

2021 UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)

The SDGs in time of crisis: A sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery from COVID-19 as an opportunity to realize the SDGs

Remarks by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta H. Fore

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. And to the children and young people here – thank you all for joining us.

For the last 18 months, we have all been grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and its many effects on our lives.

One effect is undeniable – an erosion of our hard-won progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Especially those related to children and young people.

Their mental and physical health, their education and their nutrition are all at risk.

These threats are playing out against the backdrop of shutdowns, shrinking economies, job losses, and growing poverty.

UNICEF and Save the Children estimate that in 2020 alone, over **140 million children fell back into monetary poverty** – bringing the total number of children living in monetarily poor households to over **725 million**.

The effects are devastating. Families cannot afford to send their children to school. Child labour and child marriage are on the rise. Children cannot access the healthcare, nutritious food and clean water they need. And the stresses of dealing with the pandemic pose major risks to children's mental health and physical safety.

That's why UNICEF has been calling for increased investment in all of the systems that children need.

Education is a critical example.

At the height of the pandemic, over 1.5 billion students in 190 countries worldwide were affected by school closures.

While millions were able to access online education, over 400 million children without internet access were shut out altogether.

So, in addition to safely opening schools as soon as possible, we also need the public and private sector to join forces to close the digital divide – including by supporting UNICEF and the ITU's Giga initiative to connect every school in the world to the internet. A huge opportunity to equalize education, once and for all.

Two other key needs – that are closely related – are **protection** and **mental health**.

For children already living in stressful or dangerous situations where they faced emotional, verbal, physical or sexual abuse and violence, the pandemic made things far worse. Children found themselves locked at home with their abusers, while also cut off from friends – all while child protection support services were shut down.

Children and young people have repeatedly told us that improving mental health is a high priority -- especially under COVID-19. Yet this area is chronically underfunded around the world.

So as countries look to strengthen their health systems after the pandemic, UNICEF urges increased investments in **mental health services -- including counselling -- for children, young people and their parents and caregivers**.

Throughout the pandemic, children and young people have demonstrated enormous resilience, bravery and determination.

As a global community, we need to work shoulder-to-shoulder with them to make communities and countries stronger and more responsive to their needs.

Together, let's work with them to reimagine our health, education, and social protection systems throughout the recovery and re-opening process.

Let's move forward together through this challenging time and build the future that children and young people deserve.
