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Realizing the rights of all children in a changing world

As the Convention on the Rights of the Child approaches its 25th anniversary, the frenetic pace of global change is presenting new risks to and opportunities for realizing children’s rights.

The world is changing at a faster rate than ever before. Globalization, integrated economic systems and social media have made it more interconnected than once thought possible. Along with this, improved health care and the rapid spread of technology and knowledge has meant that more people are living healthier, happier and more prosperous lives.

But there are also considerable risks. We may soon face severe limitations in the availability of resources, including energy, food and water. Food prices alone are about one and a half times what they were a decade ago; for children, poor nutrition for even short windows of time early in childhood has significant deleterious effects on their physical and cognitive development. Inequality is widening, despite a rebound in global growth. And, arguably, we could be the last generation with the potential to avert many of the effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

The coming decades will witness a rapidly urbanizing, middle-class, ageing global population. In many countries, urbanization has led to the rapid development of slums, overcrowding and air pollution. The growth of an urban middle class is also associated with new lifestyle diseases and health risks for children, such as high blood pressure, obesity and exposure to cigarette smoke. Non-communicable diseases already account for most deaths worldwide, and this trend is likely to increase. Over the next 25 years, the fight against childhood diseases and mortality must look beyond the traditional realm of the household to encompass the modern environment of disease: the neighbourhoods and the city as a whole, with all their attendant risks and harms.

As we enter an era of hyper-connectivity and increasing online accessibility, social media is transforming economic, social and political life in almost every corner of the world. In the coming decades, technological innovation will transform education and health systems. Online applications have facilitated greater identification of and access to health care providers, health information and good practices. Social media tools have also been put to innovative use in refugee camps and in disaster scenarios, allowing displaced persons to reconnect with families and loved ones. Furthermore, mobile platforms are enhancing access to education tools for children in even the most remote locations.

But while all this has meant greater creativity, access to knowledge and self-expression for many people, children included, many others, particularly the poorest, are being left out. Unequal access to technology between the rich and the poor has the potential to further exacerbate existing disparities. Proactive measures need to be put in place to overcome barriers in access, and make societies and children’s lives more equitable.

The digital revolution has also brought new risks to children, such as exposure to inappropriate content, online sexual exploitation, cyber-bullying, identity theft and lack of privacy. There is a lot for children to gain from the Internet — but great risks to safety as well. Keeping children safe in an online world presents challenges in a whole new dimension, requiring new modalities, interventions and accountabilities for their protection.

One thing is clear: the world is at a crossroads, poised to make decisions for the post-2015 development agenda and take actions that can affect generations to come. We face new global challenges, but also immense opportunities to make a bigger impact on the health and development of children. These global trends and policies matter for children because they shape the environment in which children and their families live, and their well-being.

A world fit for children is one in which social and economic progress is made with equity, with special attention to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. As we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), celebrating the success and contemplating its unfinished business, we must look ahead to the future. Faster, deeper and more equitable gains for children in the next 25 years requires a sound understanding of the critical global drivers of and threats to economic and social progress in the 21st century, and a willingness to adapt actions, advocacy and accountabilities to a rapidly changing world in a way that respects, protects and promotes children's rights.

‘Child Outlook’, a policy briefing on global trends and their implications issued by UNICEF’s Division of Policy and Strategy, is a contribution to that understanding. This ‘Special Edition’, as we mark the 25th anniversary of the CRC on 20 November 2014, evaluates a broad range of future trends identified in a variety of studies and publications from around 30 organizations, including from think tanks, the public sector, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. The objective is to gain a consensus forecast of the most prominent global megatrends, and then take a closer look at how each of these megatrends might hinder, or help, the delivery of essential services crucial to the well-being of children for the next 25 years.
A multipolar world

The locus of global economic and political power will diversify away from the West towards the East and the emerging economies. Advancing the rights of all children, particularly the most disadvantaged, will face new challenges as power structures change.

Over the coming decade, emerging markets will become the driver of global economic activity, diffusing economic and geopolitical power. Low- and middle-income countries currently account for nearly half of global economic growth. By 2025, just six — Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation — will likely account for half of all global growth. The steady shift of the centre of economic power away from North America, Western Europe and Japan toward emerging economies and regions will undoubtedly have geopolitical consequences, giving rise to a truly multipolar world.

The World Bank estimates that emerging economies will grow, on average, by 4.7 per cent a year between 2011 and 2025. This is according to Global Development Horizons 2011, where the baseline scenario is derived from longer term historical trends and forward looking components such as demography, labour markets and education. Advanced economies, however, are forecast to grow by 2.3 per cent over the same period. Sub-Saharan Africa is currently experiencing an unprecedented economic boom: it has been growing at between 5 and 6 per cent on average over the last eight years, in part due to resource exploitation and high commodity prices, and is currently the fastest growing region in the world.

The share of global exports of low- and middle-income countries has risen steadily in the last decade, from around 33 to 43 per cent. Much of this rise is from an expansion of trade among these countries. Similarly, more than one third of foreign direct investment in low- and middle-income countries now originates in peer countries. Low- and middle-income countries currently hold two thirds of all official foreign exchange reserves worldwide — a reversal in the pattern of the previous decade, when advanced economies held two thirds of all reserves. Experts are already pointing to a handful of emerging economies beyond the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) that they are calling the N11, meaning Next Eleven Grouping. These include Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Turkey and Viet Nam.

For emerging cohorts of working-aged youth, opportunities include greater future access to a diverse set of jobs and new industries, Facilitated by an increasingly connected world, there is potential for greater collaboration and improvements in global supply chains. These new industries require new skills, and governments will need to work hard to provide children with the education they will need to compete in a changing and more dynamic job environment.

But there are still holes in the bucket

While global economic integration can serve to increase stability through diversification and the dispersion of risk, contagion is a constant threat. This can result in a higher frequency of shocks — what happens in one corner of the world can be felt in all other corners. What’s more, because the predominant global growth model is packed with stresses and fragilities that vary between countries and industries; sometimes effects can be magnified, and a banking crisis that originated on Wall Street can mean greater hardship for the poorest people in other parts of the world.

Without a significant focus on reducing disparities, inequality will continue to rise, notably in low- and middle-income countries that continue to house most of the world’s poor, and particularly in Africa. In 1990, only one sixth of the world’s poor lived in Africa. Today, Africa is home to just over half the world’s poor. A recent report by the Overseas Development Institute estimated that, despite expected improvements in economic growth, by 2025 up to five sixths of the world’s extreme poor will live in Africa.

Furthermore, while globalization has meant that working-age youth in many countries are afforded better access to new types of employment opportunities, for some countries this is not the case, and economic growth is significantly fuelled by the relentless search for commodities and rent-seeking. This type of economic growth involves heavy extraction of raw materials, often with little positive, and potentially hugely negative, impacts on the families and communities where it occurs. Much of this negative impact takes the form of environmental degradation, which can be irreversible.

Finally, while global growth in the past two decades has been complemented by increasing Official Development Assistance (ODA), contributions have largely plateaued since the financial crisis began in 2008. ODA already pales in size compared to other types of financial flows to low- and middle-income countries, such as foreign direct investment, trade and remittances. Yet it has been crucial in recent decades for much of the gain in child survival and development in low-income countries in particular.

Systemic adaptation

With a more diverse group of powerful countries setting the agenda, economic systems will need to adapt. We have witnessed, as a result of the financial crisis, the need for new regulatory frameworks to manage systemic risk in financial services. We have also witnessed how economic cycles can exacerbate inequality — in general, the poorest are least able to withstand an economic bust, and benefit least from an economic boom. A policy focus on inequality will be crucial in addressing these imbalances and preventing the inter-generational transmission of poverty.

Furthermore, environmental sustainability will play an increasingly important role in economic growth and stability. Throughout history, societies have relied on the natural environment as a source for raw materials. Increasingly, societies will not only be constrained by the rapid depletion of raw materials, but also by the deleterious effects of environmental degradation, which stands to manifest itself in the form of climate change and increased natural disasters such as drought, floods and severe weather patterns.

Children will bear the brunt of climate change. Governments will need to invest in social and environmental systems to promote adaptation. This includes ensuring schools, housing, health clinics and community centres can withstand shocks and natural hazards. Governments in countries where economic systems are
based on commodity extraction will need to ensure that this type of growth does not compromise future resource availability, and thereby the needs of future generations. They will also face the challenge of using commodities revenues to build strong institutions and invest in children and youth.

Development finance will also need to change. Private financial flows can and are being geared to contribute to social goals. Communities and civil society are also using digital platforms to find new ways of connecting people with financial opportunities and systems.

Through new modalities for innovative financing such as vaccine bonds and impact investing, which incorporate elements of goal- and risk-sharing, incentives for large-scale sources of finance, as well as strong mechanisms for accountability and transparency will be necessary. Several of the new methods incorporate an element of financial return, attracting new and unconventional development financiers.

A multipolar world goes beyond globalization and inter-connectedness and will involve greater power sharing, and businesses, civil society, governments and even other hybrid organizations between these sectors will have a shared responsibility for development outcomes. This will require greater collaboration and innovative mechanisms to distribute both the costs and the benefits of system maintenance.

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**FIG. 1** Percentage of global GDP in 2005 purchasing power parity

- **2011**
  - India: 17%
  - China: 6%
  - Other non-OECD: 12%
  - Other OECD: 23%
  - United States: 18%

- **2030**
  - India: 11%
  - China: 12%
  - Other non-OECD: 4%
  - Other OECD: 28%
  - United States: 20%

- **2060**
  - India: 9%
  - China: 3%
  - Other non-OECD: 16%
  - Other OECD: 28%
  - United States: 14%

**Source:** OECD Long-term Growth Scenarios, Economics Department.

**Note:** Global GDP is taken as sum of GDP for 34 OECD and 8 non-OECD G20 countries.
Green is the new black

The bleak projected outlook for the environment is precarious for children, who will bear the brunt of climate change, resource scarcity and environmental degradation in years to come. Securing their futures must emerge more strongly in climate change talks.

Over the past few decades, economic progress has brought tremendous gains to living standards around the world. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), by 2050 the world economy is expected to quadruple thanks largely to technological innovation, rapidly growing middle-class and an expanding global population. However, the absence of policies to ensure economic progress is not at the expense of environmental and social progress has created considerable risks.

Severe scarcity of basic resources
Demand for key resources such as energy, food and water stands to increase significantly in the coming decades. The burgeoning global demand for energy, if not sustainably handled, could accelerate the pace of climate change and global warming. According to the UN Water, the UN inter-agency coordination mechanism for all fresh water and sanitation-related matters, around 700 million people in 43 countries suffer today from water scarcity: by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two thirds of the world’s population could be living under water-stressed conditions. Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest number of water-stressed countries of any region.

Food prices have also risen substantially over the past decade. Real food prices have risen by about 1.5 times what they were a decade ago, and nominal food prices have roughly doubled, according to the UN Food and Agricultural Organizations (FAO) Food Price Index. This trend is exacerbating social and political tensions, leading in many parts of the world to deadly riots over the past few years (see Figure 2). With increasing demand and unstable environments, we will face challenges in feeding the world’s children in the coming decades. The policy response has to significantly improve access to food, the quality of production and the sustainable management of natural resources.

Air pollution stands to be one of the greatest environmental killers. By 2050, the number of premature deaths from exposure to particulate matter is projected to more than double current levels according to the OECD, reaching 3.6 million a year globally — with the greatest overall proportions in China and India. Air pollution also occurs indoors. Inefficient cooking stoves and poor ventilation systems directly affects children’s health. There are many forms of technology that can help reduce the harm, but the policies and financial incentives need to be in place.

Climate change is exerting increased frequency and severity of weather patterns. Slight changes in temperature affect rain fall, and increase the severity of droughts and floods. Models have attempted to predict these changes (see Figure 3). But changes in weather patterns are putting ecosystems and biodiversity at risk. This could, in turn, exert further pressure on food systems, as well as affect livelihoods of whole communities.

Children bear the brunt
Climate change and environmental degradation affect everyone in society, but children are especially vulnerable to its most pernicious effects. For example, polluted air and water affect not only their survival but all aspects of their development — poor health, for example can make it difficult to learn in school. A rise in global temperatures over the next few decades could create conditions conducive for the growth of pathogens such as malaria, cholera and dengue fever. Frequent heavy rains can expand breeding grounds for vector borne diseases, while warming trends are likely to disrupt predator-prey relationships critical for maintaining a low population of pathogen carrying vectors such as rodents and mosquitoes. Droughts and floods can affect food security and increase undernutrition.


Source: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) AR5 WGI. Note: RCP2.6 is a low emissions scenario where carbon emissions are rapidly cut, and RCP8.5 is a high emissions scenario with no carbon cuts.
The pace of technological change in recent years has put a spin on the old saying, ascribed by some to Plato, that necessity is the mother of invention. Nowadays, opportunity, rather than need, is often the parent of innovation, and seems likely to be the case in the future.

Technological diffusion occurs within and across countries. Studies show that the rate at which people adopt new technology is accelerating. Rising levels of education together with increased per capita income mean that the demand for new products is growing, leading to shorter product innovation cycles. Invention is the only way to take them fully into account.

**The impacts are not inevitable, but good policy-making is crucial**

History has demonstrated that innovative production process, better distribution and adjustments in behaviour and consumption can overcome Malthusian projections — with many beneficial returns. Well designed public transport, for example, not only can be environmentally friendly, it can also ease urban congestion.

**Individualized innovation**

Large-scale manufacturing processes are aiming to create personalized products; similarly, small-scale manufacturing may also proliferate as producers are

![FIG. 4 Shortening time laps before mass adoption of new technologies](image-url)

Policymakers will need to be proactive to avoid scarcities. But addressing the scarcity of one resource often has direct implications for the scarcity of other resources. For example, the green revolution in Africa, which was an attempt to increase food yields, also caused water scarcity problems. More recently, the use of biofuels is widely considered to have contributed to the food price crisis in 2008. In the United States alone, 30 to 40 percent of corn crop is now diverted to fuels, according to a study by the Food Agriculture Policy Research Institute.

Rapid price volatility can be dangerous. For the poorest families, there is little room to cope with rapid changes in price of food. Food price spikes have already demonstrated to be highly correlated with social unrest (see Figure 2). New mechanisms need to be developed to protect the poorest families and enable them to manage the volatility of commodity prices.

Delivering action on environmental degradation could have grave social and economic consequences in the medium and long term. If current trends continue, children stand to inherit a world mired by environmental degradation, with climate change impacting their livelihoods and future well-being. With every new climate summit, there appears limited consensus on how to address and reverse climate change and environmental degradation. But one thing is clear — our children will judge us on our ability to be courageous enough to innovate and act decisively on this most pressing issue.

**Disruptive opportunity**

Technological innovation has the potential to change everything from business models to how people interact. A critical challenge will be to make innovation inclusive so that all children have opportunities to benefit.

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Technological diffusion occurs within and across countries. Studies show that the rate at which people adopt new technology is accelerating. Rising levels of education together with increased per capita income mean that the demand for new products is growing, leading to shorter product innovation cycles. Figure 4 below illustrates the decrease in the time taken for an invention to be adopted by a quarter of the US population; this reduction in time is also likely to be mirrored at a global level.

Innovation is an imperative for both consumers and producers alike in an increasingly inter-connected and competitive world. Transmission is key: Global risks and opportunities are transmitted faster than ever before, and innovation is the only way to take them fully into account.

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able to more cost effectively create customized products using 3-D printers and other emerging technologies. New technologies that empower individuals are likely to redefine business and social models.

Smart technology will allow more remote access to health and education information and services, and the mass availability of data has the potential to empower individual agency. Technology is changing the relationship of citizens with their governments, helping to ensure greater levels of accountability. Bio- and nano-technology, energy efficiencies, computer sciences and information and communication technology (ICT) offer vast potential for technological innovation that can help break down barriers and bottlenecks to the provision of essential services.

A big challenge to the computer and ICT world is privacy, and a central issue that many governments are grappling with right now is how to improve security without compromising openness, transparency and accountability.

**Child-sensitive innovation**

The pace of technological advance of recent decades has been frenetic. Much good has been achieved, but at the same time we are being forced to address issues of ethics, privacy, discrimination and even the nature of human interaction. What are the risks posed by rapid and unprecedented technological advance in matters such as safety, privacy and the quality of human interaction? How can innovation be harnessed to make societies and children’s lives more equitable?

There are no easy answers to these questions. But there are many examples of technologies and innovations that help overcome barriers to the realization of human rights, notably those of the most vulnerable. Antiretroviral medicines, the Mark II Pump, auto-disable syringes, education in emergencies, community-led total sanitation and U-reports show the diversity of innovations being employed in recent decades to realize children’s rights. Robots are being used to carry out many high-risk human tasks such as emergency responses or the transportation of dangerous materials.

There are also huge social and economic advantages to technological diffusion that benefit the poor. However, currently, mostly wealthy urbanites in developing countries have access to

well-established and advanced technologies while the rural poor are left out. The use of technology to overcome bottlenecks and barriers to essential services like electricity, and access to ICT, particularly mobile telecom networks and the Internet, will bolster not only social well-being, but also economic growth.

**The potential in education**

One area where we are witnessing considerable innovation potential is in education platforms. As we enter an era of hyper-connectivity and increasing accessibility to the Internet, there will likely be a tendency for learning platforms to move away from face-to-face settings and towards e-learning ones. This has considerable advantages: principally, knowledge will be increasingly accessible to a wider audience.

Many of the new developments in the education sector, from better access to e-learning programmes and distance education, are likely to benefit children in even the most remote regions. This could have profound implications for greater sharing of knowledge and the spread of ideas as well as entrepreneurial activity.

Challenges remain, however. As education moves away from face-to-face settings, there could be compromises in terms of quality. Information does not mean knowledge; and knowledge needs to be useful. As E.O. Wilson put it in *Consilience*, “We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom.”

If e-learning is to complement traditional education systems, quality needs to be maintained in both realms. An ecological approach to education demonstrates the importance of considering the variety of dimensions that affect a child’s ability to learn. Everything between social and physical environments are inter-connected: How a child lives in her home, how healthy she is and how strong her social relationships are will affect how she learns.

Ecological approaches to education go beyond product-oriented approaches to learning towards a broader environmental, historical, social and process-oriented view. If new modalities of education, including e-learning, are to be successful in maintaining quality and altering the way humans acquire and use knowledge, education systems will need to become intertwined with the way children live and experience life, and the opportunities they face.

**An urban, middle-class, ageing world**

The coming decades will see a rapid ageing of the world’s population, which will also become more middle-class and live predominantly in cities. Supporting the most disadvantaged children will become ever more important, as a growing, globally dependent population further strains public purses and household incomes.

Some of the most dramatic shifts in global trends are occurring in the area of demographics. The world’s population continues to grow and is expected to swell to 8 billion by 2025, rising to over 9 billion by mid-century (up from 6 billion in the mid-1990s). But there are several other, more specific, demographic shifts that will change the world.

**More dependents, particularly elderly dependents**

As the world becomes more densely populated, it becomes also home to a growing number of dependents, defined as people under 15, or 65 and older. Although most regions of the world will see their ranks of children begin to fall, as fertility rates remain moderate, the

global number of dependents will rise as more and more people live to 65 and beyond. The global old age dependency rate — defined as the number of people 65 and older compared to the working age population (15–64) — is forecasted to more than double from 12 per cent in 2010 to around 32 per cent by 2070.

**More children in Africa**

By 2050, more than one in three children will be African (see Figure 5). Indeed, Africa will experience explosive growth in its population in the 21st century: by the end of this millennium it will roughly account for 40 per cent of the world’s people, up from 9 per cent in 1950.
More children and families are middle-class

By 2030, the majority population share in most countries is projected to be classified as middle-class, according to national levels, for the first time in recent history, as the scourge of absolute poverty continues to diminish (see Figure 6). As this happens, and assuming prevailing trends of economic transition persist, values are likely to shift, and demand for socio-political change, and probably consumer goods and services, could rise.

However, with growing incomes, the causes and risks of health will shift (see Figure 7 on the next page). The health of individuals with higher standards of living will increasingly be related to occupational and environmental risks, addictions and unhealthy diets. In such circumstances, obesity and overweight are likely to rise due to increased exposure to fast food, cigarette smoking and high-fat diets. Mortality rates are anticipated to be less a result of communicable diseases and more due to non-communicable diseases and injuries. In fact, a WHO study find that the proportion of deaths due to non-communicable disease could rise from 59 per cent in 2002 to 69 per cent in 2030.

The middle classes may also not feel secure. Their swelling ranks are anticipated to ratchet up demand for energy, natural resources, food and water, with climate effects exacerbating food and water shortages in some areas (see earlier section on environmental degradation). Addressing this rising demand and the variety of new risks, are likely to be among the major challenges of our time.

More children in cities

By mid-century, around 70 per cent of people are projected to live in urban areas. Like the general population, the proportion of the world’s children is projected to become increasingly urban. These shifts will generate new pressures on resources, public finances, housing and health care. Diarrhoea, malaria and acute respiratory infections are related to overcrowding, air pollution and water. Children are exposed to parasite-carrying insects in contaminated air, food, water and soil. In addition, slums are associated with limited availability of open spaces and parks, as well as an increased likelihood for unintentional injuries such as road traffic accidents.

Governments will need to adapt service delivery systems to address the changing needs and growing demands of children in urban settings. New modalities will be needed to protect children from a variety of health risks, such as air pollution and diseases that thrive in highly populous areas, as well as risks to their physical integrity, such as traffic congestion, child labour and hazardous work conditions.

Less resources for all

These demographic shifts will also affect economic growth. Much of the global economic and social progress that has occurred over the past half century has occurred in the context of a rising proportion of a young and able workforce, and decreasing global dependency ratios since 1970. But this will not be the case for much longer. Even in rapidly growing economies such as India and China, the proportion of working age population compared to children and elderly is expected to shrink.

By 2070, the elderly are anticipated to overtake children as the largest proportion of dependents. With an ageing population, there will be political pressure to ensure entitlements for the elderly are protected. In countries where the proportion of children is falling, and where they have little or no formal ability to vote, mechanisms must be implemented to ensure their needs and voices are heard in political discourse. Innovative solutions are also required to meet the needs of the elderly and realise their human rights without compromising investments in children.
FIG. 7  Evolution in human health risks as economies develop


Causes of death

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<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2030</th>
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High income countries (%)

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People-centred change

Power is likely to flow away from traditional institutions that fail to deliver progress, and towards organizations, communities, individuals and businesses that act in ways that respond to people’s needs.

Over the past year or so, governments, civil society and other interested parties have contributed a wide range of diverse demands for the emerging post-2015 agenda. If these sometimes disparate requests can be seen to have a common focus, it is to generate a broader development agenda with a universal mandate and a shared responsibility in which an array of actors — governments, foundations, business, civil society, religious organizations and individuals — each have a clear contribution to make to human progress.

In the coming years, the development sector is likely to grow and diversify. According to the Yearbook of International Organizations, the number of international NGOs was reported to have increased from 6,000 in 1990 to more than 50,000 in 2006, and now number in excess of 65,000. These organizations represent a much more vibrant range of organized and unorganized groups, both online and offline. While previously civil society actors represented advocates and service providers, they are increasingly being seen as facilitators, conveners and innovators.

There is also an increasing emergence of hybrid organizations emerging, that do not fall under the traditional sector roles. They include, for example, business with a social purpose (such as microfinance institutions and businesses that sell fair trade products) and firms with environmental purposes or socially-responsible investment policies. They may also include non-profit organizations that use market-based solutions to drive change. Hybrid organizations often utilize a diversity of sources of income, values, cultures and modes of governance, stressing high levels of accountability and minimal bureaucracy.

The G20, which represents an informal grouping of countries and the European Union, have both gained greater prominence and importance since the global economic recession of 2007/2008. Its member states account for 85 per cent of global gross domestic product, more than 75 per cent of global trade, and two thirds of the world’s population. While considerable challenges remain for the G20, it is becoming clear that the G7 no longer monopolizes decision-making processes at the global level.

Corporations too are steadily changing and adopting a more social outlook in their operations and branding. ‘Good for society’ is increasingly seen as ‘good business’. Consumers are increasingly seeing their purchasing patterns as a reflection of their social identity.

But risks remain. Accountability and responsibilities of the
Social media and mobility

We stand to enter an era of hyper-connectivity driven by the rise of social media, social movements and greater mobility of ideas and persons. This presents new opportunities and risks for the world’s children.

Mobile information and communication technology is fundamentally changing human interaction, and thereby economics, politics and society. It is the backbone of the transition to a hyper-connected world.

Many of the developments and innovations in the use of mobile technology are taking place in developing countries. Using mobile phones for remittances, banking and rapid monitoring and reporting of social conditions to enhance accountability (i.e., U-Reports) all started in developing countries. An aggregate market of 54 countries, Africa is currently the second largest mobile phone market after Asia, with more than 700 million mobile phone connections, according to a recent report by Deloitte. This number is projected to rise to more than 1 billion mobile connections by 2016 at a compounded annual growth rate of more than 30 per cent.

There is also a rapidly growing interest in social media platforms. Facebook has become the most visited website on the African continent, with nearly 45 million users. But there is still significant room for growth; sub-Saharan Africa has currently one of the lowest rates of Internet users (see Figure 9). As the gap in access to the Internet closes between nations, the potential social and economic opportunities and risks could be substantial.

Social media transforming development practice

Social and mobile platforms are facilitating greater access to education tools for children in even the most remote locations. They have also been put to innovative use in refugee camps and in disaster scenarios, allowing displaced persons to reconnect with families and loved ones.

The use of social media has also improved health services for children. Examples include testing to see if medicines and drugs are genuine (such as the use of scratch cards and codes which can be verified using SMS technology). Online applications have also facilitated greater identification of and access to health care providers, as well as health information and good practices.

An increasing number of children are online — at a younger age

Children and youth have long been prominent users of mobile information and communication technology, and

Figure 9: Internet Users (per 100 people)

this has facilitated huge shifts in social engagement and political activism amongst that cohort — as witnessed during the Arab Spring but also in political elections around the world. It also facilitates youth participation in development contexts. Through online systems, youth can increasingly engage in community mapping, situation analyses and solutions to the development problems they face.

Devices, platforms and activities are diversifying too. Children across poor and rich countries are increasingly using smartphones to access the Internet, applications and social networking sites. Other activities include playing games online, downloading information for school, watching video clips, sending instant messages, sending emails and listening to music. Sharing pictures and videos to capture live events, as well as commentary on political and social issues, has also encouraged citizen journalism amongst youth around the world. Research has shown that most online activity among children occurs in their homes or at school; but with the increasing use of mobile technology such as smartphones, trends are changing.

Social media has the potential to advance an agenda for greater collaboration and communication than ever before. As we are seeing already, people will be able to connect ideas with action and social mobilization in ways they have never been able to before, giving rise to new forces that challenge the way resources are distributed and governments and institutions are held to account. However, a balanced and sobering view of the benefits of social media is important; the potential for radical transformation should not be overstated nor understated. But many of these developments benefit the wealthy children more than the poor. And, as witnessed in the Arab Spring in 2011, while social media was instrumental in helping groups of people to organize, it was not a panacea to any of the problems: social media was merely a tool.

Digital threats to children

Despite the potential benefits, online activity has brought new challenges in protecting children. Children are exposed to dangers that defy age, geographic location or other boundaries that are more clearly defined in the real world. These include content risks such as online marketing for products that may be inappropriate, as well as contact risks, such as online harassment, sexual exploitation, cyber-bullying, stalking or illegal interactions. While child trafficking occurs offline, children are often first exposed to child traffickers online.

Sharing of explicit images, or risk of abuse (sexual or bullying) can affect children online, often with parents or guardians having little or no knowledge that it is occurring. Trends are worrying: the number of URLs depicting child sexual abuse identified by The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has grown from around 10,000 in 2006 to nearly 17,000 in 2010.

There is also the risk of information privacy. Companies collect information on children and use that data to market to children. Oftentimes, information is collected with little acknowledgement of the long-term implications. Children may also be unaware of the risks of identity theft, and be exposed to online scams and fraud.

While many consider these threats an offline extension to the existing threats children already face, the way these threats are mitigated and handled in a virtual world are very different. How can the systems that we have implemented in the non-virtual world be adapted and what new ones can be introduced to continue to protect children in the virtual world?

‘Don’t talk to strangers’?

The adage ‘don’t talk to strangers’ has been used by parents for decades to protect their children from the risks they face from harmful interactions with adults. But what happens when the main purpose of many social media sites involves talking to strangers? How do we encourage the sharing of ideas in a largely anonymous virtual world while also ensuring that children and youth participating in those forums are safe? How can we protect the right to freedom of speech and expression, including that of children and youth, while ensuring their privacy, safety and protection?

These are questions that will need to be asked, and answered. Governments, civil society groups and even parents’ organizations around the world are working to address this problem. But like many technological developments that came before it, protection systems are imperfect, and considerable harm has been done to children in the meantime.
The path of most resilience

In a rapidly changing world, the potential for social unrest and fragility is high. Addressing the needs of poor children requires building resilience in fragile contexts.

Long-term trends indicate armed conflict, both among countries and within them, is receding globally. While the number of conflicts increased substantially from 1950 to the 1980s, from less than 10 active conflicts per year globally to 40, it decreased to the high 20s in the 2000s. The US National Intelligence Council points to several trends that could have contributed to this, including ageing population structures and prohibitively high costs — human and otherwise — due to the presence of a nuclear option as well as the inter-connectedness of economies.

But there are new trends in the mix. Conflict is more often occurring between communities and groups rather than between national governments. It is increasingly about economic conditions, and a variety of shocks, and manifests itself in terms of social unrest, leading to fragile contexts. Recently, the Economist Intelligence Unit found 46 countries to be at ‘high risk’ of social unrest, and another 19 countries at ‘very high risk’, based on forward looking assessments for 2014.

Shocks include economic crises, food prices and insufficient natural resources. These shocks exacerbate inequality and environmental degradation, besides perpetuating social unrest. They can also result in poverty traps, generating effects that harm not just present, but also succeeding generations.

Climate change is also exacerbating the severity of natural disasters. According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) during the 2000s, Pakistan faced five of its worst disasters in decades, while also struggling to address political violence in many parts of the country. Between 1980 and 2010, Bangladesh experienced 234 natural disasters, killing over 191,000 people. Storms accounted for 108 of these disasters, and floods accounted for 68 of them. In China, more than over 90 million people are affected by disasters each year, with direct costs of over $11 billion per year. In Ethiopia, 313,000 people have been killed between 1980 and 2010 due to natural disasters. Over the same time period in Indonesia, 192,000 people have been killed, with an economic cost of $23 billion. In each of these circumstances and behind each of these numbers are children and their families, losing critical windows of opportunity and, with alarming frequency, their lives.

Increasing proportion of the poor will be living in fragile contexts

Fragile contexts occur where the system has experienced deteriorating relations between society and the state. This can often be the result of a shock, either manmade or natural. Experts recognize that one of the main factors that could exacerbate this fragility in the coming decades could be resource scarcity, especially when complemented by mass migration leading to increasing pressure on resources, and environmental degradation.

The Brookings Institute recently published a study that found that, in the coming decade, the largest proportion of the world’s poor will live in fragile contexts that are not low-income but middle-income. The number of poor people in fragile states is expected to exceed those in non-fragile states by 2018, and this share will likely rise to nearly two thirds by 2030.

Currently, of the seven countries that are unlikely to meet a single MDG, six are fragile. It is often very difficult to mobilize domestic resources for development in fragile contexts. A recent OECD report found that fragile contexts were mobilizing only 14 per cent of GDP in tax revenues — which is well below the UN recommendation of 20 per cent of GDP.

Building resilient systems

Instability, lack of accountability, volatility and social unrest are likely to characterize the type of poverty that children in fragile contexts will face. Systems that provide essential services and protect children and families — especially the poorest and most disadvantaged and those living in fragile contexts — could crumble under such significant increases to stresses such as from climate change and the potential exposure to disaster situations including droughts and floods.

Furthermore, children in fragile contexts where there is violence are often subjected to a wide variety of abuses, including being forced into becoming child soldiers, and torture. Non-state actors pose new threats to children, for example, enlisting them in the drug trade, terrorism and human trafficking.

Addressing the needs of poor children in the coming decades will require addressing fragile contexts. This means re-examining what causes fragility, both domestically and internationally,
and focusing on building resilience. Promoting resilience means enhancing the ability of children, households, communities and systems to anticipate, manage and overcome shocks and cumulative stresses. It requires reducing exposure to shocks and stresses, minimizing their impact and strengthening capacities to address them. Without reliable safety nets or the time and means to recover, initial vulnerabilities are transformed into long lasting poverty and deprivation.

As the nature of conflict changes, and it occurs between groups of people rather than between countries, new modalities will need to include systems which involve communities themselves, and demand accountability in times of stress. They will also require better and timelier monitoring mechanisms, at subnational and international levels, that can withstand shocks.

The fragmentation of power in fragile contexts often makes it more difficult for development stakeholders to work. Governments will need to adapt to deal with new rogue actors and transnational threats and improve security for children from these new threats. Addressing social unrest and fragility will need to take account of local realities, politics and power, as well as be understood within the context of good governance and its intersections with poverty, inequality and humanitarian situations.

A tradeoff reassessed

Reducing inequality, particularly through investing in children, will be crucial to permanently lowering poverty as well as securing stable, long-term growth and employment.

One of the key achievements of the MDGs has been to reduce the proportion of extremely poor people, globally. The number of extreme poor is expected to diminish further. In April 2013, Jim Kim, the president of the World Bank, announced their target as ending extreme poverty in 2030. This is a goal the development community should rally behind. However, it is important to note that eradicating extreme poverty does not mean we have succeeded in tackling some of its worst relatives, such as inequality and marginalization. In fact, in many countries, rapid growth and reductions in poverty are often complemented by increasing inequality, as the rich get richer far faster than the poorer segments of the population — and often push the latter to the worst geographical areas, particularly in cities.

Furthermore, living just above the extreme poverty line comes with many if not most of the same social and economic challenges as living below it. The development community will need to leverage momentum, not just to eradicate extreme poverty ($1.25 per day) but go well beyond that, and also address the social dimensions of poverty.

We need to think more about how it is done. How can we reduce poverty and inequality at the same time? How can economic growth, poverty reduction and reducing inequality be mutually reinforcing? And how can growth be more socially inclusive?

New studies are shedding light on these possibilities. A central component to the successful eradication of poverty could be the extent to which inequality is reduced — and the extent to which economic growth benefits the poorest. World Bank economist Martin Ravallion has estimated that economic growth could broadly account for up to two thirds of poverty reduction, with reducing inequality accounting for the other third. Another more recent IMF staff study by Andrew Berg and Jonathan Ostry found that highly unequal societies are less likely to have sustainable and consistent growth periods. Globally, a 10 per cent decrease in inequality increases the expected length of an economic growth period by 50 per cent. Improving levels of equity can improve a country’s resilience, so that when shocks or crises occur, they are able to adapt, respond and mitigate further deleterious effects of the shock.

Another new book by Thomas Piketty, Capital in the Twenty-First Century, examines historical trends in wealth and income in over 20 countries. Piketty underlines the distinction between wealth that is created by what countries own versus wealth that is created by what they earn (annual income). He argues that because the return on capital is higher than the growth rate of the economy, the best way to accumulate wealth is to have wealth. This makes inheritance a key driver of further wealth for much of the elite, and has the potential to exacerbate inequalities. Piketty also makes another important clarification on trends: He asserts that when we evaluate longer term trends over several centuries, higher levels of inequality are in fact the norm. Despite improvements during the middle of the 20th century in inequality, we are witnessing a trend now that is bringing us back to 19th century levels of inequality.

The fact that inequality is increasing stresses the urgency to do something about it. Inequality, while potentially the norm over the long term, is not inevitable, Piketty claims. In fact, it was precisely because countries actively tackled inequality from the 1940s into the 1970s that a higher rate of return of economic growth was seen during the latter half of the 20th century.

Beyond the studies and books, the topic of inequality has gained considerable traction in public opinion, from political debates in the media to social movements such as Occupy Wall Street. The manifestations of inequality are inflaming outrage and — in both many developed and developing countries — creating political and social turmoil. Forecasters predict growing levels of social unrest and disquiet as a result, especially where it is combined with austerity measures, unemployment, political ineptitude and institutional failure.

Why equality now?

Although concern over inequalities is not new, two new dynamics make this latest focus against social-economic gaps particularly important. First, the expansion of middle-income countries has shifted the focus from inequalities between countries — epitomized by the lexicon of developed versus developing countries — to inequalities within them.

And second, citizens are now able to connect, mobilize, organize and challenge the status quo in a way that presents
unprecedented challenges to elites who were normally able to keep social movements in check. As income differentials widen within countries, and as people are able to more easily mobilize, share information and coordinate efforts, the coming decades are likely to witness significant and powerful challenges to systems and rulers that perpetuate inequalities.

But there are also normative reasons for a renewed focus on equality. Poverty transcends generations. Children born in poverty today are more likely to pass that on to their children in the future. Throughout history, children have suffered extreme poverty and faced poverty traps that lasted their entire lifetime. Eradicating poverty for one generation increases the likelihood that future generations will be better off.

Furthermore, children experience poverty in different ways compared with adults. Children are highly susceptible to deprivations — the impacts of which can last a lifetime. Childhood is a unique window of opportunity where key interventions in health, education, nutrition and safety, for example, can be determining factors in their ability to secure livelihoods in the future, and secure their physical, mental and social well-being. Targeted interventions in health and education services are necessary to ensure equity of outcomes and opportunity for children. A multidimensional approach to understanding equity and poverty that includes a monetary dimension is necessary to reach the most vulnerable and deprived children and fully end the many sides to extreme poverty.

The potential for eradicating poverty has never been greater. The poorest and most marginalized children often live in geographically hard to reach communities. New technologies make an equity-based approach more feasible than ever before. Addressing inequality is not only more crucial in reaching the last billion extremely poor, it is also more cost-effective and achievable than ever before.

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UNICEF

Responding to a Changing World

1. How can the benefits of rapid economic growth be made to benefit the poor as much as the rich?

2. In an environment where aid might be decreasing, how might private financial flows benefit children?

3. How can UNICEF work with multilateral & international institutions to support structural reforms?

4. Frenetic technological advances over the last few decades

5. Shorter time lags in the adoption of new technology

6. Prices are continuing to rise

7. If current trends persist, by 2025 nearly half of the world’s population will be living in areas of high water stress

8. Many of the major killers of children are climate-sensitive

"The world is changing..."
At a faster rate than ever before, it is essential to understand the impacts.

- Huge potential for technological innovation that could break down barriers and bottlenecks.

- How can we ensure institutions across all sectors are inclusive and responsive to the needs of children?

- What role will UNICEF play to enhance horizontal cooperation?

- The power of accountability, progress, and responding to people's needs.

- Civil society organizations will be more diverse, engaged, and collaborative than ever.

- Demographic shifts
  - Aging global population
  - Falling proportion of children
  - 1 in 3 children will be African by mid-century

- Global population projected to grow above 9 billion

- 70% of the world's population will be living in cities by the middle of the century

- In less than two decades, the majority share in most countries is predicted to be in the middle class

- In a world of falling child proportions, with little mechanism of voting, how can we promote the voice of children and the elderly without compromising the youngest citizens?
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