Global Report on Assistive Technology

For Prelims: Global Report on Assistive Technology, WHO, UNICEF, World Health Assembly, SDGS, UHC

For Mains: Global Report on Assistive Technology, Assistive Technology and the status of Technology in India, Health, Issues related to Disability

Why in News?

Recently, the **World Health Organisation (WHO)** and **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** jointly launched the **first Global Report on Assistive Technology (GReAT).**

What is the purpose of the Global Report on Assistive Technology (GReAT)?

- This report is the **culmination of the 71ˢᵗ World Health Assembly resolution in 2018** to prepare a global report on effective access to assistive technology.
- The report assumes significance as **90% of those who need assistive technology do not have access to it globally,** and including assistive technology into health systems is critical for progress towards the targets in the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)** relating to **Universal Health Coverage (UHC).**

What are the Key Highlights of the Report?

- **People Need Assistive Products:**
  - More than **2.5 billion people need one or more assistive products,** such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, or apps that support communication and cognition.
- **People Denied Assistive Products:**
  - A **billion of them are denied access,** particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where access can be **as low as 3% of the need** for these life-changing products.
- **Number of People in Need of Assistive Products in Future:**
  - The number of people in **need of one or more assistive products is likely to rise to 3.5 billion by 2050,** due to populations aging and the prevalence of non-communicable diseases rising across the world.
  - Also, **affordability is a major barrier** to access.
- **Large Gaps in Service Provision and Trained Workforce:**
  - A survey of **70 countries featured in the report found large gaps in service provision and trained workforce** for assistive technology, especially in the domains of cognition, communication and self-care.

What is Assistive Technology (AT)?

- AT is any **item, piece of equipment, software program or product system** that is used to

increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities.

- **Examples**:
  - **Technologies and devices** such as prosthetics, braces, walkers, special switches, special-purpose computers, screen readers and specialised curricular software.
- **Universal assistive technology coverage implies** that everyone, everywhere receives the AT that they need without financial or other hardships.
  - **Priority Assistive Products List** launched by WHO in 2018 include hearing aids, wheelchairs, communication aids, spectacles, artificial limbs, pill organisers, memory aids and other essential items for the elderly and person with disabilities.

What is the Magnitude of the Problem in India?

- **2011 Census:**
  - The **2011 Census** puts the **national estimate of the number of people with disabilities at 2.21% of the total population** including persons with visual, hearing, speech, locomotor and mental disabilities with the majority in the 19-59 age group.
  - The **country's disabled population increased by 22.4%** between 2001 and 2011 census periods, the total population increased by 17.6%, however.
- **NSS Survey:**
  - Subsequent to the notification of the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act in 2016**, the **76th round (July- December 2018)** of the **National Sample Survey (NSS)** reported that among persons with disabilities, **21.8% reported receiving aid/help from the government and another 1.8% from other organisations.**
    - The **rapid Assistive Technology Assessment (rATA)** is a tool developed by the WHO for national representative survey to measure unmet need for assistive technology, this shall provide granular evidence of the demand-side as and when it is available for India.

What is the Need for a Health-Industry Interface?

- **Ensure Universal Assistive Technology Coverage:**
  - Upholding the UHC approach is **necessary to ensure universal assistive technology coverage** that will entail every citizen access to assistive technology they need without financial hardship.
    - **The tasks include**:
      - production and provision of the entire spectrum of AT,
      - integrating rehabilitative services as an essential strategy in long-term care,
      - including rehabilitation at the primary health-care level, and,
      - promoting community-based rehabilitation.
- **Necessary to Meet the Needs of a Diversity of Users:**
  - Manufacturing and provision of components of the AT system is **necessary to meet the needs of a diversity of users** and provide a broader range of products that match their needs.
  - **Collaboration across academia, industry and the government will help in analysing manufacturing capacity**, ascertaining immediate need of specific AT and products and create a regulatory framework to provide users with products that are safe, secure and effective as per approved norms.
- **Related Initiatives:**
  - Ongoing initiatives such as **Make in India**, **Digital India** along with the health insurance schemes such as **Ayushman Bharat – Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY)** can cater to the AT demands of the most vulnerable 40% of the population to address their rehabilitation needs.
  - **Assistance to Disabled Persons Scheme**
  - **Accessible India Campaign: Creation of Accessible Environment for PwDs**
  - **DeenDayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme**
  - **National Fellowship for Students with Disabilities**
  - **Unique Disability Identification Project**
  - **International Day of Persons with Disabilities**

What are the Recommendations?

- **Improve access within education,** health and social care systems
- **Ensure availability, safety, effectiveness** and affordability of assistive products
- **Enlarge, diversify** and improve workforce capacity
- **Actively involve users of assistive technology** and their families
- **Increase public awareness** and combat stigma
- **Invest in data** and evidence-based policy
- **Invest in research, innovation,** and an enabling ecosystem
- Develop and invest in enabling environments
- **Include assistive technology** in humanitarian responses
- Provide technical and economic assistance through international cooperation to support national efforts.

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