

Introducing Mission Vatsalya: Stakeholders' Perspectives- Seminar Report

India Alternative Care Network (IACN)

The seminar “*Introducing Mission Vatsalya: Stakeholders' Perspectives*” was organised on November 15, 2022, by IACN with support from Butterflies and Miracle Foundation India at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, to discuss the key highlights of the scheme and its implications on child protection and family-based care in the country.



The seminar comprised a panel discussion structured into four sessions. The first session focussed on the key highlights of Mission Vatsalya. The second session analysed the implications of the guidelines on Child Protection and Alternative Care issues. This was followed by deliberation on areas in the scheme that need strengthening in context with implementation on the ground. The fourth session brought out a care leaver's perspective in looking at the new scheme. In order of the presentations, the speakers included Geetarani Lourembam- Program Manager, Prerana; Prof. Neelam Sukhramani- Professor and Head, Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia; Richa Tyagi- Director, Strategy & Technical Expertise, Miracle Foundation India; Surja Chauhan- Care Leaver and Fellow, Udayan Care. The discussion was moderated by Vijayalakshmi Arora- Head of Programmes, Catholic Relief Services.

Some of the key highlights of the scheme were brought out in the panel discussion:

- The concept of Vatsalyaa Sadan, an integrated home comprising a Children's Home, Observation Home, Special Home, and Place of Safety, along with Child Welfare Committee and Juvenile Justice Board all in one compound to facilitate the movement of individuals accessing these services so that time and resources are not lost while trying to navigate in these spaces.
- The capacity of children in CCIs has been defined as 50. For North Eastern states, Himalayan States, and hilly areas in other states, CCIs with a capacity of 25 children shall be supported.
- The Swachhta Action Plan for health and hygiene of children in Child Care Institutions (CCIs) has been introduced to promote the personal hygiene and health of children in CCIs.
- National Child Index and Child Survey for conducting a National Child Survey and development of Child Index in convergence with the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), to map the needs of children through a periodic child survey, so as to ensure suitable response in terms of policy, programmes or projects.
- Non-institutional care service has become an area of focus. The monthly grants for sponsorship, foster care, and aftercare have been increased to Rs. 4,000 per child from Rs. 2000 in the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS).
- The scheme recognises two types of sponsorship – Government aided and Private aided, within which it identifies preventive or rehabilitative sponsorship. Under Government aided, preventive and rehabilitative sponsorship finds a mention. Under private aided funding, individual, group, community and sponsorship of CCI have been included.
- While in ICPS, the provision of sponsorship was limited to economic criteria, Mission Vatsalya has listed other criteria. These include families where the mother is a widow or divorced or abandoned by the family, where children are orphans and are living with the extended family. It also covers children in need of care and protection as per the JJ Act, 2015 namely those without a home, victims of any natural calamity, child labour, victims of child marriage, trafficked child, HIV/AIDS affected child, child with disabilities, missing or runaway child, child beggars or living on the street, tortured or abused or exploited children who require support and rehabilitation, and children covered under the PM Cares for children scheme.
- The duration and procedure for sanction and release of funds have been revised in Mission Vatsalya. The duration of both sponsorship and foster care has been increased.
- Regarding the duration of foster care, The ICPS looked at it as a temporary placement of children with an extended or unrelated family member and ensuring that birth parents do not lose any of their parental rights or responsibilities. Mission Vatsalya, however, looks at foster care as short or long term placement, based on the assessment of the compatibility of the child with the foster care parents. It mentions that the period of placement can be periodically extended by the Committee till the child attains 18 years of age.

- With regard to aftercare, in ICPS while this provision was limited to those leaving institutional care, Mission Vatsalya extends this support to young persons who have been cared and protected in any formal or informal form of alternative care as a child.
- The scheme introduces the concept of - Individual Care Plan to streamline aftercare support for youth leaving alternative care.



- Under other initiatives, the scheme includes:
 - **SAMVAD:** to support advocacy and mental health interventions for children in vulnerable circumstances and distress centres under a project in collaboration with NIMHANS. This is to facilitate counselling through engagement with apex medical health institutions in the country for building capacities in psycho-social counselling care which is necessary for both children as well as care givers.
 - **Grading of CCIs:** to be done based on infrastructure, quality of services, wellbeing of children especially in terms of health and education, restoration and rehabilitation of children, inter alia.
 - **National Child Resource Centre at NIPCCD:** to create a knowledge hub to provide technical guidance to various stakeholders under child protection system to strengthen child protection services and child welfare services.

- **Child protection awards:** for duty bearers to recognize the dedication and hard work of staff working across all areas of the child protection programs in States/UTs.
- **Publication of bi-annual newsletters:** highlighting the achievements and best practices of all states and in the field of child welfare and child protection. To emphasize the efforts that any State/UT government may have taken for convergence of the scheme with other stakeholders. The purpose of these newsletters will be to raise public awareness about child rights, welfare, and steps being undertaken by the government to ensure the well-being of the child at every stage by involving the community at all levels. States/ UT Governments should upload the newsletters on the portal. However we need to
 - look at the feasibility of such publications considering the existing workload of the duty bearers.

Some of the points of reflection that emerged from the discussion include:

- Mission Vatsalya promotes family-based non-institutional care. But it is known that families might also be spaces where children face deprivation, violence, and exploitation and may not have the most congenial environment to offer to children. We are aware that there are a challenges in family functioning. It is critical to determine how the scheme can be leveraged to address those challenges, as well as whether measures such as sponsorship or other aspects of family-based care are sufficient to address the factors affecting family functioning.
- As per the national reports, crimes against children like physical abuse and rape have increased over time. It is important to see how this scheme and the non-institutional care mechanisms highlighted in the scheme like sponsorship, foster care, and alternative care can address the issues of crimes against children. Furthermore, the NHFS 5 data brought out that 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence mostly by an intimate partner, the exact figure being 29.3%. The earliest national policy on children well recognised that the care of a child should begin before the child is born. When a woman faces domestic violence, her child also becomes a witness to violence. Hence, it is vital to see how Mission Vatsalya can address these issues, and what are the mechanisms within the scheme to cater to those children and mitigate the effect of violence that the children are witnessing. It was suggested that to address these issues and promote child protection and family-based care, the sub-schemes under Mission Shakti – Sambal and Samarthya for the safety and empowerment of women should be interlinked with Mission Vatsalaya.
- It is necessary to look at how the objectives of Mission Vatsalya related to family strengthening or non-institutional alternatives will be realised. For instance, one of the objectives of the scheme is strengthening child protection at the family and community level, equipping families and communities to identify risks and vulnerabilities affecting children and creating and promoting preventive measures to protect children from situations of vulnerability, risk and abuse. But it is important to ask how it will be achieved especially when the engagement of CSOs is not well recognised. Another objective is developing a robust social safety

net for children by involving the participation of Panchayats and Municipal Local Bodies at the village and ward level and the urban cluster level within the urban municipal ward for sustained assessment of the issues deserving attention, implementation of appropriate interventions, and regular monitoring. It needs to be discussed who is going to be instrumental in creating the safety net and how this is going to translate into practice.

- When talking about family-based care, we also have to think in terms of mechanisms that allow for family strengthening to take place. We need to bring into the scheme the provision of day care centres in order to provide a safety net for children in the community. It is observed that there are increased chances of children becoming victims of abuse within low-income communities because they are left unattended when both parents are out to earn. The provision of day care centres thus should be seen as an effective mechanism to protect children, especially those from low-income group families.
- Youth leaving care do not get the required mental health support to manage the sudden change they experience post-transition. The scheme should thus focus on providing mental health support to youth as a crucial component of the aftercare programme.
- The scheme should also encourage the establishment of Care Leavers Networks. This allows care leavers to receive ongoing support from their peers and counterparts.
- While the scheme puts some of the programmes systematically, the functioning and execution will highly depend on the regularity of fund disbursal, monitoring and auditing. For instance, the officials of DCPUs often report challenges in taking up visits to institutions and communities due to delays in fund disbursals, thereby impacting effective implementation.
- Mission Vatsalya brings out convergence, but a discussion on how to achieve the convergence will be helpful. We need to look at how the structures and ministries talk to each other. The convergence matrix defines the duty bearers responsible for taking up the duties; however, it will be necessary to define the strategies through which convergence can be achieved and look at how different ministries and stakeholders can work together towards common goals.
- The scheme has assigned the responsibility for overseeing institutional and non-institutional care to the District Magistrate. Now it is important to discuss how we are strengthening the hands of District Magistrate for them to focus on the realm of child protection and family-based care amidst their other responsibilities.
- It can be seen that the scheme relies heavily on the district child protection machinery for its execution which makes it essential to streamline and strengthen this crucial structure.
- The scheme elaborates on convergence with corporate organisations, public and private. However, there is minimal mention of convergence with the Civil Society Organisations. While in ICPS the role of CSOs is mentioned about 15 times, it is mentioned only thrice in Mission Vatsalya. It is therefore vital for the CSOs to work collaboratively with the child protection system within the realm of the scheme and enhance the value of its presence in impacting the lives of children.

- The village and block-level child protection committees in the past decade have been instrumental in promoting family-based care. For years, many CSOs have worked towards strengthening these bodies. Lack of a mention of these committees in the new scheme can impact their existence on the ground and the momentum of work picked up on child protection and promotion of family-based care. It needs to be re-looked in the background of developing a robust social safety net for children by involving participation of Panchayats and Municipal Local Bodies at the village level and the ward and the urban cluster level.
- It is noted that while the scheme has introduced some progressive components towards Child Protection, it has withdrawn some important provisions. It was thus suggested that the revision of a scheme should be based on evidence in terms of output. In this case, the studies on the experiences of children in institutional care, adoption, sponsorship, foster care, kinship care, and aftercare should feed into the new scheme and revisions.



The session was closed with the recommendations and way forward emerging from the panel discussion. It was suggested that as key stakeholders- CSO representatives, practitioners, researchers and academicians, we can make concerted efforts to ensure a robust implementation of the scheme. The following suggestions were made:

- CSOs can continue to support the state in creating awareness and working towards execution of the scheme. For instance, CSOs can assist the state to develop SOPs to operationalise and achieve convergence of ministries to realize desired outcomes of child welfare and protection.

- The CSOs, practitioners, researchers and academicians could come together to document position papers, offering critical reflections on the Mission Vatsalya to create a body of knowledge on child protection and alternative care.
- We can also make a commitment to creating evidence on implementation of Mission Vatsalya by commissioning evaluation study to assess on the status on child protection.
- As an alliance, IACN can initiate an interaction with the Government taking up some of the relevant questions and critical reflections that were brought out in the discussion.

It was discussed that the scheme now being recognised as a Mission will deserve a focus and be translated into resources to secure a healthy and happy childhood for each and every child in India.