



Child Food Poverty

For Prelims: [Child food poverty](#), [Child undernutrition](#), [Child stunting](#), [UNICEF](#), [Mid-day Meal \(MDM\) scheme](#), [POSHAN Abhiyaan](#), [The National Food Security Act \(NFSA\), 2013](#).

For Mains: UNICEF Report on Child Food Poverty, its impact on the development of children, ways towards ending severe child food poverty globally.

Source: [UNICEF](#)

Why in News?

A recent [UNICEF](#) report titled '**Child Food Poverty: Nutrition Deprivation in Early Childhood**' examines the status, trends, inequities and drivers of child food poverty in early childhood.

What are the Key Findings of the Report?

- Approximately **181 million children under the age of 5 years** are living in severe child food poverty globally, which accounts for **one in four children** in this age group.
 - According to UNICEF global databases, **2023, in India, 40% of children are living in severe child food poverty.**
- Progress in **addressing severe [child food poverty](#)** is slow overall, but some regions and countries are demonstrating that progress is possible.
- Severe child food poverty **affects children** from **both poor and non-poor households**, indicating that household income is not the sole factor driving this issue.
- Children living in severe child food poverty **lack access to nutrient-rich foods** and are increasingly consuming unhealthy foods.
- The global food and nutrition crisis, as well as **localised conflicts and [climatic shocks](#)**, are intensifying severe child food poverty, particularly in fragile countries.
 - In vulnerable communities in the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) and **Somalia**, more than 80% of parents reported that their child had been **unable to eat for an entire day** because of a lack of money or other resources.
- Severe child food poverty is a significant driver of [child undernutrition](#).
- The prevalence of severe child food poverty being **three times higher** in countries with a high prevalence of [child stunting](#).

What is Child Food Poverty?

- **Definition:**
- [UNICEF](#) defines child food poverty as **children's inability to access and consume a nutritious and diverse diet in early childhood (under 5 years old).**
- The term **Child Food poverty** or Child malnutrition covers two broad groups of conditions:
 - One is '**Child Undernutrition**'—which includes
 - [Child Stunting](#) (low height for age),
 - [Child Wasting](#) (low weight for height),

- **Underweight (low weight for age)** and
- **Micronutrient deficiencies** or insufficiencies (a lack of important vitamins and minerals).
- The other is **Child Overweight**, obesity and diet-related eating habits.
 - **Childhood overweight** occurs when children's calorie intake from food and beverages exceeds their energy requirements.

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Child food poverty is measured using the UNICEF and World Health Organization (WHO) dietary diversity score. To meet the *minimum dietary diversity* for healthy growth and development, children need to consume foods from **at least five out of the eight** defined food groups.

If children are fed:	0–2 food groups/day they are living in severe child food poverty	3–4 food groups/day they are living in moderate child food poverty	5 or more food groups/day they are not living in child food poverty
			
Breastmilk	Grains, roots, tubers and plantains	Pulses, nuts and seeds	Dairy products
			
		Flesh foods (meat, poultry and fish)	Eggs
			
			Vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables
			
			Other fruits and vegetables

Note

- **Hidden hunger**, also known as micronutrient deficiency, is a **form of undernutrition that occurs when people do not have sufficient intake of essential vitamins** and minerals in their diets.

What are the Key Drivers of Child Food Poverty?

- **Poor Food Environments:**
 - **Disruptions in Rural Areas:** Adverse weather, climate shocks, insecurity, or poor infrastructure are **disrupting food production and access** in rural and remote areas.
 - Example: **Droughts and floods** in **African countries like Somalia**, have disrupted food production, limiting access to diverse and healthy foods for children in those regions.
 - **The overabundance of Unhealthy Options:** Globally, shops and markets in urban areas are **flooded with ultra-processed foods** (low in nutrients, high in unhealthy fats, sugar, and salt) that are **aggressively marketed** and often cheaper than healthier alternatives.
- **Poor Feeding Practices in Early Childhood:**
 - **Generational Knowledge Gaps:** Inaccurate information and lack of proper guidance on **child feeding practices** are being passed down through generations, leading to inadequate diets for young children.
 - **Gender Inequality:** Discriminatory gender norms in some countries are limiting **women's access to information and income**, hindering their ability to make informed decisions about their children's diets.
- **Household Income Poverty:**
 - **Unaffordability of Nutritious Foods:** Nutritious foods, especially animal-source proteins

(eggs, meat, fish) and fruits and vegetables, are often more expensive than staple foods. This makes it **difficult for low-income families to afford** a balanced diet for their children.

- **Example:** Rising food prices due to **inflation can push nutritious foods further out of reach** for families living in poverty, forcing them to prioritise filling stomachs with less-nutritious options.

- **Failing Food and Health Systems:**

- Food Systems are failing to provide **affordable, diverse, and nutritious food options** for families and children.
- **Lack of access to adequate information**, counselling, and support on child feeding within healthcare systems hinders families' ability to make informed choices.
- Further, **insufficient social safety nets** leave vulnerable children exposed to malnutrition, especially in times of economic hardship.

What are the Impacts of the Child Food Poverty?

- **Impaired Growth and Development:**

- **Physical Growth:** Malnutrition, particularly undernutrition, can lead to stunting. Stunted growth has **long-term implications** for muscle and bone development, impacting overall physical health and stature.
- **Cognitive Development:** Undernourished children often experience **deficiencies in essential nutrients** crucial for brain development. This can lead to impaired cognitive function, reduced learning capacity, and lower educational attainment.

- **Weakened Immune System:**

- Malnutrition weakens the immune system, making children more susceptible to infectious diseases like [diarrhoea, pneumonia, and measles](#). These illnesses can further worsen nutritional status, creating a vicious cycle.
- Severe malnutrition can lead to **increased mortality in children**, particularly in the first five years of life.

- **Long-Term Health Issues:**

- **Chronic Diseases:** Childhood malnutrition has been linked to an increased risk of developing chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers later in life. This can place a significant burden on healthcare systems in the long run.
- **Reduced Productivity:** The cognitive and physical limitations caused by malnutrition can hinder a child's ability to reach their full potential as adults. This can translate to **lower productivity in the workforce** and **reduced economic opportunities**.

- **Perpetuating the Cycle of Poverty:**

- Children who experience malnutrition often come from impoverished backgrounds. The negative impacts on their [health, development, and education](#) can limit their ability to escape poverty, trapping them and future generations in a vicious cycle.

What can be done Towards Ending Severe Child Food Poverty Globally?

- **Making Policy-Based Targets:**

- **Child food poverty elimination** should be seen as a **policy imperative** with time-bound targets and results in relevant sectoral and multisectoral plans.

- **Transforming Food Systems:**

- **Focus on Accessibility:** Making nutritious foods readily available especially to vulnerable sections of population communities is crucial. This includes:

- **Supporting small-scale farmers** through grants and training to **increase the production** of nutrient-rich crops.
 - Investing in **infrastructure like storage facilities** and **transportation networks** to reduce food waste and ensure year-round access to diverse food groups, especially in remote areas.
- **Affordability:** High food prices are a major barrier. Initiatives like [targeted food subsidies for low-income families](#), school feeding programs, and price stabilization measures can help bridge this gap.
- **Regulating the Food Industry:**
 - **Curbing Unhealthy Marketing: Restricting the marketing of [unhealthy foods and beverages](#) targeted towards children is critical.**
 - This can involve implementing regulations on advertising content, placement (for example, near schools), and **age restrictions**.
 - **Promoting Transparency:** Promoting transparency in food labelling allows families to make informed choices. Clear labelling systems highlighting **nutritional content, including sugar, salt, and [unhealthy fats](#)**, can empower consumers.
- **Strengthening Health Systems:**
 - **Early Childhood Nutrition Services: Integrating nutrition counselling and support into existing healthcare services like [prenatal care](#) and well-child visits is vital.**
 - Healthcare professionals can offer guidance on appropriate infant and **young child feeding practices** to optimise nutrient intake.
 - **Community Outreach:** Nutrition education programs for families can raise awareness about the importance of a **balanced diet for child development**.
 - **Social Safety Nets:** Strengthening social safety nets that provide income support to vulnerable families can improve their ability to afford nutritious food.
- **Data and Monitoring:**
 - **Improved Data Collection: Investing in robust data collection systems is crucial to accurately assess the prevalence and severity of child food poverty across different regions and demographics.**
 - This allows for **targeted interventions and tracks progress** towards achieving national and global goals.
 - **Early Detection:** Early detection of rising child food poverty, especially in **fragile and humanitarian contexts**, allows for timely responses and resource allocation to prevent further worsening of the situation.

What are the Indian Initiatives Related to Child Food Poverty?

- [Mid-day Meal \(MDM\) scheme](#)
- [POSHAN Abhiyaan](#)
- [The National Food Security Act \(NFSA\), 2013.](#)
- [Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana \(PMMVY\)](#)
- [Integrated Child Development Services \(ICDS\) Scheme](#)

Conclusion

This UNICEF report presents a comprehensive analysis of child food poverty, highlighting the alarming scope and its detrimental consequences. By taking decisive action through the outlined recommendations, governments, partners, and organisations can work together to create a world where all children have access to a nutritious and diverse diet, reaching their full potential and breaking the cycle of poverty.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. What is Child Food Poverty? Discussing its impact on the development of children, suggest the ways towards ending severe child food poverty globally.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following is/are the indicators/ indicators used by IFPRI to compute the Global Hunger Index Report? (2016)

1. Undernourishment
2. Child stunting
3. Child mortality

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1, 2 and 3
- (d) 1 and 3 only

Ans: C

Mains:

Q. How far do you agree with the view that the focus on lack of availability of food as the main cause of hunger takes the attention away from ineffective human development policies in India? (2018)