has brought new hope. "We welcome them, they have started a new programme here targeting nought to two-year-olds - these are children who are very vulnerable. I think it will be good to have them here."

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