

## State of the Young Child in India

# Report Highlights

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The lasting foundations for healthy living are laid in the first six years of a child's life. The inaugural State of the Young Child in India Report is conceived to ensure a better future for India's 159 million children who are aged under six, through holistic interventions at this most vulnerable and critical phase of life. **India has the world's highest number of neonatal, infant and under-5 deaths and, therefore, there is an urgent need to address these issues.** Based on the conviction that each child has an inalienable right to opportunities for self-development, the Report analyses key aspects of child wellbeing and development. Its aim is to place the young child at the centre of policy dialogue.

The Report draws on specially commissioned technical background papers by experts on themes of relevance: physical well-being, nutrition, mental development and stimulation, early education, safe environment, timely access to basic services, budget allocations and expenditures, and above all, love, care and dignity. A child rights perspective is applied in the analysis. **The Report introduces two "Young Child Indices" which facilitate inter-state comparisons** - an outcome based "Young Child Outcomes Index" (YCOI) uses indicators of physical well-being and cognitive development and captures trends over the years. The "Young Child Environment Index" (YCEI) uses process and input indicators that are critical to the child's well-being and growth.

The Report was compiled and completed before the COVID-19 pandemic set in. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown have exposed multiple fault lines and vulnerabilities, especially in the informal sector and the rural economy.

The chronic nature of the problems confronting the Indian child enables a reading up of the seven chapters of the State of the Young Child in India in the context of the pandemic.

- **The young child in India** initiates an enquiry into the status of the 159 million young children (aged under 6 years) in India and the major issues that have resulted in the persistent neglect of this age group.
- **Advancing physical well-being** draws upon available data to analyse the situation of the young child in terms of survival and physical development as well as the issues of nutrition, healthcare, safe water, sanitation, hygiene and socio-economic determinants that impact physical well-being.
- **Promoting early learning** lays down the importance of quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services to enhance the young child's early cognitive, physical, social and emotional development.
- **Prioritising the disadvantaged young child** highlights the various categories within this age group that deserve urgent and extra attention for consistently faring poorly in terms of development indicators.

- **Childcare and the childcare worker** acknowledges the family as the best place for a child to grow up and highlights the critical yet unrecognised role played by Anganwadi Workers (AWWs).
- **Fiscal allocations and expenditure for child development** brings out the persistent inadequacy of financial resources and major funding gaps in the per-capita-child-spend in India.

**The way forward contains the following main recommendations:**

- **Early Childhood Development (ECD) as a national priority:** The State must assume greater responsibility to ensure the young child's well-being.
- **Increase allocations for ECD:** Budget outlays for ECD to be quadrupled. The annual child budget to be Rs. 1.25 trillion (20% of social sector outlay).
- **Overhaul of ICDS services:** ICDS needs to be restructured and recalibrated to reach the most marginalised and its spending enhanced to Rs. 800 billion.
- **Crèche services and complementary childcare:** Well-equipped crèches under the ICDS as psychosocial support and care to children under-3 years.
- **Phased conversion of anganwadi into anganwadi-cum-crèches:** A phased process of conversion is recommended to provide holistic care.
- **Universal provision of quality ECCE:** All children in the 3–6 years' age group must have a right to quality and holistic ECCE.
- **Professionalise the ECD workforce:** A full-time, professional AWW cadre is fundamental to the vision of ECD programmes as a national priority.
- **Urgent response to violence against the young child:** A support-group structure led by frontline workers to monitor the child's social environment.
- **Fundamental revamping of child database and monitoring systems:** Creation of credible and freely available multidimensional disaggregated data on children.

As a large and diverse federal country, along with the centre, the states too have complementary responsibilities. The State and other stakeholders are obligated to be cognisant of the fact that the young child is a holder of rights, while undertaking all possible measures to create an ecosystem for early childhood development. In offering a solutions oriented critique of government policies and systems, the primary aim of this Report discussing the situation of the young child in India is to suggest a way forward in terms of approaches, policy parameters, legislation, programmatic interventions and investment of human, technical and financial resources. It is now up to the readers to respond and galvanise action within their spheres of influence to address all the impediments that hamper the well-being and all-round development of the young child.