World Bank Report on Stunting

Why in news?

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World Bank recently released a report on the prevalence and effects of stunting.

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What are the highlights?

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- A child is stunted if the height-for-age ratio is not proportionate.
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- **Effects** - Children with stunted growth are more prone to enduring adverse outcomes later in life.
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- They suffer from impaired brain development.
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- This leads to lower cognitive and socio-emotional skills, and lower levels of educational attainment.
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- **India** - The World Bank analysed 140 countries for workers who were stunted as children.
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- Of these, only Afghanistan (67%) and Bangladesh (73%) surpassed India's proportion (66%).
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- Around 66% of the working population in India are earning 13% less.
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- This is specifically because of lack of skills due to stunting in childhood.
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- This is one of the highest proportions worldwide in such reductions in per capita income.
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- **Others** - The average reduction for South Asia was 10% and North America 2%.
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- Middle East and North Africa do better, with a reduction of 4%.

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- This is better compared to Europe and Central Asia with a reduction of 5%.
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- The economic impact of stunting was not limited to Asia and Africa.
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- Stunting has affected almost all continents in varying amounts.
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- But Indians lost more income than people, on average, from Sub-Saharan African countries.
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- Notably, countries poorer than India have handled stunting better.
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- E.g. Senegal, with a per capita GDP of half as that of India's, was able to reduce stunting in its children by half over 19 years to 2012.
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- Peru, too, demonstrated a remarkable decline in its childhood stunting characteristics.
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- This was largely due to its nutrition, health and sanitation interventions.
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- **Returns** - The World Bank report calculated that the returns on a national nutrition package outweigh the costs.
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- This is in reference to interventions focussed mainly on maternal and neonatal health.
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- But given the time lag between childhood and joining workforce, the effects begin to show only 15 years after implementation.
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- After the initial 15 years, the cost remains static and the benefits continue to increase as more of the workforce begins to benefit.
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- The average rate of return predicted for the programme was 17%.
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- But for India the returns were forecast at 23%.
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What is the current scenario?

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- The percentage of childhood stunting in India’s current working-age population does not reflect the percentage of children currently stunted.
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- This is given the gap between childhood and joining the workforce.
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- Notably, the current number of stunted under-five children in India has reduced drastically.
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- Over 26 years to 2014, the percentage of stunted Indian under-five children has reduced from around 62% to 38%.
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What are the causes for India's state?

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- Stunting is affected by a variety of socio-economic determinants.
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- More than the economic development state, it reflects the treatment of women and children.
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- The related causes for stunting lie in social inequity with women’s status and health, household wealth, access to services, etc.
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- India clearly has inadequacies in women’s well-being and efforts to reduce poverty.
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- The two most influential deciding factors are women’s BMI and women’s education.
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- These factors explained the difference in child stunting between highly sensitive and less sensitive districts.
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What lies ahead?

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- In India, Integrated Child Development Services, PDS and mid-day meal schemes address children’s nutrition.
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- The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and the National Rural Water Drinking

Programme address sanitation needs.
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- Despite these, improving women’s well-being remains a challenge for policy.
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- A nutrition-specific national programme could significantly tackle stunting.
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- The National Nutrition Mission (POSHAN Abhiyan) should thus be promoted to address nutritional gaps for women.
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- There has to be a specific focus in the lower income brackets if stunting is to be truly eradicated.
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Source: Business Standard, Financial Express

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