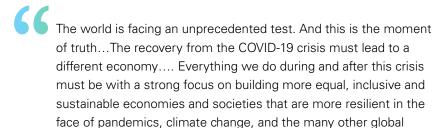


Reimagining our Future: Building Back Better from COVID-19

Solutions to reduce the impact of COVID-19 can at the same time create a foundation for a greener, more sustainable future for children



challenges we face.

- UN Secretary General Antonio Guterresi

COVID-19 has wrought havoc globally. Emerging in a world marked by deep inequalities and still far off track towards the vision embodied in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled an unprecedented global crisis that has quickly become a crisis of child rights. The socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic and the measures taken to limit its spread – as countries shut down their economies, households lose their livelihoods, and social services are curtailed – threaten to reverse decades of hard-won development gains for children, and jeopardize the accelerated progress now needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and realize the rights of the world's most vulnerable children. And the road ahead will continue to be challenging, for several reasons:

- 1. The virus will continue spreading to areas that are less equipped to manage the impact.
- 2. While the focus has been on flattening the current wave or curve, we need to discover ways of flattening many *subsequent and re-occurring* waves that are likely to persist for some time.
- Prevention measures require sustainable, affordable and equitable access to safe water; and resilient health facilities and schools.
- 4. We need to think about how we are addressing the ripple effects, such as the socio-economic impacts, as well as variety of other growing risks, such as climate change and environmental degradation, that are hampering our ability to respond to both the current and future crises.

Our actions now present both a unique risk and a unique opportunity:



The risk that we revert to a model that is no longer applicable to the world we now live in – a world where environmental sustainability has been compromised by our consumption and production patterns, with consequences we are only just beginning to feel. A world mired in natural disasters, droughts, floods, as well as spread of diseases from environmental contamination/pollution. A world where children and their families do not have what they need to address the complexity of the shocks and stresses they are faced with. The risk is that we only focus on short-term measures, which lock us into a world that is increasingly less-safe for children, both today and tomorrow.



The opportunity we have is to 'reimagine' a world that makes children safer today, as well as tomorrow. The world has an unprecedented opportunity to put in place the solutions that respond effectively to COVID-19 now, but that also strengthen the systems to better respond to future crises – whether they be pandemics or disasters. It is an opportunity that is more cost-effective and a better investment – one has higher returns and benefits in the long run, whilst also guarding against deeper threats that must not be ignored. These are the opportunities that truly pay off in terms of recovery, job opportunities, and better conditions in schools and health care facilities.

The recovery presents us with an opportunity to show the world's children a different 'business as usual'

The current crisis has us living in a world:



...where crises can potentially affect all countries in all regions at once, rather than isolated and geographically-contained events and emergencies, we are going to need a new type of programming that builds on local capacities, indigenous resources and creates self-sufficiency. Programming will need to become more localized, adaptive, flexible and innovative.



... where risks are harder to predict, we are going to need improved data, monitoring, surveillance and early warning mechanisms to ensure timely responses to emergencies and disasters, as and when they occur.



... where risks and emergencies overlap with each other, addressing them will become more complex. This will require improved coordination and collaboration across sectors and stakeholders, as no single actor or sector will be able to address the full range of effects or magnitude of the problem. This will also require the public sector, private sector and civil society working more closely together to address the common challenges – such as risk identification; incorporation of risk into the design, implementation and monitoring; and capacity building.

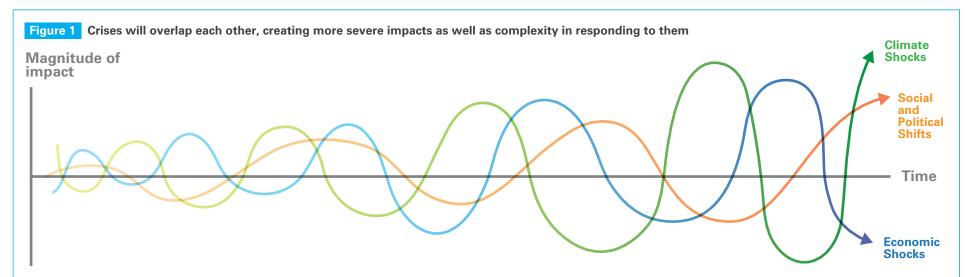


... where frequency of natural disasters is accelerating due to climate change and environmental degradation, we are going to need solutions which respond to repeated shocks, rather than one-off ones.



...where humanity's balance sheet with nature has gone too far into the red, and the dangers of wildlife/livestock exploitation, habitat loss, water resource depletion, deforestation and degraded ecosystem services must be taken seriously for our children's current and future health—and habitability of the planet.

Unless we address these stark challenges with immediate scaled-up action, the combined effect will create a world where one shockwave builds on another, magnifying direct and secondary impacts, exacerbating instability and complexity – all of which create a more dangerous world for children and threaten their survival.



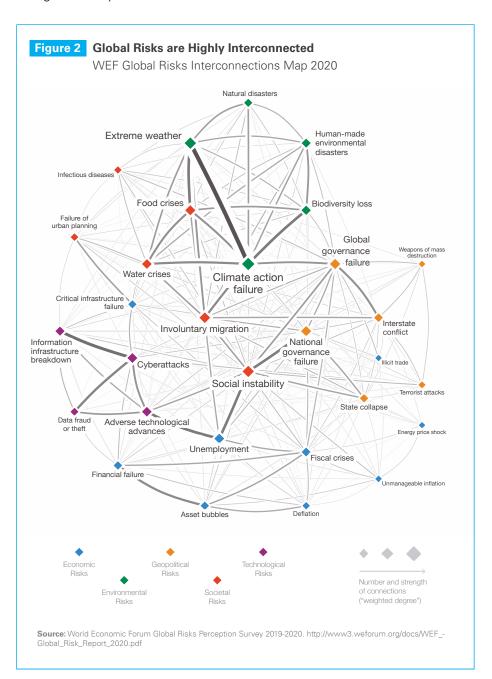
Note: This image is for illustrative purposes only. It is not a precise projection, but rather meant to illustrate the increasing frequency and severity of climate change shocks, and how those shocks can exacerbate social/ political shifts and economic shocks by magnifying peaks and troughs, and create increased complexity and volatility across sectors.

Even before COVID-19, disaster losses have risen astronomically; in a single year (2019) globally an estimated \$232 billion of losses were incurred, with \$229 billion of that related to weather events. That is higher than the GDP of 144 countries. By 2050, cumulative damage from climate change is expected to reach \$8 trillion, impoverishing the world as a whole by 3% of GDP and the poorest regions by more. At the same time as being more frequent and severe, climate shocks will draw and exacerbate volatility in economic and political/social dimensions. Growing interconnectivity between risk factors will create pull factors between multiple risks, adding considerable complexity in responding to those risks.

For example, faced with a present and future where risks and vulnerabilities are growing, more frequent heatwaves and drought will expose children to heatstress, reduce access to safe water, diminish food supplies, devastate livelihoods on which families depend, and threaten the progress towards the SDGs. Floods and extreme weather will damage infrastructure critical to survival. Changing patterns including trajectories of cyclones (hurricanes/typhoons) as well as their intensity and frequency challenge risk-management processes. More frequent landslides due to more intense weather events like heavy rainfall threatens the most remote communities and urban dweller alike. Environmental risks due to increasing GHG emissions, unsustainable energy consumption, air pollution are on the rise and impact child survival and well being. All this will create further social, economic and environmental shocks, including a loss of livelihoods, security, and potentially forcing children and their families to migrate. This will in turn further threaten the health, education and safety of children, as well as their future opportunities.

COVID-19 has brought into stark reality the need to build resilience, strengthen systems, improve monitoring, and the importance of sustainable, affordable and equitable services. We can use this knowledge to rebuild our economies in the wake of the virus, to make them more equitable, resilient, and sustainable. This means stimulus packages that prioritize low-carbon approaches to the social services children depend most upon for their survival, growth and well being. This also means having a coordinated global approach and local action, as is required for addressing climate change.

We need to prioritize solutions that will address the multitude of risks we are facing both today – and tomorrow.



Solutions for Response, Recovery, Resilience and Sustainability:

There are concrete solutions that we can take now in order to better respond and recovery from COVID-19:



| | · 3000000000000000000000000000000000000 | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|------------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Examples of Solutions | Short Term Considerations: COVID-19 Response | | | Longer Term Considerations: COVID-19 Recovery, Resilience and Sustainability | | | |
| | Impact on Addressing COVID-19 Spread, Infection and Impact | Impact on Economic Activity and Employment | Potential for Rapid Scalability | Impact on Resilience | Impact on Climate Adaptive Capacity | Impact on Climate Change Mitigation/ Low Carbon Development | Impact on Achieving the SDGs by 2030 |
| Climate and Disaster-resilient Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Services | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Green and Safe Schools – Resilient Learning | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Climate & Disaster Smart Health Services | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Reducing Pollution (air, soil, water) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Youth Engagement on Environment/ Climate Change | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Climate Responsive Social Protection | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Climate and Disaster Smart Food Systems and Diets | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | √ |



Climate and Disaster-Resilient Water, Sanitation and Hygiene:

Hand hygiene, safe water and social distancing can be practiced to collect water and access sanitation facilities. Yet latest global estimates find that 3 billion people lacked soap and water at home. 900 million children lacked soap and water at their school, and 40% of health care facilities were not equipped to practice hand hygiene at points of care. Reduced access to water inhibits the practice of handwashing to reduce risk of infection. Crowding of waterpoints increases the risk of contamination within and between communities. Lack of sanitation and hygiene facilities risks inter household contamination.

Adequate water, sanitation and hygiene services for households, schools and healthcare facilities are essential to prevent the spread of infectious diseases including COVID-19. The low levels of coverage of these basic services in many parts of the world reflect substantial inequalities between and within countries and contribute to the vulnerability of these populations to the pandemic – as well as other disasters and exacerbations from climate change.

Disaster and climate resilient WASH services can and should be scaled up — with immediate benefits in terms of reducing the spread of COVID-19 through improved handwashing and hygiene, less crowding, and broader health benefits for the community, as well as longer-term benefits in terms of sustainability, affordability and equity in ensuring children and young people have access to this essential service, especially in the face of climate change and other shocks.

Resilient WASH services are also critical to achieving sustainable growth and the SDGs. The average benefit of investing in resilient infrastructure, which includes WASH services in addition to other types of resilient infrastructure, in low- and middle-income countries is \$4.2 trillion, with \$4 in benefit for every \$1 invested. This is an opportunity to move away from shallow sources powered by manual labour or fuel, to solar-powered multi-use systems.



Green and Safe Schools – Resilient Learning:

Up to 91% of the world's student population are being affected by nationwide school closures, many of whom, especially the poorest, are not able to engage in remote learning. At the same time, more than 230 million children go to primary schools without any electricity, compromising educational and development outcomes. Education provides children with the skills, resources and abilities to harness their strengths, creativity and desire to create a better, more sustainable world around them and for their communities.

Green and safe schools goes far beyond infrastructure and includes access to renewable and sustainable forms of energy, digital connectivity and curriculum that is more attuned to the evolving needs of the growing green economy. Learning needs to be safe and disaster-resilient, so that children's learning is not interrupted by shocks or stresses. At the same time, children's links and influence to their wider communities and society has enormous potential for paradigm shifts toward better practices.

Scaling up safe and green schools in the near-term would help children affected by COVID-19, especially where it can facilitate connecting schools to the internet, and enhancing community access to mini-grid electricity more broadly, will help ensure learning needs can be provided remotely and are not interrupted. In these ways, 'learning itself becomes more resilient', including in the home. Renewable energy is critical for lighting, cooking, heating classrooms and can help create conducive learning environments for children and conditions for digital connectivity, especially for off-grid schools, as well as other needs as they arrive and as communities face the challenges of confronting the current pandemic as well as future ones. Green schools would also include curriculum which would help ensure children gain the skills they need to participate in the rapidly evolving job market – one that is increasingly characterized with the need for skills for the growing green economy. It would include WASH services that are solar-powered, and contribute to healthy environments within schools.

In the longer term, green and safe schools would improve resilience to further shocks, including ones related to climate change and environmental degradation. Low-carbon approaches from renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy

conservation would also create a cleaner environment, reducing CO2 and other toxic emissionsincluding air pollution, and creating a more sustainable future for children. Ultimately, improved social, economic as well as environmental indicators as a result of safe and green education will contribute to many of the SDGs for societies as a whole, while also reducing risk for the most vulnerable reaching the last mile and every child.



Climate-smart and Disaster-resilient Health Services that have a Minimal Environmental Footprint:

In the coming months, significant investments will flow into healthcare as part of COVID-19 response and recovery. Investments should go to functions that address both pandemics as well as the wider risks, including those exacerbated by climate change – prioritizing risk informed programming across the spectrum and health systems strengthening.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to a healthy environment. However environmental risks are growing – and now account for 1 out of 4 child deaths. Children are particularly vulnerable to many forms of environmental pollution - they breathe and consume more air, water and food per unit of body weight than adults, and hence where pollution contaminates these natural resources, children experience more polluted air, water and food per unit of body weight compared with adults. Environmental pollution also has proportionally greater impacts on their longer term development and opportunities. Toxins are particularly deleterious, as they can inhibit the growth and functioning of vital organs that affect them well into adulthood.

Healthy systems need to be strengthened to reduce the spread of COVID-19, manage the effects, and create a rapid recovery. In order to strengthen health systems, they should be geared to addressing not just direct risk factors, but also proximate risk factors, which often stem from environmental hazards and pollution. This requires, but is not limited to, improved communication for behavior change within communities, so that people understand better how to prevent diseases, infection and risks to their health rather than only treat it. It means identifying interlinkages between risk factors, including social ones, to

create a better enabling environment for the overall health of not just individuals, but whole communities. It means improved data collection, surveillance and monitoring, so that diseases and health crises can be acted upon quickly by all relevant stakeholders. This will help prevent viral outbreaks, control contagion, as well as respond to climate shifts in vector-borne diseases.

Health waste management is a huge, seemingly insurmountable issue for many countries around the world—developed and developing alike, certainly even more so now with Covid response and precautions. Overburdened or misinformed, capacities to manage waste safely are often limited, and standard affordable materials are creating large amounts of plastic waste that piles up. This leads to poor practices, such as highly toxic open burning or dumping where inevitably the floods of waste reach water supplies and create secondary health burdens, including antibiotic resistance and a broad spectrum of contamination. It is important to note that landfills are a major source of methane from the decomposition of waste—which also at times combusts into fires—this contributes significantly to GHG emissions^{v,vi}. Private sector partnership and skills development for youth can help innovation take root within countries for alternative, safe materials to reduce the source of waste, in addition to better practices for waste management.

Moreover, health systems should be resilient and utilize the benefits of renewable energy. Approximately 1 billion people globally are currently relying on health facilities without electricity, including lighting for child delivery, power for lifesaving emergency procedures, refrigeration of vaccines or electricity for simple medical and diagnostic equipment. Urgent action is required to expand electricity access, for health facilities to address COVID-19 emergencies, and provide uninterrupted cold chain of vaccines. Many of the healthcare facilities under UNICEF's programmes are located in remote areas and characterized by unreliable grid connection, poor surrounding infrastructure and low energy demand. Thus, off-grid solar photovoltaic (PV) power systems present a key opportunity to provide clean, reliable, and cost-effective electricity. Improved access to renewable energy will not only help health systems in responding to COVID-19, but also help them in responding to any range of shocks in the future, as well as reducing environmental footprints and contributing towards low-carbon development.



Reducing Pollution:

The most vulnerable to COVID-19 suffer from pre-existing respiratory conditions that are often the result of being exposed to persistent or high levels of air pollution. Air pollution not only compromises respiratory functions, but also lowers immune response systems, making it a dangerous co-morbidity factor in the current pandemic. Even in normal times, air pollution has also been proven to impact brain development, increase incidences of stunting, is a significant cause of child mortality under five, reduce lung capacity for a lifetime, and is a major risk factor for stroke later in life. Over 2 billion children live in areas that exceed international limits – and up to 300 million children are living in areas that exceed international limits by at least six-fold. If our response does not address pollution, we are raising generations of children more vulnerable to similar types of respiratory-based illnesses—with effects that can last a lifetime.

Improving air pollution can also help reduce the extent of damage caused by COVID-19; and it starts with better monitoring, which leads to increased awareness, advocacy and action. Yet – as Africa already faces considerable risks associated with COVID-19 and the ability to respond, efforts to monitor air pollution are extremely limited across the continent. Only about 6% of children live near reliable, ground-level monitoring stations that provide real-time data on the quality of air they are breathing - and it is likely that we are only scratching the surface in terms of understanding its full impact on children's health. This is compared to about 72% of children who live near reliable monitoring stations across Europe and North America. Increasing the base of reliable, local, ground-level measurements would greatly aid effective responses to the variety of respiratory infections linked with air pollution. Monitoring can then be correlated with health outcomes, interventions priorities, and awareness raised and policies changed.

Governments and communities around the world can also start to act even with imperfect monitoring, however, and this can save lives. It is important to raise awareness of the severe impacts on children's health and early childhood development. Communication for development approaches can be utilized for behavioral change that will reduce children's exposure to air pollution—from ambient and household level (e.g. from indoor cooking practices or household burning of waste). Cities, communities, and families need affordable healthy

alternatives, however, in order to manifest sustainable change, and this requires smart investment into innovative, localized, and green solutions. As countries, municipalities, and local communities invest in recovery from COVID-19, good practices should be scaled up that will reduce air pollution sources (strengthened waste management systems, emissions standards for transport, eco-and health-friendly cook-stoves, better connectivity to electricity at the right hours for cooking, etc.) as well as reduce children's exposure to air pollution (better monitoring and communication of risk, etc.).



Young people and children are rising to the challenge that COVID-19 presents us. Young people are also becoming stronger agents of change for action on climate and environment. 77% considered climate change one of the most pressing issues facing young people today. 98% thought that governments needed to tackle this through urgent action. Spurred by young people, over 4 million people called for climate action on the eve of the UNGA – and there have been about 14 million strikers on Fridays For the Future rallies.

While many schools around the world are closed, children and young people are still making their voices heard through the #ClimateStrikeOnline, and the youth climate movement is showing solidarity with their older relatives by staying inside to help keep everyone safe. Momentum is also gathering around major global events, such as COP26, which whilst postponed until 2021, is an increasingly important opportunity to make children and young people's voices heard. A prominent channel for this has been an *Intergovernmental Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action*, which is based directly on inputs from young people from around the world and which commits signatory governments to accelerating inclusive, child-responsive climate policies.

This can and should be a moment for intergenerational solidarity. The risks that the COVID-19 crisis presents to older generations are markedly higher than it presents to younger generations. However, social distancing only works when *all people* opt into a social contract – including people who are less at risk of becoming seriously ill if they contract the virus, such as young people. And by the same token, the risks that the climate crisis presents to younger generations are markedly higher than it presents to older generations. Yet stopping climate

change requires actions by older generations who sit in institutions and positions of power. We are at a unique moment for intergenerational solidarity – where we might be able to bring together people to consider how their individual actions and behaviors affect others, and harness the energy to tackle some of the greatest existential threats all-of-society is facing.



Climate-responsive

When a crisis hits, effective social protection support is often a crucial factor in determining whether families and children can quickly return to normality or their life paths will be permanently altered. All too often, however, national systems are either too weak to respond, or are not designed to have the flexibility to adjust, for example, to reach those that most need support with easily accessible and timely cash transfers while families and communities recover. In many cases, there is no risk transfer mechanism in place at all, especially in remote areas, informal settlements or areas with high rates of migration, etc. In other cases, existing mechanisms often activate too late or do not activate at all if a specific threshold is not proven—this creates a large gap in support at the most important and pivotal moments for the most vulnerable. Strengthening shock-responsive social protection systems has been shown to improve the anticipatory, absorptive and adaptive capacities of both individuals as well as communities.

- **Extending coverage** to support more people (ideally all of those who have been negatively affected).
- 2. Increasing the level of financial protection for affected populations, for example, via a higher level of support (e.g. transfer value) or longer duration of support.
- 3. Increasing the range of services offered to fully cover complex and multi-dimensional risks (e.g. wrapping a child protection or nutrition-support programme around a standard cash transfer).

Cutting across these three strategies, it is essential to provide support in a timely manner so that affected households and communities are able to cope with and recover from the impact of the crisis. This does not mean 'speed' of response, instead it implies ensuring support when it is needed.

Extending social protection that is climate-smart and shock-responsive to children and families who need it will not only help in building resilience and help them recover from the impacts of the crisis now, but will also build the foundation for a system that is dynamic and responsive to the increasing frequency and severity of crises in the future due to climate change. It is very important that social protection measures are calibrated to local contexts in an inclusive manner with a child-friendly lens in order for those measures to truly have impact and prevent hard-earned development gains. This type of social protection is also geared to the types of risks that climate change is likely to create, and incorporates both immediate as well as medium and longer-term projections as well as forms of support, such as capacity building of communities and local government on climate risks.



Climate-smart and Disaster-resilient Food Systems and Dietsvii:

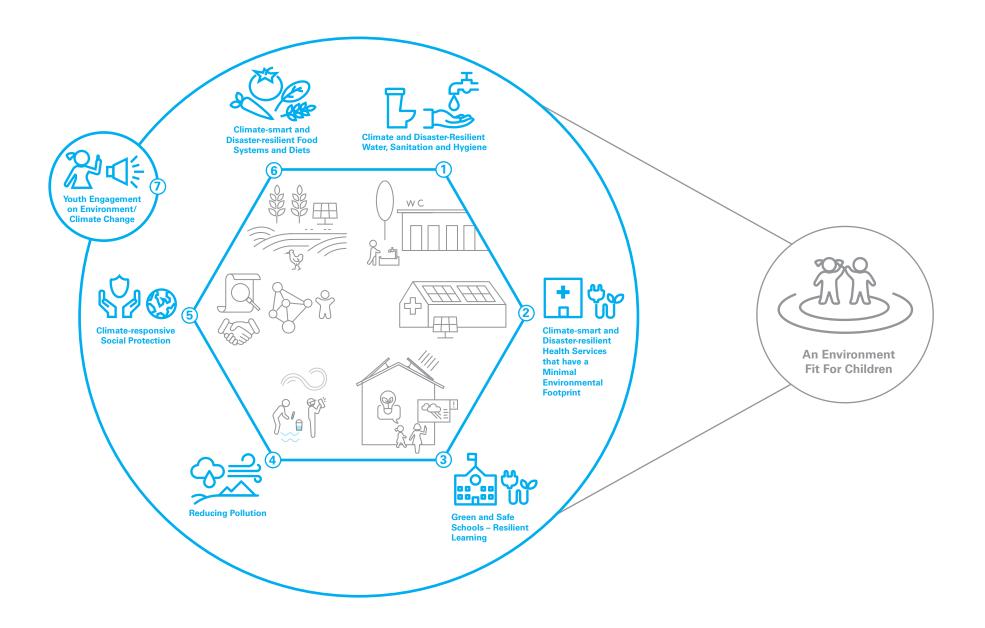
COVID-19 is having considerable effects on nutritional wellbeing of children due to reduced ability to purchase food as a result of unemployment and loss of livelihoods, as well as reduced availability of food as a result of rising prices or collapsing systems and institutions - including in some cases international supply chains. While these effects are being witnessed in all countries affected by COVID-19, the effects are most dire amongst the poorest within those countries.

Moreover, estimates suggest that climate change will be linked to 500,000 additional deaths between 2010 and 2050 through its dietary effects on reduced food quantity and nutrition, including a reduction in mineral content of foodviii. Inversely, our global diets and their supporting food systems are driving deteriorating planetary health through increased greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. Our food systems, especially the agriculture sector, is responsible for 30% of global GHGs. Meanwhile the heavy use of fresh water, fertilizers, pesticides, and continued biodiversity loss also contributes to increased risk to children and the future habitability of the planet.

Building food systems that are sustainable and support local systems, including in both supply and in demand, will make them more resilient to shocks. It will also help build positive planetary, ecological and nutritional health. An advantage of multi-use systems based on renewable energy can mean that families have

more water to grow crops or other livelihood options, increasing both household income and food standards. It is necessary to utilize the current shift in supply and demand to not only provide children with the better nutritional options now, but also promote healthy and sustainable diets, services, and practices that

support the optimal nutrition, growth and development for children, adolescents and women while taking into account climate change mitigation and adaptation.



We need to link COVID-19 recovery and response to climate and environmental action

The pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to slow down our collective efforts to combat climate change – rather it should be seen as an opportunity to accelerate our efforts.

- → This crisis has emphasized the importance of sustainable, affordable and equitable services, across all the programme areas UNICEF works.
- → This crisis has reinforced the value of multilateralism and of public/private sector collaboration a global approach is the only way to fight it.
- → It has also brought into sharp focus the need for local action, preparedness and resilience precisely the approach we need to respond to the climate crisis. We need local adaptation, that utilize local supplies, create local jobs, and build local infrastructure, energy, healthcare and resilient systems.
- → We will need to work together develop solutions, improve monitoring, and build a stronger system that is capable of dealing with the multitude of similar challenges and risks ahead of us whether they be infectious diseases or climate change and environmental degradation.
- This is a time when innovation, science and creativity need to be at the forefront of our response and we need to create an enabling environment for that to happen. The heroic response both by individuals and societies in many parts of the world is a testament to our ability to come together to solve tough problems in support of a cause we all agree upon a better future for our children.

As it contributes to the coordinated UN response, in partnership with governments and partners in civil society and the private sector, UNICEF is seizing the opportunity to reimagine a more equitable, inclusive and greener world that invests adequately in its children and young people, listens to and partners with them so that their rights, priorities and agency can steer the design of policies and programmes to accelerate sustainable development that leaves

no one behind. Children and young people are watching closely as we deal with this crisis that threatens their future. If we, in turn, keep the focus on them, they can be a touchstone for the unprecedented solidarity we need to overcome COVID-19 and build back better.



References:

- i. Launch of report on socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 "The recovery from the COVID-19 crisis must lead to a different economy" Available at: https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/launch-report-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19
- ii. AON (2019) Weather, Climate & Catastrophe Insight: Annual Report. Available at: https://www.aon.com/global-weather-catastrophe-natural-disasters-costs-climate-change-2019-annual-report/index.html?utm_source=email&utm_medium=external&utm_campaign=natcat20
- iii. World Bank and UN Population Data. Sourced from: https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-by-country/
- iv. Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) (2020) 'Global economy will be 3 percent smaller by 2050 due to lack of climate resilience'. Available at: https://www.eiu.com/n/global-economy-will-be-3-percent-smaller-by-2050-due-to-lack-of-climate-resilience/
- v. Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI) Fact Sheet: Landfil Methane. Available at: https://www.eesi.org/papers/view/fact-sheet-landfill-methane
- vi. Global Methane Initiative. Landfill Methane: 'Reducing Emissions, Advancing Recovery and Use Opportunities' Available at: https://www.globalmethane.org/documents/landfill_fs_eng.pdf
- vii. From forthcoming guidance on Nutrition-Climate Strategy, Roland Kupka & D'Arcy Williams
- viii. Smith, M., & Myers, S. (2018) Impact of anthropogenic CO2 emissions on global human nutrition' in *Nature Climate Change*, VOL 8, SEPTEMBER 2018, 834–839



