

UNICEF Executive Board - 2022 First Regular Session

10 February 2022

Statement by the Hon. Eamon Courtenay, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration of Belize

Excellencies.

The past two years are an unprecedented reminder that our work is far from finished. Climate change and conflict have been increasing poverty for years, but COVID-19 is the new and immediate threat.

In 2020, poverty increased for the first time in a generation and amongst the new groups of the population—the urban and educated. The Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report (2020) recommends a simple two-track solution: responding to immediate crisis and pursuing foundational development problems. Investing in social protection schemes is the link between these two paths along the Development-Humanitarian nexus.

In Belize, social protection remains low. Existing safety nets were expanded and new ones launched to respond to greater needs. I am glad to report that the Belize Covid-19 Cash Transfer Programme (BCCAT) was a new launch that utilized a multidimensional poverty measure for transfers, prioritizing the most vulnerable households with pregnant women, children, elderly and persons living with a physical disability. But, as designed, BCCAT is unsustainable as it is purely publicly financed. Therein lies the cruel dilemma facing the Government and affecting vulnerable children.

With UNICEF, we are working to adopt a national Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) to better understand national deprivations; and to reinforce the social protection system. Accepting the fact that poverty goes beyond income, to include disaster risk and crises, allows stakeholders to recognize the true dimensions of the problem, and to better respond.

Social protection systems have the potential to accelerate a human-centred and green recovery from COVID-19, generate synergies and ultimately alleviate multidimensional poverty.

Two elements are critical. First, depoliticising control of social spending, particularly as it relates to children thereby ensuring that those who truly need receive. Secondly, significantly boosting public investments in social protection to tackle multidimensional poverty. Belize's BOOST and BCCAT programmes provide a strong foundation to build on.

Reducing child poverty is a universal problem. Solving it in Belize, and elsewhere, requires strong partnerships with key players in the international community. A well-resourced child poverty reduction plan, designed to reduce want and need is essential to guarantee a resilient future. As a lead advocate and a trusted partner, UNICEF is well-positioned to support Belize in these strategic areas. Let's revive the social contract with our people, together.