

# 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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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.

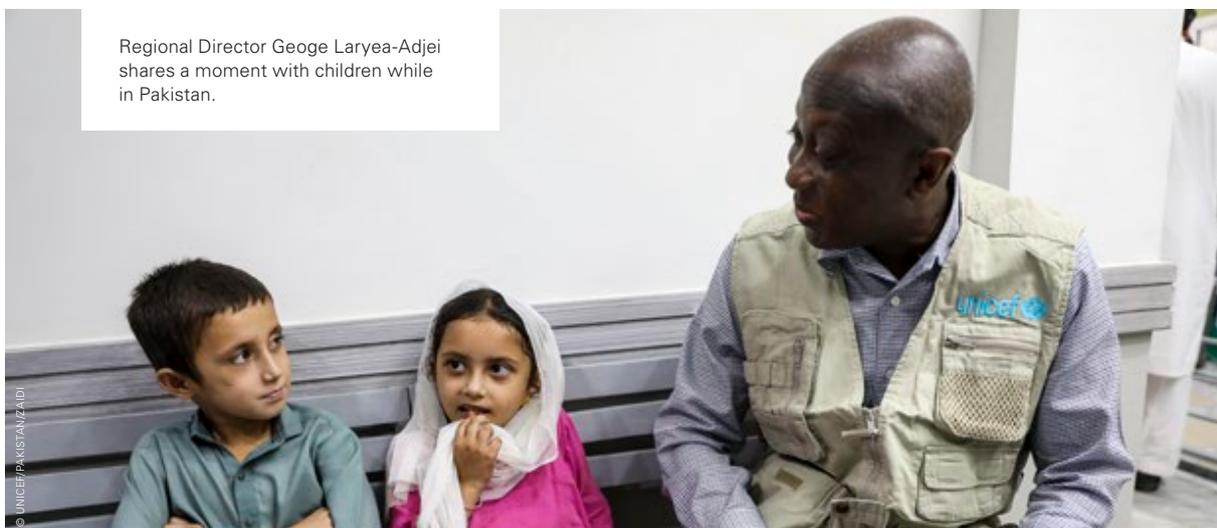
It is an ambitious vision. To make it happen will require new and strengthened partnerships between governments, the business sector, civil society

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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