SDG 16: PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

Peace, stability, human rights and effective governance, based on the rule of law are central to the realization of child rights; and a prerequisite for sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 includes several explicit targets for children (16.2 on violence against children; and 16.9 on legal identity for all, including birth registration); as well as many others where child rights are implicit, such as 16.3 on the rule of law and equal access to justice, 16.6 on strong institutions; and 16.7 on inclusive societies.

Every country and economy has been affected by the ongoing crisis of the global COVID-19 pandemic – with harmful effects on child rights and child protection across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to threaten advances in global development. Experience from previous outbreaks shows that epidemics exacerbate existing inequalities, including those based on economic status, ability, age and gender. Indeed, COVID-19 has caused disruptions to child protection services in more than 100 countries.

Notably, the most widespread drops in service coverage among 140 countries impacted on services directly influencing the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16, including: home visits by social services/justice workers (65 countries); civil registration services (42 countries); and legal/judicial processes, procedures or services for children in contact with the law (40 countries). While governments have significantly scaled up social protection response to respond to COVID-19, further scale up and continuation of social protection support and child protection services over the longer term is needed to address the projected deeper recession in 2020 and slower economic recovery in 2021.

KEY ASKS

Advances in ending violence, promoting the rule of law, strengthening institutions and increasing access to justice are uneven and continue to deprive millions of their security, rights and opportunities as well as undermine the delivery of public services and broader economic development. Despite advances being further curtailed due to overwhelming of child protection systems in the face of COVID-19, the pandemic is raising awareness of the universality of increased violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation in times of stress. Governments and other actors must seize the opportunity to turn this newfound awareness into lasting structural changes that better realize both explicit and implicit child rights. To mitigate risks during the pandemic, Governments must prioritize maintaining or adapting critical prevention and response services to protect children from violence and ensure their access to justice, as part of their public health response. Renewed efforts are essential to move towards the achievement of SDG 16.

1. Peaceful Societies: High levels of violence, conflict, insecurity, crime and exploitation – accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic – have a profound impact on sustainable development. Millions of children around the globe experience emotional, physical and sexual violence in homes, communities, schools, workplaces, detention centres, and institutions and online. Today, there are 31 million children who have been uprooted from their homes, including over 17 million internally displaced, 12.7 million refugees and 1.1 million asylum seekers. As children are particularly vulnerable to long-term effects of violence, exploitation and abuse – and are at heightened risk to the immediate and secondary impacts of COVID-19 – they require special protection and attention. During and beyond COVID-19, UNICEF urges all Governments to:

   • Provide continuous education, social protection, child protection, mental health and psychosocial support and gender-based violence services;

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“Wealth children are not the face of this pandemic, its broader impacts on children risk being catastrophic and amongst the most lasting consequences for societies as a whole.”

--Policy Brief by the UN Secretary-General : The Impact of COVID-19 on Children
• Strengthen child protection systems and the social services workforce across all sectors – social welfare, justice, health, education and security; and during COVID-19, designate the social service workforce as essential;
• Establish high-level oversight of a coordinated national agenda to end all forms of violence against children and invest in child protection;
• Finance sufficiently a reform of laws to prohibit all forms of violence against children in all settings;
• Strengthen capacity amongst children, parents/caregivers, communities and leaders/decision makers to challenge harmful attitudes; and behaviours and adopt positive social norms and practices.

2. Just Societies: Strengthening the rule of law and promoting human rights is key to establishing peaceful and inclusive societies. While the right to access justice applies equally to children and adults, it is often overlooked in relation to children in contact with the law – whether as alleged offenders, victims or witnesses. For children to exercise their rights in a meaningful way, effective representation and remedies must be available to enforce their rights and seek reparation. During the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, the human rights of every child who is deprived of her or his liberty must be fully respected, protected and fulfilled.\textsuperscript{iv}

To be able to claim their rights, a person’s very existence needs to be recognized by the state. The right to be recognized as a person before the law through a legal identity is a prerequisite for being able to exercise all other rights. A birth certificate – as proof of legal identity – is critical to ensuring that children can enjoy their rights from birth. An effective civil registration system, including universal birth registration, is essential to ensuring that all citizens and especially children are recognized before the law, have a nationality; and can access basic social services and be protected from violence, abuse and exploitation including child labour, sexual violence and exploitation, recruitment into armed groups, trafficking, child marriage and prosecution as an adult in criminal proceedings. Birth registration, as an essential component of a country’s civil registry, also strengthens the quality of statistics, aiding planning and government efficiency and investment. Significant progress has been made to achieve SDG Target 16.9 on legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030. However, substantial investments are needed to achieve this Target, as 166 million children under-five remain unregistered, and an estimated 237 million children are without a birth certificate.\textsuperscript{v} During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF urges all Governments to:

• Ensure universal access for children to independent justice systems;
• Reduce the use of deprivation of liberty for children through diversion and the use of alternatives to detention; notably, recognize safe release as the best way to uphold the rights of detained children during a pandemic;\textsuperscript{vi}
• Boost children’s legal empowerment, including children's access to alternative dispute resolution mechanisms involving informal/traditional justice mechanisms;
• Establish specialized, child-friendly procedures at all points where children are in contact with the law;
• Strengthen civil registration systems that register every child immediately after birth; and during COVID-19, designate civil registration as an essential service to maintain operational continuity, reinforcing linkages between civil registration and health;\textsuperscript{vii}
• Identify and address disparities in birth registration between different groups.

3. Inclusive Societies: Inclusive societies ought to engage people as equal participants in decision-making, policy-making and law-making processes, implementation and scrutiny. Like adults, children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. This requires that those views be heard and given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Their effective participation can enrich decision-making processes. Children should not be excluded from processes and decisions that affect them and society more broadly based on their age, gender, disability, or other status. UNICEF calls on all Governments to:

• Promote the meaningful participation of children in society and provide an environment that enables the child to exercise their right to be heard;
• Guarantee the rights of all children in their territory, without discrimination;
• Take urgent action to combat xenophobia and discrimination against disadvantaged groups of children;
• Ensure the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups are heard, including children in low-resource and/or humanitarian settings who do not have access to internet-enabled technology, including through increased innovations and adaptations to deliver information and services to people.\textsuperscript{viii}

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systems on violence against children to generate reliable evidence to guide policy and budgeting and for designing, monitoring and evaluating prevention and response programmes and services. That said, the need for evidence must be balanced against the substantial risks to children, families and researchers participating in violence-related research and data collection. These risks are always present but are heightened in the context of COVID-19, which may necessitate rapid research, often via remote means, such as mobile phones or the Internet.1

**INVEST -- SOCIAL SPENDING AND PROGRESS ON RESULTS FOR CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH**

Opening up budgets and promoting participatory budget processes is a key component in achieving effective, accountable and transparent institutions. When citizens have a say in policy formulation and resource allocation, it contributes to the allocative efficiency of national public financial management and enables better tracking of expenditure that is responsive to children’s concerns and good value for money. This is especially important for child protection related services, most of which are provided locally, making it harder to track use of public funds without feedback from concerned families and communities. UNICEF calls on all Governments to ensure an open and transparent budgeting process, prioritize resource allocation for programmes that further the realization of children’s rights; and establish measures to track and monitor public expenditures for children. Countries are encouraged to follow the guidance from the General Comment No. 19 on the best possible use of public budgets for realizing child rights. UNICEF stands ready to provide assistance through its Public Finance for Children work. More broadly, against the backdrop of COVID-19, strengthening social protection responses is ever more essential to mitigate the staggering impacts of COVID-19, with its immediate and long-term economic consequences for children and their families.2

**ACTIVATE -- AWARENESS BUILDING & MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & YOUTH**

UNICEF urges all Governments to promote the meaningful participation of children in society and to provide an environment that enables the child to exercise their rights (including to be heard) without discrimination.

- **The process for preparing the 2021 national review should directly involve children and adolescent girls and boys, especially the most marginalized or excluded.** For example, through consultations (on and/or offline), surveys or polls, focus group discussions. UNICEF together with civil society, child-focused organizations and other partners could support in the process. The results of these efforts as well as the methods employed should be described in the Voluntary National Review, including the number of young people involved in the process.

- **Actively involve children, adolescents and youth, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, in local and national planning processes in development and humanitarian contexts** through consultation and other participatory means, and as part of ongoing efforts to make children, adolescents and youth aware of these issues, inspire their positive action and expand the space for their participation in accountability mechanisms and activities. This should be part of a continuum to regularly, meaningfully and consistently engage children, adolescents and youth as agents of change to influence behaviours and social norms amongst themselves, their households and their communities. It goes beyond engagement just for the purposes of reporting periods, but rather systematizing the engagement of young people in a variety of ways and across media and communications channels, including for example: digital platforms (including U-Report), participatory theatre, intergenerational community dialogues, community and children’s radio, participatory video, school clubs, TV Edu-tainment and child-participatory research.

- **Provide spaces for children, adolescents and youth to learn about, discuss and take action on the SDGs,** including Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. UNICEF can support this effort due to existing work in this space and by creating child-friendly education and entertainment materials through UNICEF’s foundational partnerships on the World’s Largest Lesson and Comics Uniting Nations. In addition, UNICEF’s Youth Activate Talk Methodology is a platform from children to express their ideas on the SDGs through a variety of mediums.

7 Maintaining Civil Registration and Vital Statistics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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