

UNICEF's Neonatal Mortality Report

Why in news?

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- A recent UNICEF report, titled “Every Child Alive”, gives a country-wise ranking of neonatal mortality rates (NMR).

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- NMR is the probability of dying during the first 28 days of life, expressed per 1,000 live births.

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What are the highlights of the report?

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- **India** - India ranks 12th among 52 low-middle income countries having the highest infant mortality rates.

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- Neonatal mortality rate is recorded at 25.4 deaths per 1,000 live births in India in 2016.

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- A small mortality rate can translate to numerous deaths when the birth-rate is high.

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- It thus translates to death of over six lakh children within the first month of their birth in India in 2016.

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- Worryingly, this is more than any other country.

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- With this, India is ranked below Sri Lanka (127), Bangladesh (54), Nepal (50) and Bhutan (60).

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- **Global** - Globally, 2.6 million children died in the first month of life in 2016.

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- The average newborn mortality in low-income nations is nine times the rate of high-income countries.

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- In low-income countries, the average newborn mortality rate is 27 deaths per 1,000 live births.
- In high-income countries, it is 3 deaths per 1,000 live births.
- Newborns in Pakistan, the Central African Republic and Afghanistan face the worst odds.
- Babies born in Japan, Iceland and Singapore are said to have the best chance of survival.

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What is the concern with India?

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- India has more than halved the number of deaths among children under the age of five in the last quarter century.
- India is nearly meeting its MDG target, with a 66% reduction in under-five deaths during 1990 to 2015.
- However, it has not made similar progress in ending **deaths among children less than one month old**.
- Notably, India is ranked behind poorer countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Rwanda.

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What does it call for?

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- **Political will** - A majority of these deaths are preventable.

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- The report has stressed that financial resources were not the biggest constraint in improving this health indicator.
- It is rather the political will that is essential now to ensure better newborn

survival.

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- Evidently, Rwanda, which falls in the lowest income group, has reduced its mortality rates from 41/1000 in the 1990s to 16.5.

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- This is achieved through programmes targeted at poor and vulnerable mothers.

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- **Health care** - Addressing gaps in quality of health care is the need of the hour in India.

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- Hospitals should ensure that the critical products to save the newborns are available.

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- It ranges from a piece of cloth to keep the baby warm to antibiotics and disinfectants to stave off killers like sepsis and meningitis.

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- **Mother's health** - The biggest cause of death is premature birth.

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- The second is complications like asphyxia during delivery.

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- Preventing these would mean paying attention to the mother's health during pregnancy.

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- It should be ensured that she delivers in a hospital attended by trained doctors or midwives.

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- Programmes such as the Janani Suraksha Yojana should be expanded to reach the poor and vulnerable in remote areas.

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- **Gender gap** - The issue of neglect of the girl child is much broader and needs interventions beyond health.

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- The associated concerns with social norms and cultural practices should also be addressed.

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- Focussing on factors outside the healthcare system, like female literacy rates is also essential.

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- States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have focussed on these factors, bringing down newborn deaths to fewer than 15 per 1000.

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- It is time for the rest of India to take lessons from these successful states.

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Source: The Hindu

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Quick Fact

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UNICEF

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- The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is special program of the United Nations.

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- It is devoted to aiding national efforts to improve the health, nutrition, education, and general welfare of children.

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