

ED Fore's Annual Letter – For release February 17, 2021

Five Opportunities for Children We Must Seize Now:

An open letter on why I believe we can reimagine a better post-COVID world for every child

COVID-19 is the first truly global crisis we have seen in our lifetime. No matter where we live, the pandemic affects every person – children most of all. Millions are missing out on basic health services, education and protection simply because they were born into poverty or because of their ethnicity, religion or race. COVID-19 has widened this inequality gap and the social, economic and health impacts of the pandemic will reverberate for years to come, threatening child rights.

But this is not the time to be intimidated or paralyzed by these challenges. As we kick off UNICEF's 75th anniversary, we are reminded that this organization was created in the midst of another historic crisis in the aftermath of World War II. Back then, it would have been easy to be overwhelmed by the scale of the problems facing children in a war-ravaged world. But we reimaged what was possible. We built new health and welfare systems around the world. We defeated smallpox. We built the United Nations.

History is calling upon us once again. In previous major global crises, from world wars to pandemics, leaders have come together to negotiate deals and pacts, agreeing to build new ways to restore peace, recover and rebuild, and to cooperate.

We need to rally the world behind a practical and concrete [plan to protect our children](#) – a promise from our generation to the next to invest in health and education, build more resilient systems and services that can reach all children, and ensure that budget cuts and economic downturns do not harm them.

While we must be clear-eyed about the scale of the challenges facing the world's children, we can also advance in partnership and solidarity by building on our past, with ambition and confidence in our future.

This is not about a return to the way things were. For hundreds of millions of children around the world, 'normal' was never good enough to begin with.

Here are **five opportunities** for the world's children revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and **five lessons** on how we can reimagine a better future for them, as reflected in the voices of young people.

NO 1: For VACCINES to work, we must build trust

"The growing anti-vaccination rhetoric is putting us at risk from deadly diseases that should have been eradicated completely in this day and age. No one should have to suffer from a disease that vaccines could safely prevent. No one." [Ridhi, 20 Thailand](#)

History and science tell us vaccines are the best hope we have of ending this virus and rebuilding our lives and our livelihoods.

Yet, as Ridhi reminds us, there is a real risk the COVID-19 vaccines will not reach all who need it.

Vaccine hesitancy will have a profound effect on our ability to overcome COVID-19. A study of nearly 20,000 adults from 27 countries found that roughly 1 in 4 of them would decline a COVID-19 vaccine. A similar study of Americans showed that unclear and inconsistent messaging from public health officials and politicians could reduce vaccine use.

Meanwhile, vaccine misinformation has become a big and growing business. Anti-vaccination entrepreneurs have increased their online following by at least 20 per cent during the pandemic. According to Avaaz, the top 10 websites identified by researchers as spreading health misinformation had almost four times as many views on Facebook as information from established health sites.

In short, we are losing serious ground in the fight for trust. And without trust, any COVID-19 vaccine will be useless. But with the global roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines, we now have the opportunity to truly reach every child with life-saving immunizations. The light at the end of the tunnel needs to shine for all.

What needs to be done: Now that the world has developed multiple COVID-19 vaccines, we can turn our attention to the long and difficult fight to eliminate this virus from the planet with equity and fairness, reaching everyone including the poorest and most excluded.

Work is already being done to prepare for that day. UNICEF is a committed partner of the Advance Market Commitment Engagement Group of the COVAX Facility, a global collaboration to guarantee fair and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines around the world. Our goal is to ensure that no country and no family is pushed to the back of the line as vaccines become available. We will do this by leading efforts to procure and supply COVID-19 vaccines and using our existing infrastructure to help facilitate their logistically demanding delivery, even to the most remote areas. Governments must work together to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are affordable and accessible to all countries.

But just as critically, because the most important ingredient to any vaccine is trust, UNICEF is rolling out a global digital campaign to build public support and raise local awareness about the value and effectiveness of all vaccines.

Technology companies have a huge role to play and have taken important initial steps to address the spread of dangerous misinformation on their platforms. In October, Facebook announced a global policy to prohibit ads that discourage vaccinations. Soon after, YouTube announced a crackdown on anti-vaccination content, removing videos that include misinformation on COVID-19 vaccines. But more can be done. Social media platforms must take steps to flag and remove content that distorts the truth.

Vaccine hesitancy goes far beyond COVID-19 vaccines. In 2019, WHO said vaccine hesitancy was one of the top 10 threats to global health and without trust, vaccines are just expensive vials in a doctor's cabinet.

NO 2: Bridging the DIGITAL DIVIDE can help bring quality education for all

"I think this may be the perfect time for schools to listen to their students and find ways to improve their online learning facilities. Even after the pandemic passes, remote learning could be a valuable tool to making education accessible and flexible." [Kamogelo, 18, South Africa](#)

Kamogelo is right. During the peak of school closures in early 2020, about 30 per cent of the world's schoolchildren were unable to access remote learning. In fact, only just over half of households in a majority of countries around the world have access to the internet.

These are the same children who are already unlikely to have access to quality education. The fact that over 50 per cent of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple story by the end of primary school reflects a global learning crisis. And unless we bridge the digital divide, this rapidly growing group of young people will be left behind.

COVID-19 has heightened this urgency. We now face a ‘once-in-a-generation’ opportunity to connect every child and school to the internet, and provide new, digitally driven tools to help them develop the skills to realize their potential – through and beyond COVID-19.

What needs to be done: First and foremost, governments must prioritize reopening schools and take all possible measures to reopen safely.

But this great pause in learning has also provided a moment to rethink how we deliver education.

UNICEF’s Reimagine Education is revolutionizing learning and skills development to provide quality education for every child through digital learning, internet connectivity, devices, affordable data and the engagement of young people. By the end of 2021, we are aiming to reach 500 million children and youth and 3.5 billion by 2030. Together with dozens of private sector partners and governments, this includes everything from delivering textbooks to remote locations, supporting educational radio broadcasts, and reaching children with education where they live, including via SMS, WhatsApp groups and podcasts.

Digital tools can be gamechangers. UNICEF’s Global Digital Learning Toolkit is expanding access to foundational, transferable, occupational and digital skills for the hardest to reach and most vulnerable. For example, we are working with Microsoft on the Learning Passport, a platform that provides online and offline access to school curriculum in multiple languages, even in crises; collaborating with Khan Academy on foundational, digital, and STEM-related skills; providing a digital programme for refugees and migrants that teaches the host community’s language to connect to education and work opportunities; and working with Age of Learning Foundation to bring free access to school readiness and literacy and numeracy to over 180,000 students worldwide.

But learning tools must be matched by the connectivity to use them. To expand connectivity, we're working with public and private partners on the GIGA initiative to expand internet access to every child, every community and every school by 2030.

As part of this, we recently launched a global partnership with Ericsson to help map school connectivity in 35 countries by the end of 2023. This is a critical first step towards providing every child with access to digital learning opportunities.

As Kamogelo reminds us, by embracing the power of digital solutions at this crucial moment in time, we can revolutionize learning and skills development for an entire generation of children.

NO 3: COVID-19 has unlocked attention on global youth MENTAL HEALTH

“Why do we treat mental health as if it’s not a big deal? Why do we say to a person in grief that ‘you are just overthinking’? Why do we stereotype people having mental illness [as] being crazy?... It is time that we set aside these stereotypes and accept that mental health is as important as our physical health.” [Tulika, 18, India](#)

Tulika is right: mental health is a big deal – just as important as physical health. This is especially true in childhood and adolescence, when we lay the foundations for our lifelong cognitive and learning ability, our emotional intelligence and our resilience in the face of stress.

Again, the pandemic has highlighted just how vulnerable children and young people are.

For children everywhere, COVID-19 has turned lives upside down, disrupting comforting and familiar patterns like going to school and playing outdoors. For adolescents, lockdown has deprived them of the social and peer connections that are so crucial at this time of life. And for children affected by the trauma of violence, neglect or abuse in the family, the lockdown has stranded many behind closed doors with abusers and without the support they would normally find in school, and with their extended families and communities. COVID-19 has either

disrupted or halted critical mental health services in 93 per cent of countries worldwide.

These effects add to an already worrying toll. In [my previous letter](#), I wrote about the rise in mental health disorders among under 18-year-olds – a critical period on a young person’s development. Half of all mental disorders develop before the age of 15, and 75 per cent by early adulthood. The majority of the 800,000 people who die by suicide every year are young people, and self-harm is the second leading cause of death among 15–19-year-old girls.

Sadly, far too many children and young people do not seek help because of stigma and discrimination around both abuse and mental health distress. Mental health is also underfunded almost everywhere and governments must do more. Less than 1 per cent of health budgets in low-income countries goes towards mental health.

But with children and young people facing so much challenge to their mental well-being, this pandemic is also an opportunity to both talk about and learn about mental health among adults and children.

What needs to be done: Young people like Tulika are calling out for support, and we need to listen to their concerns.

Some governments are. In Bangladesh, Georgia and India, free phone helplines provide vital care and support for children. India’s Childline received more than 92,000 calls asking for protection from abuse and violence in the first 11 days of the COVID-19 lockdown, an increase of 50 per cent.

In Kazakhstan, which has one of the highest suicide rates among adolescents worldwide, UNICEF launched a platform in April 2020 for individual online counselling services for adolescents along with training and education for mental health specialists in the face of anxiety, stress and uncertainty brought on by COVID-19. Over 5,000 school psychologists and mental health specialists were trained in just three months. Other programmes in the country promote activities for adolescent social connection through peer-to-peer support groups and discussions with parents, shifting mental health from being stigmatized to providing understanding and care while increasing counseling and support.

Similarly, organizations around the world are working with young people to normalize the act of seeking help for mental health through proven interventions and campaigns. For example, [Time to Change](#) is ending mental health discrimination in the United Kingdom by working with teachers, school administrators and students to open up conversations, address stigma and support young people.

We need to do more: Countries need to give this issue the investment it deserves, dramatically expand mental health services and support for young people in communities and schools, and build on parenting programmes to ensure that children from vulnerable families get the support and protection they need at home.

NO. 4: COVID-19 does not discriminate, but our societies do

"We must discard the belief that we're powerless and realize that we're infinitely powerful." [Clover, 20, Australia](#)

The coronavirus pandemic has affected everyone on the planet, but it is not affecting us all equally. In too many countries, your ethnicity, your colour or your wealth, may make you more likely to suffer the consequences. For example, in the United States, African Americans represent 13 per cent of the population but roughly one fourth of COVID-19 deaths, and they are almost four times as likely to die from COVID-19 compared to whites.

Around the world, those who have been working on the front lines, essential workers, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and the poor and disadvantaged are already at disproportionate risk. They are more likely to catch the disease because they are more exposed and less likely to get access to care and treatment. This puts us all at risk. Rich or poor, if your neighbour is sick, you can get sick. This crisis will not end for anyone until we end it for everyone.

And poverty is rising dramatically. Globally, the number of children living in monetarily poor households is estimated to have increased by 142 million by the end of 2020.

But the effects of poverty go beyond health. The poorest children are not only the least able to protect themselves from the virus, they are also the least able to access remote learning and handwashing tools and services. For children living in a humanitarian crisis, the risks are greater still.

Children are not only twice as likely to be in poverty as adults – they are also more susceptible to suffer from its irrevocable lifetime consequences. Rarely do children have a second chance at getting the critical early nutrition, quality education or decent health care that enable them to survive, thrive and flourish. Without action, the consequences could last a lifetime.

What needs to be done. As Clover eloquently affirms, children and young people are not powerless. We must ensure that every child has the opportunity to contribute to society and that no child is left behind, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity or religion. We need a renewed commitment to addressing inequality and discrimination. As [Secretary-General Guterres said this year](#), not only do we need a new generation of social protection policies, but we must tackle deep-rooted discrimination in gender, race, or ethnicity through targeted programmes and policies.

Far too many children cannot access the basic services that we may take for granted. For example, clean water and soap are basic building blocks to preventing the spread of COVID-19 and other diseases. Innovations like portable handwashing stations, operated with a pedal to prevent hand contact with other surfaces, have been set up in markets, health centres and schools in Ecuador and other countries to protect children from viruses and bacteria.

Social protections like cash transfers can be a crucial tool not only in helping families stay afloat in the short term but also in fighting inequality more broadly – providing support to send children to school and health facilities, to buy nutritious food and to reduce child labour. UNICEF is now working with governments in 115 countries to support expanded social protection programmes in COVID-19 response and recovery.

Experience from past crises has shown there is a strong investment case for prioritizing social sectors, even during economic recession. As governments work to protect their people from the aftershocks of COVID-19, they must protect

investments in all social services from cuts, and ensure they use their resources efficiently to maintain service delivery.

NO 5: CLIMATE CHANGE is the other planetary crisis that won't wait

"A lot has changed for us since we cannot go out anymore and demand action, but that does not mean that the climate movement has been silenced... We cannot be silenced. The climate crisis is still on. It has not gone. It has not changed." [Vanessa, 24, Uganda](#)

COVID-19 has taught us that planetary problems require planetary solutions. No one suffers more from a change in climate than a child. Children are vulnerable to the changes in the air they breathe, the water they drink and the food they eat. We know children are more vulnerable to life-threatening water and food scarcity and waterborne diseases brought on by climate change. And on the current trajectory, in just 20 years, 1 in 4 children globally will be living in areas with extremely limited water resources. As adults, we are responsible for the health of the planet we will leave to our children.

Failure to address climate change head-on will only exacerbate inequality. By 2050, the cumulative damage from climate change is expected to reach US\$8 trillion, impoverishing the world as a whole by 3 per cent of GDP and the poorest regions by more. Unless we act now, more than 1 billion people face displacement within the next 30 years as the climate crisis, natural disasters and armed conflict drive an increase in migration, with major impacts to both the developing and developed worlds.

What needs to be done: We must link our COVID-19 recovery and response with bold and urgent actions that address climate change and protect our environment.

We need government stimulus programmes that prioritize low-carbon approaches and a coordinated global approach alongside local action. We already know of solutions: making water, sanitation and hygiene services climate- and disaster-resilient; creating resilient learning through green and safe schools; climate- and disaster-smart health services; reducing air, soil and water pollution; engaging youth as agents of change and our partners for the environment and climate change; climate-responsive social protection to support those affected by climate-related disasters; and creating climate- and disaster-smart food systems and diets.

Unless there are increased investments in these kinds of solutions, recovering from COVID-19 will be that much harder.

Many of these solutions have ripple effects, with benefits to health and the economy while building resilience to future disasters.

In a world where 17 countries withdraw more than 80 per cent of their available water supply each year, we need to reimagine a water-secure world for children. Better coordination and collaboration over shared water resources can be a catalyst for peace and an opportunity to build more sustainable cities, livelihoods and a clean and safe environment for children.

At the same time, providing clean water to the 40 per cent of the global population that lacks access to clean water and sanitation facilities can prevent the spread of infectious diseases like COVID-19 while resulting in US\$4 in benefit for every \$1 invested. In the 21st century, there is no good reason why we cannot get every household, school, hospital and health clinic equipped with clean water and soap.

Throughout, we can follow the lead of young people like Vanessa who are not only calling for change, but also doing something about it. For example, the winner of the UNICEF COVID-19 Innovation Challenge in Nigeria developed a solution for communities with unsafe and inadequate water using solar panels to develop sustainable water supply systems.

These kinds of solutions are not only useful in the short term, addressing the economic and social impacts of COVID-19, but also build resilience and reduce emissions over the longer term.

A final word...

In [a public letter I wrote in 2019](#), I laid out my worries and hopes for the future of children and young people. Little did I know that a year on, a global pandemic would demonstrate, in dramatic fashion, how well-founded these worries would be.

The bad news: As the crisis continues and the economic fallout deepens, we still have difficult days before us. The economic storm is decimating government budgets and reversing decades of development and progress. If we fail to act decisively and quickly, the effects could be felt for generations.

But here's the good news: We can reverse this trend by harnessing this moment as an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild and reimagine the systems upon which children and young people rely.

So this is a call to action for children, young people and leaders in every sphere of our societies – politicians on the global stage, faith leaders, government policymakers, star athletes, media owners, advocates and each and every one of us.

The international community must support [an inclusive recovery that prioritizes investments for children and child rights](#). On a wide range of issues, from internet safety and privacy, to digital learning, to providing clean water, the private sector must do more to reach and protect children with innovation. And citizens must continue to hold those in power to account and stand up to discrimination and inequality.

This year, as UNICEF celebrates 75 years of reimagining the future for every child, let's gather behind children and young people with a new spirit of urgency, as we create opportunities, ignite their dreams, and support them across every part of their lives.

COVID-19 will not be the last crisis faced by humanity. So let's work side by side as partners and friends to emerge from this pandemic stronger than before.
