



General Assembly Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
22 August 2022

Original: English

General Assembly
Seventy-seventh session
Item 23 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Operational activities for development: operational
activities for development of the United Nations system

Economic and Social Council
2023 session
25 July 2022–26 July 2023
Agenda item 19 (b)
Social and human rights questions:
social development

Follow-up to the outcome of the special session of the General Assembly on children

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In the present report, the steps taken in 2020 and 2021 to achieve a world fit for children are assessed and gaps in achievement and strategic shifts necessary to improve the situation of children are highlighted. The report was prepared in response to General Assembly resolution [S-27/2](#), which was adopted at the twenty-seventh special session, in 2002, and resolutions [58/282](#), [61/272](#) and [76/147](#), in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on progress made in implementing the Plan of Action included in the annex to resolution [S-27/2](#).

* [A/77/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. At the special session of the General Assembly on children, held in 2002, delegations from 190 countries adopted the Declaration and Plan of Action entitled “A world fit for children” (resolution [S-27/2](#), annex), in which Governments made a commitment to a set of specific, time-bound and measurable goals for children and young people, with a particular focus on: (a) promoting healthy lives; (b) providing good-quality education; (c) protecting children from abuse, exploitation and violence; and (d) combating HIV and AIDS. Many of the targets contained in the Plan of Action were effectively stepping stones towards the Millennium Development Goals and, subsequently, the broader Sustainable Development Goals. On the twentieth anniversary of the 2002 special session, the present report contains the nineteenth update on progress made since the special session and is focused on children and the Sustainable Development Goals, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution [76/147](#).¹ As shown in the report, despite significant improvements in the lives of many children in the past 20 years, the current state of the world is not fit for children, and the world is at risk of failing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

2. Progress towards most Sustainable Development Goals is behind schedule, affected by the multifaceted impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, climate change and a multitude of protracted conflicts. More than 5 million children have lost a parent or caregiver owing to COVID-19.² Under-5 mortality (Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.2.1) and neonatal mortality (indicator 3.2.2) rates are concerning and well behind their targets. In 2020, school closures and inadequate remote learning opportunities added another 101 million children, for a total of 584 million children, not meeting minimum reading proficiency standards (indicator 4.1.1). The pandemic has resulted in an increasing number of children engaged in child labour, expected to reach a total of 168.9 million by the end of 2022 (indicator 8.7.1).³ Nationally determined contributions submitted by countries in advance of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2021 have fallen far short of the targets required to remain within 1.5°C if not 2.0°C of global warming (indicator 13.2.1), putting at grave risk the future of the largest generation of children and young people the world has ever seen. Furthermore, the burden of underachievement with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals is distributed extremely unevenly both within and between countries.

3. Humanitarian needs have continued to increase. An estimated 274 million people needed humanitarian assistance and protection in 2022, up from 235 million people in 2021, which was already the highest number in decades. Escalating crises in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Ukraine added to long-standing conflicts in the central Sahel, Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and Yemen. Prolonged and violent conflicts remain the primary drivers of humanitarian needs, with increased risk of sexual violence for women and girls. Humanitarian needs are further compounded by disease, including COVID-19, and by climate change, which has

¹ Having taken into consideration the input from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, it is important to note that the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), in writing the present report on behalf of the Secretary-General, collaborated with OHCHR to ensure that the synergies between child-related Sustainable Development Goals and children’s rights were reflected.

² H. Juliette T. Unwin and others, “Global, regional, and national minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and caregiver death, by age and family circumstance up to Oct 31, 2021: an updated modelling study”, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, vol. 6, No. 4 (April 2022).

³ *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021* (United Nations publication, 2021).

become one of the root causes of famine and increasingly drives population movements and displacements.⁴

4. Recovery from the pandemic and its socioeconomic impact will depend on the manifestation of several global phenomena. Child poverty and malnutrition, already significant challenges, are now compounded by rising global food and fuel prices. Mounting debt, inflationary pressures and interest rate hikes may push Governments into social spending cuts, hindering equitable recovery for the most marginalized children and limiting urgent investments in renewable energy. To realize a world fit for children, it is essential to prevent backsliding on children's rights, preserve the effective social protection measures introduced during the pandemic and ensure that the recovery leaves no one behind.

II. Follow-up to the General Assembly special session on children

5. Since the seventh report of the Secretary-General on the follow-up to the special session of the General Assembly on children in 2002,⁵ there have been five lenses through which the progress on the report's thematic areas has been analysed: planning, children's rights, partnerships, monitoring and participation. These lenses are as important as they were in 2009. They highlight several tools critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, such as using a child-rights approach to programming, data for children, evidence-based policies and planning, cross-sectoral and public-private partnerships, and engaging with children.

A. Planning for children

6. When children participate in voluntary national reviews, they can be critical sources of data and solutions that will best support the realization of their rights. Since 2016, 166 voluntary national reviews have been presented at the high-level political forum on sustainable development, with 59 countries having conducted more than one such review. In 2021, 42 countries carried out reviews, which highlighted policies and actions for a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and focused on areas such as gender equality, children's rights, climate and biodiversity. To put children at the front and centre of discussions around the Sustainable Development Goals, several countries, including the Lao People's Democratic Republic, organized voluntary national review youth consultations. Save the Children supported children in Indonesia and Zambia to develop their own child-led voluntary national review, complementing the official review. Children shared with national government officials the findings and recommendations from consultations they organized with other children.

B. Promoting implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

7. Children continue to face ongoing rights violations and persistent and systematic discrimination, often caused by factors related to disability, racism, xenophobia, sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnicity, urbanization, migration

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020* (Copenhagen, 2021), p. 9; United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2022* (New York, 2021), p. 5.

⁵ [A/64/285](#).

and displacement, and natural disasters. The large number of armed conflicts around the world further infringes on children's rights, not just by the direct harm done to children but also through the multifaceted impact of conflict and violence on social cohesion, food security and poverty. Children who are already the most marginalized are most at risk of being left behind, and many are not able to seek redress or obtain an effective remedy. A child-rights approach, underpinned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is critical to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its pledge to leave no one behind and to support the realization of the full range of children's civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights.

8. Monitoring by, and recommendations from, international human rights mechanisms constitute a wealth of information relevant to the realization of children's rights, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and the subsequent strategies and priorities that United Nations country teams and partners identify in United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and other programming and partnership frameworks.

9. In 2021, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) continued to advocate for children's rights and report on children's rights to the global human rights mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the universal periodic review. Recommendations made to States parties through the various mechanisms formed a solid normative base for improving the lives of children and reinforcing the accountability of the State in the countries concerned. The United Nations continues to engage with Member States to advocate for the universal ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. It celebrates that Fiji became the 171st State party to the Optional Protocol in March 2021 and Suriname the 172nd State party in November 2021. Independent human rights or children's rights institutions at the national level are uniquely placed to monitor the protection of human rights and thereby play a critical role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

10. In the wake of severe upheaval caused by COVID-19, the positive trajectory towards attaining numerous Sustainable Development Goals for women and girls and the advancement of gender equality in the realization of children's rights have ground to a halt. Women have borne the brunt of the negative socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, with COVID-19 tending to exacerbate existing socioeconomic gender disparities rather than creating new inequalities.⁶ A stark case in point is the challenges faced by girls, especially adolescent girls, girls with disabilities, among the poorest communities, from ethnic minorities and those living in rural areas. With schools closed or pivoted to remote learning, an estimated 11 million girls may not go back to school.⁷ Negative trends are already being observed in harmful practices, as a staggering 10 million more child marriages may occur before the end of the decade. Other growing disparities in girls' outcomes made worse by the pandemic relate to sexual and reproductive health and rights, HIV infection and gender-based violence in diverse contexts. These areas must command intensified global action and investment across the development-humanitarian nexus if humanity is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and realize the rights of all children, including girls.

⁶ Luisa S. Flor and others, "Quantifying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality on health, social, and economic indicators: a comprehensive review of data from March, 2020, to September, 2021", *The Lancet*, vol. 399, No. 10344 (June 2022).

⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Keeping girls in the picture". Available at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/girlseducation>.

C. Collaborating with partners and leveraging resources for children

11. Official development assistance (ODA) from members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development amounted to \$179 billion in 2021, an increase of 4.4 per cent in real terms from 2020, according to preliminary data. The amount includes \$6.3 billion of donated COVID-19 vaccines. Without that amount, ODA from Committee members increased by 0.6 per cent from 2020 in real terms. Committee donors increased their spending on activities related to COVID-19 from \$16.6 billion in 2020 to \$18.7 billion in 2021. Humanitarian aid increased by 3.5 per cent in 2021, to \$18.8 billion. Twenty-three Committee members increased their ODA in 2021, but only five members (Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway and Sweden) met or exceeded the United Nations target of allocating 0.7 per cent of gross national income to ODA. ODA accounts for more than two thirds of external finance for the least developed countries.

12. To accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and the realization of children's rights, there is an urgent need to focus on leveraging resources beyond ODA. The new UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025 reflects that need and directs the organization to focus on the overall investment required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The organization will use its voice and know-how to influence public and private investments benefiting children, with a range of partners, including Governments, multilateral organizations, international financial institutions, businesses, foundations, philanthropists, and faith-based and youth organizations.

13. Global Programme Partnerships are among the collaborative initiatives that United Nations entities are continuing to pursue, and UNICEF is leveraging its mandate for children to engage effectively with thematically focused funding institutions. In 2021, UNICEF received \$563 million from its Global Programme Partnerships with key partners such as the Gavi Alliance; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; the Global Partnership for Education; and Nutrition International. The Gavi Alliance and the Global Fund increased funding to support the effective delivery of vaccines as part of the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility with health partners, including the World Health Organization.

14. UNICEF further engages in tripartite collaboration with Governments and multilateral development banks to leverage resources and technical expertise in support of the 2030 Agenda. With the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, UNICEF helps Governments to mainstream child-sensitive planning, budgeting and programming at the national and municipal levels. UNICEF leverages and influences investments from international financial institutions and operations, such as debt restructuring, to improve the well-being of children. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF scaled up its partnerships with multilateral development banks to procure life-saving supplies, such as COVID-19 vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, to strengthen social protection, health and water, sanitation and hygiene systems, as well as to improve access to good-quality education, remote learning and the Internet.

15. Across the United Nations system, several important partnerships have been developed to further the achievement of child-related Sustainable Development Goals, including the Blueprint for Joint Action for refugee children developed by UNICEF and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The 10 Blueprint countries (Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Rwanda) are home to more than 2.2 million refugee children – exceeding 20 per cent of the global total. Despite

operational challenges during the pandemic, efforts under the Blueprint have achieved strong results across the education, water, sanitation and hygiene, and child protection sectors. Approximately 840,000 refugees, returnees and host communities have received safely managed sanitation services and 1.1 million have gained access to basic water services since 2020. More than 168,000 children and young people have received individual education learning materials in Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ecuador and Iraq, and more than 173,000 children, adolescents and caregivers have benefited from community-based mental health and psychosocial services and child protection services in Bangladesh, Iraq and Lebanon. Furthermore, nearly 640,000 women, girls and boys have benefited from risk mitigation interventions to prevent and address gender-based violence. After initial evaluation findings and consultation with regional- and country-level leadership, the original timeline for the Blueprint initiative was extended until the end of 2022.

16. Partnerships with foundations, philanthropists and the private sector are not just important as ways to raise funds or to leverage financing for children. They can also help with exploring new themes, sharing knowledge and setting norms and standards. Such efforts are exemplified by the broad coalition of partners, including the International Telecommunication Union, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, UNICEF, the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, Child Help International, Global Kids Online, Microsoft, IBM, UK Safer Internet Centres and others, that has launched the Protection through Online Participation initiative. The initiative is aimed at better understanding how children and young people use online means to access safety and protection, as the increasing digitalization of children's lives and insufficient regulation create serious risks of violence against children. The initiative will provide recommendations for States, the information and communications technology industry, civil society organizations and other relevant stakeholders on improving online protection services.

D. Monitoring progress

17. High-quality data are crucial to measure progress on child-related Sustainable Development Goals and formulate evidence-based, targeted and adequate programmatic responses. In 2021, UNICEF supported Governments in monitoring progress on the Sustainable Development Goals through methodological development, data collection activities and the production of progress assessments at the global, regional and national levels. UNICEF facilitated policy advocacy, informed programmatic interventions and filled data gaps. UNICEF continued to expand its global databases by collating available survey and administrative data to improve access to data and information for decision-making. In collaboration with Governments, external survey programme partners and other United Nations entities, UNICEF supported the design and implementation of the multiple indicator cluster survey and other household surveys covering data for child-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

18. To drive transformative change for children and women, UNICEF strengthened the production, dissemination and use of high-quality and disaggregated data and statistics to monitor national development strategies and plans. In 2021, UNICEF country offices collaborated within United Nations country teams, providing support to 88 countries in strengthening national administrative data systems for individual sectors, as well as their interoperability across sectors; 71 countries in strengthening the overall national statistical systems regarding data on children and women, in alignment with the national statistical master plans or national strategies for the development of statistics; and 40 countries in documenting and taking up good data governance standards regarding data on children. A good example of improved data

work is the use of multiple indicator cluster surveys in the Pacific region: Kiribati was the first country to conduct the survey in 2018–2019, and Fiji, in 2021, collected data on health, nutrition, child protection, education, skills development, early childhood development, water, sanitation and hygiene, and other sectors.

19. Nevertheless, challenges in data collection remain. On average, there are insufficient data for 75 per cent of child-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators in every country. Significant data challenges often relate to the most vulnerable and marginalized children. Renewed efforts to address data gaps on children with disabilities led to the UNICEF report *Seen, Counted, Included: Using Data to Shed Light on the Well-being of Children with Disabilities*, covering 43 countries and using more than 60 indicators of child well-being, including education, nutrition and health, access to water and sanitation, and protection from violence and exploitation. The urgent need for data related to children with disabilities is reflected in the report: compared with children who do not have disabilities, children with disabilities are 34 per cent more likely to be stunted, 49 per cent more likely to have never attended school, 41 per cent more likely to feel discriminated against, 51 per cent more likely to consider themselves unhappy and 20 per cent less likely to have expectations of a better life.⁸ Data gaps also remain when it comes to children without adequate parental care, who are still virtually invisible in statistics. As a result, Governments lack the information to understand and address their concerns. Civil society organizations, such as SOS Children's Villages, advocate for the inclusion of data on these children in national and international monitoring systems for the Sustainable Development Goals, and for the development of disaggregated data categories relating to children's care.

E. Participation and self-expression of children

20. Climate change, conflict, epidemics, migration and technology are reshaping society, forcing children across the globe to adapt to unprecedented changes in their social lives, their education and how they prepare for work. Children have the right to freely express their views on all matters and decisions that affect them and to have their views considered at all levels of society, as established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In accordance with those rights, UNICEF consulted with more than 200,000 children and young people worldwide through U-Report, Voices of Youth and in-person and virtual workshops during the development of its Strategic Plan 2022–2025. Children and young people shared their concerns and expectations regarding such topics as climate change, mental health, digital learning and gender equality. The findings from the unprecedented consultation contributed to the theory of change underlying the Strategic Plan.

21. Children continue to exercise their civil and political rights as human rights holders, claimants and defenders, including the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression, and to be heard in their demands for, inter alia, social justice and climate action. However, they face many limitations in the exercise of such rights owing to a shrinking civic space, as well as social norms, traditional values, legal barriers and adult-centred policies and programmes. Global research reveals that only 20 per cent of children felt that their Governments were listening to them during the COVID-19 pandemic response.⁹ Remedial actions taken by Governments, such as safe opportunities to play, safe school reopening and support to families, might have

⁸ UNICEF, *Seen, Counted, Included: Using Data to Shed Light on the Well-being of Children with Disabilities* (New York, 2022).

⁹ Laura Lundy and others, "Life Under Coronavirus: Children's Views on their Experiences of their Human Rights", *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, vol. 29 (2021).

been taken earlier, better and at a lesser cost had children been consulted from the onset of the pandemic.

22. The pandemic has limited opportunities for children's activism. As the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law highlighted, 62 countries have imposed measures in their pandemic response that affect freedom of expression.¹⁰ However, children contributed meaningfully to the pandemic response when they were provided with the right opportunities. For example, in Bhutan, 70,000 Scouts engaged in supporting the most vulnerable children and youth with continuing their education. Where roads were not accessible, Scouts travelled on foot to share educational materials, supported younger children in completing their homework and provided lessons to children without access to online learning. In India, more than 7 million children and young volunteers joined the Young Warrior movement, taking action against COVID-19 and promoting skills through learning platforms available in the country. The Young Warrior NXT chatbot, designed in consultation with young people, helped children and adolescents to use sets of simple to-do lists for practising life skills around critical thinking, self-awareness, problem-solving and communication. In the Philippines, the Child-Friendly Local Governance Audit helps local government units to ensure child representation in the Local Council for the Protection of Children and children's participation in the development of policies, programmes and projects.

23. Climate change is another critical issue mobilizing children's participation at a global scale. The Fridays for Future movement, unprecedented for the young age of its participants, quickly claimed global attention and brought more than 14 million children and young people on the streets protesting government inaction on climate change. The lack of adequate response and engagement from policymakers demonstrates how even a strongly empowered, global child-led movement has difficulties in making at-scale and sustained change without the support of adult-led institutions.

III. Progress in the four major goal areas of “A world fit for children”

24. After decades of steady progress, the impacts of climate change, conflict and COVID-19 have led to major increases in child poverty. An estimated 100 million additional children are now living in multidimensional poverty. Poverty strongly undermines children's ability to have a fair chance in life, disturbing their well-being across health, education and other sectors. Children already living in disadvantaged populations and marginalized communities are disproportionately affected. At the same time, a generation of children that has never experienced poverty before is now quickly falling into poverty and deprivation, including children living in urban areas, fragile contexts and those whose parents and caregivers are working in the service and informal sectors. Child poverty is not confined to low-income countries; in fact, most vulnerable children live in middle-income contexts and are affected by inequality and policy gaps.

25. While the pandemic response has generally been impressive within existing national levels of fiscal space, the extension of social protection has often been short term and too small to meet the scale of the challenge.¹¹ Governments with well-established systems were able to respond more effectively to crises, while others had

¹⁰ International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker. Available at www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/.

¹¹ Ugo Gentilini and others, “Social protection and jobs responses to COVID-19: a real-time review of country measures” Living paper (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2020).

to develop parallel responses to support the most vulnerable children. The pandemic highlighted the critical gaps that are still being faced in social protection systems, in terms of coverage, adequacy and financing. Only one in four children receive adequate benefits, and many social protection systems face challenges in responding to crises effectively and rapidly.

26. Even in a best-case scenario, it may take seven years to recover and return to pre-pandemic levels of child poverty. Urgent action is needed to reverse the negative trends while also forging a new path for recovery. Scaling up social protection systems and protecting and expanding finance for human capital need to be prioritized in our collective efforts for inclusive recovery. The evidence is clear on the importance of social protection, including cash transfers: it reduces poverty and food insecurity; improves access to health, nutrition and education services; promotes women's economic empowerment; tackles the underlying causes of violence against women and children; and contributes to secure livelihoods and local economic development.

27. Furthermore, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will depend on the successful realization of systemic and transformative changes at the national level across sectors. Stakeholders and duty bearers need to complement the provision of traditional services with interventions that have long-term, sustainable and resilient impact. Opportunities for systemic change are to be found in policy and legislation, data collection and analysis, social attitudes, norms and behaviours, financing, infrastructure and markets. Cross- and multisectoral approaches will also be critical in the coming years, as a suitable approach to the integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals and their strong connection to the global normative framework on children's rights.

A. Promoting healthy lives

28. Good health and well-being for all is a foundation of the 2030 Agenda. At the start of 2020, more children had lived to see their first birthday than at any other time in history, as child mortality had fallen by 50 per cent since 2000. However, progress did not reach every child. In 2020, more than 5 million children died before the age of 5 years, with children in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia continuing to face the highest risk of death. If current trends continue, 61 countries will miss the neonatal mortality target (Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.2.2), and 54 countries will miss the under-5 mortality target (3.2.1). Immunization coverage has plateaued since 2010 because of significant inequities in coverage. In 2020, there was an increase of 3.4 million unvaccinated children globally, the largest increase in 20 years. Many immunization indicators are off-track to meet the targets of the Immunization Agenda 2030. The most recent data, from 2020, show that immunization coverage has declined mainly due to COVID-19 and the associated response, erasing more than a decade of progress. Disruptions in global health-care systems led to a reduction of global diphtheria/tetanus/pertussis vaccine coverage, from 86 per cent in 2019 to 83 per cent in 2020. Slow progress in the introduction of new vaccines into national immunization schedules during 2020 and 2021 was largely due to COVID-19, financial constraints and competing priorities.

29. The Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator partnership helped to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments and vaccines. Since February 2021, the COVAX Facility has delivered more than 1.4 billion vaccine doses to 145 countries and territories and has helped 92 lower-income countries eligible for donor-funded vaccines through the COVAX Advance Market Commitment mechanism to protect, on average, 43 per cent of their population with two doses. To address the urgent challenges of turning vaccine doses into vaccinated communities, COVAX

partners – the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the Gavi Alliance – launched the COVID-19 Vaccine Delivery Partnership, an initiative building on existing resources to accelerate vaccination coverage in countries that face the biggest challenges in reaching their vaccination targets. In addition to supporting the procurement, delivery and roll-out of vaccines, COVAX partners, including in the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator Facilitation Council, are helping to address key vaccine manufacturing bottlenecks to help increase overall supply.

30. Early childhood offers a critical window of opportunity to shape the trajectory of children’s holistic development and build a foundation for their future. To achieve their full potential, children need nurturing care that includes good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for learning. Despite the overwhelming evidence and political momentum around early childhood development, more than 43 per cent of children under the age of 5 (more than 250 million children) are at risk of not reaching their full developmental potential due to poverty, poor nutrition and a lack of access to basic services and opportunities for enrichment through learning, play, care and peer support. The disruption in essential early childhood development-related services due to COVID-19 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities facing parents and their children of all ages, putting many more young children at even greater risk of not receiving vital nurturing care to grow and reach their developmental potential. Moreover, the unique nature of the pandemic places parents as first-line responders for children’s survival, care and learning. The crisis threatens to reverse gains achieved in recent decades, with budget allocations for early childhood development under pressure in an environment of financial constraints and austerity.

31. In the past years, countries have increasingly adopted multisectoral early childhood development packages, integrating responsive caregiving, early stimulation and other essential services across sectors. Monitoring by UNICEF shows that the number of countries with Government-owned multisectoral early childhood development packages with costed actions plans has steadily increased, from 28 in 2017 to 61 in 2021. In addition, 99 countries established national policy or action plans on early childhood development in 2021, an increase from 65 in 2017. Urgent priorities include elevating integrated parenting support, enhancing multisectoral approaches to integrate essential services into existing service delivery platforms and strengthening enabling environments through family-friendly policies, financing and governance. Evidence has also proven the importance of early childhood development professionals, such as teachers. Singapore, for example, is providing structured guidance to early childhood educators on career pathways, skills and competencies through the national Skills Framework for Early Childhood and Continuing Professional Development training road map.

32. The lifelong health consequences of good nutrition start in the womb. Children will reach their full adult potential only if they receive proper nutrition in the first 1,000 days of life. Children whose mothers are malnourished before and during pregnancy will be born malnourished. Poor nutrition in the first 1,000 days can lead to stunting and irreversible developmental impacts. It affects a child’s brain development, school performance and future earnings, and puts children at higher risk of dying from infectious diseases, which is a particular concern when families are food insecure and unable to afford an adequate diet. The World Food Programme estimates that 276 million people are acutely food insecure and in need of urgent food, nutrition and livelihood assistance in 2022, an increase of 126 million compared with pre-pandemic levels. As more people become food-insecure, the goal of healthy and nutrient-rich diets for all becomes further out of reach. In areas affected by conflict, climate change or economic distress, malnutrition rates are on the rise, and those communities rely on nutrition and food support.

33. In low- and middle-income countries, approximately half of children between 6 and 23 months of age receive the minimum number of meals, and fewer than one third of children eat meals with the minimum level of diversity to meet their daily nutrient needs and support healthy growth. More than half of the estimated 149 million stunted children in the world under 5 years of age live in Asia, and two out of five live in Africa, where their number has increased. In 2020, 45 million children under 5 years of age suffered from wasting, including 14 million from severe wasting. While wasting is often associated with emergencies, many affected children live in non-emergency settings. At the other end of the spectrum, 39 million children under 5 years of age were overweight in 2020, up from 33 million in 2000.

34. The armed conflict in Ukraine further threatens to push millions of children and pregnant or breastfeeding women into a downward spiral of hunger and malnutrition, not only in Ukraine but around the world. The Russian Federation and Ukraine account for 30 per cent of global wheat exports and 20 per cent of global maize exports. Any disruption in production or supply can drive prices up, affecting millions of vulnerable families and instigating a global food crisis. When the prices of staple foods such as rice or wheat increase, people tend to spend more to maintain their calorie intake and spend less on other foods. This can lead to poor diets with low diversity and micronutrient content, thus contributing to malnutrition globally. The World Food Programme has predicted that the armed conflict in Ukraine could also increase the cost of specialized nutritious foods by up to 20 per cent, resulting in more than 1 million of the world's most vulnerable children unable to receive life-saving treatment in 2022 and leaving hundreds of thousands without vital prevention activities.

35. School closures amid COVID-19 had a heavy impact not only on children's learning but also on their health and well-being, as schools are a prime location for health and nutrition interventions, including school meals, deworming and vision screenings. At the peak of the pandemic in 2020, 370 million children had lost access to school meals, and by March 2022, 204 million schoolchildren were still missing out on food provided in schools, which had an especially hard impact on the most vulnerable children, for whom a school meal might be their only meal of the day. Many children are now returning to school systems that lack proper funding, which, coupled with increased poverty and hunger, increases the risk of devastating reversals in child health and nutrition.

36. The world is not on course to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (Sustainable Development Goal 6), and the rights of children and their families to safe water and sanitation will not be fulfilled. Some 3.6 billion people still lack access to safe sanitation, one quarter do not have safely managed water services and one third do not have a handwashing facility with soap in their homes. Achieving universal coverage by 2030 will require a quadrupling of current rates of progress in the availability of safely managed drinking water services, safely managed sanitation services and basic hygiene services. It will be especially challenging to accelerate progress in fragile contexts: many countries are struggling to extend water, sanitation and hygiene services to rural areas and to poor and vulnerable populations, who are most at risk of being left behind.

B. Providing good-quality education

37. Before COVID-19, the world was already facing a learning crisis: 260 million children were out of school, and those in school were not necessarily learning sufficiently. Data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) revealed that more than 1.6 billion learners in more than

190 States were out of school at the peak of the pandemic in April 2020. Full and partial school closures lasted on average 224 days in 2021. While nearly every country in the world offered remote learning solutions for students, the quality and reach of such initiatives varied greatly. Children from disadvantaged households have often experienced more negative effects than their peers because a lack of electricity, connectivity, devices and caregiver support, as well as language barriers, have impeded opportunities for remote learning. The youngest students and those with disabilities were largely disregarded in pandemic response policies, with remote learning rarely designed in a way that met their needs. Girls also faced compounding barriers to learning amid school closures, as social norms, limited digital skills and lack of access to devices constrained their ability to keep learning. The share of children in low- and middle-income countries living in learning poverty – unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 – is projected to reach more than 70 per cent, compared with approximately 50 per cent before the pandemic.¹²

38. School closures did more than disrupt education: 370 million children in 150 States missed out on school meals,¹³ 10 million more girls than previously estimated are at risk of early marriage by 2030,¹⁴ and 9 million more children are at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022.¹⁵ This generation of students is at risk of losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, 14 per cent of today's global gross domestic product.¹⁶ Early evidence from the COVID-19 crisis further indicates that mental health problems were exacerbated and that stress and anxiety increased among children and adolescents during the pandemic.¹⁷

39. Close to half of all refugee children do not attend primary school,¹⁸ and less than one quarter are in secondary school.¹⁹ Education for children in emergency situations is severely underresourced, with more than 80 per cent of humanitarian sector financing for education unfunded in 2021.²⁰ During the COVID-19 pandemic, a vast majority of forcibly displaced learners and their host communities were unable to turn to digital learning during mandatory school closures. UNHCR estimates that 57 per cent of refugee or displaced learners who were enrolled in school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were not supported by any digital or home learning programmes during school closures. Some 78 per cent of refugee children and youth had limited or no access to learning opportunities during pandemic-related school closures.

40. For children living in war zones, going to school remains dangerous. In 2020, 536 attacks on schools and on protected persons related to schools were verified by the United Nations in 21 situations. The use of schools for military purposes by armed forces and groups infringes on children's right to education. It is estimated that in

¹² World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, *The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery* (Washington D.C., Paris, New York, 2021).

¹³ João Pedro Azevedo and others, "Learning poverty updates and revisions: What's new?", Learning Poverty Monitoring Series, Technical Note 1 (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2021).

¹⁴ UNICEF, *COVID-19: A Threat to Progress against Child Marriage* (New York, 2021).

¹⁵ International Labour Organization and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward* (New York, 2021).

¹⁶ Artur Borkowski and others, "COVID-19: missing more than a classroom – the impact of school closures on children's nutrition", Innocenti Working Papers No. 2021-01 (Florence, Italy, UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2021).

¹⁷ UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, Protecting and Caring for Children's Mental Health* (New York, 2021).

¹⁸ UNHCR, *Staying the Course: The Challenges Facing Refugee Education* (Geneva, 2021).

¹⁹ Ben Sadek, *Left Out, Left Behind: Adolescent Girls' Secondary Education in Crises* (London, Plan International, 2019), p. 30.

²⁰ Financial Tracking Services, "Appeals and response plans 2021". Available at <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/overview/2021>.

2020, some 127 million children in conflict situations were out of school because of insecurity, attacks on schools or related personnel, or the military use of schools.²¹

41. The United Nations continued to advocate for the reopening of schools as a top priority to address the growing learning crisis. UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank launched the Mission: Recovering Education in 2021 initiative, focusing on the safe return to school for all learners, remedying learning losses and supporting teachers. Where schools remained closed, UNICEF scaled up interventions focused on ensuring the continuity of learning, urging countries to double down on efforts to remedy learning losses. UNICEF encouraged the rapid roll-out and scaling-up of digital learning solutions through the Reimagine Education initiative. Rebuilding better education systems also requires countries to measure how effective their policy responses are at mitigating learning losses, to analyse the impact on equity and then to use the analysis to make improvements. In 2021, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank conducted multiple rounds of surveys with ministries of education to monitor the status of school reopening and the measures that countries took to help children to catch up on lost learning.

42. To meet Sustainable Development Goal 4, the world needs to tackle the learning crisis that starts before primary school. Children who attend pre-primary programmes are more than twice as likely to be on track in early literacy and numeracy skills as those who do not. Although some countries have shown great progress in pre-primary education, such as the increase of 28.6 per cent in the gross enrolment rate in China between 2010 and 2020, half of preschool-age children worldwide are missing out on pre-primary opportunities. In low-income countries, where less than 2 per cent of the overall education budget is allocated to pre-primary education, the figure is 80 per cent.²² Pre-primary education continues to be a blind spot for domestic and international financing, representing a major missed opportunity to cultivate the world's human capital and help children to fulfil their potential.

C. Protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence

43. Decades-long progress in children's protection has resulted in increases in birth registration and reductions in child marriage and female genital mutilation. Despite progress, the world remains off-track to meet the ambitions of child protection-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators, with countries in situations of fragility and conflict furthest behind. With the highest number of countries experiencing violent conflict in 30 years, more than 30 million children have been displaced, and many of them risk enslavement, trafficking, abuse or exploitation. In 2021, the United Nations verified nearly 24,000 grave violations against children in conflict. Children further represent more than half the civilian casualties of landmines and explosive remnants of war. The number of children on the move has grown more than ever before in 2021, totalling 42 per cent of the 82 million people forcibly displaced worldwide.²³ Meanwhile, the risks facing children in the virtual world are being increasingly recognized.

44. The socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have adversely affected recent progress on gender equality. Gender-based violence has reached alarming levels globally, and child marriage and female genital mutilation (Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3) are even expected to increase.²⁴ Although female

²¹ [A/75/873-S/2021/437](#).

²² UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education* (New York, 2019).

²³ UNICEF, *UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2022 Overview* (New York, 2022).

²⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls". Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5> (accessed on 6 April 2022).

genital mutilation declined by one quarter in the past 20 years in the 31 countries with available data, global progress should be 10 times faster than over the past decade to meet the target of elimination by 2030. Child marriage has declined in recent decades, with one in five young women married in childhood today, compared with one in four a decade ago. However, global progress would need to be 17 times faster than the rate observed over the past decade to eliminate child marriage by 2030.

45. Approximately 1 billion children and adolescents experience physical, emotional or sexual violence every year.²⁵ Some 150 million children report experiencing peer-to-peer violence in and around school, often due to discrimination, and some 720 million school-age children live in countries where they are not fully protected by law from corporal punishment at school.²⁶

46. Progress against child labour (Sustainable Development Goal target 8.7) has stalled for the first time in two decades, making the elimination of child labour by 2025 unlikely. Globally, 160 million children are engaged in child labour, almost 1 in 10 children worldwide. Nearly half of all those engaged in child labour were in hazardous work.²⁷ In 2021, UNICEF supported 66 countries in ongoing efforts to address child labour specifically in relation to strengthening legislation and policy frameworks.

47. In 2021, UNICEF-supported child-friendly justice services reached 384,000 children in 81 countries, or nearly half of all children in contact with justice and administrative bodies – up from 210,000 in 48 countries in 2017. The implementation of the Law on Child Protection in Mongolia, passed in 2016 and currently under revision, led to strengthened mechanisms for identification, referral and follow-up for children who are at risk of violence and/or who experience violence. Mongolia established child helplines, temporary protection shelters and justice-for-children committees to serve children who are in contact with the law. Worldwide, 2021 saw the largest-ever release of children from detention. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 45,000 children across 84 countries have been released.²⁸ New legislation prohibiting corporal punishment in all settings in Colombia, Guinea, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Seychelles were also major achievements in 2020 and 2021.

48. The right to be recognized as a person before the law is a prerequisite for exercising all other rights. Yet the births of one quarter of all children under age 5 worldwide have never been officially recorded. In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to be registered at birth and have a legal identity (Sustainable Development Goal target 16.9). Civil registration and vital statistics, interoperability with other sectors, increased decentralization of services and investments in digitization have done much to strengthen birth registration. While there has been a rise in birth registration levels globally, with about three in four children under 5 years of age registered today, compared with 6 in 10 in 2000, the total number of unregistered children will continue to increase and will exceed 100 million by 2030 unless progress accelerates.²⁹

²⁵ Susan Hillis and others, “Global prevalence of past-year violence against children: a systematic review and minimum estimates”, *Pediatrics*, vol. 137, no. 3 (March 2016).

²⁶ UNICEF, “Protecting children from violence in school”. Available at www.unicef.org/protection/violence-against-children-in-school (accessed on 6 April 2022).

²⁷ International Labour Organization and UNICEF, *Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward*.

²⁸ UNICEF, *Detention of Children in the Time of COVID-19* (New York, 2021).

²⁹ UNICEF, “Birth registration”, August 2021. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/birth-registration> (accessed on 6 April 2022).

D. Combating HIV and AIDS

49. Over the past five years, the pace of progress in paediatric HIV prevention and treatment has slowed considerably. With antiretroviral treatment coverage rates of 85 per cent in pregnant women and 54 per cent in children and adolescents living with HIV, the world fell far short of the end-2020 super-fast-track targets of 95 per cent. The setbacks experienced due to COVID-19 lockdowns further threaten progress, especially for the most marginalized and vulnerable women, adolescents and children. In refugee settings in 2021, 81 per cent of infants exposed to HIV were screened through dry blood spot polymerase chain reaction assays at 6 weeks, but only 68 per cent were screened at 18 months.

50. The past decade of the HIV response did witness a gradual increase in adolescents' participation in shaping the agenda for health, rights and well-being, and this had demonstrable impact. In 2020, there were 150,000 new infections among adolescents aged 15–19 years worldwide, a 35 per cent decline since 2010. The figure amounts to an annual reduction of almost 3 per cent globally. However, of the estimated 1.75 million adolescents aged 10–19 years living with HIV globally, only 54 per cent were receiving antiretroviral treatment in 2020, and most of them lack access to next-generation treatment options that might improve their chances of survival. A paradigm shift must take place in redesigning HIV services to make them more responsive to the needs of adolescents through their meaningful engagement. At the current rate, progress is too slow to achieve epidemic control and an AIDS-free generation of adolescents by 2030.

51. In response to this lacklustre progress, in the Global AIDS Strategy 2021–2026, developed by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), renewed emphasis is placed on ending inequalities, with a charge to eliminate vertical transmission and end AIDS among children and adolescents. The era of siloed vertical programming for HIV has passed. To accelerate past the plateau in the response, paediatric HIV prevention and treatment programmes must be carefully but systematically integrated into primary care, education systems and social protection services. COVID-19 has shown that resilient, high-quality health-care systems are among the most important tools to realize children's rights and achieve child-related Sustainable Development Goals. Without a health-care system that is fit for purpose, and without communities that are engaged, informed and empowered, hard-fought gains in HIV prevention and treatment, immunization, antenatal care, and child and adolescent health will be at risk when the next global pandemic occurs.

IV. Ways forward

52. To advance on “Our Common Agenda”, achieve the child-related Sustainable Development Goals and reshape our world into one that is truly fit for children, the international community has to support countries to make investments in primary health care, education and universal social protection. Good health, education and secure livelihoods develop human capital, and human capital drives national economies. This means, first and foremost, ensuring that government spending and tax systems benefit communities and children. It requires tackling the learning crisis, getting children back in school with tailored support to remedy the learning losses acquired during the pandemic. Education recovery requires adequate and sustainable funding and should build on the lessons learned and digital infrastructure and modalities developed during the pandemic. Recovering from the pandemic also means addressing the mental health of children and adolescents, which has been overlooked for far too long, with tremendous costs for society – both financial and in terms of human lives. The global compact for education financing, with a focus on both

domestic and international financing modalities, will be at the core of the discussions at the Transforming Education Summit that will convene Heads of State in September.

53. Making peace with nature has been correctly identified by children and young people as the defining task of the twenty-first century. It is essential to address the three-pronged environmental crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste, which risks irreversibly changing the natural world and how humanity benefits from it. The crisis is directly linked to current unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. Massive investment is needed to accelerate the phasing-out of coal and the phasing-in of renewable energy. It is not only a moral obligation but smart self-interest that wealthier countries have to uphold their pledge to support low- and middle-income countries in their bid to become climate-resilient.

54. Children must be at the heart of solutions to these challenges, at the global, national and local levels. Making up more than one quarter of the global population, children can help to bring about a sustainable future by making deliberate choices in their everyday lives. Not only are they the change agents in schools and communities today, but they are also the decision makers of tomorrow. Their engagement is crucial and mandated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United Nations is working with the biggest child- and youth-led movements and education partners to inspire them and equip them with the skills that they need today, and to tackle the challenges of tomorrow and overcome the troubled legacy that they are set to inherit.

55. After more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is further away from realizing the rights of every child and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Children around the world are demanding transformative change, the protection of their rights, an equitable recovery and intergenerational justice. To honour these demands and to provide children with a liveable planet, leaders in Governments and the private sector need to make substantial investments beyond current levels, particularly for children in fragile and humanitarian contexts. Guided by “Our Common Agenda” and the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations stands ready to collaborate with children and young people, Member States, the private sector and civil society organizations to meet the challenges of the current decade.
