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PM's nutrition panel puts focus on 200 poorest districts

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NEW DELHI: With nearly 50% child deaths in [India](#) caused due to malnutrition, the PM's panel on nutrition has directed Planning Commission and the ministry of women and child development (WCD) to prepare a roadmap for 200 of the poorest districts with special focus on children under 2 years and pregnant women.

The PM's council on nutrition met on Wednesday and it is learnt that ministries have been asked to bring attention and resources on children between 0-2 years to nip the problem of under-nutrition.

India's health and nutritional indices are lower than parts of sub-Saharan [Africa](#). While more than 1.4 million babies die before they complete the first year of life, another 0.6 million children die in the next 4 years. According to [WHO](#), poor infant feeding practises are responsible for two-thirds of deaths.

Activists have long demanded a rights-based universal intervention with special emphasis on enhancing breastfeeding practises and universalising maternity benefits. "India's report card is poor when it comes to policy and programme to support women for breastfeeding. About 20 million of the 26 million infants born are not being breastfed exclusively for 6 months leading to 14 lakh deaths from diarrhoea, pneumonia and infections in the first month of life," Arun Gupta, IBFAN Asia's regional coordinator, said.

Consultations with Planning Commission have also raised issues like the need to strengthen nutrition infrastructure with additional village level workers for proper nutritional guidance and setting up of a separate department within the [ministry](#). Activists also feel that strong regulation is required over MNCs and private companies pushing baby foods through covert advertising and ensuring institutional safeguards for preventing the entry of commercial food products.

The WCD [ministry](#) will also look at strengthening nutritional surveillance by mapping undernourished endemic zones and identifying high risk and vulnerable districts.

A report prepared by the ministry in consultation with the Plan panel recommends developing a nutrition surveillance system to identify clusters of cases and deaths due to under-nutrition. It also suggests setting up of a working group comprising experts to monitor ICDS and MRHM. The system envisages tracking of children to ensure medical intervention and families can benefit from government schemes like 100 days of employment under [NREGA](#).

There will be a multi-sectoral approach and the PM's panel has recommended that nutrition be made the focal point in government programmes like National Rural Health Mission, ICDS, JNNURM, Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission and National Food Security Mission.

The core interventions that have been recommended include ensuring household food security and livelihood, need for supplementary food programmes to address maternal and infant under-nutrition, restructuring of ICDS, capacity building, monitoring nutrition interventions and restructuring of ICDS.

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