

ARUN KUMAR



INTERVIEW

Dr Arun Gupta, member of the prime minister's national council on nutrition

“Has private sector solved malnutrition problem anywhere in the world?”

Dr Arun Gupta, a member of the prime minister's national council on nutrition, who challenged the market-led solutions provided by the Lancet to tackle the problem of undernutrition, spoke with **Trithesh Nandan** and **Aishwarya S Iyer**. Edited excerpts:

Why are you opposed to this study?

We are actually challenging its market-led solutions. The report recommends investment of public money to the tune of about \$9 billion while at the same time it prefers market-led solutions. Who will benefit out of it?

But why would the Lancet report recommend commercial exploitation by private players?

If we find something wrong, it is our duty to raise the issue because the recommendations are in public space and it is also for the government. When the report was released on June 28, the rural development minister, Jairam Ramesh spoke whether the recommendations on agriculture would lead to introduction of genetically modified (GM) crops. Where does he get that idea from? I think science is getting questioned because of the conflict of

interest, which is not a good idea.

What is the extent of push for private sectors through the Lancet study?

It has been stated by a few authors who are members of the shared value committee. They also sit on the board of the Micronutrient initiative, which is an initiative funded by the Canadian and the US governments. Their one-point agenda is to promote Micronutrients. They argue that tackling the problem of malnutrition can't be done without the private sector. They have resources, human resources and organisational resource too. Why does the government, or a UN agency, or a scientific journal or the scientists themselves need to advocate for private sector? I don't understand how private sector is a solution.

Do you think India will accept Lancet's recommendation?

We hope that the government will take an informed decision on the basis of its own analysis. We are only alerting (and) warning the government that all that has been said needs to be analysed in depth. The Lancet does enjoy global legitimacy in terms of projecting science. We are trying to challenge the

science if it is tainted.

Two reviews by the Cochrane Collaboration have been released after the Lancet, criticising it. It says you don't need pre-packaged or ready-to-use therapeutic foods, or supplementary foods. You use home food and other things, but give them enough, treat the child well, and when the child eats well, the problem should be solved.

Do you think the government is serious in tackling the problem of malnutrition?

I don't think so. There have been some actions that have been taken like the PM council met (once) and they took four actions. The ministry is developing plans and it took the ministry two years to develop a plan. I might be criticised for saying so, but I can take that criticism. I don't think the government is serious about the issue. What they have done best is that they organised a campaign (featuring Aamir Khan), which you might have seen on TV and in newspapers. I don't think anything will change drastically through the campaign. ■

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