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Recover, Rebound, Reimagine

Building a better future for every child in East Asia and the Pacific, post COVID-19
Introduction: The three ‘Rs’

The world as we know it has changed. In the space of just a few months, COVID-19 has unleashed itself with alarming speed, leaving no continent or country untouched. In East Asia and the Pacific, home to 2.2 billion people, COVID-19 has further pummelled families already struggling to put food on the table and educate their children. It has turned upside down the lives of those who have lost good jobs and income security, further increasing inequalities. It has piled new layers of hardship on a region highly prone to natural disasters and buffeted by climate change. It has also normalized rights violations. COVID-19 is as much a human rights crisis as it is a health and economic one.

While children are not the face of the pandemic, they are among the hardest hit.

There are three main ways in which children in East Asia and the Pacific are affected. First, by direct infection with the disease itself or the infection of a caregiver; second, by the immediate consequences of actions to contain the pandemic, such as the universal closure of schools and the disruption of essential health and immunization services; and third, by the socio-economic crisis that threatens to erase long-term development gains. Each and every victory painstakingly won for children’s rights and dignity over years if not decades, risks unravelling.

We cannot let this happen.

From the very start, UNICEF and its partners have been responding in full force – guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our vision is ambitious. Not only to provide immediate support and protection to those who need it the most in these coronavirus times, but to encourage, in lockstep with governments and many other partners, new thinking and new strategies to safeguard progress and achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs) in a post COVID-19 world. What will that world look like? Our COVID-19 blueprint for action: Recover, Rebound and Reimagine, may help shape the answer.
**RECOVER**

Keeping children physically and mentally healthy, well-nourished and safe, is the most urgent priority. The ‘Recover’ phase is about restoring the provision of essential services – and scaling up successful interventions – to support children, particularly those whose underlying conditions make them even more vulnerable to infection from the virus.

Basic social services must reach children who are undernourished, living with disabilities, migrant children and children of ethnic minorities, who face additional difficulties, stigma and greater exclusion because of COVID-19. Routine immunization services and campaigns must be re-established, the provision of programmes like water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) scaled up, and the needs met of children who have lost a parent or carer to the virus and who are at risk of violence and abuse at home, online, in quarantine, in detention centres and in institutional care.

Equally urgent, governments must expand unconditional cash transfer programmes to curb the threatened increase in child and family poverty as a lead-in to establishing strong, permanent social safety nets.

**REIMAGINE**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and all that they promise, remain the global agenda for humanity. Children in East Asia and the Pacific – as in all regions – stand to be the biggest beneficiaries of this agenda. However, the devastating social and economic tolls exacted by COVID-19 must be reckoned with. How do we stop the backsliding, revive optimism and regain the development momentum for our precious youngest generation?

Reimagining a better world for children post COVID-19 is a good place to start – though it is as challenging as it is essential. Reimagining requires out-of-the-box, agile and inventive thinking – the kind of thinking that produced practical, flexible solutions to problems such as remote learning during school closures. Reimagining is about tapping into an experimental mind-set to tackle obstacles on the road to creating a more equitable, inclusive and resilient society, one able to better cope with tomorrow’s disasters.

**Reimagining nutrition** means harnessing digital tools to diagnose severe and acute malnutrition early without the need for a hospital visit and carry out rapid online assessments, surveys and polls in real time.

**Reimagining WASH** includes the use of contactless technologies by establishing handwashing with soap stations with water and soap dispensers with sensors.

**Reimagining mental health** approaches could start with integrating mental health services into universal health care.

**Reimagining responses to climate change** embraces new investments in climate-smart clean water, air and construction systems as part of post-pandemic rebuilding efforts.

Unprecedented crises demand unprecedented actions that are daring and appear too risky in normal times. Without an audacious vision, we risk losing not only precious development gains but also a generation of future thinkers, leaders, workers and consumers.

Governments in East Asia and the Pacific have announced wide-ranging stimulus packages, including social protection measures to support the most vulnerable. This is a very positive development. But if we have learned anything from past crises, it is that expansion of social protection interventions are temporary. Strengthening public finance for social protection on a permanent basis is vital and will require prioritized allocation of resources to respond to children’s health and basic needs.
Reimagining is also – and fundamentally – about brokering new partnerships to help bring about enlightened norms, policies and programmes. Simply put, partnership is the only way forward because in unison we can do so much more.

As UNICEF shapes its blueprint for action, we will be reaching out to our partners – governments, business, young people, civil society, communities, NGOs, UN agencies – to come together as never before to transform the way we nurture and invest in our youngest. And invest in them we must if we are to succeed with the SDGs.

This report summarizes the challenges, opportunities and proposed actions during and in the aftermath of the pandemic as they relate to social protection, emergencies, WASH, immunization, education, child protection, nutrition, climate change, migrants, adolescents, mental health, gender equality and business and family friendly policies – all through the prism of the Recover, Rebound and Reimagine strategy.

This is a call to our collective imagination. It’s a call to ask ourselves, “What’s possible?” and to work together towards a more protected, healthier and immunized population, with an education system that leaves no one behind. A more equal, safe and fair world for all children.

We must, we will, come out of this crisis more resilient, showing our children it is possible to turn adversity into advantage through courageous collective actions. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to reimagine a better world for children. Let’s do it together. Let’s prove that we are #NotGoingBack
Conclusion: COVID-19 and the way forward for children

In a matter of weeks, fresh from new year celebrations, much of the world ground to a halt. Human to human transmission of a novel coronavirus forced us to change our way of life and confront a staggering reality: that the unthinkable is possible. While the virus showed how connected and inter-dependent, we are of one another, it also laid bare the inequalities among society’s most vulnerable populations, including children.

As many of us start to emerge from lockdowns, there is a collective realization that ‘returning to the old normal’ is simply not going to happen. We shouldn’t go back to normal and we won’t, because normal never was.

What this means in concrete terms for the 580 million children and adolescents living in East Asia and the Pacific we can’t precisely know. But one thing is certain: UNICEF will act to transform the crisis into an opportunity and channel the power of transformation to create a better future for each and every child.
STRATEGIC VISION

UNICEF has been responding to the COVID-19 catastrophe in overdrive, innovating and brokering new or stronger partnerships and treading a steep learning curve, with valuable lessons learned being urgently applied. As we focus on responding and recovering, re-imagining will be our biggest challenge as well as our biggest opportunity.

The goals of every right for every child and achieving the SDGs are more relevant than ever, as are UNICEF’s three regional ‘Headlines’ for East Asia and the Pacific, embodying its contributions to the SDGs: Early moments matter, Safe and sustainable environments, and Adolescents potential unleashed. Now, though, we need to feed into these the impact of COVID-19. To this end, we are working with partners on generating, collecting and analysing data on the changed situation of children and adolescents in countries across the region with an effort to increase data collection and disaggregation by sex, age and disability.

As country COVID-19 caseload curves are flattened, we will collectively act to limit the regression in key indicators of children’s well-being by assuring the resumption and continuity of services and efforts to reach those currently excluded, such as migrants. We will take advantage of the societal disruptions to establish positive norms, reclaim the possibility of accelerated progress for children and introduce innovative ways of reimagining solutions.

Some things we count on not changing: Persistent, well-planned and partnership-based advocacy is one of the most potent tools in our change-for-children quest. We will use it to ensure that the hard-won gains achieved for children in the areas of health, education and protection are not only not jeopardized, but indeed built upon.

One important lesson to emerge from the pandemic is the critical importance of supporting parents and caregivers. Stressed and fearful, they have had to juggle parenting with home-schooling, working or losing their jobs, managing households and acting as family counsellors. Families with a member with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by interrupted home, community and social services and supports, including personal assistance. Supporting parents and caregivers through tailored programmes, services and family friendly policies in the workplace is vital to helping them support their children in times of havoc.

Another lesson is the need to address emerging ethical issues and dilemmas, including around data privacy protection, given an increasingly digital experience, the role of business in norm setting and the ethical use of data.

So too, climate change, with increasingly frequent and ferocious natural hazards in East Asia and the Pacific, has taught us that we must tackle the triple challenges of the climate crisis, pandemics and inequality as part of the COVID-19 recover, rebound and reimagine mission.

The biggest lesson of all is something we already know but need reminding of: Societies that prioritize investment in children’s health, education and protection systems are better placed to recover and rebound from crises quicker. Even as multiple priorities scream for attention from governments overwhelmed by the pandemic, this one cannot wait. Our plea to governments in East Asia and the Pacific is to fast track increased investments in children as part of their COVID-19 recovery plan and longer-term development of human capital.

History will be the judge of whether we collectively succeed in our actions. As we look back in five, 10- or 20-years’ time to 2020, we want to be able to say, “Together we seized the opportunity out of disaster to reimagine a brighter, better world for our young. And it has come to pass.”
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