

The State of the World's Children 2016: A fair chance for every child

CONTENTS

Foreword.....page 1

Executive Summary..... page 3

Foreword

The state of the world's children

Inequity imperils millions of children and threatens the future of the world

As we look around the world today, we're confronted with an uncomfortable but undeniable truth: Millions of children's lives are blighted, for no other reason than the country, the community, the gender or the circumstances into which they are born.

And, as the data in this report show, unless we accelerate the pace of our progress in reaching them, the futures of millions of disadvantaged and vulnerable children – and therefore the future of their societies – will be imperilled.

Before they draw their first breath, the life chances of poor and excluded children are often being shaped by inequities. Disadvantage and discrimination against their communities and families will help determine whether they live or die, whether they have a chance to learn and later earn a decent living. Conflicts, crises and climate-related disasters deepen their deprivation and diminish their potential.

But it need not be so. As this report also illustrates, the world has made tremendous progress in reducing child deaths, getting children into school and lifting millions out of poverty. Many of the interventions behind this progress – such as vaccines, oral rehydration salts and better nutrition – have been practical and cost-effective. The rise of digital and mobile technology, and other innovations have made it easier and more cost-effective to deliver critical services in hard-to-reach communities and to expand opportunities for the children and families at greatest risk.

For the most part, the constraints on reaching these children are not technical. They are a matter of political commitment. They are a matter of resources. And they are a matter of collective will – joining forces to tackle inequity and inequality head-on by focusing greater investment and effort on reaching the children who are being left behind.

The time to act is now. For unless we accelerate our progress, by 2030:

- Almost 70 million children may die before reaching their fifth birthdays – 3.6 million in 2030 alone, the deadline year for the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Children in sub-Saharan Africa will be 10 times more likely to die before their fifth birthdays than children in high-income countries.
- Nine out of 10 children living in extreme poverty will live in sub-Saharan Africa.

- More than 60 million primary school-aged children will be out of school – roughly the same number as are out of school today. More than half will be from sub-Saharan Africa.
- Some 750 million women will have been married as children – three quarters of a billion child brides.

These vast inequities and dangers do more than violate the rights and imperil the futures of individual children. They perpetuate intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and inequality that undermine the stability of societies and even the security of nations everywhere.

More than ever, we should recognize that development is sustainable only if it can be carried on – sustained – by future generations. We have an opportunity to replace vicious cycles with virtuous cycles in which today's poor children – if given a fair chance at health, education and protection from harm – can, as adults, compete on a more level playing field with children from wealthier backgrounds. Thus making not only their own lives better, but their societies richer in every sense of the word.

For when we help a boy access the medicine and nutrition he needs to grow up healthy and strong, we not only increase his chances in life, we also decrease the economic and social costs associated with poor health and low productivity.

When we educate a girl, we not only give her the tools and knowledge to make her own decisions

and shape her own future, we also help raise the standard of living of her family and her community.

When we provide education, shelter and protection for children caught in conflicts, we help mend their hearts and their minds – so that someday, they will have the ability and the desire to help rebuild their countries.

This report concludes with five ways to strengthen our work, building on what we have learned over the last 25 years – and what we are still learning: Increasing information about those being left behind. Integrating our efforts across sectors to tackle the multiple deprivations that hold so many children back. Innovating to accelerate progress and drive change for the most excluded children and families. Investing in equity and finding new ways of financing efforts to reach the most disadvantaged children. And involving everyone, beginning with communities themselves, and with businesses, organizations and citizens around the world who believe we can change the outcome for millions of children.

We can. Inequity is not inevitable. Inequality is a choice. Promoting equity – a fair chance for every child, for all children – is also a choice. A choice we can make, and must make. For their future, and the future of our world.

Anthony Lake
Executive Director, UNICEF

Executive Summary

Every child is born with the same, inalienable right to a healthy start in life, an education and a safe, secure childhood – all the basic opportunities that translate into a productive and prosperous adulthood. But around the world, millions of children are denied their rights and deprived of everything they need to grow up healthy and strong.

An infant deprived of post-natal care may not survive her first days. A child deprived of immunization or safe drinking water may not live to see his fifth birthday, or may live a life of diminished health. A child deprived of adequate nutrition may never reach his full physical or cognitive potential, limiting his ability to learn and earn. A child deprived of quality education may never gain the skills she needs to succeed someday in the workplace or send her own children to school. And a child deprived of protection – from conflict, violence or abuse, from exploitation and discrimination, from child labour, or early marriage and motherhood – may be physically and emotionally scarred for life, with profound consequences.

The evidence is all around us – in cycles of deprivation that are transmitted from one generation to the next, and deepening inequality that threatens societies everywhere. Children who do not have the opportunity to develop the skills they will need to compete as adults can neither break these vicious cycles in their own lives nor give their children a chance to fulfil their potential. Their societies, too, are deprived of the full contribution they might have made. Left unaddressed, gaps will grow wider and cycles more vicious, thus affecting more children. This is especially true in a world increasingly beset by violent conflict, chronic crises and other

humanitarian emergencies caused by natural disasters and the growing effects of climate change – all of which affect children disproportionately, and the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children most of all.

The topic of this year's report is motivated by a sense of urgency and the conviction that a different outcome, and a better world, are possible. Children born into poverty and deprivation are not doomed to live lives of despair. Inequity is not inevitable, if governments invest in expanding opportunity for every child – shifting policies, programming and public spending priorities so the most disadvantaged have a chance to catch up with the most advantaged.

The good news is that there are more effective – and cost-effective – ways to reach the hardest-to-reach children, families and communities. New technology, the digital revolution, innovative ways to finance critical interventions and citizen-led movements are all helping to drive change for the most disadvantaged. Investing in these interventions and initiatives, and fuelling these emergent movements, will yield both short- and long-term benefits for millions of children and their societies.

The arithmetic of equity is relatively simple, and it is not a zero-sum game. Everyone should move forward, in rich and poor countries alike. But with greater investment and effort focused on reaching the children and families who have made the least progress, advances in child survival, health and education can be more equally shared to the benefit of all. To realize our global development goals, we must invest first in the children who are furthest behind.

Why focus on equity now?

As governments around the world consider how best to meet their commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, the lessons of global efforts over the past 15 years are instructive.

Progress achieved towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) between 2000 and 2015 demonstrated the power of national action, backed by international partnerships, to deliver transformative results. Children born today are significantly less likely to live in poverty than those born at the start of the new millennium. They are over 40 per cent more likely to survive to their fifth birthday and more likely to be in school.

Governments and communities around the world have rightly celebrated these advances. Yet in the midst of progress, millions of children continue to live – and die – in unconscionable conditions. In 2015, an estimated 5.9 million children died before reaching age 5, mostly as a result of diseases that can be readily and affordably prevented and treated. Millions more children are still denied access to education simply because their parents are poor or from a stigmatized group, because they were born female, or because they are growing up in countries affected by conflict or chronic crises. And even though poverty is falling globally, nearly half of the world's extreme poor are children, and many more experience multiple dimensions of poverty in their lives.

In many cases, equity gaps have narrowed over the past 25 years. For example, in all regions, the poorest households experienced greater absolute declines in child mortality than the richest. Four regions achieved gender parity in primary

education. But in far too many other cases, overall progress did little to narrow deep and persistent disparities. Governments failed to track the equity gaps separating the most disadvantaged children from the rest of society. National averages marking overall progress masked glaring – and sometimes growing – gaps between children from the poorest households and those from the richest.

We cannot afford to let history repeat itself. To meet the 2030 goals, the pace of progress in the next 15 years will have to be faster than that made towards the MDGs. The consequences and costs of failure are enormous. If the trends of the past 15 years continue for the next 15 years, by 2030, an estimated 167 million children will be living in extreme poverty. Approximately 69 million children under age 5 will die between 2016 and 2030 – 3.6 million in that year alone, still from mostly preventable causes. And there could still be more than 60 million primary-school-aged children out of school.

Far more than the MDGs that preceded them, the 2030 goals recognize the critical importance of promoting equity. The 17 goals and 169 associated targets that the world's governments have committed to achieving are universal, linked by a pledge “that no one will be left behind ... and we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.”

Redeeming that pledge must begin with delivering progress for the *children* who have been left behind.

The United Nations has projected increasing humanitarian needs and a grim outlook for children in 2016. The United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees estimated that by 2015, at least 60 million people had fled their homes because of conflict and violence. Half of them are children. The number of children experiencing prolonged and complex disasters, such as the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, is growing. The intensifying effects of climate change are also exacerbating the risks to the most disadvantaged children. Globally, more than half a billion children live in zones where the occurrence of flooding is extremely high, and nearly 160 million live in zones where the severity of drought is high or extremely high. The World Health Organization has projected that approximately 250,000 additional deaths will occur annually through 2030 from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress attributable to climate change.

The challenges of reaching these children with essential services and protection are considerable, but so are the benefits to be gained. And we must reach them. For if we do not, we are likely to see hard-won development gains slip away and watch the consequences of this failure play out across the world. There is no question that progress for the most disadvantaged children and families is the defining condition for delivering on the 2030 goals and determining the future opportunities of generations to come. The time to act is now.

Meeting the equity imperative

Our new targets for children cannot be achieved unless we make the most disadvantaged children a priority, shifting policies, programmes and public spending to promote greater equity. The areas in which children experience inequity are many, but in this report we focus specifically on three areas that exemplify both the magnitude of the challenge and the immensity of the

Child health: Data snapshot

Compared to the richest, the poorest children are:

- **1/3** as likely to have a skilled attendant at their birth.
- **1.9X** as likely to die before age 5.
- **2.1X** as likely to be stunted.

- Children born in rural areas are **1.7X** more likely to die before age 5 than children in urban areas.

- For approximately 1 million children in 2015, their first day of life was also their last.

- The relative child mortality gap between sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia on one side and high-income countries on the other has barely changed since 1990.

- Children born in sub-Saharan Africa are 12 times more likely than their counterparts in high-income countries to die before their fifth birthday, just as they were in 1990.

opportunity to improve the lives of millions of children.

The report begins with the most glaring inequity of all – disparities in child survival – and goes on to explore the underlying determinants of preventable child mortality. It argues that to meet the 2030 child survival target, we must urgently address persistent disparities in maternal health, the availability of skilled birth attendants, adequate nutrition and access to basic services, as well as other factors such as discrimination, exclusion and a lack of knowledge about child feeding and the role of safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and hygiene in preventing childhood diseases.

The discussion continues with a look at one of the most effective drivers of development and the greatest equalizer of opportunity: education. Without quality education, disadvantaged children are far more likely to be trapped in low-skilled, poorly paid and insecure employment, preventing them from breaking intergenerational cycles of disadvantage as adults. But a greater focus on early childhood development, on increasing education access and quality, and on providing education in emergencies will yield cascading benefits for both this generation and the next.

Education: Data snapshot

- About 124 million children are denied opportunities to enter and complete school.
- Since 2011, the global number of children who do not attend school has increased.
- 38% of children in primary school do not learn how to read, write and do simple arithmetic.
- An estimated 75 million children (3 to 18 years old) in 35 countries are in desperate need of education. Of these, 17 million are refugees, internally displaced or part of another population of concern.
- Girls in conflict-affected contexts are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than girls in more peaceful settings.
- In many low- and middle-income countries, growing disparities in education among different social groups already have increased the probability of conflict.
- Around 150 million children under the age of 14 are engaged in child labour.

Children and poverty: Data snapshot

- Children make up 34% of the total population in low- and middle-income countries – but 46% of the population living on less than US\$1.90 per day.
- More than 300 million children live in zones of very high flood occurrence that are also in countries where more than half of the population gets by on less than US\$3.10 a day.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 247 million children – or 2 in 3 – live in multidimensional poverty.
- More than 1/3 of countries are not measuring child poverty; around half of those that are measuring it are not doing so routinely.
- In the 41 most affluent countries, nearly 77 million children lived in monetary poverty in 2014.
- At current trends, 156 million children in sub-Saharan Africa will be struggling to survive on less than US\$1.90 a day in 2030; as a group, they will comprise nearly half of the world's extreme poor.

Having discussed two of the most critical deprivations children face, the report then examines child poverty in all its dimensions – and the role social protection programmes play in reducing it. Arguing that child poverty is about more than income, it presents a case for complementing measures to reduce income poverty with integrated solutions to the many deprivations experienced by children living in poverty.

The report concludes with five ways to strengthen our work, building on what we have learned over the last 25 years – and what we are still learning:

- Increasing **information** about those being left behind.
- **Integrating** our efforts across sectors to tackle the multiple deprivations that hold so many children back.
- **Innovating** to accelerate progress and drive change for the most excluded children and families.
- **Investing** in equity and finding new ways of financing efforts to reach the most disadvantaged children.
- And **involving** everyone, beginning with communities themselves, and with businesses, organizations and citizens around the world who believe we can change the outcome for millions of children.

These principles are a guide more than a blueprint, but they can help shape policy, frame priorities and inform the debate about the best way to deliver on the promise of the 2030 goals and secure a better future not only for the most disadvantaged children, but also for us all.

Inequity is neither inevitable nor insurmountable. With the right investments, at the right time, disadvantaged children can realize their dreams of a better life. By reducing the inequities that violate their rights today, such investments can help these children lead more productive lives as adults and enable them to pass on more opportunities to their children, thus replacing intergenerational cycles of deprivation with sustainable cycles of opportunity.

That is the promise – and the imperative – of equity.

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