



Child Rights Input

United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

*Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while
advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable
Development*

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Overview

The present report is submitted following a request of the Human Rights Council for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to contribute to the work of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), by providing comprehensive input from a child rights perspective to its yearly thematic reviews of progress.¹ The report has been informed by broad consultations with stakeholders and by children's own perspectives on the situation.²

Realizing children's rights is a requisite to achieving SDGs, and there is no possible separation between the future of the world and that of its children. Yet discrimination, inequality, lacking political will, inadequate investment, among other barriers, have meant that children's rights often remain far from a reality. The impacts of COVID-19 have been reversing the decades of gains made towards realizing children's rights, placing them at risk in all countries. These impacts may persist well beyond the immediate crisis, causing long-lasting and potentially irreversible harm to present and future generations.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to contain and respond to it, children have been exposed to heightened physical and psychological violence, including sexual exploitation and neglect, child labour, child marriage, and trafficking. Yet an estimated 1.8 billion live in countries where violence prevention and responses services have been disrupted due to COVID-19.³ An estimated 100 million more children were living in multidimensional poverty by the end of 2021 compared to the pre-COVID situation.⁴ Disruptions in health coverage are leading to higher rates of child and infant mortality, and an estimated 80 million children under the age of 1 are at increased risk of contracting vaccine-preventable diseases in the context of COVID-19 containment and response measures.⁵ At their height, lockdowns affected 90 percent of students, in a world where more than a third of all schoolchildren do not have access to remote education.⁶

While national budgets are under pressure from responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed existing economic fragilities, the full impact that it has inflicted on the world economy is still unfolding. Projections indicate a situation which will place developing country economies under disproportionate strain, where the economy of many countries will face negative growth rates and the prospect of a downturn not seen since the Great Depression. Based on the lessons of history, a global recession may usher in austerity and regressive spending policies, which would dangerously curtail spending on crucial areas for children, including health, education and social protection. Indeed, despite the disastrous ramifications of education gaps and system failures for children, societies and economies, expenditures on education are already reportedly shrinking.⁷

The current global situation of instability due to the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict and interlinked political, economic and environmental crises poses an immediate threat to all of children's rights, including to survival and development. In this context, COVID-19 has exposed and deepened the existing pandemics of inequality and discrimination. Overall, those who were already marginalized and discriminated against have been affected the worst – children with disabilities, from the poorest households, girls, migrants, displaced and those living in conflict-affected settings, among others.

Ensuring that every child has the best possible start in life and the means to develop their potential is an effective strategy to secure human rights and development for everyone.⁸ In this respect, children's rights provide guardrails and a foundation for building forward towards more just, equal and resilient societies. Governments and their partners can only benefit by closing the gap between child rights obligations under international human rights law and their implementation on the ground.

Every child has the right to develop to the maximum extent possible and to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. By reaching the children being left furthest behind, and ensuring that they are protected, healthy, educated and included, societies can build back better and breakdown intergenerational cycles of inequality and exclusion.

Progress, experience, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17

SDG 4 [Education]

Disruptions to education a catastrophe for children

The Covid-19 pandemic has created the single largest disruption to education systems that the world has ever seen, rendering the pre-existing global crisis a catastrophe for children.⁹ An estimated that 258 million school-aged children – one child in six – were already denied their right to education before the pandemic.¹⁰ This escalated sharply when more than 1 billion children were affected by school closures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19.¹¹ Increased rates of poverty and unemployment, which have primarily hit poor and rural households, and women and girls, have directly contributed to widening existing educational inequalities.¹² Yet, despite the present education crisis and its far-reaching ramifications for societies and economies, international, domestic and household expenditure on education is reportedly shrinking.¹³

Children's views: Not being able to access education during the pandemic was a concern for children consulted, and many said that they felt stressed and anxious about not being able to go to school. As a child in South Korea explained, "my friends and I feel anxious about our grades because online classes are not good enough for us to prepare for exams and performance evaluations. Despite these negative emotions, there is virtually no place for us to relieve our stress because all the places where we normally hang out including karaokes and youth centers have shut down." Similarly, Maricielo, a 16 year-old living in Peru said "our emotional health has not been taken care of, there [are] a lot of school dropouts and it is because there was no emotional health. There is a lot of stress, depression and anxiety in students and teachers".

Children consulted were also deeply concerned about inequalities, emphasizing that they have widened during school closures. Some highlighted, for example, that they or their peers could not afford the technical equipment or did not live in an appropriate situation to participate in online learning, while others could. For example, José, a 13 year-old from Peru said that "the poorest people are more vulnerable, they do not have access to the internet or education in this context of the pandemic".

Because of new and increased financial hardships associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, children said that they or their peers had had to take on work to earn money for the family, removing them from education completely. A child in Palestine reflected: "Today, Palestinian children face a lot of barriers to access quality education. The Palestinian children and teachers are not ready yet for online education[...] The Palestinian children have started to work in the streets to gain their life and support their parents." Gissela, a 15-year-old girl from El Salvador said that "Only in private schools do you have quality education. The public system was not prepared to have online classes, there was a lack of devices such as cell phones or computers. Education has been neglected a lot and the right to education is not being equitable and egalitarian".

Children said they wanted governments to build more and better-quality education infrastructure that is free for all children; to support all children to go to school instead of having to work; to provide students with the supplies necessary to keep up with their education, including online learning; and to support girls' education to curb teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

Knock-on impacts of school closures

In addition to disrupting children's learning, school closures have denied millions of children access to the support, protection, and access to crucial services that schools provide. This includes life-saving protection from domestic violence and abuse, and access to school meals. These impacts compounded by the severe psychological effects of isolation on children, as they miss out on peer interaction and support crucial to their mental health, development and wellbeing.¹⁴ In this context, the secondary impacts of school closures in the form of increased violence against children, child abuse and exploitation, malnutrition, and mental and physical health problems, among others, have loomed large, violating children's rights including and far beyond their right to education.

Digital exclusion

The reliance on online education as an alternative to in-person school attendance has helped to keep many children learning, but has required unplanned support from parents and a disproportionate reliance on women, exacerbating the pressure on families and existing gender inequalities.¹⁵ Moreover, it is estimated that before the pandemic almost one-third of young people worldwide were digitally excluded,¹⁶ so with the transition to online learning pre-existing education gaps and inequalities widened rapidly. Globally, three-quarters of the students excluded from online learning are children from rural areas and poor households who lack the space, equipment, time and parental support that it requires.¹⁷ Among those most excluded are the disproportionate number of girls who are required by their families to prioritize domestic and care work over online learning,¹⁸ and the 128 million children and young people whose education was already disrupted by conflict and humanitarian crisis, where education systems were already weak or failing.¹⁹

Long-term consequences

Children excluded from education, even for short periods, are at risk of never returning.²⁰ It is estimated that school closures due to the pandemic will result in at least an additional 10–16 million children never returning to school.²¹ As education is also a core tool to empower children, serving as a catalyst for them to participate as active changemakers and future leaders, especially girls who are at heightened risk of social and economic exclusion, lost education translates directly to potentially long-term disempowerment and marginalization, deepening all forms of social and economic inequality.²²

SDG 5 [Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls]

Girls have borne the brunt of economic and education disruptions

The impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected women and girls because of gendered stereotypes and discrimination that they are already subject to in society and the economy.²³ Girls have been profoundly affected due to direct impacts on their education and the economic circumstances of their families and communities, directly undermining their right to equality and to physical and mental health.²⁴ In particular, girls have been subject to heightened levels of sexual violence, and are often expected to take on more responsibilities for domestic work in the home, further excluding them from education. The economic and social stress during the pandemic, coupled with restricted movement, lockdowns and social isolation measures, have led to an exponential surge in gender-based violence, in particular intimate partner violence and domestic violence against women and girls. Many have been forced into lockdown at home with their abusers, while services to support survivors have been disrupted or rendered inaccessible by measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19.²⁵ The 'shadow pandemic' of gender-based violence has been evidenced by the surge in femicide recorded in some countries.²⁶

Far-reaching lifelong implications for girls

Economic shocks, school closures and interruptions in services associated with the pandemic have resulted in an estimated 10 million girls being placed at risk of child marriage in the next decade.²⁷ The disruption of services deemed to be 'non-essential' in favour of the responses to Covid-19, including reproductive health services, alongside challenging access to contraceptives and other essential services, have contributed to increased early pregnancy and child marriage, denying the many girls affected worldwide the right to control their bodies and lives.²⁸ Comprehensive sexuality education has also often been left out of online learning packages during school lockdowns, and even where it was included, girls from marginalized, poorer households were the least likely to be able to access this information.²⁹ Adolescent girls have been especially affected, and many face lifelong consequences in the form of disempowerment, gender-based violence and marginalization.

Building back means empowering girls

Building back from the pandemic and reaching the SDG 5 commitment to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls requires addressing the root causes of gender stereotypes, harmful practices and violence against women and girls. In addition to being a global commitment, gender equality is a human right and cross-cutting imperative for the enjoyment of children's rights and all human rights. Stronger national laws and programmes must urgently be implemented to tackle child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence against children. This must include effective legislation setting the minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys at 18; banning female genital mutilation, and forbidding the medicalization of this practice. Women's and girls' empowerment is equally about the role of men and boys, who must be involved in policies and measures to overturn discriminatory gender stereotypes by challenging patriarchal norms and unbalanced power relations.

Children's views: Girls consulted said that they felt more discriminated against than boys and have less opportunities to thrive, and that deep-rooted gender discrimination in urban and rural societies has become worse because of the pandemic. A 16-year-old from Brazil said that being a girl, plus being black and poor made them much more vulnerable than others. Cleo, aged 14 said "The problem is that the boys in this group [of children being consulted] don't see that inequality. They don't suffer anything from machismo, so they don't realize the problems that girls suffer". A girl from India said that "Early girl child marriage is still present in Indian communities. Girls are forced to do the household chores whereas boys are encouraged to go for higher education."

Children reported increases in violence against girls, child marriage, and sexual violence because of the Covid-19 pandemic. They noted links with worsening economic conditions as well as their reduced access to education. One girl explained, "In some countries like India and Nepal, poor households, due to degrading economic conditions, have been forced to compromise the lives of their children by either engaging in trading of children for meagre amounts or practiced child marriage to seek money through dowry." Sharon, a 16-year-old girl, said "World leaders can encourage education of the girlchild, to avoid issues of teenage pregnancy and child marriage".

Some children said they needed increased sexual and reproductive health as a means of giving girls more opportunities, and that young boys need to be taught to respect girls as their equals. Ana, a 16 year old from Brazil spoke of her experience of becoming more empowered: "First of all, I believe in myself – I know that I can do many things. But this has been a long journey from being a disempowered and isolated girl to become a strong, determined and empowered girl. I don't cry anymore, I do things now. My friends and I do many things to improve our lives here. We fixed our school that was much deteriorated".

SDG 14 [Life Below Water] & SDG 15 [Life on Land]

Children suffer disproportionate consequences of pollution and environmental degradation

States have recognized that children have the right to live in a healthy environment. Protecting life below water (SDG 14) and life on land (SDG 15) is crucial to providing children with a safe and clean environment to grow, develop and reach their full potential. The present crisis in the form of climate change, pollution, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss is violating children's human right to a healthy environment, and causing lifelong consequences for their health, well-being and development. Because of their sensitive phase of growth and development, children are more affected than adults by pollution and environmental degradation. For example, because they have faster metabolic rates, breathe more air and consume proportionately more water and food, their exposure levels to hazardous substances and pollutants in the environment is much higher than adults.

Yet approximately two billion children live in areas where high air pollution levels cause them to breathe toxic air, compromising their health and brain development.³⁰ Forests absorb harmful air pollutants that children would otherwise breathe, and oceans not only produce most of the planet's oxygen, but also absorb about 30 percent of carbon dioxide produced by humans.³¹

Children and their communities rely on a healthy environment for their survival

When the earth's natural resources are out of balance children are subject to heightened incidence of disease and food insecurity. Nearly half of all under-five deaths are caused by undernutrition, which can lead to stunting and irreversible effects on children.³² Together with their communities, children rely on land and marine resources to access safe water, food, and air for their survival and development. Many worldwide depend directly on marine and coastal biodiversity for their livelihoods; 1.6 billion rely on forests, and an estimated 2.6 billion depend on agriculture.³³ Depleted fish stocks and destroyed forests threaten family livelihoods, with direct impacts on children's nutrition status, physical and mental health and wellbeing.³⁴

Moreover, it is estimated that by 2040 almost 600 million children are likely to live in areas where the demand for water will exceed the amount available.³⁵ Contaminated water contributes to food insecurity, malnutrition, underdevelopment, and disease among children, who are also at risk from ingesting harmful substances such as mercury from polluted oceans.³⁶ In addition, plastic pollution leakage into aquatic ecosystems has risen sharply in recent years, and is projected to more than double by 2030.³⁷

Realizing the right to a healthy environment for all children

Children in low-income, minority, indigenous and marginalized communities are the worst affected by environmental degradation, pollution and the loss of biodiversity, although their circumstances are often inadequately monitored. Children across the social and economic strata are experiencing "eco-anxiety" about the state of their environment. They are experiencing heightened stress and a lack of hope for their future and that of the planet, which is affecting their mental health.³⁸

Urgent and decisive, rights-based action on climate change and the environment is needed to mitigate and prevent the impacts of environmental degradation on children, including the environmental burden of disease. A lack of political will and resources have limited the progress needed to realize the global commitments made to tackle climate change. This demands changes in individual behaviours, regulations, and business practices.³⁹ Children's right to a healthy environment should be integrated in all efforts to recover from the pandemic. This requires better sharing of information and collaboration at all levels, and mobilizing adequate resources for effective action.⁴⁰ Moreover, as children should have a seat at the table on decisions affecting their future and that of future generations, they need to be given the political space to participate effectively, with their concerns

and ideas heard and listened to. Children must be provided with relevant information and education to enable their empowerment and participation, as emphasised in SDG 14 and SDG 15, as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art.12).⁴¹

Children's views: Many shared concerns about violations of their right to live in a healthy, sustainable environment. Christian, a 16-year-old from El Salvador said "We have become enemies of the environment, we are destroying the environment - we have many diseases and disasters, we must do more for the earth". One child consulted felt that "it should be mandatory for schools to teach about climate change and ways to be more sustainable."

Children spoke about their fears about rising temperatures, shifting rainfalls patterns, natural disasters, crop erosion and drought, which have direct impacts on them and their communities, for example by leading to poor harvests and food insecurity. Claudia, a 15-year-old girl from Brazil said "Hunger proved to be deadlier to us than the COVID-19 virus did. Some of us have to choose which of our family members would get to eat, since the food is not sufficient for all of us." A 9-year-old girl who participated in consultations said "I wish there was more help available for families going hungry. People can't go out and work and the situation is desperate. Children don't know how to wait. They only know they're hungry. "

Children said that food insecurity causes depression, poor physical health and other mental health issues, and some flagged the particular impact of food shortages on vulnerable groups (e.g. migrant and indigenous children). Rebecca, 17 years old, El Salvador said, "Our countries do not have an efficient food production system, there is a lack of food because with natural phenomena crops are lost". As one child said, "Governments need to ensure that not only do we have a contingency plan but also have the means and guarantee security against natural disasters"

Children drew attention to the serious health issues being caused by air pollution, contaminated food and water, and poor sanitation and hygiene. For example, some in India spoke about experiencing shortness of breath due to severe air pollution, and said they lacked access to clean water. A 17-year-old male said that "industries, businesses and consumers should be encouraged to recycle and reduce waste. The efficient management of our shared natural resources, disposal of toxic waste and pollutants are important targets."

The destruction of natural resources, including cutting trees and burning forests for cultivation or housing was a concern shared by many of the children consulted. According to a 17 year old in Uganda, "many people in our communities have failed to appreciate and implement government guidelines on climate action, such as 'cut one tree and plant two' which makes us lag behind as a country." Another boy in Rwanda requested leaders to prioritize reforestation, and "Encourage people, including children, to plant trees all the time". A group of children in Kosovo said "children in the near future will be the ones taking the brunt of any decisions leaders make today, therefore by involving them early they will create change that is more sustainable in the long-run."

SDG 17: [Means of implementation and global partnerships]

A time for strengthened global solidarity and partnership

In the present context of multiple global crises in the form of climate change and environmental degradation, conflict, the pandemic and economic instability, divisive politics and fear have become more common. Yet today, arguably more than ever in human history, global partnership, solidarity and cooperation are the only option to secure human rights, development and a future for children and for everyone. The phase of 'building back' presents an opportunity to re-embrace global solidarity and innovate in strengthen the cooperation and partnership that this requires.

Prioritizing investment in children

Early investments in children's health, education, and development pay off economically, and the most successful countries and societies are those that invest in their children and protect their rights.⁴² To accelerate progress for the children being left behind States must prioritise child rights obligations in their national plans and investments towards building back. States are under obligation to implement the rights of the child within the framework of international cooperation (CRC art. 4). This relies strongly on investing in children's rights and needs, especially during their early years, which lay the foundation for their future development, and in turn the development prospects of their future communities and societies.⁴³ Moreover, under international human rights law States are obliged to invest in economic, social and cultural rights up to their maximum available resources.⁴⁴ In particular, targeted investments which protect and provide for the needs of the most marginalized children in their early years must be a central aim of the cooperation and partnerships towards building back from COVID-19 and reaching SDGs.

A concerning outlook for spending in social sectors

The full impact of COVID19 on the world economy is still unfolding. Government spending and monetary policies have entered uncharted territory and a situation which is especially harmful for developing countries. Data shows that the global economy as measured by GDP was at negative 3.3% in 2020,⁴⁵ which is a downturn not seen since World War II. It is possible if we had a global economic measure that considered well-being and the enjoyment of rights, the downturn could have been greater.

Government policies worldwide since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic have helped to mitigate its short-term economic impact and safeguard against the consequences of other forms of existing economic fragility. However, this has produced more public debt. According to the Institute of International Finance, global debt has gone from 250 trillion USD in 2019 to almost 300 trillion USD in 2021⁴⁶. The closest comparator to this situation in living memory is the banking crisis of 2008, which ushered in unprecedented economic austerity and regressive social spending policies worldwide,

Children's views: Children consulted in Brazil said that that world leaders can support them by emphasizing the importance of children's rights and making sure that countries are following high standards to implement them. Juliana, aged 16, from Brazil said "We will never progress as a country and society if our governments do not work for children's rights. We are not just the future, so we cannot wait, we are the present and our present does not look well".

One teenaged boy consulted noted that conflict between countries prevents cooperation, and another called for world leaders to "promote peace through alliances". Children aged 12-14 in Palestine said "world leaders should work together to improve the psychosocial well-being of children through improving the quality of education and supporting the economies of their countries. These leaders must stop wars and conflicts [...] and should work to ensure equality in everything." Children in Pakistan aged 14-16 years said "World leaders and developed countries should work more closely with under-developed countries for world peace and to support them in ensuring child rights."

Children said that governments should involve, listen to, and consult them on relevant issues, and get back to them so that they know they have been heard. For example, Hassan from Palestine said "We are the ones who understand the challenges we encounter, more than anyone else. Yet, decisions concerning us are made without our consent or involvement, because we are invisible to everyone." A teenaged girl named Claudia said "We need the authorities to commit to include our ideas in their work plans. Keeping quiet is in the past [...] Children have to work alongside world leaders in creating laws that define our lives, because this is not just today and tomorrow, this is a struggle until all children grow up having a full childhood."

severely curtailing investment in the areas of health, education, and social protection, among others critical to the fulfilment of children's rights. Moreover, rising food and energy prices are hitting low-income countries and households hardest.⁴⁷ Indeed, despite the disastrous, far-reaching ramifications of education system failures for children, their societies and wider economies, international, domestic and household expenditure on education is already reportedly shrinking.⁴⁸

Improving monitoring and data

An evidence-based understanding of the situation of children at local and national levels is needed to support policies and investments which address children's rights and needs. This involves information-sharing, the systematic collection of quality, disaggregated data, and a human rights approach to data and monitoring.⁴⁹ Yet data collection often misses the most marginalized groups of children most in need of better support. For example, official data on school attendance, usually collected through household surveys, excludes the large numbers of children living in street situations who are missing out on education.⁵⁰ Targeted data collection and the assessment of quality, disaggregated data are fundamental to identify how discrimination and inequality are affecting children. More and better data collection is essential to gain an understanding of the situation of children, and particularly those who are the most marginalized and least likely to be counted in existing data and statistics.

Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “leaving no one behind” against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Heightened inequalities and discrimination

While COVID-19 has not discriminated, its harmful effects have, exposing and exacerbating existing inequalities, discrimination and exclusion which were already holding back development progress. In the current global context of multiple crises, these dynamics now threaten to destabilize entire economies and societies. There has never been more urgency to redress deep social and economic inequalities, the effects of which have disproportionate and lifelong impacts on children, directly undermining the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and all human rights.

The children who were already experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination on multiple grounds including gender, (dis)ability, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, have been even further excluded due to the impacts and measures to contain COVID-19. The impacts of the pandemic also rapidly deepened the exclusion and human rights risks faced by children subject to discrimination because of their age, race, gender, ethnicity, disability or health status, or other factors. Increasing numbers of children now live in new or worsened situations of vulnerability, with sharp increases in children living in poverty, street situations, engaging in child labour, or becoming victims of violence, child marriage, exploitation and abuse.

For example, it is estimated that around 100 million more children were living in multidimensional poverty by the end of 2021 compared to the pre-COVID situation.⁵¹ In addition, it is estimated that more than 1.5 million children have been orphaned by the pandemic,⁵² in addition to the countless additional numbers of children who have become separated from their families due to severe illness or financial hardship during this time. Many of the most vulnerable children have faced severe consequences from child protection gaps and shortfalls, and increased risk of being placed in unsuitable alternative care, including institutions often characterized by inherently harmful living arrangements.⁵³

Who are the children being left behind?

The children whose rights were already being denied to them because of their life circumstances have been especially affected, placed in even more precarious or dangerous circumstances as a result of confinement measures, economic shutdowns and the disrupted provision of already limited child protection services. This pertains, *inter alia*, to children subject to violence, exploitation and abuse, children living in rural or otherwise marginalized communities; children on the move; children living in poverty; children living in street situations; children living in institutions and otherwise deprived of their liberty; children living in humanitarian disasters and conflict; migrant, asylum-seeking, refugee and internally displaced children, and children whose births are not registered. For example, child migrants have faced vulnerabilities due to the circumstances of their journey and the poor conditions in which they often find themselves.⁵⁴ This includes barriers to accessing health care⁵⁵ which contributes to the discrimination they already experience because of their situation.

Children's views: Children were worried about the poverty and inequalities being experienced by their families and communities, and how increased unemployment and reduced incomes have made many families vulnerable. One child said that "Inequalities exist when the most powerful exploit the less powerful." According to another, "Countries must grow together with the people. For this we should deepen quality education for those who cannot access it". Some children expressed concerns about the heightened vulnerabilities of specific groups during the pandemic, including migrant or refugee children, street children, children in rural areas and adolescents in centres of detention. Several participants said that children in poverty are largely neglected by governments, while others expressed frustration that corruption and poor management of government resources has had further negative impacts on the realization of their rights in recent years.

Many children spoke about different forms of discrimination, which have been exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 response. According to Max, aged 17 from Brazil: "Racism is always present; we can see it every day at school. Black children are put behind and rejected, even though many children are Black. I have been discriminated against, myself, many times for being Black." Claudia, aged 15, also living in Brazil, said "the main worry of young people is the police abuse against Black young people. We see this every day in our communities. Black young people feel scared most of the time, and many avoid the streets". A child in India said that "Emergency responses were mainly directed at those who could produce some form of proof about their residency. [The] majority of the street-connected population, having migrated from other places to the city in search of livelihoods, could not produce documents proving them as residents of the city. This reduced their opportunities to access emergency responses during the time of pandemic."

Implications for children's health, survival and development

Disruptions in essential health services due to COVID-19 have threatened decades of progress in child health, survival and development, jeopardizing progress on SDG3. The response to COVID-19 has taken resources away from fighting other concerns such as malaria which infected 221 million people in 2020, whereby in Africa according to the World Health Organization children under 5 accounted for 80% of the deaths.⁵⁶ Life-saving vaccinations and daily meals that had been delivered at schools before the pandemic were cut by school closures. Routine healthcare services were disrupted, leading to further delayed or cancelled vaccinations, check-ups, and nutritional support programmes.⁵⁷

Beyond the school closures affecting millions of school-age children, millions of younger children have not been able to attend early childhood education and care and became entirely reliant on their caregivers at home, placing significant additional stress on parents and carers. Research finds that as a result they might have interacted differently or less with their young children in ways that could affect a child's physical and mental abilities.⁵⁸ Preliminary research also suggests that pandemic-related stress during pregnancy has negatively affected foetal brain development in some children.⁵⁹

Although more data and research are urgently needed, it is already clear that the burden has been carried most heavily by the children who were already being left behind before the pandemic hit: those living in low/low-middle- income countries, where government health spending is low, out-of-pocket spending is high and development assistance is important.⁶⁰ As countries build back, States must ensure that no child dies from a preventable cause and all are able to reach their full potential in health and well-being. Universal health coverage is needed, accessible to every woman and child, to prevent child mortality from treatable and preventable conditions. States must take action to tackle inequities in health outcomes to accelerate coverage and leave no child behind.

Children said that because of the pandemic, they were more likely to experience malnutrition and hunger, and that many had been unable to access good health care. One 17-year-old consulted said that in her community some children had received medical treatment during the pandemic and others had not, depending on who they were, and that this inequality had made the children who were less privileged more likely to lose their lives.

Violence against children

Children exposed to violence suffer life-long consequences, for their wellbeing and mental health, with far-reaching repercussions for society. The loss of family incomes, disruption of child protection services and lockdowns have led to increased risk and levels of violence, including sexual exploitation and neglect, for children. Substantial increases in violence against children during the pandemic were recorded, both in frequency and severity. Children whose schools were closed, for example, reported rates of violence in the home that were more than double those of children who were still able to attend school in person.⁶¹ An estimated 1.8 billion children live in countries where violence prevention and responses services have been disrupted due to COVID-19.⁶²

Online and offline sexual exploitation and abuse against children have similarly increased during the pandemic.⁶³ Girls have been particularly targeted by heightened levels of violence online, subject to more physical threats, sexual harassment, sex trolling, sextortion and online pornography than ever before.⁶⁴ Where data is available, it reflects, for example, that the demand for child pornography reportedly increased up to 25 per cent in some member States of the European Union during the COVID-19 lockdowns.⁶⁵ Children with disabilities have reportedly experienced heightened risk and incidence of being exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation.⁶⁶

In this context, failure to integrate violence prevention in responses to the pandemic will undermine recovery efforts overall, with lasting consequences for future generations.⁶⁷ For example, the mental health and wellbeing of children cannot not be effectively addressed without tackling the increasing violence, neglect and abuse placing million at heightened risk of poor mental health outcomes.⁶⁸

The existing perils faced by children living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, linked to increased political instability, security challenges, and the climate emergency, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it.⁶⁹ This includes increasing risks of being recruited and used or abducted by parties to conflict.⁷⁰ It has been reported that sexual and gender-based violence against vulnerable children in these settings, including in refugee and internally displaced persons' camps, have risen significantly.⁷¹ The diversion of funds from essential child protection and monitoring, due to COVID-19 prevention and responses, have prevented child protection actors from carrying out vital work to monitor and verify grave violations against children living in conflict contexts, and hindered engagement with parties to conflict on the release of associated children.⁷²

Children's views: An adolescent child in Palestine said “Domestic violence is one of the main problems that children face in Palestine. COVID-19 has its negative impact on Palestinian parents. Some of the parents are very violent and transform their internal conflicts to their surroundings, particularly their children. The problems of the Palestinian children are similar to other children in the world.”

Children in Kosovo said job losses due to COVID-19 increased the level of physical and psychological violence children were exposed to, greatly affecting their health and well-being. They said it was important to invest more in the economy and mental health. Some children consulted in Brazil said that violence and abuse is the norm where they live. Many said that corporal punishment and verbal abuse are used by parents to discipline them, or expressed concern about gang violence in the streets, particularly affecting boys.

Increases in sexual violence and adolescent pregnancy were concerns highlighted by many children. Some talked about how, because of the pandemic, they have been more vulnerable to violence and exploitation in general, including child labour, sale of children and child marriage.

A group of girls and boys consulted in the Philippines, aged 10-17, asked the government, schools, and communities to provide immediate support to child victims and survivors of all forms of abuse, including online sexual abuse and exploitation, especially of children in disadvantaged conditions (e.g. children in street situations, children of indigenous communities and ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, and children left behind by their parents/caregivers).

Child-sensitive social protection

Child-sensitive social protection serves as an essential guardrail to protecting children in the most precarious situations from the devastating impacts upon them of economic and other shocks, thereby safeguarding their human rights, health and wellbeing. Despite the promising advances made towards extending child-sensitive social protection in many parts of the world in recent years, the pandemic has largely derailed this progress.⁷³ In this context, overlapping inequalities and significant gaps in social protection coverage, comprehensiveness and adequacy have been exposed and worsened across countries.⁷⁴ As a result, the associated high levels of economic insecurity, poverty, and inequality have harmed the millions of children who were not adequately protected. In addition, the pandemic has significantly impacted the capacity of many parents and caregivers to nurture and safeguard their children, leading to greater levels of neglect, abuse and violence.⁷⁵ Children living in low- and middle-income countries have been worse affected as their governments have struggled to mount a proportionate social protection and stimulus response to contain the pandemic's adverse impacts.⁷⁶ This situation was amplified in contexts of fragility, conflict, and emergencies where social cohesion was already undermined, and institutional capacity and services limited.⁷⁷

Child participation in matters affecting them

Children throughout the world face major barriers to claiming their civil and political rights, because of age-based discrimination, a lack of awareness and implementation of their right to participate in matters affecting them, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, closures of spaces to participate. In particular, children's rights to information, participation, and access to justice have often not been respected, protected and fulfilled in State responses to the pandemic.⁷⁸ Meaningful, inclusive participatory processes are indispensable to understanding the lived challenges that children are facing, and are a powerful tool to empower the children being left furthest behind from development and plans to build back. Adults must do more to hear and listen to children's views about how best to fulfil their rights and build forwards towards a sustainable future in which their rights are respected. To participate effectively children need safe spaces online and offline, and timely, age-appropriate information in the language they understand.

One child who was consulted reflected that “We are the ones who understand the challenges we encounter, more than anyone else. Yet, decisions concerning us are made without our consent or involvement, because we are invisible to everyone.”

A 17 year old girl from South Korea explained that “I am part of a youth-led organization calling for climate justice and we have found it difficult to deliver our voices to the decision-makers as we had to cancel all the protests and events we were preparing for prior to the pandemic. Also, the roles of student councils/governments have been extremely limited ever since classes were moved online. As a student, I feel like I have no way to share my opinion on school decision making.”

Children consulted in Brazil highlighted that they see themselves as ‘change-makers’, and that they have organized themselves in local associations to advocate for change. They pointed out that at the beginning many people – especially adults – did not believe in their abilities to do this, but they were able to prove that they had the motivation and skills to make things happen.

Key messages and policy recommendations in areas requiring urgent attention

The impacts of COVID-19 have been reversing decades of gains made towards realizing children’s rights, and are placing children at risk in all countries. The current global situation of instability due to interlinked political, economic and environmental crises threaten all of children’s rights, including to survival and development. Without urgent action and investment, these impacts will persist and cause long-lasting, potentially irreversible harm to present and future generations. Children’s rights can serve as a foundation for building more just, equal and resilient societies, and by reaching those who are the furthest behind intergenerational cycles of exclusion can be broken.

Protecting all children from violence and abuse, educating them, ensuring they can grow up in a clean environment, and that they have access to adequate nutrition and healthcare, is an effective strategy to secure human rights and development for everyone. In this respect, decisions on priorities to build back can be guided by the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, their rights to life, survival and development, and the right to participate:

1. Place children’s rights at the core of plans to build back, to uplift societies and economies

In accordance with their international obligations, governments must invest the maximum available resources in children’s rights, especially in their protection from violence and abuse, including gender-based violence,⁷⁹ health, including mental health, quality education and social protection to safeguard against the impacts of crises. The child rights framework, including the core principle of prioritizing the best interests of the child, can guide effective investments in children which ultimately serve to uplift societies and economies.

2. Monitor children’s situation in order to ensure effective responses, including in times of crisis

More and better data is needed to monitor children’s situation. Data disaggregated by age, sex, disability, migration status and other factors is essential to track the situation of those furthest behind. Monitoring and data must be guided by child rights principles of involving children themselves, ensuring transparency and the right to information while respecting the right to privacy. Real-time monitoring of children’s situation needs to be strengthened in order to respond better to future crises.

3. Empower children as changemakers, ensuring they can participate in building back

Children around the world have demonstrated that they can play a central role as changemakers and innovators in defining a more stable, sustainable future for themselves and generations to come.

Governments must uphold children's right to participate meaningfully in decisions and processes affecting them, by enabling children to participate in decisions towards building back that respond to their concerns. To participate effectively children require safe spaces online and offline, and timely, age-appropriate information in the language they understand.

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- ¹ See resolution 37/20: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/37/20>
- ² In partnership with the network organization Child Rights Connect and its members, in person and online focus groups were held in 2021 with 449 children between the ages of 6 and 17 years old from 25 countries across all regions of the world, and direct virtual dialogues were held with 30 children from 15 different countries.
- ³ 66% of countries reported a disruption in violence against children-related services due to COVID-19, <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>.
- ⁴ UNICEF, December 2021, [Impact of COVID-19 on children living in poverty](#), Technical note
- ⁵ <https://data.unicef.org/resources/immunization-coverage-are-we-losing-ground/>.
- ⁶ “Children cannot afford another year of school disruption,” Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, 11 January 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-cannot-afford-another-year-school-disruption>.
- ⁷ UNICEF blog: [Global education calls for effective leadership and coordination now more than ever](#)
- ⁸ The important decision taken by the Secretary-General to develop a Guidance Note on Child Rights Mainstreaming for the entire United Nations system reflects that children’s rights are at the heart of sustainable development, and must be reinforced across the work of the United Nations at all levels in line with the UN [Common Agenda](#) and the Secretary-General’s [Call to Action for Human Rights](#) (C2A).
- ⁹ UNICEF blog: [Global education calls for effective leadership and coordination now more than ever](#)
- ¹⁰ UNESCO (2019) New Methodology Shows that 258 Million Children, Adolescents and Youth Are Out of School in Save the Children, September 2021, Build Forward Better: How the global community must act now to secure children’s learning in crises
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- ¹² UNICEF blog: [Global education calls for effective leadership and coordination now more than ever](#)
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- ¹⁴ OHCHR Child Rights Input to HLPF, March 2021
- ¹⁵ https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Whose-time-to-care-brief_0.pdf; Carretero Gomez, S., et al. (2021) [What did we learn from schooling practices during the COVID-19 lockdown?](#)
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- ¹⁹ UNESCO blog, [The future of an entire generation hangs in the balance](#)
- ²⁰ UNICEF blog: [Where are the girls and why it matters as schools reopen?](#)
- ²¹ Save the Children, September 2021, Build Forward Better: How the global community must act now to secure children’s learning in crises
- ²² [A/HRC/43/63](#), Report of the 2019 Social Forum, 24 February–20 March 2020
- ²³ UN, 9 April 2020: [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#)
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- ²⁸ PLAN blog: [How COVID-19 is Threatening Girls’ Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights](#)
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- ³⁰ UNICEF [Environment and climate change](#)
- ³¹ UNICEF Global Forum for Children and Youth <https://childrenyouth.sdgcommitments.org/sdg15-2/>
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- ³³ UNICEF Global Forum for Children and Youth <https://childrenyouth.sdgcommitments.org/sdg15-2/>
- ³⁴ UNICEF Global Forum for Children and Youth <https://childrenyouth.sdgcommitments.org/sdg15-2/>
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