



# REIGNITING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN IN SOUTH ASIA

Regional Flagship Report

unicef   
for every child

75

**Cover:** Meem, 5 holds a toy at a UNICEF-supported Child Protection hub in Bangladesh.

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All artwork in the report was drawn by children in South Asia

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# FOREWORD



When the deadly COVID-19 pandemic unfurled across South Asia in May and June 2021, the terrible price being exacted on children soon became apparent. Children were losing their parents and sole carers, witnessing scenes that no child should ever see. Impacts on learning, health care, nutrition, and child protection put the hopes and futures of an entire generation of children at risk.

In recent months, vaccination rates in developed countries have steadily increased, and wealthier economies are recovering. But in South Asia, the picture remains bleak. While the region braces itself for future waves of the virus, more and more children and families are slipping into poverty. The climate crisis and other humanitarian emergencies, such as the escalating crisis in Afghanistan, further diminish their hope for a brighter future.

The remarkable achievements our region has made in advancing child rights over recent decades are now at risk of being decimated.

In the past quarter century, the number of children dying before their fifth birthday in South Asia has more than halved. Since 2000, the number of stunted children under 5 has fallen by over one third.<sup>1</sup> In the past 25 years, the likelihood of a girl under 18 becoming a bride has dropped by a similar percentage. Secondary school enrolment has risen steadily, including for girls. And more than 90 per cent of the population today has access to safe drinking water. As a result of COVID-19 and other crises,

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*There is no question which side of the argument UNICEF is on. Seventy-five years ago, our organization was created at another moment of global crisis, amid the ruins of World War II.*

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these transformative gains for children are now under serious threat.

The next steps we take are critical. Do we rally and unite to protect decades of progress on child rights? Or do we stand aside and watch as an unequal recovery from COVID-19 extends the suffering of the poorest families far into the future?

There is no question which side of the argument UNICEF is on. Seventy-five years ago, our organization was created at another moment of global crisis, amid the ruins of World War II. Then as now, marginalized and vulnerable children were the most at risk.

We have reached a moment of reckoning, but a moment which also presents an opportunity to do things differently. This report calls on governments and their partners to make the best investment they



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can ever make – to invest in children in a way that addresses the needs of the marginalized while also leveraging opportunities to accelerate progress for all children in the years ahead.

Key actions need to be taken today to reverse the alarming rollback in child health and nutrition and ensure protection and mental health support for every child, including the most disadvantaged. We also need to bridge the digital divide, provide universal access to quality education, and provide young women and men with the skills needed in today's fast-changing economies.

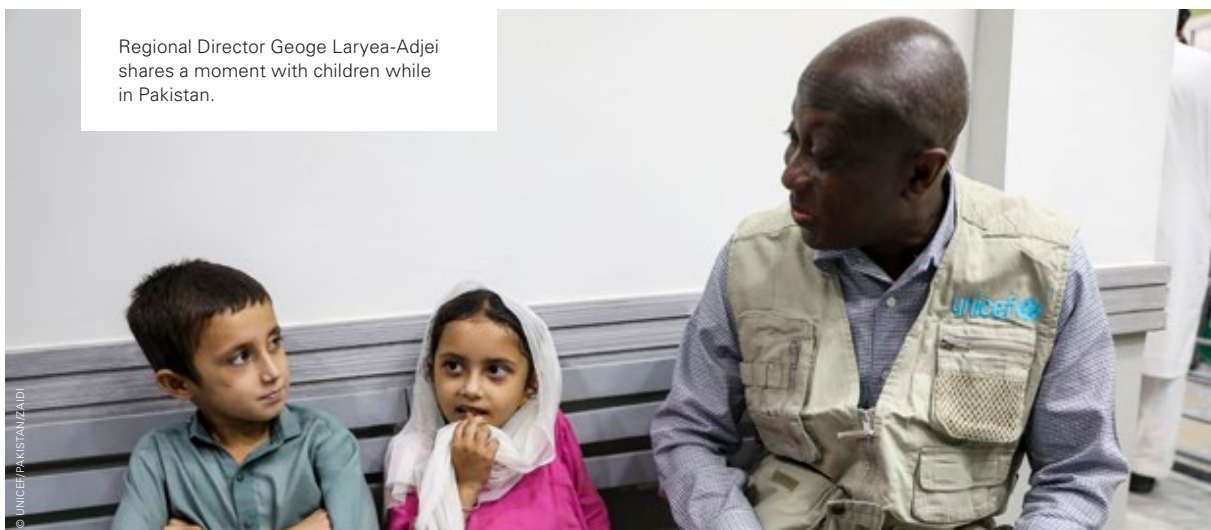
It is an ambitious vision. To make it happen will require new and strengthened partnerships between governments, the business sector, civil society

and UN agencies. It also requires the active involvement of children and young people themselves. Their strength, creativity and solutions – reflected in the youth statement in this report – give renewed reason for hope.

If we fail to act, the worst impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt for decades to come. But by acting now, we can reignite opportunities and ensure every child in South Asia not only survives but thrives.

**George Laryea-Adjei**

UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia



Regional Director Geoge Laryea-Adjei shares a moment with children while in Pakistan.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 has taken a heavy toll on South Asia. Two years after the virus first struck, the impact on children's lives and prospects has been nothing short of devastating. Children from poorer and more marginalized backgrounds are losing out disproportionately, particularly as the climate crisis and other humanitarian emergencies further undermine their health and well-being. At the same time, opportunities are emerging which – if capitalized on – can help reignite hope for children.

Long-term school closures interrupted the learning of over 400 million children.<sup>2</sup> Despite the introduction of remote learning, children from poorer backgrounds, girls and children with disabilities struggled to keep up with their studies. Many children lacked access to digital devices or found connecting online impossible, while many teachers discovered they lacked the training to make online lessons work.

Yet these initial attempts to apply the benefits of technology have provided valuable lessons which can help more children access learning and improve the quality of the education they receive. For example, remote learning has allowed children to learn more autonomously and has encouraged a shift away from classroom-based rote-learning methods. Investing in teachers, bridging the digital divide and taking a more blended approach to learning have come out as top priorities for the education sector. Governments are also increasingly recognizing the need to invest in and support the nearly 350 million<sup>3</sup> adolescents and youth in the region, many of whom are not in any form of employment, education or training.

Disruptions to services prompted by the pandemic led to mothers and children missing out on vital health, immunization and nutrition services. Millions of children did not receive lifesaving vaccines, and child mortality is projected to rise. Deepening poverty -- combined with rising prices and disruption to supply chains -- has put nutritious diets beyond the reach of many households. An additional 3.85 million children in South Asia could have suffered from wasting in 2020 as a consequence.<sup>4</sup>

But there have also been gains. The upgraded vaccine cold-chain systems left by COVID-19 can help vital routine vaccination programmes for children get back on track. Integrated packages of health and nutrition services that cover the essential needs of a mother and child, from conception through to the child's second birthday, can effectively curb rates of malnutrition. Concerted efforts with the private sector can help transform food systems and improve children's diets more broadly.

During the long months of lockdown, the pandemic drew attention to the neglect, abuse and violence that has long scarred the lives of children around the region. Phone helplines brought direct testimony from children suffering abuse, loneliness, anxiety and depression. As mental health issues came to the fore, public conversations were sparked around a topic which had rarely been discussed in South Asia, highlighting stigma and creating new demand for services and support systems.





For many children in South Asia, the challenges brought by COVID-19 have served to compound those of an accelerating climate crisis. Right across a vast region, the evidence of inexorable climate change – whether in melting glaciers, broiling heatwaves or riverine floods – is impossible to ignore. As the climate crisis begins to be understood as first and foremost a child rights crisis, opportunities have opened up to better protect and climate proof the infrastructure that children rely on, including critical water and sanitation services.

Finally, as existing social protection schemes for the poorest households proved to be of only limited value during COVID-19 due to their high exclusion rates, new opportunities have emerged to better identify and ring-fence spending on programmes for children. Other opportunities include working towards universal child benefits and family-friendly services like affordable, quality childcare.

Although South Asia's post-COVID-19 outlook seems bleak, governments and their partners have a different path open to them. Through a package of critical investments in children, they can both protect the important development achievements of recent years, and build towards a better, more equitable future for their societies. The alternative would risk allowing the worst socio-economic impacts of the pandemic to be perpetuated long into the future.

## THE ROADMAP

The roadmap that UNICEF South Asia has laid out comprises the following areas of action:

1

Invest in child-sensitive **social protection**

2

Resume in-person learning, address learning loss and improve **quality education** for every child

3

Protect children from deadly but **treatable diseases** and **reverse the child nutrition crisis**

4

Protect children from **neglect and abuse** and **promote the mental health** of all children and young people

5

Urgently act to protect children from **climate change**

# UNICEF IN SOUTH ASIA

*75 years of delivering  
for children*

Over three quarters of a century, dramatic improvements in children's health, education and life prospects have been achieved in South Asia. But the years have also witnessed brutal conflicts and terrible natural disasters in which children too often suffered.

UNICEF is a global organization, but many of the key moments in its story have taken place in South Asia.

One early success in the struggle against killer diseases came in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) where, between 1945 and 1960, mass anti-disease campaigns supported by UNICEF cut the death rate from malaria from 1,300 per million to zero.

The protective power of vaccines has long been central to UNICEF's work on child health. One such campaign came in 1961, where UNICEF helped the Government of India extend care to nearly 7,000 clinics in rural areas.

There have been innovations in many areas. Few have been as influential as the India Mark II family of water handpumps developed in the 1970s. Even today, it is still the world's most widely used human-powered pump.

In November 1970, UNICEF joined efforts to help more than 4.5 million people affected by a devastating cyclone in what was then East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh). UNICEF helped re-establish water supplies by repairing and recommissioning more than 11,000 wells.



In the early 1980s, UNICEF launched the Child Survival and Development Revolution, a drive to save the lives of millions of children each year, focusing on four low-cost measures: growth monitoring, oral rehydration therapy, promotion of breastfeeding and immunization.

In 1991, Bhutan became one of the world's 10 poorer countries to immunize over 80 per cent of its children, from just 27 per cent in 1985.

In the 1990s, UNICEF developed School-in-a-Box, which continues to keep children learning in emergency settings to this day. Different solutions were applied in Maldives, where UNICEF helped modernize teaching methods while preserving positive cultural traditions.

In 2002, following the conflict in Afghanistan, UNICEF played a major role in a 'Back to School' campaign. The operation to supply educational materials for around 3,000 schools allowed 3 million children to enrol around the country, one third of them girls.

Since the turn of the millennium, progress for children in South Asia has accelerated. The number of children dying before their fifth birthday has more than halved. One factor was the increased use – championed by UNICEF – of Vitamin A supplementation programmes.

The likelihood of girls under 18 entering into child marriage fell by more than a third, while birth registration – critical for ensuring children can access vital services in later life – has more than doubled.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2000, primary school enrolment rose by 13 per cent, with an even bigger increase among secondary students.<sup>6</sup> In addition, between 2000 and 2017, 540 million children and families gained access to basic drinking water.<sup>7</sup>

In 2014, after concerted efforts by governments, UNICEF, WHO and other partners, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka were all declared polio-free.

In 2020, UNICEF played a key role in the UN-wide response and led efforts to procure and supply COVID-19 vaccines so that all countries have fair and equitable access to the vaccine as part of the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility (COVAX). By mid-November 2021, COVAX had shipped more than 105 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to South Asia.<sup>8</sup>

In 2021, Pakistan immunized more than 90 million children against measles and rubella, in what is believed to be the largest campaign in Pakistan's history.

In Afghanistan, UNICEF has rolled out a significant humanitarian response, deploying mobile health and nutrition clinics, delivering water to drought-affected areas and supporting nationwide vaccination campaigns against measles and polio.



# CONTEXT: A PROTRACTED PANDEMIC WITH UNEQUAL IMPACT

In the years prior to 2020, South Asia was the world's fastest-growing region. Prosperity was increasing and a middle class emerging. Steady strides were being made in children's rights, with increasing numbers of girls and boys enrolled in school, falling child marriage rates, and more and more children receiving lifesaving vaccines.

But while the lives of millions of children improved, the gap between rich and poor also increased. Millions of families in South Asia still lack clean water, sanitation, a decent diet, and access to social protection.

For the poorest children, the pandemic has made a bad situation worse. Between 48 and 59 million people – including many parents – are expected to become and remain poor. Many were day labourers and migrant workers whose jobs vanished when lockdown was imposed. According to an estimate by the International Labour Organization (ILO), 115 million jobs were lost in South Asia during the third quarter of 2020 alone.<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing the need to deliver assistance to the poorest families, governments in South Asia enacted a series of social protection schemes. However, some schemes used complex targeting methods that missed many vulnerable households, while others were simply too small and fragmented to reach the vast numbers of desperate families in need.

As families struggled to meet even the basic needs of their children, the pandemic was exacting a devastating toll on children's health and nutrition. Already before the pandemic, South Asia accounted for more than half the world's wasted children<sup>10</sup> and 38 per cent of newborn deaths.<sup>11</sup>

Disruptions to essential health, immunization and nutrition services caused by COVID-19 are thought to have cost the lives of an additional 228,000 children in South Asia in 2020 alone.<sup>12</sup> Levels of stunting and wasting among young children soared. Hundreds of thousands of children missed out on fortified school meals and micronutrient supplements because they were no longer in school.

The impact on education proved equally devastating. School closures affected over 400 million children in South Asia,<sup>13</sup> compounding the situation of a region that already had the world's largest population of out-of-school children and youth. Efforts to substitute in-person learning with online or other forms of distance learning met only partial success, with significant numbers of children reporting that they learned nothing at all during school closures.<sup>14</sup>

With schools closed, children found themselves confined to home and deprived of the everyday pleasures of playing with friends. Long lockdown months led to increased psychosocial distress, poor mental health and increased risk of violence. Some children and women found themselves in homes where they experienced or witnessed violence, without being able to rely on the support services normally available to them. Child marriage became an even bigger risk for girls in a region where rates of the practice were already high.

With the pandemic far from over, there is every reason to fear that even more children will slide into poverty and miss out on the opportunities that learning and skills building could bring. Already, the proportion of children and youth – especially girls – who are not in education, learning or training has risen.

Restored health services will struggle to deliver the essential vaccines and nutrition services that young children need to survive. Humanitarian disasters – such as the escalating crisis in Afghanistan – and climate disasters will continue to pose multiple threats to children across the region. The suffering left by these combined crises will not be felt by all children equally.

An alternative path forward is possible. By implementing key policy shifts and investments, South Asia can reignite opportunities for its 616 million children<sup>15</sup> and ensure the most disadvantaged are not left behind.



# OUR FUTURE, OUR RIGHTS, OUR VOICES

*Adolescents and young people in South Asia reimagine a better, more prosperous future for all*

**We – the adolescents and young people of South Asia – have dreams and hopes of a better world.**

We come from many different backgrounds and communities. From remote mountain villages, impoverished city slums, and fragile coastal communities. Many of us already have to work, others are in school, and some of us do both. Some of us have no chance to work or study. Many of us are survivors - of violence, of exploitation, of poverty, of discrimination. Some of us live with disabilities, and some belong to LGBTQI+ communities. And yet we are still helping to build a better world for the rest of us.

Many of us have felt the terrifying effects of climate change, especially those of us who live in poor, marginalized communities. Unpredictable and extreme weather is destroying our homes. Selfish, irresponsible behaviour is suffocating our planet. Yet we don't sense any urgency from our leaders to address climate change. We feel we are being robbed of our dream to live in a cleaner, greener world.

That's the case of Naureen, 17. She describes her country, Maldives, as a "paradise on earth". She says: "We are famed for our white sandy beaches and our clear turquoise waters. However, global warming and sea level rise are eroding our islands to the size of a watermelon seed."

Meanwhile, on the coast of Bangladesh, Tahera and her community are facing an acute shortage of drinking water. Every day, girls like her walk two hours to fetch water - time they would much rather spend studying. During the flood season, children like her wade to school, risking infection from waterborne diseases. She has witnessed lives being lost and families being displaced.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made our situation much worse. The jobs that fed our families, and the health services that saved our pregnant mothers and little sisters and brothers, are no longer there. Our schools have been closed, often for months at a time. Many of us may never return to school. Some of us are forced to work or are subjected to violence and abuse. Many girls among us are being pushed into early marriage against our will. We are suffering from isolation and our mental wellbeing is deteriorating.

Those of us living in rural areas and in impoverished communities are the worst affected. We want to continue learning online but our parents cannot always afford mobile devices or internet charges. For those of us who do manage to get online, unreliable, and slow networks make it hard for us to keep up with our classes.

The experience of Simran, from a tribal community in India, is not unusual. Passionate about learning, her family sold prized possessions to allow her to continue her education. But when learning went online during the pandemic, Simran and other marginalized girls began to fall behind, because families prioritized boys when it came to use of their precious digital devices.

Some of us need to work alongside learning. Anjali says: "For our brothers and sisters to be able to go to school, to afford medicine for our grandparents and to take care of our family, we have to work. Our situation will not improve without addressing the root problems that push us to work."

These are not the only reasons so many of us will never achieve our dream of a quality job, stable income, and the chance to lead a decent life. Our education curricula do not give us the skills we need to get good jobs. Especially for those of us living in rural and marginalized areas, quality education, skills, vocational training and employment opportunities remain a distant dream.

The girls among us have it particularly rough. If we avoid the perils of child marriage, violence, or early pregnancy we may still be prevented from going to school. For the lucky ones who get to go to school and find jobs, prejudice and discrimination can still block us from making headway in our careers.

The path to success is even more fraught for those of us who suffer discrimination. Women, LGBTQI+ communities, people with disabilities and marginalized communities all face prejudice in the workplace. As Jony, a non-binary youth, shared: "Too often, we don't get credit for our knowledge and skills, and get rejected from jobs because they are not considered 'appropriate' for us."

It is time for such discrimination to end. It is time for all of us to be able to go to school, build our skills and have dignified employment opportunities.

We fear for our future, yet we cling to hopes of a better one - a future where we can reach our full potential. We are survivors and we need you beside us. We look upon you all – our governments, our leaders, our carers, for support.

We are here today to urge you to do the following:

***Involve young boys and girls in revising the laws, policies and programmes that concern us.***

We want to be included in decision-making processes, to which we can bring valuable insights. For example, with our first-hand knowledge and experience, our ability to innovate and create new solutions, we can help develop policies that protect and uplift girls and boys who are forced to work.

***Invest in digital skills for youth and begin to bridge the digital divide.***

Help make digital devices more accessible and internet connectivity affordable and reliable, while ensuring the online experience is safe.

Support our teachers to continue teaching us in all circumstances, including online.

***Develop education curricula fit for a greener and digital world.***

We need curricula that include the skills needed for jobs in the digital world. Climate education should begin in primary school so that we have the knowledge and skills needed to take action and speak for our right to a healthy and safe environment.

***Support youth entrepreneurship and investments in green and sustainable innovations.***

We have brilliant minds among us who are excited about and committed to transforming the world we live in. Seed funds, incubation centres, and tax subsidies can help us get these innovations off the ground. Together, we can reach our goal of sustainable, cleaner, safer and healthier cities and villages.

***Lastly, vigorously enforce laws that combat discrimination against girls and women, people with disabilities, marginalized communities and LGBTQI+ youth.***

Disadvantaged groups deserve to feel protected and empowered to reclaim their rights to education, health, employment, equal pay and fair conditions at work.

With your action, we can transform the lives of young people in South Asia.

The time for that action is now.

Thank you.

**Md. Loqman Ansari**  
Afghanistan

**Mahib Reza**  
Bangladesh

**Tashi Dema**  
Bhutan

**Aabhas Asit Senapati**  
India

**Zaaya Ahmed Zubiar**  
Maldives

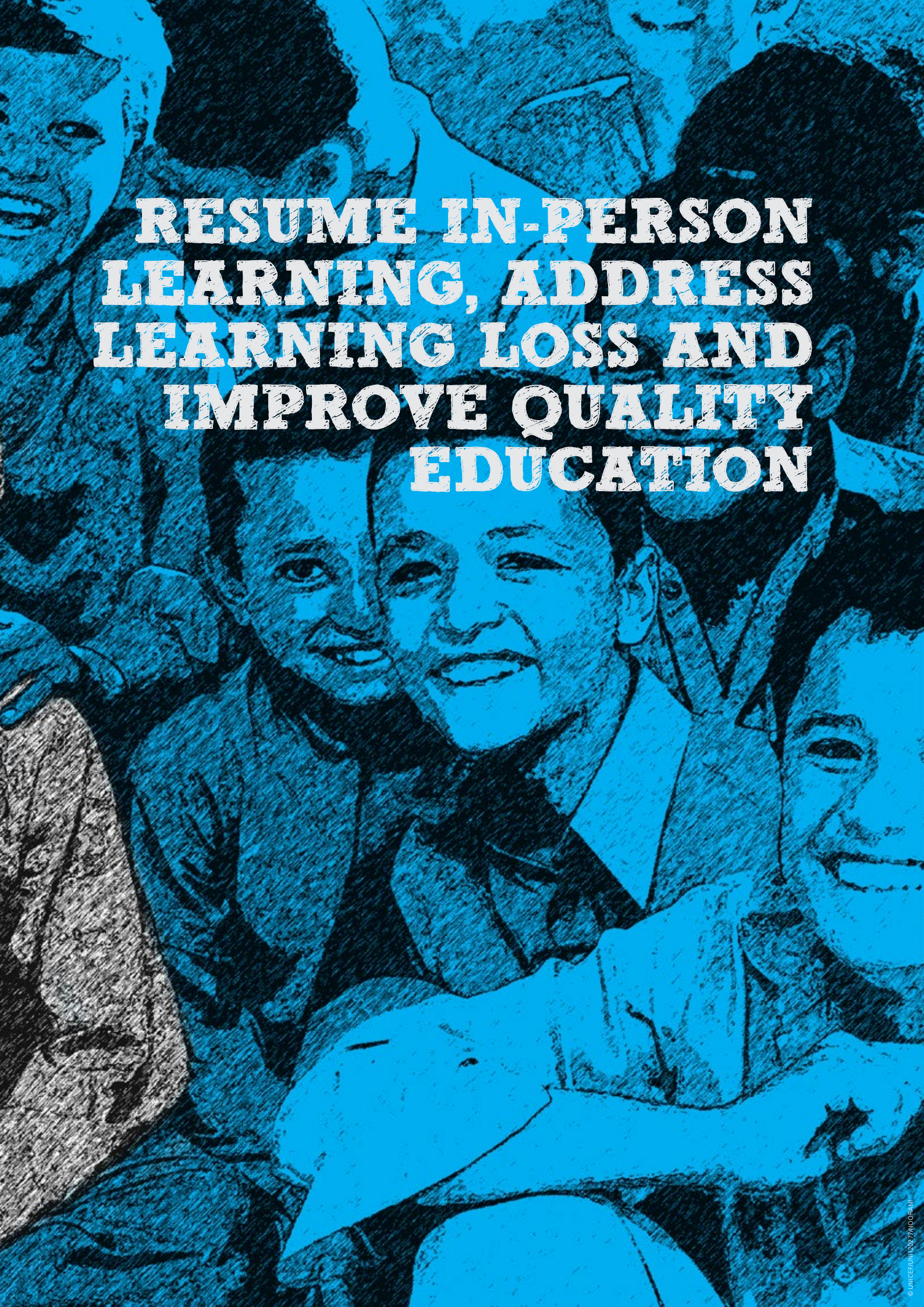
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**RESUME IN-PERSON  
LEARNING, ADDRESS  
LEARNING LOSS AND  
IMPROVE QUALITY  
EDUCATION**

# RESUME IN-PERSON LEARNING, ADDRESS LEARNING LOSS AND IMPROVE QUALITY EDUCATION

When schools in Pakistan suddenly closed, Rubab, 11, could not hide her disappointment. A Grade 5 student in Rehmanabad, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Rubab remembers her parents explaining the reason to her. “I understood that it was important to stay at home and be safe,” she says. “But my education was disrupted. I tried to study on my own, but without my teacher’s guidance, it was not the same.”

Rubab is just one of 434 million children in South Asia whose learning has been disrupted by COVID-19. School closures in the region often lasted longer than in other parts of the world.<sup>16</sup> Between March 2020 and August 2021, schools in South Asia were fully closed for an average of 31.5 weeks.<sup>17</sup> Bangladesh recorded one of the longest school closures worldwide, with all schools remaining fully closed for almost 18 months.

The resultant losses in children’s learning have been huge. One study in Karnataka, India, showed that the proportion of Grade 3 children who could read a Grade 1 level text fell from around 42 per cent in 2018 to 24 per cent in 2020. Similarly, the proportion of Grade 3 children who could recognize double digit numbers fell from around 78 per cent to 61 per cent.<sup>18</sup>

Before COVID-19 wreaked havoc on children’s learning, more and more children were going to school in South Asia. Over the past twenty years, the number of out-of-school children at primary level

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*The best thing about coming to school is to celebrate special moments with friends and teachers.*

–**Kinzang Wangmo**, Grade 3 student, Bhutan

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dropped by about 22 million – a reduction of some 60 per cent. Improvements in girls’ enrolment were another notable success.

But alongside such advances, severe educational challenges persisted.<sup>19</sup> Progress in reducing the number of out-of-school children has stagnated over the last few years as has the quality of education. Across South Asia, 58 per cent of children under 10 are unable to read a simple text,<sup>20</sup> a rate that ranges from 15 per cent in Sri Lanka to over 90 per cent in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

South Asia also has the highest youth population not in any form of education, employment or training in the world: 30 per cent. Illiteracy among youth remains widespread: of the 27 million youth who remain illiterate in the Asia-Pacific region, 95 per cent reside in South Asia.<sup>22</sup>

When countries began organizing remote learning for children unable to go to school, the most



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Anuja, 17, studies at home during the COVID-19 pandemic in Rajasthan, India.

vulnerable children were quickly left behind. A deep digital divide emerged, separating the haves and have-nots of the internet world. Online classes often worked for children from better-off families. But remote learning options were extremely limited for children from the poorest families, as well as those in remote areas with patchy internet or electricity coverage.

With limited or no access to mobile devices, and increased pressure to perform domestic work, girls were at a particular disadvantage.<sup>23</sup> Children with disabilities, including the visually impaired, also generally found themselves excluded. For their part, many teachers discovered they lacked the training to make remote learning work effectively.

With most in-person classes now resumed, the immediate priority is to address the learning loss children have suffered. This involves adapting school curricula, assessing students' learning levels and ensuring that areas of lost learning are addressed.<sup>24</sup> Lessons are being drawn from the months of remote learning, including the importance of mobile phones to stay in touch with teachers, and the value of low and no-tech solutions.

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*We have many primary and secondary schools that are doing a fantastic job in educating the students. But not me. I'm a so-called special student with special needs. I'm blind and the system is not ready for me.*

**–Zaaya Ahmed Zubair, 16, Maldives**

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Students in Sri Lanka, for example, successfully used simple printed packs distributed by the government to continue learning remotely,<sup>25</sup> while in Bhutan, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education in printing and distributing self-instructional materials for children unable to connect online. So-called 'blended approaches', combining a variety of teaching methods, have demonstrated real potential in helping children continue learning in all circumstances.



Children return to school in Bhutan.

The importance of investing in teacher training has been clearly demonstrated. Ensuring teachers are fully able to support distance and blended learning will be key to building resilient education systems which can keep children learning, no matter the circumstances.

Remote learning has opened up other possibilities as well. For example, the experience of teaching students away from the classroom may help shift conventional teaching methodology away from traditional rote-learning methods to more active learning and offer students the chance to learn more autonomously.

As South Asia looks towards a post-pandemic future, harnessing the potential of adolescents and youth will be key. In absolute numbers, South Asia is home to more adolescents – nearly 350 million – than any other region.<sup>26</sup> They will require an array of 21st century skills in order to gain a foothold in a region where jobs remain scarce, technology is evolving rapidly, and deep-rooted inequalities, restrictive gender norms and discrimination remain.<sup>27</sup>

Top priority must go to those who find themselves on the margins of society, including adolescent girls, young people with disabilities and those on the move. Ensuring they acquire the ‘soft skills’

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*When it rains, our internet cuts and we are unable to attend classes. When we go to the next class, we are unable to catch up.*

**Youth consultation on the education digital divide,**  
September 2021

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that employers most value, including teamwork, critical thinking, leadership and entrepreneurship, will become increasingly important in the uncertain market conditions created by the pandemic.

Opportunities for young people to acquire and practice new skills are appearing around the region. In Bangladesh, a GenU-backed project has set itself the goal of enabling more than 17 million opportunities for youth by 2025 through new partnerships. In Maldives and Sri Lanka, projects linked to the Blue Economy – such as coral restoration and sustainable fishing – are showing promise.



## Nothing should stop a child from learning

By Gargee Tanushree Paul, 13, Grade 7 student and a child journalist for *bdnews24.com's Hello platform*

The coronavirus pandemic has made me look at my surroundings in a completely different way. I feel it has made me grow up faster than I ever wanted.

In Bangladesh, we first heard of COVID-19 infections in March 2020. It took us much longer to become aware of how bad the disease was. Despite lockdowns, the number of people falling sick soared higher by the day. The virus affected every part of our lives.

For me, education is what has suffered the most due to the pandemic. The schools closed and millions of students like me were left in a dilemma. Many children ended up being completely unable to continue classes.

After the closures in 2020, many schools, including mine, started giving online classes. But these classes were very new to us and to our teachers as well. We all faced challenges getting used to the new methods.

The first problem I faced was that I didn't own a mobile phone or any other device to use. Fortunately, my parents solved that problem for me. Even then, I had to struggle with the unstable internet connection and electricity supply.

Then I had difficulties in understanding concepts and clearing up confusion in online classes. Unlike in the classroom where I could easily interact with my teachers and ask them questions, I couldn't do that when sitting in front of a screen. My friends faced the same issues and so did the teachers who found it hard to make sure that students understood the lessons properly.

Another thing was that everyone, even students, became more concerned about exams, even though, in my opinion, the goal of being educated is not examinations.

For children who did not have devices or internet connections, the situation was far worse. As a child journalist, I keep in contact with children from all over the country, from many different backgrounds. And through these conversations, I realized that the situation for students in many district towns and remote areas was challenging. Even when they could access classes online, I heard from students how they became depressed as they had to stay inside their homes for months at a time.

Through my reports, I tried to tell their stories. I reported about the lives of Raju and Rafik from Mymensingh who, after their school closed, had

to start tending cattle. I wrote about Kohinoor from Dhaka, who was forced to become a domestic worker. And I heard from Farzana how she had to get married at a young age because her family could no longer provide for her.

Some children told me that they were not even aware of distance learning opportunities, and if they did, they could not afford the necessary devices or did not have reliable electricity or internet connections.

Our learning has already been affected by the long closure due to the pandemic. When I heard that the government had decided to reopen schools in September, I felt extremely happy and relieved. Out of excitement, I started packing my school things, eager to start learning in the classroom and meet my friends after such a long time.

With schools reopened, I feel we need to ensure that no more damage is done and students who dropped out can be brought back into class.

At the same time, we also need to keep developing our distance learning systems for children from all walks of life. The government can work with mobile network operators so that students can watch and download video lessons for free. Such initiatives will continue to help students even after the pandemic is over and ensure that we are prepared in case there is a need to close schools again.

Bangladesh has a large population and education is the only way to turn that population into our nation's strength. We must ensure that the education of our country is not harmed more.

I think now is the time for the government to make big investments in teaching and learning as well as ensuring that all children have the necessary devices and know how to use them. Leaders from all over the world need to work together to ensure that no child from any country falls behind. Wealthier countries should extend their support to create a world of peace for our generation.

In the past, human beings have adapted to new and challenging environments, recovered from the worst natural calamities, and survived the toughest pandemics. I believe we can prove our strength again as we face the COVID-19 pandemic. I urge leaders from all over the world to ensure that all children have the opportunity to keep learning so that we can build a better future for ourselves.

## Online learning was exciting but more challenging

By Geeta Acharya, Grade 10 student at Damphu Central School in Tsirang district of Bhutan

When COVID-19 hit Bhutan, I thought the situation wouldn't be as bad as in other parts of the world. I was wrong.

The virus spread fast and disrupted education across the whole country. Schools and all other learning institutions were closed. Perhaps for the first time in the country's history, students like me stopped going to school.

Going online for classes was exciting, but the excitement came with challenges.

Teachers and students alike were completely new to the system and had difficulties attending and participating in the online classes. Together we had to learn how to use online platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom and Google classroom.

Most Bhutanese students live in rural areas and have to help their parents with household chores and errands. Students of all ages were caught between helping parents and attending classes online.

Internet in Bhutan is too expensive, despite the student data package offers that the Ministry of Education came up with.

Bhutan connected to the Internet in 1999, fairly late in comparison to other countries. The pandemic pushed us all to go online just as the country was starting to catch up with the rest of the world in terms of its connectivity.

While not being able to understand the lessons taught online was a challenge for those who managed to get online, most rural students had no smartphones. Shops ran out of smartphones, but many parents found that buying a mobile phone for each school-going child was beyond their means. Fortunately, my family managed to get me and my younger sibling a phone each. But I soon realized that having a phone was not enough.

In remote places like Dungalang, Tsirang in central Bhutan, where I live, connecting to the internet is a major problem, compounded by very

high data charges. Connectivity is especially bad when I am out in the fields or helping my parents herd cattle. When I managed to get some time to go online, I often couldn't connect and join most of the classes. Still, I studied whenever I got some free time and I wrote most of my assignments late in the night and early morning.

But it was a huge struggle to keep up with the lessons. With no one reminding us to study - unlike in normal classes - online learning required us to rely on our own grit and zeal for learning.

Our online classes were an uncomfortable experience. Technology is meant to be empowering and democratic. But the reality of the digital divide revealed more than issues of connectivity. It exposed the poverty and inequality issues in our society, villages and homes.

For my siblings and I, and possibly for many children like us, being in school offered us a chance to focus on learning and to be away from troubles at home. Education for many of us is the only hope to change our lives, and poor access to digital learning threatens to take away this very hope.

Despite the challenges, we cannot imagine what sorry state we would be in if it weren't for remote learning. While it can never replace the benefits of in-person classes, the pandemic has given an urgency to governments to bridge the digital gap in South Asian countries.

Governments and institutions must make more effort to bridge this technological divide and provide equal opportunities to all children. A solution must go beyond providing gadgets and internet. It is about addressing the issues that hamper learning, poverty and inequality. It is also about empowering teachers to use technology and giving support to parents as well.

Bridging the digital divide is an investment that enables us to continue learning and preserve our hopes for a brighter life.

## Young people and the enormous opportunity to transform India and the world's future

By Ashwin Yardi, CEO – India, Capgemini and Advisory Board, YuWaah (Generation Unlimited India at UNICEF); and Dhuwarakha Sriram, Chief of Generation Unlimited (YuWaah), Youth Development and Partnerships at UNICEF

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, India's young people have led from the front, assuming the responsibility to work towards a better, resilient society.

One example was 22-year-old #YoungWarrior, Manpreet Kaur, in Ferozepur village, Punjab. Forced to discontinue her own high school studies, she understood the importance of education and used her modest resources to provide classroom coaching for children who did not have access to smartphones. She opened her house to classes of 8-10 students while maintaining social distance.

Then there was 18-year-old Aslam from Delhi who put his personal loss of losing his father aside and risked his own health to provide 600 families with lifesaving oxygen cylinders during an intense phase of the pandemic. While the capital was reeling under COVID, Aslam and his team of volunteers used their own funds to buy five cylinders which they delivered to people battling for their lives.

India's young people have displayed exemplary leadership and resilience to come up with hyper-local and innovative solutions, even as they were dealing with multiple personal struggles. In some cases, young people lost parents, teachers and caregivers to the virus, leaving them without proper care. They also faced mental health issues, as lockdowns shut them off from their vital support networks. Young people have been at the forefront of safeguarding their families, communities, and the nation, whether distributing supplies, rallying funds, or monitoring the availability of oxygen cylinders or beds.

Now the country needs to step up and prepare our young people for the future. With learning severely impacted during COVID-19, they need essential life and employability skills to succeed in their chosen careers. This will require a conscious effort to provide a broad set of knowledge, skill sets, work habits, and character traits.

According to the World Economic Forum's Future of [Jobs Report](#), the top skills for 2025 are critical thinking, analytical thinking, innovation, problem-solving, creativity, leadership, resilience, emotional intelligence, and digital literacy. Not

surprisingly, the list is full of deeply human capabilities which are not easily replaceable by an algorithm or a machine. And they are all skills that every one of us can learn.

These skills not only provide a foundation for successful learning in the classroom but also ensure young people can thrive in a world where change is constant and learning never stops. India should also address the psycho-social impact that COVID-19 has had on young people's mental and emotional well-being.

Against this backdrop, #YoungWarriorNXT was introduced by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Central Board of Secondary Education, YuWaah (Generation Unlimited India), UNICEF, and several partners from Government, the private sector and civil society. #YoungWarriorNXT aims to empower five million young people with essential life skills to enable them to pursue successful lives and careers.

Learning resources are offered through multiple channels - from no-technology to technology-based delivery models including Chatbots, innovation challenges, DIY kits delivered to homes, and IVRS number, community radio, and many more platforms to target the largest number of young people nationwide.

Young people will learn these critical life and employability skills and will receive certificates of participation and completion. To be part of #YoungWarriorNXT, young people can simply send YWNXT to +91 96504 14141 on WhatsApp, or go to UReport India Facebook Page, and send YWNXT on the Facebook messenger. For more information: [www.yuwaah.org/youngwarrior](http://www.yuwaah.org/youngwarrior).

It is instrumental for us, as a nation, to understand how the world is changing and impacting young people. Until we can identify challenges and know how they respond to them, we will not address their needs. Our responsibility is to give India's young people hope, opportunity, life skills and a nurturing environment. We must listen to their voices and views and help them learn and grow while still building a healthy, safe, and gender-equal world.



## Soft skills are your superpower

By Rajinda Jayasinghe, Vice President for Asia, Ubiquity University, Sri Lanka

All over the world, companies, schools and governments are waking up to the fact that Soft Skills matter. This is revolutionary. For the past 400 years, Hard Skills like science, engineering, technology, mathematics, business and finance have been prioritized at the expense of all else. Modern education was designed within this framework and thus emphasized knowledge, memorization, analytical thinking and tests.

It was considered “soft” to teach emotional intelligence, social skills, interpersonal collaboration and overall personal development. These have been largely considered private matters, best kept outside the educational system and developed on your own somehow.

Sadly, Sri Lanka is a standard bearer for this archaic approach to education. From a very young age, students are rewarded for rote memorization and nothing else. Parents, teachers and school administrators focus solely on examination results and perpetuate a factory-style system of education in which students are churned out like robots, each model looking much the same as the last, regurgitating soon-to-be obsolete knowledge and bereft of many of the innate skills and talents that set them apart as human beings.

The unfortunate result is that many of our graduates do not enter the workforce with the skills they need to be functional, let alone successful. As both an employer and an educator, it is disheartening to watch students systematically stripped of their individuality and denied the opportunity to reach their full potential.

The world is becoming an increasingly complex place. “Soft skills” are now emerging as critical because they make you more adaptive and resilient in a radically changing world. They enable you to navigate. They are the key to getting jobs, being promoted and developing successful careers. Companies and colleges understand this. This is why Soft Skills are now understood to be as important as Hard Skills. The more you develop each, the better you do with both.

More and more companies are hiring because of who you are, not because of what you know. Then,

after you're hired, you are trained in the domain in which they want you to work. Companies want to know about your Soft Skills because it is these that will determine how well you can learn new things and perform well on the job.

There is more. A study released by the World Economic Forum looked at 21 different industries in 7 Asian countries. Their conclusion: the best way for companies, governments and workers to prepare for the increasing impact of Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, Automation and Robotics is NOT to develop more Hard Skills but to learn Soft Skills. Soft Skills, more than anything else, are essential in developing the “flexible” workforces necessary for the future. This is an astonishing conclusion. Everything is being reshaped by advanced technology but the way to successfully deal with this is not through more technology but through the development of what makes us human - Soft Skills.

As an educator, I have seen the massive deficit Sri Lanka faces when it comes to high performing graduates. I have also seen the huge strides students take when encouraged to develop their Soft Skills that focus on topics like global mindset, innovation, entrepreneurship, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and leadership. Through this type of education students begin to understand the importance of good health and well-being.

They learn to practice mindfulness, how to be authentic with their friends and on the job, how to work to their strengths, to be willing to fail and be self-critical. If our students can master these skills, they will unlock their highest potential and dramatically increase their chances of successfully navigating an increasingly complex future. For today's youth, Soft Skills can truly be their superpower.

It is imperative then, that governments work with local and international partners to restructure our curriculums in a way that honours both Hard and Soft Skills in equal measure. This is how we will give our youth the skills they need to survive and thrive.





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**PROTECT  
CHILDREN FROM  
DEADLY DISEASES  
AND REVERSE THE  
CHILD NUTRITION  
CRISIS**

# PROTECT CHILDREN FROM DEADLY DISEASES AND REVERSE THE CHILD NUTRITION CRISIS

As much as anything, India's immunization programme is evidence of the immense progress South Asia has made towards meeting the vital health needs of citizens. Created in 1978, the Universal Immunization Programme now operates 27,000 cold chain facilities the length and breadth of the vast country. It delivers vaccine and booster shots to well over 100 million children and pregnant women every year.

If not on the same scale, other South Asian countries have success stories of their own. Fewer women in the region are dying in childbirth, and vaccines are protecting an increasing number of children against potentially lethal diseases like measles and polio, ensuring that more and more celebrate their fifth birthday.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic sent shockwaves through health systems across the region. As lockdown rules came into force, vital services for pregnant women and newborn babies were abruptly closed down, and their staff transferred to help deal with the fast-spreading virus. Immunization programmes, essential nutrition services and special feeding programmes were suspended.

The impact was immediate and sweeping. In Bangladesh,<sup>28</sup> for example, the pandemic led to a 50 per cent drop in the number of women and children using maternal and child health services. Deliveries in health facilities, usually over 350,000 per month, dropped to 160,000 in April 2020.

"There was fear on both sides of contracting COVID-19. Patients were afraid to come to the health clinic and health workers hadn't yet received sufficient Personal Protective Equipment to protect themselves while working," says Dr Sanjana Bhardwaj, Chief of Health at UNICEF Bangladesh.

The full cost of the near meltdown of primary healthcare services around the region is still not clear. In March 2021, a United Nations report projected that an additional 228,000 children may have died in 2020. Among the contributory factors it cited was an 80 per cent drop in the number of young children treated for the most severe form of malnutrition in Nepal and Bangladesh, and sharp falls in immunization rates for measles and other killer diseases. The study also projected an additional 11,000 maternal deaths in 2020.<sup>29</sup>

The easing of the pandemic has allowed some primary health services to resume. But to a large extent the damage was done. WHO and UNICEF data released in July 2021 showed that more than 5.3 million children in South Asia missed out or did not complete essential vaccinations in 2020, nearly 1.9 million more than in the previous year.<sup>30</sup> Major outbreaks of measles and other diseases have been reported in the region, putting un- and under-vaccinated children at risk of life-threatening diseases.

Several countries have mounted intensive vaccination drives to get immunization rates back on track. India, which was particularly hard-hit by



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V for Victory, V for Vaccinated! Girls aged three to five years, in Lahore, Pakistan, welcome the polio vaccination team to their neighborhood.

COVID-19, has refocused efforts on missed children living in remote areas.

Governments and partners are capitalizing on the lessons learned from the pandemic, the most critical of which is the importance of substantial and long-term investment in primary healthcare systems<sup>31</sup> in order to prepare for and respond to future health emergencies. Countries like Bhutan, which experienced only a slight drop in routine immunization due to pandemic-related disruptions, demonstrated the value of decades-long investments in its health care system.

Some important gains from the COVID-19 experience are already demonstrating their value.

For example, the stepped-up use of oxygen to treat COVID-19 patients has created infrastructure and staff capacity which can now benefit mothers and newborn infants suffering from other conditions. Upgraded cold chain infrastructure and newly trained staff can be capitalized on to roll out routine vaccinations for children against diseases like measles and polio.

Health systems have been strengthened in other ways too. Several countries have modified services for treatment of severe wasting in order to improve their impact and reduce the cost to patients.



A child in Afghanistan is fed Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food after being diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition.

© UNICEF/UNISER/ISBO/ROMENZI

In addition, COVID-19 has allowed for deepened understanding of community attitudes towards vaccines and methods for stemming the flow of misinformation, both of which will prove valuable for improving routine immunization. New partnerships with women's organizations are slated to play an important role in the broader promotion of immunization and positive health and nutrition practices.

COVID-19 has revealed the stark need for increased investments in child nutrition, as well as better integration of primary health care and nutrition services. It has also highlighted the role that food systems and social protection systems can play in improving children's diets.

The crucial work being carried out by community-level health workers has been clearly demonstrated. In Afghanistan, 38-year-old Balqis is one of 28,000 community health workers making health and nutrition services a reality even for the remotest communities.

"I teach mothers about what to feed their babies, and I continuously promote exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months," says Balqis. "With my sister-in-law, Khadija, I organize educational sessions based on foods that are available, and affordable."

Simple advice like this is especially needed in a region where rates of malnutrition are stubbornly high. Even before COVID-19, an estimated 26 million children suffered from wasting, while 59 million suffered from stunting.<sup>32</sup>

As a result of the pandemic, poor households which had already struggled to afford healthy diets now found the task much harder. Household surveys revealed that families were shifting to starchy and ultra-processed foods and cutting back on fruit, vegetables, dairy, meat and fish.<sup>33</sup>

As health partners survey the future, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized families will be key. So too will be the work of leveraging the policies, resources and actors within food and social protection systems to deliver better diets for young children.

One way of doing that is to expand and upgrade the current range of national social protection schemes and focus on delivering a complete and integrated package of benefits covering children's essential health and nutrition needs during the first 1,000 days of life.









**PROTECT CHILDREN  
FROM NEGLECT  
AND ABUSE AND  
PROMOTE MENTAL  
HEALTH**

# PROTECT CHILDREN FROM NEGLECT AND ABUSE AND PROMOTE MENTAL HEALTH

From early in the pandemic, child helplines in South Asia began reporting an alarming upsurge in cases of violence and other forms of abuse against children. In Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, helplines run by governments and civil society organizations were ringing off the hook with these painful accounts.

Some child callers described how the prolonged lockdowns had made them more vulnerable to corporal punishment, sexual abuse and stress. Others had witnessed violence against their mothers or siblings. With many children spending unsupervised time using the internet, reports of online abuse and harassment surged.

Already before the pandemic, the region had high rates of violence against children. A 2016 report<sup>34</sup> said that of all children globally who experienced severe violence, 64 per cent lived in South Asia. Physical and sexual violence against women is also widespread: a 2020 survey revealed that 46 per cent of women in Afghanistan and 27 per cent of women in Bangladesh had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the last 12 months. Lockdown measures further deepened the vulnerability of many girls, women and boys.

The pandemic brought other consequences as well. As a result of deepening poverty, some households resorted to marrying their underage daughters, threatening to reverse the significant decline in child marriages the region recorded in the past 20 years.

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*When I was six years old, I saw my 14-year-old aunt become a victim of a kidnap marriage. She was forced to marry a 23-year-old man just because he had touched her and taken her to his house. Since ancient times, kidnap marriage has been part of my culture. Hence, no one spoke against it.*

—**Maya**, 20, Nepal (name has been changed)

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Factors such as economic shocks, interrupted education, disruption to programmes and services, early pregnancy and loss of caregivers are likely to lead to an additional ten million child brides globally by the end of the decade, many of them in South Asia.

Cases of child labour have increased as well, spurred on by school closures, financial hardship within families and employers looking to trim costs by hiring cheaper child workers. In June 2021, a joint ILO/UNICEF report said that globally, the number of child labourers had risen to 160 million, with millions more at risk because of the impacts of COVID-19.<sup>35</sup>



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*There are times when feelings are hard to describe with words. It's not easy to admit your mental health problems, even if it is your parents.*

**-Taieba**, 16, Bangladesh

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Governments and their partners adopted a wide range of initiatives to protect children during the pandemic, often bringing in new partners and fresh solutions, and ultimately opening the door for further strengthening of child protection services. In India, where cases of child trafficking were causing concern amid a massive wave of internal migration, railway police were brought in to help identify trafficked children on trains and at railway stations. In Maldives, UNICEF worked alongside the government, local communities and women's organizations on a 'break the silence' campaign against child abuse and sexual violence reaching even the most remote islands.



The long months of lockdown and restrictions on movement had damaging effects on the mental health of children and adolescents across the region, with many children and young people reporting feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression.

Shitanshu, 20, from Nepal, remembers how challenging it was to face a second lockdown. In the beginning of the pandemic, she says, “it felt temporary – you told yourself you just had to be patient and find new ways to bide your time.” But with the second lockdown, it was like being “back to square one, and it’s even more difficult to stay positive.”

Mental health services for children and youth remain limited in South Asia, and almost non-existent outside cities, though good practices do exist. One UNICEF-supported project which provides

psychosocial support services to women and children in remote communities of south-west Pakistan has already reached 22,000 people. In Nepal, which has one of the highest suicide rates in the region, a collaboration between the Government and a local NGO has established the country’s first specialist outpatient child mental health services. In Bhutan, high-level advocacy in which UNICEF was involved led to a royal initiative making mental health a national priority. Nearly 3,500 students, teachers and parents in Bhutan received psychosocial support through UNICEF-supported services provided by the Ministry of Education.

The spotlight COVID-19 has shone on the mental health of children and youth can be capitalized on to drive more investment in better protection, mental health and psychosocial support services across all sectors and community services.



A young woman looks out from her house in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Counselling is helping violence survivors start a new life.

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## How sports help girls overcome barriers and bias

By Sachin Tendulkar, UNICEF Regional Goodwill Ambassador for South Asia

The late, great cricket coach, Achrekar Sir once told me: No one is bigger than the game. It was one of the most profound pieces of advice that I ever received and it stayed with me throughout my years in the sport. The game does not discriminate; it doesn't matter who you are, or where you have come from. It doesn't matter if you are a girl or a boy. As long as there is passion in your heart, the game is all yours.

Sport is a wonderful medium for transformation. Look at Avani Lekhara, the Indian Paralympian and rifle shooter. The grit and mental strength that she displayed to overcome challenges at such a young age—she is just 19—to win a gold for India in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics is incredible.

That is the amazing thing about sport. It brings you hope and joy even in the most challenging circumstances. You can leave behind all your doubts, fears, and prejudices that may have caged you, and give in to your most natural instinct: to play.

Children must have the right to play. It is the best medium to help them channel their energy and teach them some of life's most valuable lessons—on strength and determination, humility and mutual respect, on resilience and sportsmanship.

To be able to play with an open mind encourages children to push their limits, and in the process, discover their own potential. Throughout my career, I have always played with my heart. It was always about the process and not the result. I played because cricket gave me, and will always give me joy.

My father would always tell me: Be a good person first; everything else can come later. Sport is the best teacher to build character. When you are on a sports field, be it cricket or badminton, football or hockey, you let go of everything else and become a sportsperson, and only that.

You stand on the same platform as everyone else and learn to win with dignity and accept defeat

with humility. Sport does not see your gender, just your hard work.

It is for this very reason that I believe sport is a great medium to empower girls. In November 2019, when I visited Nepal as a UNICEF ambassador and engaged with the women's team in a game of cricket, the confidence they exuded left me impressed. The enthusiasm of the cricketers participating in the Women's Cricket League in October 2020 in Jammu and Kashmir was inspirational.

At home, or in society at large, girls may face various kinds of discrimination, but on the sports field they have an opportunity to showcase their talent. This helps them grow as individuals. The Indian Women's Hockey team played brilliantly in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and produced many such examples. The captain, Rani Rampal's father could not afford to buy her a hockey stick when she was growing up, so she would play with a broken one; Salima Tete from Jharkhand would play with wooden sticks for the same reason. Deep Grace Ekka's family was criticized because she was 'allowed' to play the game despite being a girl.

It is the same purpose that drives teenage footballer, Pria Dutta of Bangladesh to play for the national football team. Pria's father is a carpenter who has to work hard to sustain his family of four. All of her difficulties, including the bias of society, fade once Pria, the team's top striker, dribbles the football. She knows that on the field, she is invincible and that motivates her to work harder.

The big message is this: Let every child, girl and boy, play a sport. It will help their physical and mental growth. As the UNICEF Cricket for Good ambassador at the 2017 Women's World Cup, my aim was to motivate girls to pick up the sport and participate in world-class championships. Sport, like music, transcends boundaries and helps in moulding our children into well-rounded individuals who will be an asset to our society. Let's give them that opportunity.





## A plea to end parental violence against children

By Mahnoor Mahsud, 12, Grade 7 student from South Waziristan District of Pakistan

Children are like a flower. When you crush a flower, it loses its beauty and aroma. Children are broken by the violence that is perpetrated against them. It shatters their dreams and diminishes their passion, hopes and talents. When adults fail to control their anger and yell at children, they instil fear in them and impede their growth and development.

In our society, it is often overlooked that children need love and compassion. Instead, they are subjected to violence to such an extent that some are left suffering mental illness. Parents and grandparents should not scold their child in front of other children, as it causes the child to develop an inferiority complex and lack of confidence. The child will no longer be able to tell what is in their heart, and what they want, because she or he is always afraid of being beaten again.

From the beginning to the end, humans spend their lives in a family. When there is yelling, beating and abuse in the family, it has negative effects on a child. They become a failure and see others their age as failures too. Because the child is taught violence, he or she will grow up to do the same to their own children. Parents who have been exposed to violence in their childhood become violent and allow their anger to spill out on their own children.

The way parents interact with their children affects their education. When a child does not have good results at school, some parents hold them responsible and mentally abuse them. The effects of mental abuse last even longer than those of

physical abuse, and affect the child's personality.

In Pakistan, corporal punishment is a common way of disciplining children. It makes children think that violence is the solution to problems. That idea becomes part of their personality and prevents them from succeeding in life.

Too often, family members make fun of children, causing them to lose their self-confidence.

A child who is subjected to violence stops trying to progress. A child who is not appreciated stops appreciating the good things in life.

I request parents to stop using violence against children. By using violence, parents risk causing their children to suffer mental illness, lack of confidence, and a sense of inferiority to other children. Children who see other children being brought up with love and care want to belong to another home, one where they will be loved and cared for, and where their wishes could be fulfilled.

Children dream of princes and princesses in their childhood. When they awaken from these day dreams, they feel as though they have been slapped on the face. They spend their whole nights in fear, dreading that tomorrow they might be scolded again. The awful events of the day cause them to have frightening nightmares at night.

Our religion and Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) prohibits violence against children. So we are advised to treat children with love and compassion.

## Opening up to the mental health needs of youth

By Shitanshu Dhakal, medical student and the co-founder of Team Aarogya, Nepal

Eighteen-year-old Meena has been fighting depression for the past two years. But it was only when she started talking about her condition that she discovered she was not alone.

“I realized I belong to a very big club of young people,” said Meena, adding: “But it’s only when mental illness is visible on a sufferer, that society doesn’t say “Just get over it”.

In Nepal, nearly 8,000 people commit suicide annually. The number rose to a peak during the first three months of the national lockdown when more than 2,000 suicides were recorded. Even these numbers are likely to be an underestimate because so many cases go unreported.

Adolescents are particularly prone to mental health problems, especially in Nepal, where one-third are affected. The rate of suicide among females is much higher than that among males due to the patriarchal norms, gender discrimination and misogyny that is still prevalent in our conservative society.

The suffering caused by mental illness is influenced by many factors. Mental health has traditionally been a secretive topic in our society, where it is seen as a cause for stigma and shame. To many people, mental illness is the result of possession by a spirit, black magic or divine punishment. Sufferers typically seek out traditional healers as a first source of help and treatment.

A national Mental Health Policy came into effect in 1997, but twenty-four years later, the framework is still to be put into effect. That said, the new 2021 National Mental Health Strategy has raised hope that positive change could lie ahead.

Caught up by the pressures of modern living, young people are very often prey to depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions. There are evident cases of substance abuse and digital addiction among young people around us. I can say this looking at how the people around me have been grasped by the internet world that their lives

happen to completely revolve around it. During the pandemic young people have been separated from their friends who are often the most important people in their lives. They have missed out on big moments of their teen lives. They are living with fear of contracting the virus but also find themselves targeted by misinformation circulating on social media.

Without parental monitoring or other limits on their daily activities, many young people overindulge in social media and suffer sleeping problems as a result. As the pandemic worsened, more and more had to cope with the trauma of losing close friends and relatives to the virus, making it even harder for them to resume their normal lives. Children and adolescents who were already suffering from mental health issues prior to the pandemic have seen their condition worsen.

Despite the extent of these problems, less than 1 per cent of the national health budget is allocated to mental health services. There is a severe shortage of psychiatrists, psychologists and other mental health specialists. Of the limited facilities available, just one of them is dedicated to treating children and adolescents. Eighty percent of existing services are accessible only to people living in urban areas.

In order to help young people safeguard their mental well-being, mental health education should be incorporated in the school curriculum. Regular awareness programs are badly needed. Workouts and meditation should become a daily part of children’s daily lives. Parents need guidance for appropriate parenting at home. It must be made easier for them to reach out to specialists whenever they are needed.

Young people’s voices need to be heard to understand their mental health issues and to tackle them in an effective manner. The resumption of normal schooling will make a huge difference, and allow children to begin living their lives to the full again.





## Young life in Afghanistan

By Sheema (name changed), youth from Afghanistan

In July, I completed my final high school exams and was looking forward to attending Kabul University to study psychology. I was getting ready to enter a new phase in my life - complete my higher education, make my parents proud and build the life I had always wanted.

Then, on August 15 this year, everything changed – especially for us Afghan girls.

It was a life-long dream of mine to become a psychologist. All I've ever wanted is to help the people of my country; create a better life for themselves (and for me); to help young people overcome challenges in their life, inspire them to raise their voices and to take control of their lives and their future.

Now, instead of meeting new friends, learning new knowledge and building new skills, I am sitting at home. Sitting. At. Home. It is difficult to describe the pain I am enduring.

Tell me, how do you process the seismic political shift and all it means for your country's citizens? How do you describe the boredom that envelops you from the moment you get up to the moment you go to bed, or the fear that reverberates around your body when there is a knock at the door? How do you not lose hope for the life that you thought you were going to have?

Tell me, please. Because I don't know.

Pain only makes you stronger, they say. I agree. But, first, it stabs you; rips your heart out of your chest; hits you on your knees until you fall and lie numb. Then, if you survive, yes, maybe you will be stronger.

As I think about what the last three months have been like for people my age in Afghanistan, it is difficult not to despair. The people you know and love have become the people you're no longer able to meet. Our friends have left the country and we feel there is nobody left by our side. It's tormenting

to see friends who are the same age as me getting married – especially when you've always heard them talk enthusiastically about building their life and forging a career first. But I'm trying to be strong; trying to hope that, maybe one day, they'll revisit their dreams in reverse order.

I'm trying hard to think but all I see is a blank sheet. That's what my future looks like. A blank sheet. I want a better life for the future generations of Afghan girls that walk in my footsteps. It's a life we dreamed of having but will never have. A life of health, education, happiness, freedom and all the good things we deserve.

One thing that has given me hope through these last months is the work UNICEF is doing for Afghanistan's children.

Throughout the upheaval, U-Report, a text message-based service, enabled young people, like me, to voice my thoughts and find useful information as we struggled to come to terms with what was happening.

At a time when so many were silent or had been silenced, U-Report had grown into a huge and powerful community of youth. It gave Afghan youth the chance to take control, ask questions and help to bring positive changes.

Looking forward to the coming years, I cannot help wondering what my beloved Afghanistan will look like. One thing I do know is that young people in Afghanistan are resilient and tenacious. We may often fall, but we always rise stronger.

Happy 75th anniversary UNICEF! Even during our toughest moments, you stayed and delivered. That, in itself, gave me and so many others hope. May we celebrate the 100th too! I hope the situation improves for us all, especially girls, and we can come together to celebrate better futures, for every child.

## Social norms slow progress towards curbing violence and abuse of children

By Iftikhar Mubarik, Executive Director of Search for Justice Pakistan

In Pakistan, as in many other countries, it is a sad fact that children continue to be subjected to physical, mental, emotional and sexual violence, and to neglect. Much of this violence is hidden from sight within the private realm of the family or within the confines of schools, prisons, care homes and other institutions. This makes it harder to prevent, discover, and address.

Cultural norms are part of the problem. In too many countries children are still considered to be the property of their parents, and corporal punishment is regarded as being in the child's 'best interest', even though all evidence suggests otherwise.

Violence against children directly contravenes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a legally binding international agreement setting out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of every child. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also urges States to "end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against, and torture of, children".

Pakistan was the sixth country to sign and ratify the Convention in 1990. Article 19 describes the role of State parties in protecting children from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect, including by taking legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures, and by investigating cases of violence and holding those responsible to account.

In recent years, Pakistan has made progress towards addressing violence against children. Federal and Provincial Assemblies have enacted significant legislation. The federal government has put together a National Commission on the Rights of Children, an overarching statutory body tasked with the promotion and protection of children's rights. It also launched a national Child Labour survey – the first one in 25 years.

We now need to develop clearly defined child protection policies, coupled with detailed action

plans, at the federal and provincial levels. To help the legislation translate into progress on the ground, we need to ensure the allocation of adequate human and financial resources, and the development of effective protection systems on the ground.

Parliamentarians have a vital role to play in highlighting child protection issues. Setting up results-oriented working groups that agencies like UNICEF and national Civil Society Organizations can support will help improve legislation further, increase oversight and ensure that the legal framework is properly implemented.

High-level forums are needed at the district, provincial and national levels to reinforce coordination among government departments and authorities. Effective administrative arrangements must be in place so that child victims of violence can be promptly referred to medical, legal, and social care professionals.

Medical professionals, police, prosecutors, teachers, and social workers all need to be trained in how to interact with children. All must be given an opportunity to develop the competencies, knowledge, and motivation they need to provide effective protection for every vulnerable girl and boy.

Curbing violence against children will require challenging social and cultural norms, and positive change in attitudes towards children, for example in cases of child labour and child marriage. Mass media, community leaders and influencers must be engaged in this effort.

Finally, to ensure the full participation of children and adolescents, we need to include strong messages on children's right to protection in the curriculum of our schools. This will be a powerful tool not only to raise their awareness, but also to empower children themselves in the ongoing movement to protect every girl and boy, as is their right.





## COVID-19 affected children in more ways than one

By Ranavasia Lata Paragbhai, 18, India

During the lockdown I was frightened by the frequent sound of ambulance sirens. It kept me up many nights. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people lost their jobs. With less money at home, families had to go to bed on an empty stomach. Children remained hungry. There were frequent quarrels in the house. Children suffered a lot and in some cases, were forced to go out to work to earn money. Everyone was terrified by the mere mention of the word Corona.

Lockdown became an unpleasant experience for some children. At times they were physically and mentally abused by members of their own families. Constant fights between parents further added to their stress.

For many, online education was a ray of hope as I could still interact with my friends and teachers even during the lockdown. This made me very happy and helped me feel connected even though we were physically apart. But not every child had access to a mobile phone. Sometimes they had only one phone in the family. Deciding which child would get that phone for their class then became a problem. In most cases, boys got preference over girls. Even if they did manage to get a phone, paying the monthly bill was an additional burden. In a hilly area like Amirgarh, where I am from, even the mobile network is poor.

Children were vulnerable in other ways too. They would play online games or watch pornographic videos. Some visit social media sites instead of studying, and became victims of cybercrime and sexual abuse.

When families got poorer, labour increased a lot in tribal societies during the pandemic period.

We must do our best to keep COVID-19 away. Everyone must wear a mask, and wash their hands with soap frequently, and get themselves checked if they have a cold, cough, or fever. Caution and safety are key to keep the virus and our troubles away.

## Children in tribal areas suffered the most

By Bumbadia Sangeetaben Revabhai, 18, India

COVID-19 brought all sorts of problems to our lives. It affected our education and social life, and hurt families economically. A simple life. They go to work and bring back food and other essentials for their families. COVID-19 put a stop to that.

As soon as the income stopped coming in, family quarrels started. If a child interfered in his parents' quarrel, he was beaten. Family members who had migrated to other places for work, came back home during the lockdown. This made life tough and relationships became strained within families.

But it was not just the poor that were affected by COVID-19. Many middle-class families suffered too. Marriages were postponed and some married girls who were to be sent to their in-laws' house could not go because of the difficult circumstances. In some cases, girls from the tribal community were married to non-tribal members out of desperation, because their parents could not feed everyone in the family.

Child labour increased a lot because there was no money in the house. Some children from the neighbourhood started going to the farm to work so that their parents did not have to hire outside labour. Children working elsewhere would give a portion of the earned money to their parents and keep the rest for themselves. This has made some of them addicted to money. These children have dropped out of school permanently.

The psychological impact of COVID-19 on children has been drastic. Some have trouble sleeping, or have had bedwetting issues. Some are too scared to be alone, or cry constantly. There are some children who have become aggressive and are always angry, or talk back to their parents. The world has become a strange place. People have stopped visiting each other's houses, children are not allowed to go out and play. COVID-19 has made our lives miserable and we are waiting for all of this to come to an end.





**URGENTLY ACT  
TO PROTECT  
CHILDREN FROM  
CLIMATE CHANGE**

# URGENTLY ACT TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM CLIMATE CHANGE

When lockdown first emptied the congested streets of Kathmandu in early 2020, people noticed something remarkable. As the pall of vehicle and factory fumes lifted, Mount Everest came into view for the first time in decades. Residents were given a graphic visual reminder of the effect humankind is having on the environment and the global climate.

In South Asia, the devastating impacts of climate change have been apparent for years, affecting the lives of children and their communities across the region. Images of children wading through waist-high floodwaters and of whole villages swallowed by riverine erosion have become all too familiar.

From the melting glaciers of northern Pakistan and Bhutan, to the heatwaves scorching India's northern cities and the rising sea levels threatening the very existence of Maldives, children are feeling the intensifying effects of the climate crisis first hand.

"My city faces the issue of extreme heat every year," says 16-year-old Aabhas Asit Senapati from the northern Indian state of Gujarat. "Temperatures reach over 50°C and it becomes very difficult to even live in apartments. The heat waves during the summer are so unbearable that even schools and institutions have had to close down over the last 4-5 years."

Climate change is a global phenomenon. But South Asia – where one fourth of the world's population

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*Climate change is not new to us. We the youth and children are the least responsible for climate change and yet, we have to bear its brunt.*

–**Debarati Ganguli**, 21, India

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and an estimated 616 million children live<sup>36</sup> – is facing particularly severe consequences because of high levels of poverty and the absence of effective safety nets. With limited access to resources that can help recovery from shocks, marginalized children and women feel climatic shocks more intensely.<sup>37</sup>

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and India are among the countries where children are at particularly high risk of the impact of droughts, floods, air pollution, and river erosion. Maldives is expected to disappear entirely before the end of the century if urgent action is not taken.<sup>38</sup> Even carbon-negative Bhutan is vulnerable due to its dependence on hydropower and agriculture.

When children and adolescents are asked about the effect climate change is having on their lives, education shows up as a particular concern. In one survey,<sup>39</sup> 78 per cent said that their studies had been



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A young girl outside a glue factory near Buriganga river in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

affected by climate change. Most cited either an inability to concentrate during heatwaves, damage to their school buildings, or disruptions to their journey to school.

In response, children are speaking out and demanding more governmental action to tackle climate issues. One example was the 2020

Bangladeshi Children's Climate Declaration, which called on the government to protect children against the impacts of climate change; reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions; increase investments in education, training and a green economy; and consult children on policies and decisions that impact their future.

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*We, the children, call for intergenerational solidarity and for exemplary leadership by the Government of Bangladesh. There is no time to lose. Our futures are intertwined and our planet is shared. Together we can reimagine a new vision for a better, safer, greener Bangladesh. We, the children, are ready to act with urgency and courage. Join us!*

Extract from the Bangladeshi Children's Climate Declaration, 2020

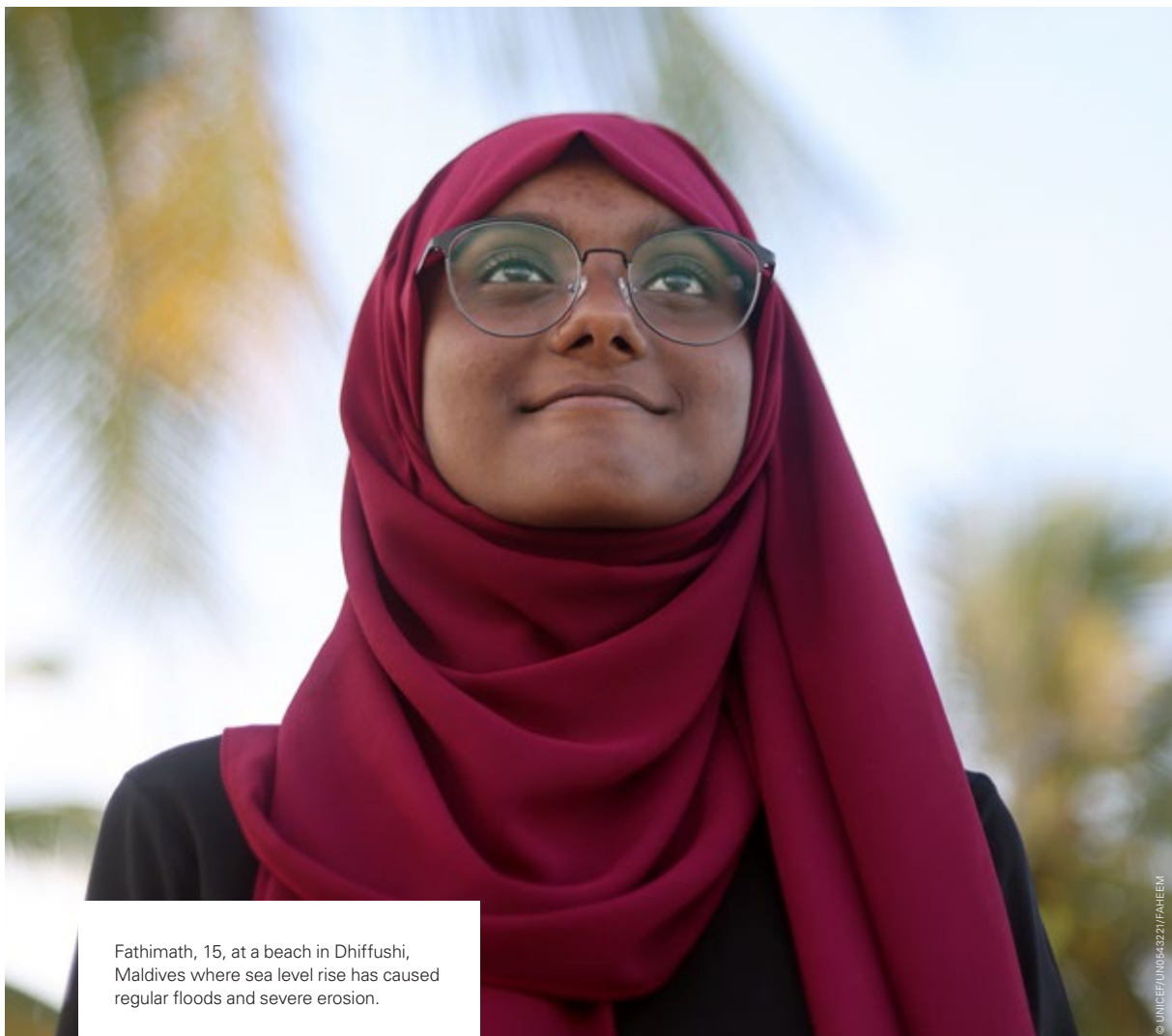
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Meanwhile, youth-led initiatives to promote a sustainable environment and curb the effects of the climate crisis are taking root. In India, a Youth4Water campaign mobilized over 5,000 young college students as ambassadors to raise awareness on water and climate change issues.

As calls multiply for the COVID-19 recovery to be green, and as the climate crisis is increasingly understood as a child rights crisis, opportunities abound for improving the climate resilience of critical infrastructure that children rely on. The pandemic has notably exposed some hard truths for those working in water, sanitation and hygiene. Hygiene precautions necessary to keep the virus at bay – and

to reopen schools and health centres – require ready access to handwashing facilities and safe water. But in South Asia, only around 50 per cent of schools have the minimum facilities.<sup>40</sup>

Tackling this deficit should be an urgent priority for governments as part of their efforts to make basic services for children resilient to the threat of climate-related hazards. Making water, sanitation and hygiene facilities resilient to climatic shocks in areas prone to flooding has already produced innovations. In Bangladesh, one technique showing promise is aquifer technology<sup>41</sup> which provides clean drinking water when wells and other traditional water sources are damaged in cyclones or floods.



Fathimath, 15, at a beach in Dhiffushi, Maldives where sea level rise has caused regular floods and severe erosion.

© UNICEF/UN54327/FAHEM



## Our Climate, Our Future: Children and Adolescents' Urgent Call to Combat Climate Change

By Fathimath Maesa Zaki, Writer, Maldives

"I feel like most of the damage to the environment is being done by adults," says thirteen-year-old Iz Yala binth Ali Shameem. "Often I see them just throw garbage into the sea. It's really bad for the fish and for us."

Yala lives in the Maldivian island of Kudafari. She is a passionate home gardener who believes that everybody should try to grow their own food.

"I'd like to tell kids my age to be more open about the damage being done to the environment. If you know something is not right, you have to say something."

In Maldives, most food products, including staples like rice, flour and sugar, are imported. To cater for the growing population as well as the large number of tourists who visit the country, Maldives imports massive quantities of food, a long journey which relies on energy from burning fossil fuels.

Yala was inspired towards a more eco-conscious life by her love for Maldives' famous coral reefs. A cornerstone of the national economy, coral reefs are one of the most valuable and diverse ecosystems on earth. Unfortunately, due to the warming ocean temperatures, well over 60 percent of Maldivian reefs have been hit by bleaching which causes the corals to die, thus affecting the entire ecosystem that relies on the corals.

Kudafari island is on a mission to instigate change in Maldives through example. People have planted trees along the harbour, restored coastal vegetation, promoted bicycle usage and installed solar panels – all part of efforts to become the country's first zero-waste island.

Ali Shameem heads Kudafari local council. While forming the council committee, he understood the necessity of allocating seats for the community's youth.

"Young people can be the leaders who inspire this movement," said Shameem. "They are the solution to the global climate crisis. Today's generation have mastered the art of spreading the word, so imagine if you took that connectivity and directed it towards the single goal of preventing climate change."

Right now, in Maldives and around the world, climate change threatens children more than anyone else. However, too many young people hesitate to raise their voices, according to Climate Advocate Aisha Niyaz.

"In Maldives, young people and adolescents who have raised their voices (about climate change) have faced harassment and repercussions," said Niyaz. "As a result, many are not comfortable to speak out."

Niyaz says there is a disconnect between older and younger generations on the issue of climate change, but that children need to take charge as it is their future.

"Don't let anyone get to you," she says. "Kids like (youth climate activist) Greta Thunberg have proved that one person, no matter how young, can make a huge difference."

Maldives is already experiencing the impacts of climate change first-hand. Islands are losing their coastlines. Erratic weather patterns lead to damaged crops and islands needing emergency drinking water supplied to them. Sea surges and storms cause frequent floods that hinder children from going to school and disrupt economic activities in different islands.

Although the topic of climate change is often referred to in future tense, its effects are already happening in Maldives, and very visibly so. We are already living this terrible phenomenon. Young people whose futures depend on our actions know that immediate changes are required before we reach the point of no return.

## The world we want to leave behind for our children

*By Saleemul Huq, Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh*

Human-induced climate change is an unprecedented challenge and a global problem like no other that humanity has faced. The actions we take today will decide the future of our children and the generations that follow them. A recent UNICEF report described climate change as the 'greatest threat facing the world's children and young people,' impacting 1 billion children across the globe and putting them at 'extremely high risk' of its impacts. These include cyclones, heatwaves, floods, water scarcity, increasing disease burdens, and air pollution.

In comparison to adults, children have undoubtedly a higher stake in a stable climate system: As one of society's most vulnerable groups, they are more at risk of dying from diseases such as malaria and dengue as well as from developing long term illnesses due to air pollution. Lacking the knowledge, resources and capacity to protect themselves, children are also more likely to die in natural disasters and are vulnerable to related risks, including displacement, deepening poverty and exposure to violence and trafficking. Children's vulnerability worsens in the face of additional challenges such as nutritional, educational and protection-related deprivations, which are often reinforced by the effects of climate change. Combined, these impacts of climate change can impair children's development, resulting in a lifetime of lost opportunities.

Bangladesh is among the countries where children are most imperilled by climate change. As a low-lying, deltaic and densely populated country, many of the risks converge, especially in areas where the poorest and most marginalized children live. For example, children in remote, saline-prone coastal areas are not only at risk of natural disasters, such as cyclones and flooding, but also witness their homes and schools being threatened by sea level rise and erosion. Students from such areas report the challenges they face going to school due to waterlogging, damaged roads and excessive rain. When strong winds and fallen trees damage their schools, they can't go there. Imagine, during extreme weather, they often reach them despite facing a lot of troubles and are then sent back home because the school building is damaged and unsafe.

In densely populated, low-income urban communities, children's health and survival is threatened by air, soil and water pollution, urban flooding and outbreaks of dengue and other diseases. The poorest children face multiple, sometimes overlapping risks that can continue to affect their well-being over their lifetime.

This is why a paradigm shift is needed away from the traditional way in which international issues are

tackled. This is not a question of negotiating to achieve what is best for individual countries and their citizens because this is not an issue that has isolated effects on individual countries. When it comes to tackling climate change, leaders are deciding about the world they will leave behind for future generations.

While many world leaders have yet to grasp the importance of this re-framing of global action, young people around the world have been at the forefront of raising awareness and calling for action on a problem that is not of their making.

Like their counterparts around the world, children in Bangladesh have been advocating for climate action and doing their part to reduce pollution. Activists and groups have been arranging climate strikes across Bangladesh, adding the voices from frontline communities to the global climate movement. They have been raising awareness through community radios, blogs, newspaper articles and social media and they are assisting in disaster preparedness and response, and changing behaviours in their families, schools and communities. Actions like tree planting or waste management have demonstrated how change can start at the local level.

On World Children's Day, 20 November 2020, children representing all 300 constituencies of Bangladesh came together to draft a Children's Climate Declaration. It stated: 'For us children, it is a battle for our future, for the planet we share, for the lives we live, for the children today, and for the children of tomorrow.'

The declaration called on policymakers to take effective steps to protect children from the impacts of climate change by reducing emissions, expanding climate and environmental education, investing in a green economy, and most importantly, making children part of the solution. In October 2021, they again gathered at the National Parliament and handed over their declaration to members of the Bangladeshi delegation to COP26.

These young people understand the urgency of the situation. In their own ways, they are trying to effect change in their surroundings and raise their concerns, hoping that adults pay heed. It is crucial therefore to invest in them, empower them and listen to their concerns and – importantly – show that they are taken seriously by acting according to their demands. Children are at most risk from the impacts of climate change despite having contributed the least to causing the problem, and they rightly want solutions that are fair and just.



# FIRST IN LINE FOR INVESTMENT LAST IN LINE FOR CUTS

## An urgent agenda for a better future

When UNICEF was founded 75 years ago, the world needed solutions to heal divisions, harness global progress, and protect and uphold universal human rights. We believe just as firmly now as we did then that this starts with guaranteeing the next generation a better life than the last.

But the generation currently growing up in South Asia is facing the devastating long-term consequences of COVID-19, as well as climate and humanitarian disasters. To avoid a lost decade, it is essential that countries invest in children as part of sustained, inclusive economic growth, and make sure that children are prepared for the global economy of the future. Governments, UN agencies, civil society, private sector businesses and children themselves each have a critical part to play in igniting a region-wide force for positive change.

Below, we set out some of the key actions that are needed to begin the process of building a better future for every child in South Asia.

### **1** Invest in child-sensitive social protection

- Identify and ring-fence spending on programmes for children, adopting the principle of children being first in line for investment and last in line for cuts.
- Expand social protection programmes for the most vulnerable children and their families, including working towards universal child benefits and family-friendly services like affordable, quality childcare.
- Direct funds from international donors towards an inclusive recovery that protects children, especially the poorest and most marginalized.

### **2** Resume in-person learning, address learning loss and improve quality education for every child

- Prioritize the safe reopening of all schools, while also ensuring that children are able to pursue quality learning remotely if necessary.
- Assess children's learning levels and ensure catch up is enabled through a "learning recovery" period.
- Train and equip teachers to better reach children and adolescents with limited or no access to technology; provide support to parents and caregivers to continue home-based learning when needed.
- Protect and expand investments in education, including critical pre-primary and foundational literacy and numeracy.

# INVESTMENT, ACTS:

## Action for children

- Bridge the digital divide, improve connectivity and create high quality, multilingual remote learning content tailored to students' needs.

### 3 Protect children from deadly but treatable diseases and reverse the child nutrition crisis

- Strengthen national health systems by increasing targeted investment, protecting aid budgets, and fulfilling existing commitments to support lifesaving child health services including routine immunization.
- Capitalize on strengthened immunization systems to reach every child with essential vaccines, prioritizing communities with 'zero-dose' children.
- Invest in primary health care, including at community level, and ensure integrated services covering health and nutrition.
- Transform food, health, and social protection systems and improve the prevention and treatment of the most severe forms of malnutrition.
- Ensure the financial commitments made by development and humanitarian donors to fighting child malnutrition are doubled, at a minimum.

### 4 Protect children from neglect and abuse and promote the mental health of all children and young people

- Support families by scaling up parenting programmes that promote responsive, nurturing caregiving and support parent and caregiver well-being.

- Systematically respond to abuse and neglect, ensuring children and their families have access to response services, care and justice and prevent reoccurrence.

- Use the focus COVID-19 has placed on children's mental health to invest in more and better protection, mental health and psychosocial support services across all sectors and community services.

### 5 Urgently act to protect children from climate change

- Increase investment in climate adaptation and resilience in key services for children, and ensure that the design and planning of water, sanitation and hygiene services is risk informed and that services are climate resilient.
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Countries must cut their emissions by at least 45 per cent (compared to 2010 levels) by 2030 to keep global warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius.
- Provide children with climate education and green skills, critical for their adaptation to and preparation for the effects of climate change.
- Include young people in all national, regional and international climate negotiations and decisions.
- Ensure the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is green, low-carbon and inclusive, so that the capacity of future generations to respond to the climate crisis is not compromised.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 [UNICEF ROSA Progress Report /stunting](#)
- 2 [Situation Analysis – COVID-19 and Education](#)
- 3 [UNICEF Adolescent Demographics data](#)
- 4 [The Lancet, Aug 2020: Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood malnutrition and nutrition-related mortality](#)
- 5 [25 million child marriages prevented in last decade due to accelerated progress, UNICEF estimates](#)
- 6 [World Bank](#)
- 7 [UNICEF data: WASH in Schools](#)
- 8 [UNICEF COVID-19 Market Dashboard](#)
- 9 [UNICEF Protecting children from the economic impact of COVID-19 on small businesses](#)
- 10 [Regional overview of food security and nutrition 2020](#)
- 11 [Investing in newborn health in South Asia](#)
- 12 [Direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 pandemic and response in South Asia](#)
- 13 [Repeated School closures due to COVID-19 leading to learning loss and widening inequities in South Asia](#)
- 14 [Idem](#)
- 15 [Progress towards UNICEF South Asia's headline and complementary results \(2018-2021\)](#)
- 16 [Reopening with Resilience](#)
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- 18 [Annual status of education report \(rural\) 2021](#)
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- 23 [An analysis of the reach and effectiveness of distance learning in India during school closures due to COVID-19](#)
- 24 [Guidance on Distance Learning Modalities to Reach All Children and Youth During School Closures](#)
- 25 [Reopening with Resilience](#)
- 26 [Adolescent demographics \(UNICEF Data\)](#)
- 27 [UNICEF ROSA Adolescents in South Asia](#)
- 28 [Building back better: saving vulnerable newborns with revitalized health services](#)
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- 36 [SOWC 2021 - dashboard and tables - UNICEF DATA](#)
- 37 [The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights' crisis](#)
- 38 ['There's no higher ground for us': Maldives' environment minister says country risks disappearing/ CNBC, 18 May 2021](#)
- 39 [Rising to the challenge, 2020](#)
- 40 [Progress on drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene in schools](#)
- 41 [The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights' crisis, p. 60](#)



**Reigniting opportunities  
for children in South Asia**  
Regional Flagship Report



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