

World Bank Approves \$286m Programme to Strengthen Healthcare and Life Expectancy in West Bengal

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The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors has approved \$286 million in financing to support a major health system reform programme in India's West Bengal state, aimed at improving quality of life and life expectancy for more than 90 million people through more equitable access to quality healthcare.

West Bengal has recorded steady health gains over the past two decades. Infant mortality declined from 32 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2010-2012 to 19 in 2018-2020, while life expectancy has risen to 72 years, above the national average. The state's total fertility rate stood at 1.64 births per woman in 2019, among the lowest in India.

Despite this progress, significant challenges remain. West Bengal has the second-highest rate of adolescent pregnancies in the country at 16 percent, contributing to a maternal mortality ratio of 103 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2018-2020. Districts including Purulia, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Maldah, and Uttar Dinajpur face persistent gaps in reproductive, maternal, and adolescent healthcare.

"This programme will help West Bengal deliver more equitable and higher-quality health services, with measurable results for women, adolescents, and people living with non-communicable diseases," said Paul Procee, Acting Country Director for World Bank India. "By linking financing to verified outcomes and strengthening governance and climate resilience, the operation addresses both service gaps and systemic constraints that have held back health gains for vulnerable communities. This will have a direct impact on people's ability to access better jobs and livelihoods."

The West Bengal Health System Reform Program Operation will support personalised healthcare services for residents over 30 years old through digital tracking of non-communicable diseases such as hypertension and diabetes. It will introduce a more patient-centric care model, strengthen the measurement of health outcomes, and improve the resilience of healthcare facilities to extreme weather events.

The programme also includes targeted measures to strengthen responses to gender-based violence, including interventions focused on boys, married adolescents, and healthcare providers. In the five most affected districts, it aims to improve access to quality maternal and adolescent healthcare and reduce entrenched health inequities.

“Strengthening the continuum of care at the primary level through measures like effective control of hypertension and diabetes is central to bending the non-communicable disease curve,” said Rahul Pandey and Meghna Sharma, Task Team Leaders for the programme. “The focus on quality of care and mechanisms to respond to gender-based violence is critical to improving health outcomes and rebuilding trust in the health system.”

The \$286 million loan is provided by the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and has a final maturity of 16.5 years, including a grace period of three years.