State of the World's Children (SWOC) 2025 - Indian Perspective

The SWOC 2025 report delivers a stark message - while global extreme child poverty shows a welcome decline, childhood itself is under unprecedented threat from multiple fronts. Globally, four out of five children are now exposed to at least one extreme climate hazard annually, posing a new and complex risk to health, nutrition, and education. Furthermore, conflict has doubled its reach since the mid-1990s, with about 19 per cent of the world's children living in affected areas in 2024. The report also warns that cuts in international development aid could lead to a catastrophic increase of 4.5 million under-five deaths and push six million children out of school by 2030, underscoring the interconnectedness of funding and survival.

India’s Burden of Multidimensional Deprivation

Despite the global decline in extreme poverty, the report highlights that India carries one of the largest burdens of multidimensionally deprived children. Multidimensional deprivation goes beyond simple income poverty; it reflects a lack of essential services and rights.

The statistics are sobering - about 206 million Indian children experience at least one deprivation. More alarmingly, one-third of these (62 million) face two or more deprivations. The nature of this deprivation is systemic, reflecting gaps across critical sectors -

Nutrition and Health - This is a major concern, manifesting as malnutrition (stunting, wasting, anaemia) which permanently compromises a child’s cognitive development and physical health.

Education - Lack of access to quality learning and high dropout rates.

Housing and Sanitation - Unsafe living conditions and lack of basic services like toilets.

Water - Inadequate access to safe drinking water.

Reasons for Persistent Gaps

The persistence of child deprivation in India stems from a mix of systemic, structural, and environmental factors.

Declining Policy Priority (Budgetary Cuts) - A critical factor is the falling political priority given to child welfare. The budget allocated for the Ministry of Women & Child Development (MWCD) for 2025-26, though substantial in absolute terms (₹26,890 crore), shows a significant drop in its share of the total central expenditure, falling from 0.96 per cent in 2015-16 to just 0.5 per cent in 2025-26. This reduction indicates that children’s welfare has not gained greater priority in the overall governmental framework.

Gaps in Implementation - Even with allocations, programme effectiveness is hampered by delays. These include slow progress in upgrading anganwadi infrastructure and persistent shortages of trained staff and frontline workers. Such systemic shortfalls dilute the impact of even higher funding.

Structural Inequities and Digital Exclusion - Digital exclusion leaves millions of children behind, denying them access to online learning, crucial information, and skill-building opportunities—a gap particularly evident post-pandemic.

Vulnerability Hotspots - The most difficult combination of malnutrition, unsafe housing, pollution, and interrupted schooling is often found in urban slums. Furthermore, climate vulnerability disproportionately impacts the poorest families, disrupting essential services and forcing displacement.

Government Measures and the Way Forward

Current Interventions

The Government of India has several flagship programmes to address child welfare. The 2025-26 Union Budget allocates funds for -

1. **Saksham Anganwadi & POSHAN 2.0 -** This scheme focuses on improving nutrition outcomes, health, and early childhood care and development, with a major allocation of ₹21,960 crore.
2. **Mission Vatsalya -** Aimed at ensuring a safe and secure environment for children, with an allocation of ₹1,500 crore.

While these schemes form the backbone of child welfare, the core challenge remains the falling overall budgetary priority and the effectiveness of last-mile delivery.

Blueprint for Action - The Way Forward

To truly align with UNICEF's five-point framework and ensure that India's demographic dividend materialises, child poverty must be treated as a national mission. This requires a concerted, multi-sectoral approach -

Prioritising the Child in Policy - The budget share for children must be substantially increased and protected, reflecting a clear policy commitment.

Decentralisation and Community Ownership - States must play a crucial role in translating central policies into local results. The Kerala model, leveraging Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and strong decentralisation to establish Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) at the anganwadi level, is exemplary. These community-owned and -led committees foster a supportive social environment, strengthen child rights, and enhance welfare outcomes.

Strengthening Service Delivery - This involves immediate steps such as ensuring timely fund disbursement, maintaining fully functional anganwadis, and conducting regular on-the-spot inspections to improve accountability.

Technological Integration - Adopting technology-driven intervention and real-time monitoring systems can drastically improve accountability, track outcomes, and ensure that services reach the most vulnerable.

Addressing Structural Gaps - Universal access to essential services, including digital connectivity and stronger social protection measures, must be ensured to cover the last mile. This also calls for better coordination across ministries and states to avoid fragmented service delivery.

Conclusion

The SWOC 2025 report serves as a demanding call to action. India stands at a critical juncture where the health, education, and safety of its children will determine the nation's future trajectory. Without deeper reforms—from increasing financial allocation and strengthening frontline workers to embracing decentralisation and technology—millions of children will remain outside the arc of opportunity. The national mission must be to ensure that every Indian child is seen, heard, and served, guaranteeing their fundamental rights and enabling them to contribute fully to the country's progress.

Main Practice Question

1. "Despite increased budget allocations for core schemes, why is the declining share of child welfare in central expenditure and systemic implementation gaps hindering India's ability to address multidimensional child deprivation effectively, and what structural reforms are necessary to achieve UNICEF's vision"?

Answer Guidelines

I. Introduction (Approx. 10% - 30 words)

Hook - Briefly introduce the context of the UNICEF SWOC 2025 Report and the finding that India carries a massive burden of multidimensionally deprived children (206 million, with 62 million facing multiple deprivations).

Thesis - State that the problem lies not just in a lack of schemes, but in the falling priority (budget share) and implementation failures that negate the impact of specific program funds.

2. Body

I. The Hindrances - Budgetary and Systemic Gaps (Approx. 40% - 100-120 words)

Analyze the reasons why India's efforts are being diluted, drawing directly from the provided text and core knowledge of governance -

A. Declining Budgetary Priority - Explain the paradox - Allocation for schemes like Saksham Anganwadi & POSHAN 2.0 (₹21,960 crore) is high, but the overall MWCD share in central expenditure has fallen (0.96% to 0.5%).

Analysis - This indicates that child welfare has lost priority in the overall policy framework, making it vulnerable to resource competition and demonstrating a lack of long-term, comprehensive commitment.

B. Systemic Implementation Gaps - Cite issues - Delays in upgrading anganwadi infrastructure, shortages of trained staff, and poor fund disbursement mechanisms.

Analysis - These functional deficiencies create a 'leakage' effect, diluting the impact of funds and preventing benefits from reaching the last mile, especially in urban slums and climate-vulnerable areas.

C. Structural Inequities - Mention digital exclusion and the disproportionate impact of climate vulnerability/pollution on the poorest, which further complicate service delivery.

II. Necessary Structural Reforms (Approx. 40% - 100-120 words)

Detail the structural and governance changes required to align with UNICEF's vision, focusing on the 'National Mission' approach -

A. Governance and Coordination - Need for closer coordination across ministries and states (e.g., Health, Education, WCD) to tackle the *multidimensional* nature of deprivation. **Strengthening Frontline Workers (FLWs) -** Ensure better training, resources, and timely pay for Anganwadi Workers/ASHAs.

B. Decentralisation and Accountability – **Adopt the Kerala Model -** Emphasize the crucial role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) to foster local ownership and better monitoring. Implement Technology-driven interventions and real-time monitoring systems for enhanced accountability and service delivery tracking.

C. Universal Access and Social Protection - Treat child poverty as a National Mission requiring universal services - Universal digital access and robust, last-mile social protection schemes.

3. Conclusion (Approx. 10% - 30 words)

Summarise - Reiterate that addressing child deprivation is key to realising India's demographic dividend.

Final Thought - Conclude that without deep, sustained structural reforms that prioritize children both financially and functionally, millions will remain "unseen, unheard, and unserved."