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Recover, Rebound, Reimagine

Building a better future for every child in
East Asia and the Pacific, post COVID-19



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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.

REBOUND

Nurturing children's resilience amid the suspension or disruption of basic services is what this next phase is about, with the focus on protecting the most vulnerable. UNICEF and its partners are fostering the rebound by, for example:

- Supporting governments in the region to ensure cash grant payments for families and an increase in the number of beneficiaries to include the newly poor;
- Engaging with organisations of people with disabilities to identify their needs;
- Developing new protocols and guidelines for the safe reopening of schools;
- Messaging on the importance of hand hygiene, and innovating hygiene facilities;
- Ensuring adolescent voices are heard and acted upon through online surveys, webinars and participatory sessions;
- Setting up mental health helplines and services in many countries of the region;
- Supporting employers with guidance on family friendly policies and practices to help working parents and caregivers; and
- Leveraging technology to communicate the importance of healthy diets and physical activity.

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.

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.

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**



Mitigating the socio-economic impact

Many governments in East Asia and the Pacific were quick to put in place stringent measures to stem the spread of COVID-19. The results are striking. Infection and mortality rates have remained comparatively low, although other factors – possibly still unknown – may have influenced this.

Nevertheless, grave economic recessions caused by country-wide shutdowns and depression-level job losses threaten to be lethal in a socio-economic sense. While cases of child infection in the region were in the thousands, it is estimated that the number of children slipping into poverty because of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic will be in the millions. UNICEF predicts that an additional 22 million children in Southeast Asia and the Pacific could fall into poverty in 2020.

The economic crisis will hit all countries in East Asia and the Pacific regardless of their number of COVID-19 cases; it will be bigger than the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis on the region and will sharply increase inequalities and disparities.



POST-PANDEMIC POSSIBILITIES

UNICEF's blueprint for action aims to harness the current unprecedented political support and strong fiscal space for far-reaching social protection policies and expenditures.

As a critical first step, UNICEF and its partners have been urging governments to rapidly scale up unconditional cash transfer programmes during and following full or partial lockdowns. Governments must ensure they protect every child by layering as many social transfers as existing social protection systems allow. Simply put, no child should be left unprotected at this time, something that is possible and doable. With a few exceptions, most countries in the region have functioning social protection schemes that can and are being expanded.

Governments in East Asia and the Pacific have announced a broad range of stimulus measures, including provisions to support the most vulnerable. Targeted fiscal measures have also been adopted, such as tax breaks and subsidies to affected industries. This is salutary.

But we should also be realistic. If the past is any guide, there will likely be a fiscal expansion — usually of short duration — followed by a fiscal consolidation — usually lasting longer. Public social interventions will be supported to address immediate needs but soon, attention will shift towards reviving the economy and away from supporting social sectors and the well-being of the most vulnerable. Permanent, larger budgets must be allocated to children to address their basic needs. Though an essential social protection measure, cash transfers alone are not sufficient. We cannot stress this enough.

EXPANDING THE SAFETY NET PERMANENTLY

The Covid-19 will certainly change the region's social protection systems for ever. It is essential that countries make sure this is a positive transformation by striking a balance between pressing emergency needs and long term sustainable and equitable economic recovery.

In a region that has historically spent well below the global average on social protection (7.4 per cent of GDP compared to the 11.2 per cent global average), now is the time to propose bold social policy approaches to permanently expand a few of those ad hoc emergency safety nets and make countries better prepared to handle future shocks without the perils of rising poverty levels. This means taking leaps with fresh, creative ideas for sustainable, universal, integrated and affordable services in social welfare, education, health, social protection and early childhood development. All of these play an instrumental role in shielding children and families from the harsh effects of all sorts of crises, including recurring natural disasters and climate change that are exacerbating underlying vulnerabilities.

ENSURING PUBLIC SPENDING FOR CHILDREN UNDER TIGHT FISCAL CONSTRAINTS

Countries in the region are projected to see a mere 0.5 per cent increase in GDP in 2020 compared to 5.9 per cent growth in 2019, according to the latest World Bank projections. A larger impact on government revenues is also anticipated. Consequently, governments will be fiscally constrained to maintain financing of key services essential to children at pre-COVID-19 levels.

UNICEF is closely monitoring the impact of the novel coronavirus on public spending for children in key social sectors such as education, health, nutrition, social welfare and WASH to ensure the needs of children are prioritized in government spending decisions at a time of fiscal austerity — in line with the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

This dynamic and diverse region has shown it can deliver impressive economic growth. In these pandemic times, leaders must deliver the investments needed in social protection to ensure that children make it through with minimal suffering and that theirs is a future to look forward to.

Online survey in Thailand: Youth concerned about family income due to COVID-19

More than 8 in 10 children and young people in Thailand said they were deeply worried that the pandemic would affect their household income as parents face layoffs due to business shutdowns, according to an online survey led by UNICEF in partnership with the National Child and Youth Council. Data, collected from 6,771 young people across the country, also revealed the anxieties of children and young people related to education, domestic violence, pressures on LGBTI youth, mental health and concerns for the lives of loved ones, especially the elderly.

To help children and families cope with the consequences of COVID-19 and using the survey data, UNICEF and its partners are urging decision-makers to put in place strong social protection measures and ensure that children and young people have access to alternative learning, counselling, peer-support services and professional mental health services.



Covering all the bases

COVID-19 is like no other emergency East Asia and the Pacific has ever experienced. The pandemic has hit all 26 countries in the region, albeit not to the same degree. Socio-economically, poorer countries stand to bear the brunt. And it will be big.



RESPONDING FROM THE OUTSET

From the earliest days of the crisis, UNICEF has been working throughout the region to protect children and their families from exposure to the virus and minimize mortality, partnering with governments, the WHO, other UN agencies, the International Federation of the Red Cross, national Centers for Disease Control, NGOs and the private sector. Delivering life-saving WASH supplies and services to over 5.2 million people, providing masks and other personal protective equipment to over 260,000 health workers and training more than 445,000 health workers on the management of COVID-19 cases, were key critical emergency actions. So too the construction of handwashing points for families and the procurement of nutritional supplies for children. Over 18 million people were reached with nutrition messages and more than 1.5 million children have been provided with essential nutrition services. Sixty-eight million students around the region were supported through home-based learning. Health messaging has also been essential to communicate important actions to prevent COVID-19 infection- nearly 800 million people received public health messages.

LINKING HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Innovative initiatives swiftly activated during the emergency response show that it is feasible to link emergency response to longer-term development programmes and reimagine a healthier world for children. They have also driven home how digital technologies can improve the speed, quality and monitoring of interventions.

Predictive water shortage mapping in Myanmar

Amid the COVID-19 global pandemic, it is vital that people have adequate water; not only access to supply of clean drinking water but also sufficient water flow to enable proper handwashing with soap.

For the 4,924 people in the Ah Naeuk Ywe camp in the Rakhine State in Myanmar, accessing water is difficult. They rely on rainwater harvesting ponds, but because of the limited capacity of these ponds, the dry season and pressure from the high camp population, the ponds have almost dried up. Groundwater sources are prohibitively expensive to access, due to the geology of the area.

An existing app showing the real time presence of surface water was updated to help compare the water situation between April 2019 and April 2020 in an effort to predict the economic burden of water shortages compounded by COVID-19. Some 37,000 litres of water were transported by boat on the first day of the emergency response.

The app works globally down to a 30-metre resolution. It is particularly useful when populations are dependent on small ponds for drinking water, like many areas in Myanmar

Making hand hygiene habitual

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the evidence that frequent and proper handwashing with soap and water is one of the cheapest, easiest and most effective ways to stop the spread of the virus and prevent infection with other diseases. This requires having a specific place with access to water and handwashing facilities, including soap or alcohol-based sanitizers, in every home and in all settings, including schools, health care facilities and public places.

Yet in East Asia and the Pacific, as globally, basic WASH facilities required for hand hygiene remain out of reach for many. This is particularly the case in rural areas where only around 10 per cent of households in the region have easy access to soap. Regionally, almost a third of homes lack a dedicated place for washing hands. Similarly, more than half of the schools in the region lack handwashing points with soap and water, as do 4 out of 10 health care facilities. Persons with disabilities face especially big challenges accessing WASH facilities.



WHY THESE DEFICIENCIES IN WASH?

A lack of handwashing facilities is largely linked to socio-economic factors and household priorities. But there is more to it than that. Knowledge plays a big role in establishing the link between diseases and dirty hands and the need for good hand hygiene. A common community belief holds that handwashing is needed only when hands are 'visibly' dirty and that water is sufficient on its own to clean hands. Soap is widely seen as unnecessary, or a luxury product.

COVID-19 offers a huge opportunity to establish hand hygiene as the global 'new normal' – a default act – to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and to protect health in general. Moreover, it is a cost-effective strategy. The cost of implementing hand hygiene strategies in health care facilities, for instance, ranges from US\$0.9 to \$2.5 per capita per year, depending on the country, according to a 2018 [report by the OECD](#).

Access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene has been at the centre of UNICEF's response to COVID-19. Proper handwashing with soap and water has probably been the most visible and widely voiced message of the pandemic by UNICEF in partnership with governments, stakeholders and private sector partners and rightly so, since it is a key prevention measure against COVID-19. People are following the advice, according to many real time surveys, such as on Yougov.com. But more needs to be done. Maintaining the gains made during the pandemic and ensuring that hand hygiene habits take root permanently will require ongoing intensive efforts by all concerned stakeholders.



Indonesia. 2020
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HYGIENE-SMART: HANDWASHING AS A GLOBAL SOCIAL NORM

UNICEF and the World Health Organization have launched the global Hand Hygiene for All call to action to achieve universal access to hand hygiene through:

- **Enhanced political leadership** to embed a culture of hygiene society-wide and make hand hygiene everyone's business.
- **Hand hygiene behaviour change** to establish hand hygiene as a social norm.
- **Innovating hygiene services and facilities** by supporting robust supply chains and encouraging businesses to offer a range of affordable, durable and high-quality hand hygiene products.
- **Advocating for increased financing** for new approaches to boost hand hygiene.
- **Fostering new partnerships** at all levels and with the private sector and other constituencies to promote universal handwashing.

More broadly, we reimagine WASH developing into a real service with an emphasis on:

- **Innovative approaches:** the use of distance (electronic) billing systems for household water consumption, sanitation-related tariffs and bill payment.
- **Contactless technologies:** establishing handwashing with soap stations with water and soap dispensers with sensors.
- **Real time monitoring and detection systems:** developing technologies and systems for the detection of viruses and bacteria in wastewater in order to predict community transmission and reduce risks.

Safe hand hygiene is no magic bullet to stop the pandemic in its tracks. But soap and water may make the difference between whether a child gets sick or not. Making sure we all properly hand wash is an essential part of the response to COVID-19 and reimagining a WASH-wealthy world.

Restoring routine immunization

Health systems throughout East Asia and the Pacific have been put to the test by COVID-19. Whether richly or poorly resourced, most countries in the region have witnessed the disruption of essential health services, such as antenatal care, newborn screening and immunization programmes. In many cases health care workers, including immunization personnel, have been co-opted for COVID-19 patient care, creating a staffing void. But even where routine health services have been provided, many people are too afraid to head to hospitals or health posts for fear of contracting the virus.

One consequence of all this is that children are missing out on critical vaccines. Immunization campaigns have been postponed because of social distancing rules. Malaysia and the Philippines, for example, had to postpone their mass polio vaccination campaigns, making unimmunized children susceptible to polio. In addition, the Philippines had to postpone its measles campaign, with the number of susceptible children accumulating (approximately 2.4 million children under 5 years old to date) and the risk of a huge outbreak.





Vietnam. 2020
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DECLINING COVERAGE A CONCERN

Indications point to a decline in routine immunization coverage in the region during lockdowns, meaning that many children will be unimmunized or under-immunized, exposing them to vaccine-preventable diseases.

What more terrible proof than COVID-19 to show that disease outbreaks can happen in many countries at the same time and spread quickly without a vaccine to protect the public. Scientists and virologists are working round the clock on a COVID-19 vaccine. It is not yet known when a rigorously tested vaccine will be available to the public, but when it is ready to be rolled out, countries in East Asia and the Pacific will require strong immunization platforms and services to reach vulnerable populations.

As for standard vaccines, our messages to parents is: Do not wait. As soon as restrictions and lockdowns are eased, make sure your children get their routine immunizations if they are behind schedule. For parents mired in economic hardship, having to treat children with life-threatening, vaccine-preventable diseases would put them in an even more dire situation.

REIMAGINING IMMUNIZATION SERVICES

To ensure immunization rebounds as quickly and as widely as possible, UNICEF in East Asia and the Pacific is vigorously calling for monitoring of the impact of the crisis on coverage rates. It is also important to identify the reasons why coverage has dropped, in particular relating to the perceptions of health care workers and parents.

Now is the time to plan for and reimagine improved services that reach the most vulnerable and marginalized children once restrictions are lifted. That means figuring out how to catch up the children who missed immunization as part of an increased focus on infection prevention and control measures. We remind partners, parents and health workers that immunization is one of the safest and most cost-effective ways to end vaccine-preventable child deaths.

In the longer term, UNICEF and partners aim to create a new global architecture in health that ensures an equitable distribution of global public goods, strengthens core public health functions and shores up public health facilities. This includes professionalization of the community-based health workforce by bringing it formally into the health system and financing it. Immunization should strengthen primary health care and help achieve the aspiration of universal health coverage. It should also be leveraged to bring in other health and social services for the most vulnerable.

Post-pandemic, UNICEF and partners will continue to support the development of e-health – health services and information delivered through the internet and related technologies. E-health also symbolizes a commitment for networked thinking to improve health care locally and regionally using information and communication technology.

Technological advances and e-health can help improve immunization programmes, campaigns and outreach strategies. Nothing, however, can replace 'contact' immunizations against common childhood killer diseases.



Beijing, China. 2020
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Rapid assessment: Immunization services in Indonesia

The Ministry of Health in Indonesia, with technical support from UNICEF, conducted a rapid assessment at different levels of the health system to better understand the effects of Covid-19 on immunization services. The aim of this exercise was to identify gaps, gather perceptions of health workers, prepare for the resumption and safe scale up of immunization activities, and tailor interventions to reach vulnerable communities.

From 20 to 29 April 2020, a total of 5,329 of 9,993 health centres participated in the online survey with a completion rate of 89 per cent, covering 388 of 540 districts and cities across all 34 provinces in the country.

The survey found that in nearly 84 per cent of the reporting health facilities, immunization services were significantly disrupted due to the pandemic and current government policy of physical distancing measures. As an immediate response to the survey, the Ministry of Health developed a guideline on the delivery of safe immunization practices during the pandemic. The guidelines were integrated by 34 provinces in early May 2020.

Reopening schools right

For the first time in the modern era, schools across East Asia and the Pacific shut down as part of containment measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. This catapulted more than 325 million children into an educational void. That void was quickly – and at least partially – filled with alternative forms of home-based learning for perhaps 50 per cent of the region's students with the help of governments and numerous stakeholders, including UNICEF.



ROLLING OUT REMOTE LEARNING

Putting distance learning in place was an enormous challenge given the complexity of providing content, supporting learners and teachers, guiding families and tackling connectivity issues. Moreover, there was no one-size-fits-all solution. Children with disabilities face some of the biggest barriers to remote learning, in part because they lack the devices needed to participate. More generally, unequal access to the internet has exposed a huge digital divide across the region.

High poverty rates in some East Asian and Pacific countries means that access to the media is patchy. Most families have a mobile phone, but some do not have a television or radio and the internet may only be for a privileged few in urban areas, exposing a huge digital divide.

While an invaluable temporary solution, distance learning is a complement to, not a replacement for, school enrolment. Schools do much more than teach children how to read, write and count. Schools provide children with the opportunity to express themselves, interact with girls and boys from different backgrounds, and learn key skills such as emotional self-regulation, creativity and problem solving. They also provide nutrition, health and hygiene services and mental health support, and dramatically help to reduce the risk of teenage pregnancy and child marriage. The longer schools remain closed, the greater the risk to children's learning, safety and well-being and the greater the chance that some will never go back. This is especially true for girls and adolescents in certain countries, boys and adolescents in others, learners with disabilities, ethnic minorities and migrant learners.

THE CASE FOR RESTARTING CLASSES

In deciding to reopen, governments must weigh difficult trade-offs between public health and the adverse economic and social impacts on children of school closures. Across the region, policymakers are considering the timetable for reopening, looking at flexible models for ensuring children's safe return to schools. UNESCO, UNICEF, UNHCR, the World Food Programme and the World Bank have developed a [Framework for reopening schools](#) that offers practical advice to governments on when to consider reopening and how to prepare schools to keep children and staff safe when they return.

TRANSITIONING BACK TO SCHOOL

The challenges will not go away once schools reopen. In fact, in many ways they may increase. Recent gains will have been lost in learning, some children will remain excluded and some may never return.

When schools reopen, it is essential that they re-open right. This means ensuring every child is included and learns, has access to school-based health and nutrition services and is connected to the internet. Without this, we risk undermining the learning and potential of an entire generation.

History has proven that quality education for all has an enormous influence on the welfare of society by reducing inequalities, improving public health and increasing social cohesion. The pandemic might just be a catalyst for turning classrooms and schools into the engaging, creative and intellectually enriching places we imagine they can be.

High and low-tech: Education continues through remote learning in Timor-Leste

In response to school closures, UNICEF supported the Timorese Ministry of Education to set up a distance learning platform called “School Goes Home” in just two weeks. For a small country with a population of 1,2 million, setting up distance learning to support 400,000 children, especially those in remote areas, was a tall order.

While almost all families in Timor-Leste have a mobile phone, less than half have a TV, and only a quarter have access to radio. The internet is available mainly to those living in urban areas. At home, many families in remote regions also lack basic learning materials and reliable supply of electricity.

The UNICEF-supported platform provides learning content online and through TV, radio, mobile phones and print, aiming to ensure all children can access educational resources, no matter their circumstances. The online part of the programme, called the Learning Passport, gives children remote access to their national school curriculum with child-friendly textbooks, storybooks, songs, videos and interactive quizzes.

UNICEF launched an app version of the platform to allow students to download books and resources in advance whenever they are in range of WIFI so they can continue to study at home, even if their community does not have regular access to the internet. Soon the platform will also offer skills training for adolescents.

To address cost issues and mobile data usage, UNICEF has partnered with a local telecoms company with the aim of giving 600,000 mobile phone users free access to the learning materials. Parents and caregivers can also sign up for SMS text messages with advice and tips on how to support their children’s learning at home.

Reducing online and offline risks

With schools shut because of COVID-19, hundreds of millions of children in East Asia and the Pacific have been spending far more time at home and online than they usually do.



HEIGHTENED ONLINE RISKS

While the internet has been a social and educational lifeline for many children, it has also come with heightened risks of exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying and online sexual exploitation and abuse. The mental health impacts of COVID-19 measures have increased the risks of grooming, including by predators who target children who have expressed vulnerability online.

UNICEF is urging governments, the information and communication technology sector and other partners to take urgent measures to reduce these potential risks, while ensuring that children's rights to participation and free speech are maintained. With the internet firmly embedded in children's lives, the safety issue will long outlast the end of containment measures and indeed the pandemic.

To empower parents and children to safely navigate the internet, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific collaborated with colleagues at the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention and Literacy Online to produce easily readable tips for adolescents and for parents and caregivers. Key actions for adolescents include checking privacy settings, making sure locations cannot be identified, blocking anyone that makes them feel uncomfortable and knowing where they can seek help.

...AND OFFLINE RISKS

Home is a place that should be safe. Yet containment measures have heightened the risks of child abuse, exploitation and violence, including sexual violence, from those who are supposed to protect children. The abuse might come from parents or family members taking their stress, anxiety and anger out on children as problems pile up: jobs and income lost, growing isolation from friends and communities, and escalating use of alcohol or drugs or the resort to other dysfunctional coping strategies. Children might also be witnessing domestic violence between their parents. Indications from many countries in this and other regions suggest that domestic violence against women has massively risen during lockdowns and confinement. Making matters worse, disruption of services and restrictions on movement have prevented many victims from seeking help and sanctuary.

Children who are separated from their families and children in detention, institutional care and quarantine are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse, as are those with disabilities, migrant children and marginalized children. Some groups of children have also experienced stigma and harassment, including those who are from families impacted by COVID-19 and migrant children.

ENSURING CRITICAL PROTECTION SERVICES

The case for governments putting child protection at the heart of COVID-19 recovery efforts is a strong one. In addition to a rise in violence and abuse of children during lockdown, it is inevitable that the economic fall-out will worsen the problems of family separation, child labour, trafficking, child marriage and sexual exploitation.

It is vital that **child protection services and GBV services** supporting the most vulnerable and at-risk children continue and are properly funded during the recovery and rebound periods, particularly given escalating needs.

The social welfare workforce will be instrumental in helping families and children to cope with the economic and its consequences. The workforce must be strengthened, and social workers provided with the skills, knowledge and equipment to reach those most in need effectively and safely.

Digital technology was key to the adaptation of child protection services during COVID-19 and offer opportunities to support and safeguard children during the recovery phase. Teleservices mean vulnerable children and families receive more regular support and monitoring, while allowing in person interventions to be concentrated on higher risk cases. Online platforms help deliver training, coaching, supervision and case consultation, rapidly building the capacity of social workers and community actors. Child protection information systems, such as Primero™, are essential tools to help social workers manage cases and decision makers to track child protection trends.

A continued expansion of helplines, hotlines and other online platforms will provide essential opportunities for violence and abuse to be reported and for children to get help.

Parents need to be supported to nurture their children and to use positive parenting to reduce violence in the home. Where children cannot be safeguarded at home or are without parental care, it is essential that **safe, family based alternative care** is available. Widespread use of residential institutions must not be a part of how children are cared for in the future.

Gains in ending child labour, trafficking and child marriage in the region cannot be allowed to be eroded.

The **social welfare sector must be protected against any cuts** in public expenditures. Now is the time to boost resources and investment in children, not reduce it.

SaferKidsPH acts swiftly on cyberspace protections for children in the Philippines

SaferKidsPH, a consortium led by UNICEF Philippines, was quick to adapt its programme protecting children from online exploitation and abuse to the COVID-19 crisis. Throughout April 2020, its social channels were updated with messaging, information and tools on mental health and psychosocial support, parenting, how to stay safe online and prevent and report online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC). Online safety campaigns were rebranded under the COVID-19 banner to highlight the link between increased online risks and containment measures.

The National Telecommunications Commission, UNICEF and mobile operators including Smart and Globe, collaborated to send out 'text blasts' encouraging subscribers to visit the UNICEF and SaferKidsPH websites and access more information on child online safety. An anti-OSAEC campaign is ongoing, specifically geared to parents, caregivers, children and adolescents through TikTok and Facebook.

The return to school after containment measures end will be a critical opportunity to raise awareness on OSAEC as well as create safe spaces for reporting cases of abuse, including online abuse. To this end, SaferKidsPH is working with the public education sector to ensure that child online safeguarding measures are in place and to help coordination with local governments to identify and respond to OSAEC cases. Cybersafe modules are being rolled out for school staff, and teachers are receiving guidance on referral mechanisms and case management.



Time for a fresh approach to nutrition

COVID-19 is threatening to reverse the nutrition gains made in the last decade and cement a trend towards processed food consumption in East Asia and the Pacific, with potentially harmful consequences for children's health.



A TREND TOWARDS FAST FOOD

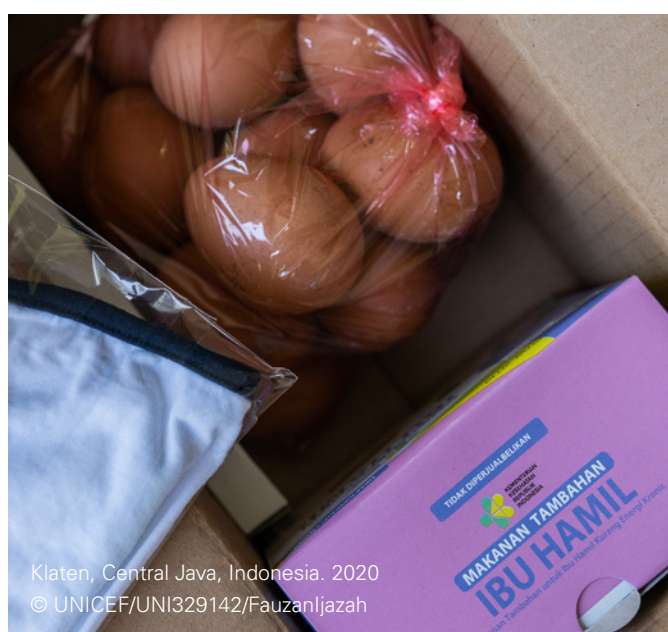
A growing appetite for highly processed and fast foods was evident in the region before the crisis, with instant noodles, pizza, burger and sugary drink companies all holding important shares of the market. This trend has been intensified by the current crisis, with people opting for 'comfort' snack items and fast foods. In Thailand, for example, instant noodle production increased in response to panic buying in February and March 2020. Some food and beverage companies are taking the opportunity to promote their brands, with companies serving meals to frontline workers and local communities.

Euromonitor International predicts that small to medium health and wellness brands will struggle to survive. In contrast, the packaged food multinationals have more resources to weather the storm and are well placed to expand their market share.

The ubiquitous wet markets selling fresh produce have come under scrutiny during the pandemic. They are in fact an important source of cheap, nutritious and fresh food, critical to the livelihoods of independent smallholder farmers and serve as a hub for communities.

The pandemic has also stimulated a major change in food purchasing patterns, with millions more consumers now resorting to online food shopping, a trend that is set to continue even after the pandemic ends.

With poverty rising, it will be difficult for many families to afford a variety of foods. A higher consumption of highly processed foods will lead to increased levels of overweight and obesity among children – particularly worrying in a region which is already experiencing the most rapidly growing rates in the world.



Klaten, Central Java, Indonesia. 2020
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OPPORTUNITIES FOR A FRESH APPROACH

The COVID-19 crisis has brought huge uncertainty, but it also provides an opportunity for a fresh approach to promote nutritious diets and nutrition care for children and their families. Critical to this agenda will be to:

- **Use technology to improve delivery of nutrition services.** Emerging technologies used for the COVID-19 nutrition response present an opportunity to expand the reach and effectiveness of nutrition services in the region. For example, e-learning platforms make it possible to rapidly scale up skills-building for health workers in remote areas, with on-the-job coaching and performance monitoring. Mobile technology can be used for remote counselling and support for mothers not able to get to health centres for face to face counselling. Nutrition information can be digitized on digital platforms as can meetings, polls and surveys.
- **Drive food suppliers to provide nutritious food.** Sustained efforts are needed to encourage wet markets to supply safe and nutritious foods and for convenience stores, home-delivery services and e-commerce to offer healthy foods.
- **Build healthy food environments.** Convenience stores, e-commerce and home-delivery services must be covered by legislation and regulations on, for example, labelling and marketing.
- **Empower people, particularly adolescents, to demand nutritious food.** Young consumers should be provided with the knowledge, tools and platforms to make their voices heard and to inspire change.
- **Gather good quality data and evidence.** Bespoke studies are needed to better understand the new food landscape and to identify effective policies and actions.

Taken together, these actions provide a smorgasbord of options not only to prevent nutritional backsliding during the pandemic but to inculcate healthy eating habits in children and young people, thereby protecting their health way into the future.

Climate change and COVID-19: Related crises, integrated solutions

The socio-economic devastation wrought by COVID-19 coupled with environmental degradation could portend some ominous outcomes, particularly for the most disadvantaged children in East Asian and Pacific countries. Yet the pandemic also provides important lessons for us to flatten the curve on the climate crisis, albeit on a longer time horizon. There is already strong public demand for governments to include environmental protection and climate actions as priorities in the COVID-19 response. As economies reopen, we have an opportunity to put the world on a sustainable development path that ensures a stable climate, healthy natural ecosystems and an equitable society for children.



AIR AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION, A POTENTIAL AGGRAVATING FACTOR

Air pollution seems to be a risk factor for COVID-19 mortality rates, and other environmental factors may contribute to the virus spreading more rapidly in communities. A small increase in the long-term exposure to PM2.5 air pollution may be associated with a large increase in COVID-19 death rates.

The majority of pre-existing conditions that increase the risk of death from COVID-19 are the same diseases that are affected by long-term exposure to air pollution. In East Asia and the Pacific, an estimated 92 per cent of people are exposed to harmful levels of ambient air pollution, and dirty fuel and technologies for cooking and heating remain prevalent in many of the poorest and most marginalized communities.

The COVID-19 crisis seems to be particularly dangerous for those who live in polluted environments with little access to clean drinking water, basic sanitation and hygiene, and waste management services. Hence, areas with historically high air pollution rates and lower access to WASH services, in addition to other socio-economic risk factors such as poverty, need to be prioritized in prevention and relief efforts.

CLIMATE RISK FACTORS ACT AS THREAT MULTIPLIERS TO PANDEMICS

In East Asia and the Pacific, many communities are already suffering the impacts of climate change, with the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters in the region threatening food and water shortages. In the Mekong region, for example, severe drought, saltwater intrusion and upstream dam activities have led to historically low levels of water flow in the Mekong river, leading to loss of crops and livelihoods. Mekong-dependent communities now also have to contend with the crushing economic burden from the coronavirus.

In the Pacific islands, Cyclone Harold struck in the middle of the pandemic – a striking example of how children and families face the dual shocks of COVID-19 and climate-related disasters. With such disasters and slow onset changes likely to increase in frequency and intensity in many areas, we need preventive actions to tackle both the climate crisis and COVID-19 for the most vulnerable communities.

INTEGRATE THE CLIMATE ACTION AGENDA AND INEQUALITY INTO COVID-19 RECOVERY PLANS

UNICEF calls for governments and partners to tackle the triple challenges of the climate crisis, pandemics and inequality as part of the COVID-19 recovery and safeguarding children's environmental rights. This involves unprecedented challenges and opportunities.

SHIFT INVESTMENTS TO CLIMATE-SMART SYSTEMS

One of the most important actions is to increase investments in climate-smart systems as part of rebuilding efforts. In Southeast Asia, the COVID-19 stimulus packages of Indonesia, Viet Nam, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines alone total more than US\$80 billion, with likely more to come. These investments should explicitly focus on strengthening the social equity, environmental sustainability and climate resilience of essential basic social services such as social protection, education and health care and include clean energy for the poorest households, schools, health facilities and transport services.

Moreover, we need to empower children and youth to get involved in environmental issues and participate in global and local environmental solutions that can help address systemic causes of the climate crisis and inequality.

TIGHTEN AND ENFORCE ENVIRONMENTAL SAFEGUARDS AND REGULATIONS

Another important action is to ensure that existing environmental and social safeguards and regulations are strengthened and fully enforced in COVID-19 recovery and rebuilding initiatives. Existing safeguards and regulations need to better integrate the vulnerabilities of communities to all climate and environmental risks, including air pollution, water pollution, water shortages, floods, droughts, cyclones and heat stress.

Effective enforcement is essential to ensure that rebuilding and recovery measures prevent environmental pollution and the destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems on which poor and marginalized communities depend the most. This also includes full respect and realization of the environmental rights of children regarding access to information, participation in decision-making and grievance mechanisms.

Migrants, refugees and the internally displaced: Moving them into the response

COVID-19 has laid bare existing inequalities in countries and exacerbated long-standing vulnerabilities. Migrant, refugee and displaced women, men and children, in particular, are suffering some of the harshest consequences of the coronavirus calamity.



ESSENTIAL WORKERS IN THE REGION'S ECONOMIES

In Southeast Asia and the Pacific, there are around 11.6 million migrant workers – 5.2 million of whom are women. Migrant workers are the backbone of many of the region's economies, who depend on them to do everything from street cleaning to skyscraper construction. It is migrant labour that largely built the gleaming office towers and condominiums redefining the region's cities and towns.

An estimated 2.8 million international migrant children were living in East Asia and the Pacific in 2019. As a result of economic shutdowns, many migrant workers have lost their incomes, threatening rising debts for this already vulnerable group as well as for their families back home, whose only income is often the remittances sent to them. Remittance flows to the East Asia and Pacific region in 2020 are expected to fall by 13 per cent due to the impact of COVID-19, according to the World Bank. Note that seven of the world's top 10 remittance-receiving countries are in Asia-Pacific, with China and the Philippines in the top three.

COVID-19 containment measures, notably service and border closures and mobility restrictions, have not only caused financial hardship for migrants but put them into prolonged limbo. Many migrants remain in precarious living conditions in destination countries while others have been forced to return home. Some – undocumented migrants – have been arrested in the region, even those with young children, in clear breach of the best interests of the child. Moreover, the fear of arrest, detention and deportation risks pushing these groups further into hiding, preventing them from seeking testing or treatment, as poverty, cramped rooms, and desperation breed conditions for violence and abuse.

PERILS FOR WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

Isolation and reduced mobility have increased the risk of abuse, exploitation and trafficking in persons, particularly of women migrant workers (including by employers and partners) and children. In the face of mounting strains from safety, health and financial worries, women and girls are more likely to be at risk of violence. COVID-19 response measures that are not inclusive of migrant workers in the informal economy further put these workers and families at risk of exploitation.

Women migrant workers, moreover, are at greater risk of infection from COVID-19. Many are on the front lines of the pandemic response, with, for example, jobs as care workers – but without social protection coverage.

Migrant children, who already face significant barriers in accessing health and child protection services, are left even more vulnerable by the closure of such services. School shutdowns have put migrant, refugee and internally displaced children especially in harm's way. Many are likely to be excluded from distance learning because they don't have access to the internet and some migrant children may never return to school because of economic recessions. The combined effects of school closures and economic distress is likely to lead to increased risks of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, child labour and exploitation and recruitment into criminal gangs, among other things.

Attitudes to migrants were generally not positive even before the pandemic and have now only worsened, with xenophobia and discrimination on the rise. Moreover, some migrants face discrimination in their home communities upon their return.

A deeply troubling development is that boats full of vulnerable Rohingya children, women and men have again been adrift in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, unable to come ashore in the midst of the pandemic. As United Nations agencies have jointly stated, containment measures "should not result in the closure of avenues to asylum, or in forcing people to either return to situations of danger or seek to land clandestinely, without health screening or quarantine."

The COVID-19 crisis also threatens to further erode the already precarious situation of children who are internally displaced. Crowded living conditions with limited access to WASH facilities, severely curtailed health care and movement restrictions, are already the reality for these groups and have left them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the virus.

SUPPORT TO MIGRANT, REFUGEE AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED CHILDREN

UNICEF calls on governments in East Asia and the Pacific to address the specific needs and rights of migrant, refugee and internally displaced children as part of their immediate response to and rebound from COVID-19. Measures for these populations need to include access to essential services for all. Political will and regional coordination are needed to address and eliminate xenophobia, discrimination and stigmatization of migrants and to invest in enlightened long-term actions to change mindsets.

No one should be left behind – no matter who or where they are, or what legal status they hold.

Adolescents: Redefining their resilience, valuing their voice

COVID-19 has altered the reality for adolescents. Just as many coming-of-age girls and boys were starting to find their voice, that voice is being muffled.

Physical distancing measures, restrictions on movement, school closures and confinement, plus the sudden halt of business have adversely affected essential education and training, disrupted support systems, exacerbated youth unemployment rates and impacted adolescents' mental health, with frequent reports of anxiety, stress and self-harm emerging from countries.

The pandemic is constraining opportunities for young people to participate, just as their input is needed in all phases of the COVID-19 recovery.



STARTLING CHANGES AND THE NEED TO SOCIALIZE

The impacts of COVID-19 are, and will continue to be, felt most harshly by young people in disadvantaged circumstances, including refugees and migrants, young people experiencing homelessness or living in high-density urban slums, young people with disabilities and adolescent girls and young women who already suffer from gender-based deprivations.

For countries in East Asia and the Pacific, how adolescents fare today could well determine the prospects for their societies tomorrow. We know that investing in adolescents builds strong economies, inclusive communities and vibrant societies.

[Evidence](#) shows that investing in adolescent girls and boys is central to human capital development and equitable growth, especially in low-income and middle-income countries with high youth populations. Yet, investments in adolescents were far from sufficient pre-COVID-19, and in many cases, the pandemic response has inadvertently put their lives at further risk.

VOICE & CHOICE

Young people should be involved in all phases of COVID-19 recovery, rebound and reimagining process. Youth civil society organizations are often uniquely placed to understand the specific challenges faced by their communities. Young people can also be critical in bridging the digital divide by providing information and knowledge to communities that do not have access to digital technologies, helping, for instance, to communicate accurate knowledge, tackle myths and stigma and police fake news.

U-Report, UNICEF's social messaging tool to empower young people, is demonstrating just how critical its role is in this crisis and its enormous reach. Thus far it has racked up 20 million interactions globally. Children, youth and adolescents in seven countries in the region are using U-Report's COVID-19 bot to share and access life-saving information. Furthermore, U-report survey results have been used to shape policies and inform ministries.

In the longer term, young people can help spur change by giving voice to issues that are important to them. Whether this is online or offline, adolescents have a role to play in shaping the world through designing and developing solutions that enable societies to move ahead.

COVID-KINDLED UNEMPLOYMENT

Right now, though, one major risk that young people face is being scarred throughout their working lives – leading possibly to the emergence of a “lockdown generation”. In this context, young people confront a triple whammy: disruption to education and training, employment and income losses and greater difficulties in finding a job. A new global survey by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and partners shows that more than one in six young people aged 15 to 24 have stopped working since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. While this percentage is higher in high-income countries, young workers in countries of all income levels have been heavily affected, including in a region like Asia Pacific where the informal job rate for young people stands at 84 per cent according to a report by the ILO.

As we imagine our pandemic-free world, we must recognize the significance of building the resilience of young people and emphasizing their civic engagement rights. COVID-19 has shown us that the future of jobs also hinges on a strong care economy, green jobs, people and culture. Thus, by encouraging youth-led organizations and initiatives, investing in local participatory planning processes, and supporting youth volunteers, young entrepreneurs and start-ups, we will gradually emerge stronger and better as a region.

Kuaishou technology gets millions of adolescents in China exercising indoors

In China, UNICEF partnered with tech company Kuaishou (similar to Tiktok), using their technology to reach millions of adolescents in the country with tips and tools to help them cope with COVID-19-induced stresses. In two online youth challenges, adolescents were encouraged to post short videos of indoor exercise to motivate them and their parents to interact – a great antidote to anxiety during confinement. More than 4,600 short videos were uploaded from users, attracting 11 million page-views. Additionally, live-streaming sessions gave practical advice on how to do indoor exercises. Kuaishou developed an augmented reality-based filter to make the online challenges more fun and used big data analytics to better target the content to adolescents, so that the information found adolescents as opposed to the other way around.



Mental health: Emerging from under the radar

Behind closed doors, a mental health crisis has been brewing – though not exactly in secret. The psychological trauma and emotional stresses induced in children, adolescents, adults and frontline workers by an unending, catastrophic pandemic has brought mental health problems out into the open. After all, given our common coronavirus plight, we are all prone to these problems. In East Asia and the Pacific, the taboos around discussing and seeking support for mental health issues have been chipped away, enabling a much bigger conversation on meeting the mental health needs of populations.



DOING WHILE RETHINKING

UNICEF East Asia and Pacific is grasping the window of opportunity to advocate for comprehensive provision of mental health and psychosocial support and reimagine its engagement in this area even as it pursues an emergency response with:

- Mental health and psychosocial support for children, parents and caregivers, as well as for frontline workers;
- Follow-up support to families through social media messaging apps;
- Strengthening or setting up helplines;
- Partnering with the China Youth League to develop a series of podcasts addressing post-coronavirus back-to-school topics including mental health and bullying; and
- Launching KitaConnect in Malaysia, an online platform with discussions on mental health led by youth, celebrities and experts.

UNICEF envisions moving beyond an emergency focus to a systems-wide mental health approach powered by new partnerships and innovation and enabled, crucially, by increased government investment. The priorities are to:

- **Integrate mental health services into universal health care.** UNICEF is advocating for a tiered set of mental health services to respond to a range of needs and the incorporation of mental health services into universal health care schemes on the basis that mental health is fundamental to overall health.
- **Approach mental health in a multisectoral way.** To be effective, mental health services need to be cross-sectoral, spanning health, social welfare, adolescent development, social protection and other concerned sectors.
- **Strengthen mental health services for children, adolescents, parents and frontline workers.** Adolescents, in particular girls, those with disabilities and LGBTIQ are especially vulnerable to mental health stressors as a result of school closures, loss of livelihoods and lack of access to essential services, including online learning. Parents themselves need help to manage stress and anxiety, which can have a detrimental effect on their children's development. Children who have suffered violence, abuse and neglect need support to recover. Frontline workers, such as teachers, care workers and social workers, need support to enable them to cope with their key roles.
- **Generate evidence and data on mental health.** The lack of data on mental health and young people in the region is a major stumbling block to designing policies, programmes, services and strategies for them.
- **Ensure support services are available to tackle alcohol and substance abuse for adults and children.** Mental health setbacks often lead to drug and drinking problems and vice versa.
- **Recognize that mental health problems in adolescents can be the result of abuse, violence and neglect in their younger years.**



Bangkok's Klongtoey community. 2020
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Mental health: LGBTIQ adolescents and young key populations

Surveys and other anecdotal evidence indicate that the mental health and well-being of LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning) adolescents and young key populations (YKPs) are particularly on the line in this pandemic.

Pre-pandemic, LGBTIQ youth already faced uphill struggles and a hostile environment because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, with difficulties in accessing health services, job opportunities, formal education and in financially supporting themselves. They also faced high levels of domestic and intimate partner violence, family rejection and stigma and discrimination, stymying any meaningful political participation. The COVID-19 crisis has only made their situation worse.

UNICEF, Youth Voices Count, Equal Asia Foundation and Prism Chat launched a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTIQ adolescents in Southeast and East Asia – an important informational tool given the dearth of data about adolescent mental health in general. Some 91 per cent of the 543 respondents (mostly from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore) said they obtained mental health information only from social media. Almost two-thirds expressed worry about their mental health, and just over half, anxiety about their financial situation.

YKPs and young people living with HIV are also experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety amid lockdowns, restricted movements and isolation from their peers and support networks. To gauge their needs, the Interagency Task Team on Young Key Populations in Asia and the Pacific carried out a rapid response survey of YKPs aged 18 to 29. Seventy per cent of participants reported feeling anxious or extremely anxious, with concerns about their own health (82 per cent), loss of income (59 per cent), ability to get medications (49 per cent), isolation (46 per cent), inability to work as usual (39 per cent) and stigma related to HIV status (32 per cent).

As countries in East Asia and the Pacific reopen, it will be important to:

- **Encourage LGBTIQ adolescents, young people living with HIV and YKPs to stay connected with peers through video chat platforms**
- **Ensure they have access to updated lists of available services**
- **Strengthen schemes for young people to support each other, like a wellness buddy system**
- **Work with local counsellors and social workers to provide mental health services**
- **Advocate for inclusive COVID-19 support services and social protection for them**
- **Advocate for a human rights-based response to COVID-19 that promotes non-stigmatizing care for marginalized groups.**

Gender equality: Reversing a backward step for girls

The novel coronavirus doesn't discriminate. It has no gender bias. However, the unfolding pandemic is hammering home gender power imbalances, leaving girls and women at greater risk of violence, illness, emotional trauma and financial hardship. All this points to a backward step for girls after years of hopeful advances and passionate advocacy.

Consider this: Women make up the majority of the COVID-19 frontline health care workforce. This makes them more vulnerable not only to infection, but also to intimidation and harassment at times of stress.

Women and girls also make up most of the other frontline workers, such as cleaners and laundry and catering workers. These jobs tend to be short-term, part-time or casual contracts without health benefits. In addition, many women must deal with the challenges of menstruation while working long hours with few bathroom breaks and shortages of menstrual hygiene products.

Women and girls are commonly swamped with unpaid and invisible care work. Adolescent girls are less likely to have paid jobs, be in school or in some type of training compared to boys. In previous health emergencies, school closures have led to millions of adolescent girls dropping out of school to help at home, one factor perpetuating the cycle of poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic could result in millions of girls never returning to education as they are co-opted into fending for their families.



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Coronavirus has also put women and girls at greater risk of gender-based violence, leaving many in confinement forced to spend weeks or months locked in with their abuser. Some countries in the region with reporting systems are recording as much as a 25 per cent surge in reported cases of violence against women but the true numbers are probably much higher because victims often don't feel safe alerting authorities to their plight.

On top of this, COVID-19 has closed many support services, many of which were already underfunded. Not only does this prevent women and girls from obtaining accurate information, but also limits where they can go to for help. This is particularly worrisome for places where violence against women and girls is endemic, such as Papua New Guinea.

Often under-funded in normal times, services for gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health, including HIV and AIDS, are likely seeing their resources diverted to the pandemic response. This portends even greater challenges for pregnant adolescent girls in the region, who already face big barriers to reproductive health care, such as a lack of money, mobility constraints and being stigmatized by health care staff. Such obstacles are linked to high maternal mortality rates in the Pacific, Lao PDR and Timor-Leste. COVID-19 has compounded these complexities.

ACCELERATING THE GENDER AGENDA

Gender equality is a central plank of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and as such, actions to make good on the gender goals must be stepped up.

UNICEF calls on governments in East Asia and the Pacific to recognize the social welfare workforce as essential workers to provide protection services for vulnerable women and girls. Where data on gender inequality are lacking, they must be amassed, analysed and acted upon.

In reimagining solutions that give top billing to gender equality in a post-COVID-19 world, the bar remains high: a norm-changing revolution to give girls and women their just due.



Business and family friendly policies: Shifting the business model

The COVID-19 crisis has prompted a growing recognition of the importance of family friendly policies and the need for a shift in business models and strategies towards putting the well-being of workers and their families first.

But while this recognition has been catalysed by the pandemic, the private sector has yet to catch up with the public perception of how it is performing. The Edelman Trust Barometer's Spring 2020 update shows that half of the people surveyed believe business is doing poorly, mediocre or completely failing at putting people before profits; only 43 per cent believe that companies are protecting their employees sufficiently from COVID-19. On a positive note, more than two thirds of respondents say they believe the pandemic will result in valuable innovations and improvements in how we work, live and treat each other.



FAMILY FRIENDLY POLICIES

In the COVID-19 crisis, family friendly policies are more critical than ever to enable workers to care for themselves and their loved ones. It is no exaggeration to say that such policies – or the lack of them – can mean the difference between revival or ruin.

Business knows it must pull up its bootstraps and play a more pivotal role in protecting human rights, if public discourse is any indication. The private sector was well represented in the first virtual Forum on Responsible Business and Human Rights held in June 2020 with more than 6,000 joining, including also representatives from civil society and governments across Asia and the Pacific. The aim of the Forum was to discuss the pandemic's impact on workers, business and economies and the implications for advancing responsible business and human rights in the region. The premise of the Forum was that there cannot be a return to 'business as usual' during the post-COVID-19 recovery.

UNICEF has long sought to shake up the 'business as usual' model – the focus on short-term profit maximization and the prioritization of profit over people. In unison with many partners – including the private sector itself – it has worked to mainstream child rights principles into business policies and practices, with growing success in Thailand and elsewhere in the region as more companies pledge to adhere to those principles. Research has shown that the most vulnerable families lack affordable childcare, face limited protections for working mothers and struggle with low wages and long hours.

A HANDBOOK TO HELP

In June 2020, UNICEF published a new [handbook](#) to support companies make the workplace family friendly. The handbook identifies key policies such as:

- Paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers to care for young children.
- Flexible work arrangements.
- Protections for pregnant women, including job security and support for breastfeeding mothers.
- Access to affordable, quality childcare up to the start of primary school.
- Child benefits that include regular cash transfers as part of a government-sponsored system of social protection.

One real-time example of these principles in action: in Mongolia, against a backdrop of widespread school and day-care closures at the onset of the pandemic, line ministries and many companies started to implement family friendly policies. In practice, this included paid leave, shortened work hours and the option for parents and caregivers with young children as well as pregnant employees to work from home.

Well-planned and implemented family friendly policies represent a win-win situation: good for business, good for parents and children, and good for communities and society. They are an opportunity for companies to explicitly commit to human rights as part of their core business model. A better future for children means a future where companies put the well-being of their workers first. A commitment to family friendly policies is an essential first step towards that.

Generating Evidence: Key to understanding COVID-19's impact on children

UNICEF is committed to ensuring that the severe and systemic inequalities exposed by the pandemic are reversed and that no child is left behind. Our priority, therefore, is to invest in evidence generation to understand the impact of COVID-19 and paint a picture of children around the region. We need comprehensive data to prioritize programmes, drive equity focused policies and measure and communicate about the extent to which our interventions have been successful in protecting children – a goal now more essential than ever.

UNICEF is working with governments, humanitarian organizations, the private sector and other partners to generate a critical mass of evidence and analyse huge data sets that, together, can guide policy and decision-makers and ensure that adequate resources are allocated to children's health and safety in the immediate response and longer term. Examples of our support for evidence generation include child focused social and economic impact assessments – interpreting data that have been collected – in the Philippines, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea and Viet Nam.



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."

Redrawing the Future for every child in East Asia and the Pacific

UNICEF IS CALLING FOR

Scaling up and instilling the practice of **handwashing** as a social norm.

Universal health coverage and health systems that ensures an equitable distribution of public goods, strengthens core public health functions and the delivery of health services.

Promotion of **nutritious**, safe and sustainable diets for children and their families and empowering young people to opt for a healthier, sustainable diet in a post-COVID-19 world.

Ensuring continuity of learning as well as prioritisation of schools in reopening plans as part of a larger strategy to build more resilient, equitable and universally accessible **education** systems, making sure that **ALL** children have access to learning and are integrated back in.

Comprehensive and sustainable social protection system, including universal cash transfer programmes for children and their families to prevent escalating poverty rates and reimagining financing for children's development in innovative ways.

Inclusion of the specific needs and rights of the most vulnerable children, including children with **disabilities, migrant, refugee and internally displaced children** in the response to, and rebound from, COVID-19.

Child protection services, supporting the most vulnerable and at-risk girls and boys, to continue and be properly funded delivered by a **strengthened social welfare workforce**.

Urgent measures to reduce **online safety** risks for children by governments, the information and communication technology sector and other partners.

Address the mental health crisis by eliminating stigma and scale up services powered by new partnerships.

Make available platforms to provide **engagement opportunities and agency to adolescents and young adults**.

Promote a model for **economic recovery that is resilient, climate sensitive**, and that reduces vulnerability and does not exacerbate inequality.

Embrace corporate social innovation that brings positive impact on society including employers to put the well-being of their workers first, with a strong commitment to **family friendly policies**.

Scaled up collaboration for **innovative data collection** and analytical methods to monitor child rights and to ensure that no child is left behind.

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