



Save the Children

COVID'S KIDS

Repaying our debt to
the Covid Generation

Save the Children exists to help every child reach their full potential.

In more than 100 countries, we help children stay safe, healthy and keep learning. We lead the way on tackling big problems like pneumonia, hunger and protecting children in war, while making sure each child's unique needs are cared for.

We know we can't do this alone. Together with children, partners and supporters, we work to help every child become whoever they want to be.

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Some children's names have been changed to protect identities.

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Cover photo: Isabela and her family migrated to Peru to escape violence and economic turmoil in Venezuela. (Photo: Hanna Adcock/Save the Children)

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Children wait to be vaccinated at an outreach session in Ethiopia's Somali region.



Do right by the Covid Generation: intergenerational justice in the decade of recovery

“[Our movement] must not be content to save children from the hardships of life – it must abolish these hardships; nor think it suffices to save them from immediate menace – it must place in their hands the means of saving themselves and so of saving the world.”

Eglantyne Jebb, co-founder of Save the Children

A century ago, in the aftermath of the first world war and the 1918 flu pandemic, Save the Children’s co-founder, Eglantyne Jebb, created a movement dedicated to the idea that “every generation of children offers mankind the possibility of rebuilding his ruin of a world”. The gendered language reflects her time, but Jebb’s salutary insight was that investment in children – as a group for whom the future is unwritten – is the best way for societies to move meaningfully beyond moments of profound crisis.

The coronavirus¹ pandemic is the biggest global upheaval of our age and will have profound implications across all countries and all areas of our lives. Despite being less at risk of severe illness caused directly by the disease, children are not exempt. Children alive today will forever be ‘the Covid Generation’, their lives deeply marked by its impacts. Their generation carries our hopes for a brighter future; but there is a real risk that – counter to Jebb’s vision – it is a generation that will be failed by the choices we make today.

Huge strides have been made over the last century in realising children’s rights. But the pandemic has created, exposed or exacerbated numerous challenges for children that, if unaddressed, could result in stalled progress or – at worst – a profound reversal of the gains that have been painstakingly won since Jebb wrote the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1923.

Children in every country in the world face immediate impacts: losing out on education, weakened healthcare provision, a looming nutrition crisis, damage to their mental health and diminished

protection. In the medium term, this whole generation of children faces lost opportunity and a financial price to be paid as they grow into adulthood. In the long term, if humanity fails to find sustainable ways of organising itself, grievous harm will be done not only to this cohort of children, but to their children and to their children’s children.

The pandemic has been a stark reminder of our vulnerability as individuals, as societies and as a species. It is clear that recovery cannot mean a return to the status quo; the economic, political and social conditions that existed before the pandemic are part of what have given it such destructive force. They are too weak to be relied on as foundations for the future.

As we slowly emerge from the white heat of the crisis into a new normal, now is the time to agree how we want the world to look and to actively shape the response and the decade of recovery that follows. In this report, we argue that critical to the success of the post-pandemic settlement will be the extent to which it serves the interests of the Covid Generation, defending the historic progress in children’s rights made over the past century while seizing new opportunities to protect and advance the rights of future generations.

In essence, this is about **intergenerational justice**. We will return to this theme throughout as a framework to examine what it is that adults alive today owe to the generation of children living through Covid, as well as to the generations of children that will follow. Each section in the report explores the ways in which children are being disproportionately impacted by the crisis,

and the risks (and occasionally opportunities) that are emerging that affect children as a group – or specific groups of children – and that will shape their ability to realise their rights. Are the costs of the crisis being unfairly diverted to groups with relatively little power? Or deferred in such a way that children will be forced to ‘pick up the tab’ in decades to come? And what priorities should those in positions of power today adopt in order to ensure the decade of recovery does justice by children and promotes their rights and wellbeing?

We have adopted a **universalist lens** where appropriate, and have attempted to draw out issues that are relevant to children everywhere, from both rich and poor countries, while fully recognising that these play out differently in different places and among different social and economic groups. The pandemic has exposed deep divisions, inequalities and injustices between different countries and groups of people, differences that are profoundly shaping individual experiences of the pandemic. However, it has in many ways also been a great unifier: people everywhere, facing the same threat, have become aware of our interdependence, the similarities of our hopes and fears, and our shared vulnerabilities. It has presented us with a rare opportunity to understand that we have more in common than we often admit, and that our experience of fear and hardship in the face of disease, while not uniform, is universal.

We hope, therefore, that this report will have relevance across sectors and across continents. Whether you are a teacher, entrepreneur, parent, politician, philanthropist, researcher, healthcare worker, scientist, official, social worker or activist, there are decisions you make every single day that have an impact on children. Wherever you are in the world, your actions have a ripple effect around the world. We have written this report to help you think through five big agendas that we propose should be a focus for everyone who cares about children:

1. Creating economies in which all children can thrive
2. Rescuing childhood for the Covid Generation
3. Saving children’s natural inheritance
4. Governing for children’s rights – by sharing and building power
5. Governing for children’s rights – through international cooperation

In each section, we first revisit pre-existing challenges and trends. We then consider the challenges, risks or opportunities for children that have been created, revealed or accelerated by the pandemic. Finally, we reflect on how together we might shape the recovery to protect and to promote justice both for the Covid Generation and for the children who will follow.

Whether we have picked the right five agendas and analysed them accurately will, of course, be contested. This report has been written primarily by a team in Save the Children UK. We have drawn on contributions from children in the countries where we work, on evidence from our programmes and on expert input from colleagues and friends within and outside the Save the Children movement. And we have tried to take a holistic view. However, as authors, our analysis is necessarily shaped by our perceptions in the Global North. We recognise this is a major weakness. If the objective is to set out a blueprint for building a world in which children everywhere can thrive, then that plan should be shaped by people from all around our world and, in particular, by children themselves. We therefore propose that the report be treated simply as a **provocation for debate**. As a next step, we plan to widen this discussion, engaging children and communities around the world to flesh out a shared vision. We also hope the report will help prompt reflection within a range of institutions, including our own, on how all of us who believe in intergenerational justice can adapt our approaches in response to the changed world – and thereby do right by the Covid Generation.

1 Creating economies in which all children can thrive

“Inequality is increasing, which has resulted in poverty. The Government should ensure food for those who are in quarantine.”

16-year-old boy, Nepal²

“My father and brother are no longer employed due to coronavirus, and there are a lot more people in the same situation who have households to provide for and need money.”

15-year-old girl, Egypt³

1.1 Before Covid our economies were already failing children

Children’s experiences in their early years – their nutrition, their education, their protection, their access to health services, the care they receive and the environment in which they live – matter for the rest of their lives. Realising children’s rights in these areas ought to be a fundamental goal of any economy. But by and large economies have developed along demonstrably flawed lines that leave many unable to fulfil even children’s most basic needs. Analysis by Save the Children and UNICEF shows that even before the pandemic hit, some 586 million children – almost one-third of children in low and middle-income countries – lived in monetarily poor households, as measured by national poverty lines.⁴ Likewise, many children were being left behind in richer countries – for example, almost a third of children in the UK were living in poverty even before the pandemic.⁵ Research shows that children are disproportionately affected by poverty, which makes this a core issue of intergenerational injustice. Adults have built economies that, instead of protecting a group that is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of poverty as they grow and develop, generate far higher levels of poverty among children than the population at large.⁶

While significant progress in child poverty has been made over the past few decades, there is evidence that even before Covid this progress was stalling. Data from the World Bank shows that the rate of poverty reduction has halved since 2013, and the absolute number of people living in extreme poverty

has actually been *increasing* in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years.⁷ And in many countries, income inequality is also growing – wealthy families are becoming wealthier while many children grow up in relative poverty.⁸ A staggering 3 billion people or more could not afford a healthy diet even before the pandemic, with between a quarter and a third of children under five being stunted or wasted – that is, too short or too thin – while another 38 million under-fives were overweight.⁹

Just a decade ago, the world suffered one of the most severe recessions of recent times following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. That crisis illustrated the consequences of a failed international response to a global challenge. The recession – and the policy choices made in the wake of it – did enormous harm to younger generations by further exacerbating poverty and inequality, reducing opportunities and driving up debt.¹⁰ It could have been a watershed moment – a chance to redesign national and international economic systems to make them more productive, fairer, less destructive and more resilient, but by and large that opportunity was passed up.¹¹ The sectors of the economy that had caused the crisis were bailed out, with the imposition of only minimal additional regulation to prevent a version of the crisis repeating again. As stringent fiscal policies were imposed in country after country, often in ways that disproportionately harmed children in poorer households, a generation of young people were, in effect, forced to pay the bill for a crisis that they had no hand in creating. So-called austerity measures – government spending cuts – may not only have slowed recovery;¹² they also caused a

retraction of state and public services that has detrimentally affected the life chances of millions of children.¹³ The fragility inherent in a failed economic model that was left largely intact has made us even less able to weather the new crisis brought on by the pandemic.

As we discuss in section 3.1, the world's economic model is also profoundly unsustainable from an ecological perspective, with exponential and potentially catastrophic implications for today's children and, especially, for future generations.

1.2 The pandemic has highlighted and entrenched inequality, poverty and precarity, while forcing the next generation to bear the costs of recovery

In every country in the world, the pandemic has both highlighted and exacerbated poverty, inequality and vulnerability at the household level. The most adverse peacetime shock to the global economy in a century is putting enormous pressure on millions of increasingly destitute families as they struggle to make ends meet in the context of constraints on movement, rises in the cost of essential goods and lost employment.¹⁴ Analysis by Save the Children and UNICEF estimates that without urgent action the number of children living in poverty across low and middle-income countries by the end of 2020 could soar by up to 117 million.¹⁵ As a consequence, many children will experience new or exacerbated deprivations in their health, nutrition, education, protection or wellbeing that, for some, will cause them to suffer a lifetime of poverty, violence and other rights abuses. For many, the impact will be profound and immediate. A major international survey of families by Save the Children has found that as a result of food-price rises associated with the pandemic, almost two-thirds of respondents are finding it difficult to provide their families with food basics.¹⁶ An analysis published by the Lancet estimates that Covid will lead to an additional 6.7 million children under five suffering from moderate to acute wasting in 2020, an increase of over 14% compared with projections without Covid.¹⁷ Oxfam estimates that an additional 12,000 people per day could die from Covid-linked hunger by the end of 2020.¹⁸

The coronavirus pandemic has caused a major contraction in access to basic healthcare for children,

with consequences that could last a lifetime. While the need for adequate and well-funded universal healthcare services has never been clearer, those services are now being put under unprecedented pressure. Many children growing up in countries whose health systems have been unable to cope will suffer as a direct consequence of disruptions to routine healthcare provision.¹⁹ In Sierra Leone, Kenya, Bangladesh, Yemen and elsewhere, as government resources have been diverted to the Covid response, Save the Children has seen significant and widespread disruption of maternal and newborn healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare, immunisation, mental health support, and nutrition. Our 'Protect a Generation' survey found that a third of respondents were facing additional barriers in accessing healthcare and medication as a result of the pandemic. The top reasons cited were the closure of healthcare centres (10%), long queues at healthcare centres resulting in not being assessed or treated (12%), and a shortage in required medication at healthcare centres and pharmacies (15%).²⁰ Vaccination is one of the most cost-effective ways of protecting young lives, but of the 68 new immunisation programmes planned for 2020 by Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, 39 have confirmed delays.²¹ Research by Johns Hopkins University suggests that under-five mortality could increase by between 10% and 45% as a consequence of such disruptions, leading to between 250,000 and 1.2 million additional deaths of children under five.²²

As we discuss in section 2, the temporary suspension of education provision in many countries has also imposed a huge and widely felt financial burden on millions of families, while jeopardising the futures of the children missing out on months of learning. We know that access to nutrition, healthcare and education early in life has a profound and lasting impact not only on children's future wellbeing but also on their ability to earn and contribute to the economy. Given that, the policy response to the pandemic is heaping an as-yet-unknown burden of lost opportunities and lost future income on the current generation of children.

*The children of the 'precariat' – the millions of people working in uncertain, unreliable employment – are likely to suffer the most from declines in employment.*²³ When parents or carers cannot depend on continuous, adequately paid employment, children are put at risk. Recent polling across 28 countries in every

continent found that 83% of employees now fear losing their job.²⁴ In poorer countries, the informal sector has always employed the most people,²⁵ while in richer countries the rise of 'zero-hours contracts' and other insecure forms of work, together with the decline in collective bargaining, have increased the number of people – including parents – whose work is informal and pay uncertain.²⁶ Participants in the informal sector tend to be poorer – in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 22% of households that have only 'nonstandard' employment are in poverty, against only 3% of those who enjoy stable work conditions.²⁷ The pandemic risks compounding underlying inequalities between those in informal and formal work. Across rich and poor countries, young, female, ethnic-minority, low-paid, migrant, part-time, vulnerable and precarious workers have been most affected by reductions in working hours.²⁸ Members of the 'precarariat' are made more vulnerable by the volatility of their incomes, the speed at which they can be laid off and, because many are also undocumented, their often limited access to healthcare, social safety nets or other government benefits.²⁹

Moreover, many governments are piling up huge fiscal deficits and debt in their response to the pandemic, creating the risk that future generations will be burdened with the costs of recovery for decades to come. Even before Covid hit, developing and emerging economies were accumulating debt at a deeply concerning rate: after 2010 the ratio of debt to gross domestic product (GDP) of developing countries climbed 54 percentage points to 168%.³⁰ The pandemic has since led to unprecedented levels of public spending in both advanced and developing countries, against a backdrop of decreasing tax revenues and other sources of government income. While this public spending has been critical in lessening the impacts of the crisis on households thus far, the result is likely to be levels of public debt not seen since the world wars. The International Monetary Fund estimates advanced-country fiscal deficits will average 11% of GDP in 2020, while debt-to-GDP ratios will rise from an average of 105% in 2019 to 122% in 2020 alone.³¹ The World Bank is so concerned by ballooning debts in developing countries that its President has recently raised the prospect of debt write-offs, in addition to repayment holidays.³² The way that governments choose to manage down and pay off these accumulated debts over the next

decades will matter deeply from the perspective of intergenerational justice. The balance struck between funding cuts and new taxation, and decisions about where new taxes fall, the extent to which monetary policy is used as an alternative to fiscal measures and the timing of debt reduction will all determine how much the Covid Generation picks up the bill for the pandemic. This will look different from country to country, with richer nations typically enjoying lower interest rates and making payments in their own currencies while poorer countries have to contend with external debt and higher rates of repayment. This will not be a policy question only for the next decade; to give just one cautionary example, Britain only paid off its national debts from the second world war in 2006.

1.3 To achieve a just economic recovery for children, large-scale public investments and safety nets will be needed, with global economic cooperation to support poorer countries

Build long-term child-centred social protection schemes

All around the world, innovative and expansive social protection schemes have been one of the hallmarks of the response to the coronavirus pandemic, with governments rightly recognising that, with millions of households temporarily unable to earn, the only way to prevent destitution is to provide various forms of 'cash transfer'. As of June 2020, 195 countries and territories had planned, introduced or adapted social protection programmes in response to the pandemic, and international aid responses have also heavily relied on cash assistance.³³ Few good things have emerged from the pandemic thus far, but one positive is the widespread recognition at both the government level and among the public that protecting family incomes from short-term shocks is a policy imperative. Global polling suggests there is now very high support for redistributive programmes that directly support vulnerable people.³⁴

To ensure household incomes are protected in the long term, a key step will therefore be to maintain these enhanced social safety nets as a standard public policy tool. Effective social protection systems reduce the risks that arise for the millions of parents who are dependent on informal economies for their

livelihoods. Social protection increases households' resilience to shocks. It can promote gender equality through increased income for women, decreased gender-based violence and increased school attendance for girls.³⁵ And it tends to strengthen the overall social contract between citizen and governments, with positive consequences for levels of trust.

As children are disproportionately affected by poverty and often rely on others to realise their rights, there is a strong case for investing in child benefits as an especially impactful form of social protection. These benefits have been demonstrated to drive down poverty rates, reduce inequality and help children flourish.³⁶ A growing body of evidence shows that income transfers for children are an investment in them and in the wider economy, offering substantial returns.³⁷ However, currently only one in three children receives some form of child or family benefit.³⁸ Many of the most deprived and marginalised children are especially likely to be excluded because they lack formal documentation; expanding this coverage needs to be a priority in the recovery.

Increase support for quality universal public services

Another encouraging consequence of the coronavirus crisis is heightened appreciation for, and understanding of, the value of high-quality universal public services and the public servants who keep them running. Where public services, particularly healthcare, have been widely available, events like weekly applause or pot-banging for healthcare workers have demonstrated the degree to which people have felt grateful for and dependent on them. Where necessary services are sorely lacking, the gap has been painfully felt.

As we move towards the decade of recovery, it is imperative that governments use this moment of clarity to invest in high-quality and universally accessible public services, both as a means of stimulating devastated economies but also as a way to increase resilience to future crises. We know that investment in public services is a means of significantly reducing poverty among children, especially girls and the most deprived and marginalised children.³⁹ Oxfam cites evidence from 150 countries spanning a period of over 30 years that shows that, overall, investment in

health, education and social protection reduces the gap between rich and poor.⁴⁰ The Overseas Development Institute has calculated that most countries, though not the poorest, could afford the public investments needed to provide universal healthcare, education and social protection if they allocated enough of their budgets to these goals – and raised more in tax.⁴¹ This is a critical finding. With reform to existing tax systems, including more progressive and redistributive approaches that tax wealth in addition to income and consumption, most countries could make huge progress in meeting the basic needs of all their children.

Tackle the crisis of job security and create accessible, resilient labour markets that value the 'children's workforce'

A focus on decent, secure jobs must be at the heart of the economic recovery from the pandemic. At least four conclusions in this area are emerging from the coronavirus crisis:

1. Children's wellbeing is in large part dependent on economies generating employment for their parents and care-givers, which means that active policies are needed to manage the impacts of economic change and automation on the availability of work, including social protection and support for re-skilling.⁴²
2. Job security is critical – jobs that exploit their workers (including, of course, child labour) or that can be withdrawn at a moment's notice do not build resilience to shocks.
3. Expanding access to work for certain groups can have significant benefits both for the wider economy and for preventing poverty, including child poverty. For example, migrants, including refugees, often make significant economic contributions when they are allowed to, while withholding their right to work can do significant harm to their children.⁴³ And if men and women had equal access to the labour market it is estimated that global GDP would increase by \$193 billion, with gains being much more significant in poorer countries.⁴⁴
4. Certain functions in our economies – for example, in healthcare, education, social care, infrastructure and parts of the commercial sector – are fundamental to our collective safety and wellbeing and must be validated and protected as such. In particular, the global 'children's workforce' of teachers, midwives,

mental health specialists, social workers and others whose work is so critical to our collective wellbeing must be prized especially highly in the economies of the future.

Cooperate internationally to reduce tax avoidance, support countries with unmanageable debt burdens, invest in global public goods and support recovery in the poorest countries

The pandemic has been a lesson in the globalised nature of both risk and recovery in the 21st century. Countries are inextricably interconnected, which has driven the scale and speed of the crisis but also points to the necessary way out of it. Collaboration on vaccines and medical knowledge is just the start of what needs to be a decade of unprecedented cooperation between nations to rebuild economies. With public debt levels skyrocketing everywhere, the need to safeguard public revenues and ensure taxes are paid where they are due will never be more important. It is time to get serious about tackling illicit financial flows and tax avoidance and evasion, which, thanks to financial deregulation and technological advances, now take place on a massive scale, deepening inequality and siphoning off billions of dollars of potential government revenue that might otherwise be used to fund public goods and to alleviate poverty for children.⁴⁵

The burden of unpayable debt must also be removed from those countries that, following the pandemic, will otherwise be forced to divert funds away from public services and towards debt servicing and repayment. The International Monetary Fund, World Bank and major creditors will need to work closely and with purpose in order to realise this goal. Failure to do so would, in effect, be a conscious choice to impose brutal austerity on the poorest children in the poorest countries.

In addition, governments everywhere should take proactive measures to protect and promote the flow of remittances, which, according to a recent report by an intergovernmental group led by Switzerland and the UK, account for more than 5% of GDP for at least 60 countries – higher

than either foreign direct investment or official development assistance.⁴⁶ The flow of global remittances is projected to see the sharpest decline in recent history as a consequence of the pandemic, equivalent to two-thirds of the global aid budget, with devastating impacts likely for millions of families.⁴⁷

Finally, official development assistance will continue to be a critically important part of the picture. International donors should resist pressure to cut aid funding in response to the pandemic and redouble efforts to meet the UN commitment to give 0.7% of their income as aid and to ensure that this benefits the poorest children and their families directly. In a time when other forms of investment are likely to decline drastically, the counter-cyclical potential of aid will become especially important for the wellbeing of families in poorer countries.

1.4 Summary

The Covid Generation cannot afford a return to 'normal'. The scale and severity of poverty, inequality, malnutrition, poor health, precariousness and exclusion that persisted before the pandemic mean that for many millions of children, normal simply was not good enough. And poverty for children in the present more often than not means poverty for children in the future.

Recovering from the pandemic offers a chance to break this cycle, to catalyse the emergence of economies that value the things that really matter. This will take concerted engagement by governments and a clear view on how to distribute wealth in ways that strengthen resilience, that allow families to thrive and that promote a fairer settlement between generations. Among other things, this means putting family finances at the heart of economic decision-making everywhere, prioritising universal public services, protecting parents from precarious employment and re-focusing on international economic cooperation that puts the rights and interests of children first.

2 Rescuing childhood for the Covid Generation

“I don’t know when we’ll be able to go back so that I can continue my education and meet my friends. I don’t want to miss learning. This really worries me.”

Hawo, 13, Somalia⁴⁹

“Help all children so that we can do better with our education. I don’t have internet access or tech, so I have not learned much over the past months.”

15-year-old girl, Colombia⁵⁰

“Youth mental health services in Finland should be considerably increased in general and not just during the pandemic. There are long queues everywhere and I, too, have been left without treatment due to this. That is one of the reasons why my mental state now during the coronavirus pandemic has declined.”

Anonymous child, Finland⁵¹

“I did not know I’d miss school or the endless work. But this self-isolation really is cruel. They say history books will record this as the time everyone stayed home. As if we’ll need something to help us remember this.”

Lavannya, 17, USA⁵²

2.1 Even before the pandemic, the experience of childhood was highly uneven and rapidly changing

The concept of ‘childhood’ as a unique phase of life with distinct expectations and privileges is a relatively recent concept, emerging in reaction to the cruelties of the industrial revolution and as state-led education became widespread in some parts of the world towards the end of the 19th century.⁵³ The idea of what constitutes a ‘good childhood’ has continued to evolve over the last century, with the almost universal adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 30 years ago both expressing and driving global consensus around the special needs and rights of children in relation to adults.

While the concept of what a good childhood looks like is now reasonably well established, encompassing basic needs being met, protection from harm and support to flourish, the contexts in which childhoods are actually lived are still very variable.

Before the pandemic struck, 258 million girls and boys were out of school.⁵⁴ UNESCO’s 2019 projections for reaching the 2030 education target of quality education for every last child were dire, indicating that there will be almost no progress on reducing the number of children who are out of school by 2030.⁵⁵ Even when children were at school, this did not necessarily mean they were learning; 53% of ten-year-olds in low and middle-income countries are not able to read well.⁵⁶ One of the key reasons for this shortfall is a massive gap between the funding that is needed for education and the funding that is available. Before Covid, this was estimated to be \$148 billion annually.⁵⁷ The share of education in official aid was close to 15% in the early 2000s but now stands at just over 10%.

When it comes to child protection, prior to the pandemic, 1 billion children – or one in two – experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence or neglect each year.⁵⁸ An estimated 12 million girls were marrying each year before the Covid crisis, 2 million of whom were married before their 15th birthday.⁵⁹ Save the Children estimates that

the economic impacts of the Covid crisis will put an additional half a million girls at risk of child marriage in 2020 alone and 2.5 million over the next five years. The same economic impacts could put more than 1 million additional girls at risk of adolescent pregnancy in 2020, with pregnancy and birth complications already the leading cause of death for girls aged 15–19 years.⁶⁰

In addition, 85 million children were engaged in hazardous labour⁶¹ and 149 million were living in high-intensity conflict zones.⁶² While rates vary widely worldwide, in most countries that collect data, one in five girls aged 15–19 had experienced violence from an intimate partner.⁶³ Children with disabilities are almost four times more likely to experience violence than children who do not have a disability.⁶⁴ In most places, child protection is especially poorly funded. It accounts for just 0.6% of official development assistance.⁶⁵ According to the latest UN Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against Children, while 80% of countries have a national plan to address violence against children, only a fifth had funded those plans.⁶⁶

Childhoods are also changing fast. The interplay of pressures and changes arising from technology, globalisation, environmental degradation and social shifts are radically disrupting the context in which children are growing up.⁶⁷ No doubt partly as a consequence, the mental health of millions of children seems to be under increasing pressure. Worldwide, 10–20% of children and adolescents currently experience mental disorders.⁶⁸ Half of all mental illnesses begin by the age of 14 and – shockingly – suicide is now the second leading cause of death in young people worldwide.⁶⁹ Protecting children from the negative consequences of innovations and changes that adults have made for our own benefit is a core matter of intergenerational justice, but at the moment the world is failing to address it.

One of the most significant drivers of change is digital technology – in particular, the great disruptive influence of the internet and of mobile communications. These are unprecedentedly powerful means of bringing people together and of creating new ways for young people to learn about, engage in and have influence over their world. For children with access to these technologies, their ability to find information has been transformed – much of the world’s knowledge is now readily accessible to anyone with an internet connection.⁷⁰

These technologies are also playing a huge role in shaping how many children learn, talk and think. However, there is a gaping digital divide. More than 1 billion children and young people are online,⁷¹ but where these children live and their socioeconomic groups are highly concentrated. While more than 90% of North Americans and more than 80% of Europeans have access to the internet, the figures for other parts of the world are significantly lower – around 70% in the Middle East, Latin America and Oceania, 55% in Asia and 40% in Africa.⁷² Moreover, whether people use the internet varies widely by level of education,⁷³ and in some countries by gender – across low-and middle-income countries, 313 million fewer women than men use mobile internet, a gender gap of 23%.⁷⁴

2.2 The pandemic has had a dramatic impact on children’s day-to-day lives, with consequences that will be felt long into the future

Education has been one of the most visible victims of the pandemic, with far-reaching consequences for today’s school-aged children. During the early months of the crisis, more than 1.5 billion children were not attending school.⁷⁵ It is likely that 30 million of these children will never return to formal education, with girls and disabled children most at risk of dropping out.⁷⁶ Save the Children’s survey found that four out of five children felt that they were learning little or nothing at all while out of school, with girls, displaced children and children living in poor households most likely to report that they had learned nothing at all during school closures.⁷⁷ The ability to continue learning while schools are closed has been deeply unequal between and within countries, with the wealthiest families more likely to have technology, connectivity, books at home and the knowledge and time to support their children’s home learning and to provide emotional support. Over 60% of national distance-learning alternatives rely exclusively on online platforms, yet as many as 465 million children and young people in countries where these have been set up do not have access to the internet at home.⁷⁸ Throughout the pandemic this has had a direct impact on which children are learning and which are not. Loss of learning will have long-term impacts on the Covid Generation’s economic outcomes. According to the World Bank, school closures lasting five months could

result, on average, in a reduction of \$872 in yearly earnings for each student from today's primary- and secondary-aged cohorts, while the long-term economic cost of lost schooling could be as much as \$10 trillion.⁷⁹ The pandemic is thus likely to compound what was already being widely described as a global learning crisis.⁸⁰

Pressure on children to provide for themselves and their families is increasing as households struggle. Reports are emerging of growing numbers of children engaged in child labour,⁸¹ and of children being sexually exploited and abused in exchange for essential products and services.⁸² While boys are more likely to be engaged in child labour,⁸³ during times of crisis girls are more likely to take on increased unpaid workloads in the home. Almost two-thirds of girls responding to our survey on their experiences of Covid reported that the time they spent on chores had increased since lockdown; more than half spent more time caring for family members, in some instances placing them at increased risk of infection.⁸⁴ Research shows that a 1% rise in poverty typically leads to at least a 0.7% rise in child labour.⁸⁵ With the number of children living in poverty set to climb dramatically this year and little prospect of economic recovery in 2021, dependence on child labour and unpaid work in the home will continue to increase.⁸⁶ Moreover, as we discuss below, there is evidence that girls are marrying in order to relieve economic pressure on households: the UN Population Fund estimates that the pandemic will result in an additional 13 million such marriages over the next ten years, in part due to interruptions to critical programme interventions.⁸⁷

Some children are being increasingly exposed to violence. In over a third of households responding to a Save the Children survey, a child, parent or caregiver reported that there had been violence in the home since the beginning of the pandemic.⁸⁸ The proportion reporting violence was especially high in households that had lost all or most of their income due to the pandemic and also during periods when schools were closed. Gender-based violence, while always under-reported, appears to be increasing. For example, from mid-March to mid-May 2020, Save the Children staff working in Colombia near the Venezuelan border saw a 33% increase in demand for support related to gender-based violence, including sexual violence against children. The team has seen an increase of nearly 80% in calls to our helplines and a 62% increase in psychological

first-aid consultations. Worldwide, lockdowns, school closures and movement restrictions have left far too many children stuck with abusers, without access to safe spaces. And stay-at-home measures, including school closures, have limited the usual sources of support for children and families such as teachers, social workers or community health workers.

The pandemic is deepening the mental health crisis among children. Children and adolescents are an at-risk group in the present crisis, as most mental health conditions develop during this period of life. Children who previously had few experiences of anxiety and distress are experiencing an increase in the number and intensity of mental health issues due to Covid, and some have developed mental health conditions.⁸⁹ A survey by Save the Children of more than 6,000 children and parents in the USA, Germany, Finland, Spain and the UK found that up to 65% struggled with boredom and feelings of isolation as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and school closures.⁹⁰ In a similar survey in Thailand, 46% of children and young people reported they have experienced stress from being quarantined in their houses,⁹¹ and in Lebanon our survey found that 40% of children aged 15 to 18 years old said the situation is taking a toll on their mental health.⁹² There can be serious long-term consequences for children and adolescents when prolonged levels of stress and social isolation are not addressed; these include disruption to their healthy development and to their ability to cope and learn.⁹³

Lockdown measures are driving childhood online and exposing children to new risks. The shift to distance education has caused many children to move large parts of their lives online. In some parts of the world, internet use has gone up by 50% since the start of the pandemic.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, millions of other children are on the wrong end of the deepening digital divide, having limited or non-existent access to mobile or internet technology.⁹⁵ Those who are online are facing increasing exposure to risks, including sexual exploitation, harmful material, cyber-bullying, online risk-taking and inappropriate collection of children's data.⁹⁶ Girls make up 90% of children in online child sexual abuse material and will be disproportionately impacted.⁹⁷ Global reports of suspected online child sexual exploitation more than doubled in March 2020 compared with March 2019.⁹⁸ In India, the Child Protection Fund has reported a 95% increase in traffic searching for child sexual abuse content since before Covid-related lockdowns.⁹⁹

2.3 As we recover from the crisis, the Covid Generation needs support to regain their childhoods and to thrive

Tackle the financing gap to ensure good-quality education for all

The pandemic has forced societies everywhere to think about the value they place on education. Without remedial action, the economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis will severely worsen the pre-existing learning crisis. National education budgets are being hollowed out by recession and the diversion of public spending to healthcare and economic recovery. Our analysis estimates that the economic consequences of the pandemic could lead to education spending in low and middle-income countries reducing by \$77 billion over the course of the next two years.¹⁰⁰ Substantially increased international funding is needed – governments and the World Bank must acknowledge the severity of the situation and the huge opportunity costs that will arise if the challenge is not met. Innovative financing, of a sort that has historically been largely absent from the education sector, could be a game-changer. For example, an International Finance Facility for Education could be established to provide loan guarantees, thus enabling the World Bank and other institutions to borrow cheaply on international markets and then lend funds to developing countries.¹⁰¹ Every \$1 of guarantees under this scheme could unlock \$4 of financing for education. Tracking this expenditure – that is, ensuring full transparency of the progress countries are making in educating their children – will also be key.

Build on opportunities created by the pandemic to develop new models for education

The pandemic has brought into focus the opportunity to complete the challenge of getting out-of-school children connected to learning, building on the remote-learning models put in place while schools were closed. According to the World Bank, some 130 governments are investing heavily in multiplatform remote learning in response to the pandemic. This sudden spate of innovation has created an opportunity to develop education systems that are more resilient, adaptable to student needs, equitable and inclusive.¹⁰² Principles

for Digital Development have been developed over a number of years to help practitioners succeed in applying digital technologies to development programmes; these offer valuable guidance to governments, donors, schools and others in refining effective approaches to distance learning.¹⁰³ Evidence also shows that the more parents and caregivers are involved in their children's education the more children learn and relationships within the family improve. New tools and guidance that have been developed to assist parents and caregivers to home-school their children and support their wellbeing should therefore be capitalised on and scaled.

Today's generation of young people faces a radically changing world. The Education Commission, which is made up of 26 current and former heads of state and government, government ministers, Nobel laureates and leaders in the fields of education, business, economics, development, health and security, estimates that up to half of the world's jobs – around 2 billion – are at high risk of disappearing due to automation in the coming decades.¹⁰⁴ Demographics will exacerbate the challenge, with the greatest population increases occurring in countries already lagging furthest behind in education. At a time of rapid technological, economic, environmental and social change, when familiar ideas and well-established industries are likely to change or disappear and new ones that are as yet unthought of are likely to emerge, it is necessary not only to extend the reach and the quality of education but also to make sure it helps children develop the skills they might need in the future. As Tom Fletcher and his colleagues in the *Towards Global Learning Goals* coalition put it, we need a revolution in how and what humans learn.¹⁰⁵ This is partly about building children and young people's understanding of some of the underlying drivers of change in their world – of economics, ecology, social movements and political power – but it is also, more importantly, about teaching them how to ask the right questions, critically evaluate information, flex their views and innovate in their answers, and about how to engage and empathise with others. That is, how to be “kind, curious and brave”. For this to happen, we need a new coalition of innovators, pioneers and educators, working together towards global learning goals “of the head, hand and heart”.¹⁰⁶

Strengthen child protection systems

Protecting children from fear and harm is as important as protecting them from hunger or want. Violence and exploitation can damage children's future health, development and prospects in similar ways to malnutrition.¹⁰⁷ The pandemic has shown how important social networks are to our wellbeing, and in particular to child protection. Fundamentally, if we want to ensure children are safe, secure and able to thrive, child protection systems – the services and support networks available to children – need to be maintained and strengthened. This can sometimes be relatively simple; for example, Save the Children's own experience during the pandemic has shown that strengthening support to child helplines can be an easy but crucial step to ensure children can seek help when they don't have access to other avenues. Effective child protection also involves reaching and supporting the most vulnerable households; careful monitoring, reporting and data collection of incidents and patterns; training social workers; and collective efforts to reduce the acceptability of violence in society more broadly and to reject harmful gender norms that help perpetuate it. While the solutions are clear, they will still need concerted, joined-up action. Important initiatives are being driven forward amid the crisis, such as the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.¹⁰⁸ But this is not just work for specialist agencies and dedicated activists – it is work for everyone who ever encounters children and, as such, must become a priority for all of us.

Invest in children's mental health

If we want our children to thrive in the future, we must support their mental wellbeing today. This means investing properly in various forms of provision for mental healthcare and psychosocial support across different domains, such as education, child protection and healthcare. It means adapting approaches in schools so that children learn how to recognise and name the pressures they face and, in so doing, start the process of accepting or overcoming them. It also means working to reduce the pressures that children face and to protect childhoods. The window to invest in support for children whose mental health has been impacted by Covid is now. The good news is that the issue of mental health has at least been widely recognised in the context of the pandemic – for example, the UN published a policy brief in May 2020 that sought to mainstream care for mental health into the wider

crisis response.¹⁰⁹ For an issue that has so long been invisible and rarely talked about, this is significant progress. Governments must ensure that evidence related to promoting and protecting mental health is integrated into Covid response plans and must implement the recommended actions and interventions from the World Health Organization's Mental Health Action Plan, which includes interventions that can be delivered in low-resource settings.¹¹⁰ As adults, we should each take our share of responsibility for trying to free the children in our lives to enjoy the full gift of childhood – to feel loved, to feel safe, to play, to be in nature and to experience joy.

Close the digital divide and make the virtual world a safe arena for childhood

The urgency of closing the digital divide has been brought home by the pandemic. As the UN Secretary-General has said, technology has the potential to turbocharge the recovery from Covid and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, but to do so will take vision and investment.¹¹¹ The UN's recently launched Roadmap for Digital Cooperation is a welcome step, promoting a vision of an inclusive, sustainable digital future by connecting 4 billion people to the internet by 2030. Governments and international donors need to get behind this initiative to work to close the gap – to fulfil children's rights, as an act of social justice and as a means of realising human potential.

However, the digital world was never imagined as an environment in which childhood would take place.¹¹² It was invented by adults, for adults and with the implicit expectation that children and young people online will be treated as adults. Digital technology companies are among the only ones in the world that are not required to make their products safe for children – we regulate drugs for children's doses, children's food and children's toys, in order to protect them, but do almost nothing to regulate children's online experiences. The result is that millions of children experience or witness bullying, upsetting content or inappropriate marketing every day. They have no meaningful control over their privacy or how their personal data is being used. And they are exposed to pressures that can lead to addiction, sleep deprivation, mental illness, self-harm and even abuse.¹¹³ If we are to emerge from the pandemic with a renewed focus on closing the digital divide then we must also see redoubled

efforts to make digital technology safe for children. The 5 Rights Foundation argues that companies must design services that anticipate children and young people by design and default. Adults must work harder to mitigate risks and promote positive online experiences for children so they can be empowered to navigate the digital world creatively, knowledgeably and fearlessly.

2.4 Summary

The protection and promotion of safe, nurturing and engaging childhoods is one of the most fundamental ways that humans can thrive as a species. For nearly all the world's children, the pandemic is putting this in jeopardy. As we seek to

recover from the crisis, naming the changes, threats and opportunities to childhood is the first step to working out how to adapt the ways that we care for, educate and empower our children in our efforts to give them the best chance of flourishing. Key elements will include:

- investing properly in education and adapting approaches so that children are equipped with the skills they need to thrive in a more connected and technologically enabled world
- taking much more seriously the challenge of child protection
- sharpening our focus on children's mental health
- closing the digital divide, while minimising the risks, so that all children can enjoy the transformative benefits of digital technology.

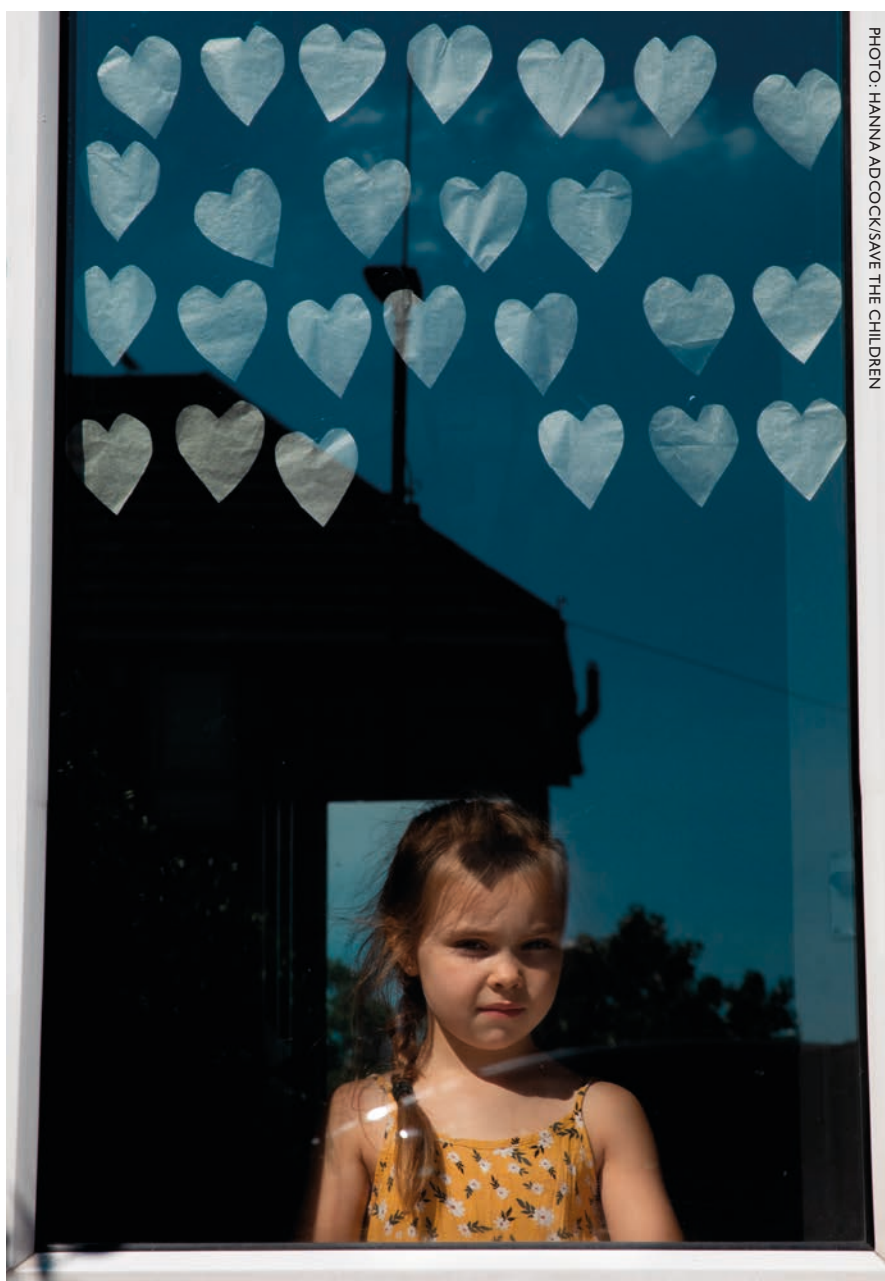


PHOTO: HANNA ADCOCK/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Niamh, aged 5, at home in Sheffield, UK during lockdown.

3 Saving children's natural inheritance

“What I've seen change due to the drought is the price hikes. There's no rain and the trees have no water... What I wish for my community is that it rains, there's no hunger and people can farm.”

Siwela, 12, Zimbabwe¹¹⁴

“Climate change is a huge issue in Sri Lanka. My health is affected. I have some issues with my lungs and I get rashes from the heat. I do not think adults are working hard enough for this problem because most of them do not care; they put plastic and waste and garbage all over the city.”

Kaviti, 17, Sri Lanka¹¹⁵

3.1 The most serious challenge to intergenerational justice is climate change and environmental degradation

The coronavirus pandemic has temporarily diverted attention away from what is undoubtedly the biggest crisis facing humanity. In 2019, the most comprehensive assessment of planetary health ever undertaken showed the extent of the impact of climate change and ecological degradation: three-quarters of land surface has been significantly altered; millions of hectares of forest have been destroyed; pollution of air, water and soil is rising; and a million species are at risk of extinction.¹¹⁶ The biological diversity on which the whole system of life depends is under threat, and human activity is responsible for nearly all the damage.

This diminishing and disappearing of incredible and irreplaceable natural wealth is the great tragedy of our era. It is a tragedy in its own right, but it is also a tragedy because of the enormous harm that this destruction does to us as a species, and in particular to future generations. Through its ecological and evolutionary processes, nature sustains the quality of the air, the fresh water and soils on which humanity depends, distributes fresh water, regulates the climate, provides pollination and pest control and reduces the impact of natural hazards.¹¹⁷ Biodiversity also underpins our economic prosperity, with more than half of global GDP – the equivalent of roughly US\$44 trillion – being moderately or

highly dependent on nature.¹¹⁸ Of those people living in poverty, more than 70% depend, at least in part, on natural resources to earn their livelihoods.¹¹⁹ The contemporary extinction crisis, which is irreversible, may threaten the persistence of modern society itself.¹²⁰

This is a profound – perhaps the defining – question of intergenerational justice. Put simply, adults – or, rather, a small subset of generally wealthy adults – have done catastrophic damage to the natural inheritance of their children and of their children's children in the pursuit of economic growth and material consumption. Many people – concentrated in the Global North and emerging economies – have experienced historic rises in their living standards as a result; but the asset-stripping of the natural world cannot be sustained, and it will primarily be children in the poorest communities in the Global South – and even more, those yet to be born – who will pay the heaviest price.

Every way one looks at it, the destruction of the environment is a children's crisis

Children benefit enormously from nature. Numerous studies have shown that nature can be profoundly good for their health and ability to learn. Evidence suggests it improves children's psychological and physical wellbeing, restores their attention, helps them develop self-discipline, encourages greater levels of interest and engagement, builds physical fitness and promotes social connection

and creativity.¹²¹ The enjoyment of nature has been one of the widely celebrated experiences for families living under lockdown in some communities, especially in more affluent places, but this is a right that is routinely denied to millions of children worldwide. For example, in a recent survey conducted by Save the Children in Vietnam, one-third of children reported that they were unable either to go to school or to participate in outdoor recreational activities over the previous 12 months due to poor environmental conditions.¹²²

Children are especially vulnerable to harm arising from damage to the natural world. Countries that are most vulnerable to climate change also have a higher and growing proportion of children in their populations.¹²³ Children are also more likely to experience health complications caused by the impacts of climate change on water and food security, such as drought, crop failure and the decreased nutritional value of staple crops due to higher carbon dioxide concentrations. The World Health Organization estimates that by 2030 climate change will lead to nearly 95,000 additional deaths per year because of undernutrition in children aged five and under, and an additional 24 million undernourished children by 2050.¹²⁴ Similarly, it is anticipated that by 2030, climate change will result in an additional 60,000 deaths from malaria among children under the age of 15 and that climate-related increases in diarrhoeal disease will lead to the death of an additional 48,000 children.¹²⁵

The impacts of climate change and other forms of environmental damage, as well as the measures that are adopted to address these, are exacerbating gender inequalities. Adolescent girls are particularly affected by threats to safe water supplies since they are often responsible for water collection. In a changing climate they may be required to travel further to find sufficient quantities of water, representing a significant physical and time-consuming burden, with implications for their education, leisure time and wellbeing. In addition, during long journeys to fetch water or other household resources, such as firewood, girls may be exposed to risks such as sexual violence. Climate stress also leads to negative coping mechanisms. Save the Children's teams in many places have found that families facing repeated climate-related shocks, such as flooding, loss of crops or cyclones, are more likely to marry off their daughters at a young age.¹²⁶

Given the far heavier costs of the climate emergency that will fall on today's children and future generations, it is perhaps not surprising that it is children and young people who are at the forefront of campaigning to persuade governments to put the environment further up their agendas; but the primary responsibility for taking action rests with adults. The imperative to take seriously the responsibility to look after the natural environment is one of the foundational ideas behind the Sustainable Development Goals that were agreed by all UN member states in September 2015. It is one of the most important ways that these goals are distinct from the Millennium Development Goals that preceded them. Yet too many organisations working internationally, Save the Children included, are stuck in an 'MDG' mindset and have not fully internalised the idea that full human 'development' – in other words, achieving children's rights – will never be realised until all forms of injustice, including the intergenerational injustice of the climate change and ecological emergencies, have been overcome.

3.2 The pandemic has both exposed and compounded the climate and ecological emergencies in new and unexpected ways

Disruption to routine health services has left children more vulnerable to climate-linked diseases. The projected impact of climate change on children's nutritional and health outcomes is expected to be worsened by the disruption of routine health services by the pandemic. For instance, malaria deaths are projected to reach 769,000 in Africa – levels that were last seen 20 years ago – due to disruption of insecticide-treated net campaigns and access to antimalarial medicines.¹²⁷

The pandemic has shown how vulnerable we are to new diseases as a consequence of environmental degradation. Recent research indicates that most emerging infectious diseases – including Zika, Aids, Sars and Ebola – are driven by human activities.¹²⁸ They all originated from animal populations under conditions of severe environmental pressures and they all illustrate that our destructive behaviour towards nature is endangering our own health.¹²⁹ Rampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species, have created a 'perfect storm' for the spill-over of diseases.¹³⁰ These activities, combined

with urbanisation and the explosive growth of global air travel, can cause pandemics by bringing more people into contact and conflict with animals.

The pandemic has also delayed urgent action on climate change, most obviously in the postponement of the 26th UN Climate Conference, which was due to take place in late 2020. A delay of a year to agreeing concerted international action to tackle the climate emergency is disastrous at a time when scientists indicate the window for action is closing fast. Perhaps more worryingly, it is possible that the economic impact of the pandemic will reduce the willingness or ability of governments to make substantial new investments in measures to make their economies more environmentally sustainable. Child climate strikers, led by Greta Thunberg, have stated that as a result of the pandemic “the gap between what we need to do and what’s actually being done is widening by the minute. Effectively, we have lost another two crucial years to political inaction.”¹³¹

3.3 The pandemic offers an opportunity to reset our approach to climate change and the natural environment

The pandemic is forcing us to come to terms with many things: our global interconnectedness, our collective vulnerability and how environmental harm is creating immediate threats as well as long-term ones. One idea the coronavirus pandemic has brought home in particular is the meaning of the word ‘exponential’. We are all now familiar with the idea that, if left unchecked, a small number of cases can very rapidly multiply into many millions. That same perspective applies when we think about human impacts on the environment – with both human populations and average environmental impact per head continuing to rise, we can expect the degradation of the environment that we see today to multiply rapidly unless radical action is taken immediately. In the process of containing a pandemic, we are learning that every moment of delay makes the task of repairing the damage many times harder. In some ways, a deep shift in attitudes and understanding might present the biggest opportunity of all as our societies emerge from the crisis.

Take advantage of radically altered political landscapes to seize new opportunities for change

The pandemic has cracked open what is politically possible. Policies that were unthinkable a year ago are now standard, and we have demonstrated our ability to upend our lives and economies in the face of a species-level threat. As we saw in the aftermath of the world wars – when the creation of the Bretton Woods Institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) and welfare states in the Global North transformed the lives of millions – moments of huge disruption and crisis can herald unprecedented global cooperation and policy innovation. The profound political and social shifts already caused by Covid open up similar possibilities for a fundamentally new approach to tackling the climate and environmental crises. The pandemic has given us a taste of what responding to an emergency on this scale looks like. It shows us that some measures that are customarily thought of as being so impractical or costly as to be impossible, such as locking down whole populations in order to curtail the spread of a disease, are in fact realistic and achievable when there is sufficient consensus around the urgency of the action that needs to be taken.

A starting point would be to ‘lock in’ some of the environmental gains that have emerged as a consequence of widespread lockdowns – for example, the drastic reduction in air travel and other forms of transport, especially in and from richer countries. To the extent that these represent ‘sacrifices’, they should be framed as acts of kindness and solidarity to and with future generations. But further and harder measures will also be needed to drive behaviour change, including substantially increased taxes on carbon. By making and winning the argument that climate change represents a threat many times greater than that of the coronavirus pandemic, it may finally become politically possible to secure the sort of thorough-going action that is so urgently needed.

Use recovery measures to green our economies rather than building back the status quo

With multitrillion-dollar economic recovery packages being introduced around the world, the coming years are a precious moment to:

- ensure that only those businesses that mitigate climate change and other environmental harm – or at least do not contribute to them – receive post-pandemic financial support
- require businesses to adapt their models in order to promote environmental regeneration
- invest in projects that enhance sustainability and resilience.

Child climate strikers, in an open letter to EU leaders, have demanded that Covid recovery programmes should involve divesting from rather than propping up fossil-based and carbon-intensive industries.¹³² A recent Oxford University study showed that an approach to economic recovery that prioritised tackling climate change would actually be better for jobs and growth than traditional stimulus practices.¹³³ The celebrated concept of 'doughnut economics' created by economist Kate Raworth is a helpful way of thinking about the challenge; it suggests that our goal should be economies that meet social foundations such as food security, education and housing but without overshooting ecological 'ceilings' such as ocean acidification, air pollution or biodiversity loss.¹³⁴ As the economist Mariana Mazzucato has argued, governments have multiple levers by which they can directly and indirectly shape a green recovery;¹³⁵ now is the time to use them.

Strengthen ecological education

The link between environmental damage and the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic is a reminder that the mindset that treats economic or social issues entirely separately from environmental issues, or that thinks of the environment as a second-order agenda to the core business of generating and distributing wealth, is emphatically wrong. Moreover, as James Murray, editor of BusinessGreen, has pointed out, while children

are now, rightly, being taught about the science of climate change, they are not being equipped with anything like enough information about the systemic failings that have fuelled the crisis nor the transformations that will be required to defuse escalating risks.¹³⁶ Nor are they being helped to develop the soft skills and emotional resilience that will be necessary to live and to prosper in a world that will witness such strain and such loss. The emergence of a zoonotic pandemic that has touched the lives of children almost everywhere should be sufficient prompt finally to take these goals seriously.

3.4 Summary

The health of our natural environment is integral to our health as a species and as a society – they are part of the same project. It is meaningless to imagine a thriving future for the world's children that is not also a vision of restoration for the natural world. Conversely, failure to take radical action now will do untold harm to the health, safety and prosperity of our children and of future generations. The pandemic has given further evidence of the ways in which environmental destruction harms children and it has further delayed action on tackling these harms. However, it has also demonstrated that drastic change is possible and post-pandemic economic recovery packages offer an unprecedented opportunity to incentivise a shift towards ecologically sound economics. Indicative polling suggests there is high public support for this approach: in an international survey, nearly two thirds of respondents said governments' economic recovery plans should prioritise climate change.¹³⁷ This is not, however, a task for government alone. All of us – as citizens and as members of communities, workplaces and other institutions – have a role in ensuring that responses to the pandemic have the strengthening and enforcing of environmental protection at their heart. This approach, above all others, would show we have fully grasped what intergenerational justice really means.

4 Governing for children’s rights – by sharing and building power

“I often hear that we as children and adolescents are the future of the nation, and we are, but we’re also the present, and I want my rights to be fulfilled now.”

Marvin, 16, Mexico¹³⁸

“If the children are not active, positive leaders and know that they have to demand their rights while they are young, they will not be active and innovators when they become adults.”

Jamillah, 15, Yemen

“I would ask for more opportunities for persons with disabilities. Our life is always in quarantine.”

17-year-old girl, Kosovo¹³⁹

4.1 Before the pandemic hit, deep inequalities and an unjust distribution of power were already depriving millions of children of their rights

The achievement of children’s rights is inherently bound up with power. Differences in power between and within countries, communities and households harm children in multiple ways, marginalising certain groups while benefitting others, and creating engrained inequalities that both reflect and reproduce wider power imbalances.

The last century has seen important progress across many fronts in most societies. Aspirations to live in a more equal world have been codified in international frameworks such as the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In many – though by no means all – parts of the world, movements for greater equality between races, sexes, people of different abilities and different sexualities have made some, albeit inconsistent, progress. However, even before the

pandemic hit, an unjust distribution of power was leaving – or more accurately, pushing – millions of children behind. There is not a corner in the world where children who are girls, refugees, migrants, LGBT+, disabled or religious or ethnic minorities do not experience worse outcomes and more acute forms of marginalisation than their peers.¹⁴⁰

Intergenerational justice will only be served when justice is done by all, including those children who are systemically disempowered. In general, young people today are far more fluent in describing these injustices and how they intersect with each other than people typically were in previous generations. And they are far less willing to view these inequalities as somehow inevitable or immovable. But these inequalities will continue to do enormous harm to today’s children – and to their children – until adults everywhere, and especially those in powerful institutions, make it a core activity to address inequality of power and until leaders actively govern for equality and children’s rights.

4.2 The pandemic has illuminated and deepened inequalities between children, while enabling a deterioration in democratic governance, transparency and regard for rights

The pandemic has compounded existing inequalities

*Members of racial and ethnic minorities seem to be more likely to experience severe health consequences from Covid.*¹⁴¹ Colleagues working in Save the Children's programmes around the world have seen this pattern show up repeatedly. In some ways this is simply reflective of already widely known health inequalities. That the pandemic has coincided with a global wave of protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement has helped to surface some of the reasons such ethnic disparities persist. Slowly, the penny is starting to drop that people from dominant ethnic groups carry with them a set of unearned and generally unacknowledged inherited privileges. These privileges are particularly insidious when they interact with histories of colonialism, slavery and the ideology of white supremacy. Peggy McIntosh, a research scientist at the Wellesley Centers for Women, memorably describes white privilege as "like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks".¹⁴²

The coronavirus crisis is also aggravating the exclusion and discrimination suffered by women and girls. This is for multiple reasons, including their lack of social protection stemming from their concentration in informal, low-status and low-paid jobs; their burden of care for children and the elderly; and the continued exclusion of women from decision-making.¹⁴³ As discussed in section 2.2, reports of gender-based violence have increased in the months since the crisis began. Moreover, with the loss of access to contraception due to lockdown measures, we can expect to see significant further increases in adolescent pregnancy and subsequent maternal mortality.¹⁴⁴ As in previous crises, the pandemic is also likely to lead to an increase in child marriage in poorer communities and groups, as girls lose the often protective factor of school. Evidence from Malawi, for example, suggests child marriage may have doubled due to the Covid crisis and school closures, with even more dramatic rises in incidence

of child rape and teen pregnancy.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, evidence suggests that in countries that have locked down, it is women who have taken on extra burdens of childcare, while being almost twice as likely to lose paid employment.¹⁴⁶ The scarring effect of a major economic downturn that disproportionately impacts women will set back progress for the next generation of girls. From an economic perspective, Melinda Gates has argued that if the pandemic stalls progress toward gender equality, the cost will be in the trillions.¹⁴⁷

While the pandemic threatens all members of society, children with disabilities are being disproportionately affected due to existing disadvantages that are being reinforced in the response to the crisis.¹⁴⁸ As people with disabilities are overrepresented among people living in poverty¹⁴⁹ and often face discrimination and other barriers to accessing livelihood and income support, children in families affected by disability are at greater risk from the economic impacts of the pandemic. Students with disabilities are the least likely to benefit from distance-learning because they often need specific teaching support to learn, may be less able to access standard technology or software and may not have access to the learning aids that are usually available in the school environment.¹⁵⁰ Children with a disability are at greater risk of contracting coronavirus as they are more likely to experience barriers to implementing basic hygiene and social-distancing measures.¹⁵¹ They are also 17 times more likely to be in institutional care, where rates of infection and mortality are evidently higher.¹⁵² Furthermore, they are more susceptible to developing severe conditions or dying from the virus as a result of underlying health conditions and poor access to healthcare.¹⁵³ However, a potentially positive consequence of the crisis is that the virus has to some extent challenged understandings of disability and health deprivation because so many different types of people have been affected. The myth of a clear binary distinction between the able-bodied and the disabled, or the idea that disability is a minority experience, are now harder to sustain. These realisations could lead us to develop a richer vision for disability rights for the next generation, shaking off the medical model of disability that conceives of disability as deviation from a norm and focusing instead on the inherent dignity and inestimable value of each person, including, of course, each child, placing them centre-stage in all decisions affecting their lives.¹⁵⁴

In a threat to the human rights principles upon which all children's wellbeing depends, many governments, in responding to the pandemic, have turned to centralisation, secrecy and anti-democratic measures. Whether due to an understandable desire to respond at speed and at scale to the Covid crisis or – more worryingly – in order to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the crisis to consolidate power, many governments' responses have been characterised by secrecy, centralised policy and decision-making, and sometimes anti-democratic and authoritarian approaches.¹⁵⁵ Around the world, the virus is being used as an excuse to limit people's rights to speak out and to participate in decisions that affect their lives.¹⁵⁶ Journalists, bloggers and civic activists, including children, are being threatened and intimidated, and minorities are being stigmatised as a public health threat. Some governments are also using the pandemic as an excuse to increase surveillance of citizens and to harvest personal data or to undermine the authority and independence of their country's institutions.¹⁵⁷ There is a real risk that these temporary measures will become the new normal, eroding human rights and the transparency and rule of law that underpin state accountability. We have also seen how a lack of transparency has in some countries curtailed the quality of policymaking, arguably resulting in unnecessary deaths, for example where infection and death rates have been misreported or data withheld from the press and the local actors best placed to respond.¹⁵⁸

The pandemic may be exacerbating social polarisation at a time when cohesion has never been more necessary. Dangerous health misinformation and hateful conspiracy theories have spread widely, both of which threaten children's wellbeing directly. For example, in April 2020 Save the Children surveyed 3,600 people in Somalia and found coronavirus misinformation was driving stigma and deterring people from seeking care.¹⁵⁹ The pandemic has arguably both made more visible and accelerated the tendency towards division in our societies. While the gravity of the situation has given leaders a chance to rise above such divisions, the combination of heightened public anxiety, strained governance capacities and the differential impact of the virus on particular groups may instead bear down on long-standing fissures.¹⁶⁰ Research for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Studies suggests there has been a range of different outcomes.

In some countries, the virus has temporarily lowered political temperatures, even if underlying cleavages remain. In others, it has heightened tensions. On balance, the research found that, overall, the picture is troubling; in most cases, the pandemic has amplified the already dangerous effects of political and social polarisation, with serious ramifications for public health, democratic governance and social cohesion.

4.3 Sharing power, improving the underlying quality of governance and promoting children's voices are critical to a more equal recovery

Share power wherever it is concentrated

The pandemic has not only deepened and reproduced inequalities for specific groups, but it has also exposed how allowing such inequalities to persist makes us all more vulnerable and less resilient in the face of collective threats. One of the most important shifts needed in the decade of recovery is therefore a recognition of the role power plays in society, and a willingness by leaders and institutions – wherever power is concentrated – to share their power with those who lack it. This implies a fundamentally different mindset. As we emerge from the coronavirus crisis, intergenerational justice will not be achieved solely through prioritisation of particular investments and the reallocation of resources – vital as these things are – but will also depend on people and organisations that have relatively more privilege and power consciously recognising the former and proactively sharing the latter. In practical terms, this means individuals with power being held to account for the degree to which they speak up against systemic prejudice and take personal responsibility for playing their part in ending it. At the institutional level, it means things like transferring access to and control over resources; opening up spaces where marginalised people, including children, can be heard and their views acted on; diversifying governance structures and ensuring they are inclusive; and proactively recruiting, investing in and promoting people from disadvantaged groups. These are all actions that Save the Children, recognising its power as an international organisation, has committed itself to but still has a long way to go to achieve.

Strengthen domestic political governance through greater transparency, defending human rights and tackling social polarisation

The main arenas in which children's rights are fulfilled and defended are in their countries, with outcomes heavily determined by the actions – or inaction – of state institutions. Effective, just governance is key to securing children's rights and will be critical for families trying to recover from the pandemic. Data from the Worldwide Governance Indicators project, which gives a 'good governance' score to every nation, demonstrates the powerful relationship between the quality of the state and outcomes for children. For each 10% increase on the governance scale, infant mortality falls by 11 deaths per 1,000 children, neonatal mortality by 3 deaths per 1,000, the proportion of children achieving a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics rises by 2.7% and the proportion of children experiencing physical punishment or psychological aggression falls by 1.8%.¹⁶¹

While improving domestic governance is a huge and contested topic, we believe three areas must be priorities in the decade of recovery:

1. **Increased transparency:** Information is a necessary pre-condition for any realisation of rights – it is what enables children and families to hold those who have duties towards them accountable for delivery. Transparency and open information underpin many facets of national effectiveness, including effective rule of law, the timely and high-quality delivery of public services, vibrant and actively engaged civil societies, and free and independent media. In the wake of the pandemic, these are needed more than ever. Citizen oversight of the massive stimulus packages and safety nets that have been introduced in response to the pandemic is essential because, while millions of lives and livelihoods are at stake, the risk of corruption, capture and failure to reach those who need help the most is significant. Now, more than ever, governments need to embrace genuine openness, enabling citizens, civil society and businesses to shape programmes and to 'follow the money' to ensure that funds achieve their intended purposes.¹⁶² As part of this, governments everywhere should join the Open Government Partnership and embrace its action-planning methodology.¹⁶³
2. **Redoubled efforts to defend and promote human rights:** Children's rights are human rights, and rights-based approaches are the strongest guarantors of children's ability to thrive. There is a risk that, over the coming years, governments and civil society will become so focused on addressing the health and economic consequences of the pandemic that they will do too little to address the equally pressing threat to human rights. This threat is coming on multiple fronts, including assaults on freedom of conscience, free speech and association, press freedom, privacy, fair judicial process and protection of human-rights defenders. It is critical that as we recover from the pandemic the trend is actively resisted and reversed. However, the defence of human rights will not be easy. It will be necessary to inspire and persuade sceptical politicians and weary publics to embrace (or re-embrace) the concept, often in the face of concerted opposition. It will mean prioritising the defence of human rights champions of all stripes against persecution by governments, even when doing so is difficult or uncomfortable, on the basis that an attack on just one rights advocate is an attack on the whole framework. And it will require bold communications and advocacy, challenging governments, powerful companies and individuals to uphold high standards and exposing wrongdoing without fear of – or in spite of – likely negative ramifications. This defence of human rights will take clarity of vision and bravery in action.
3. **Getting serious about depolarisation:** Without depolarisation there will be no effective politics, and without effective politics there cannot be effective rights-respecting states. As the Long Crisis Network's Alex Evans and David Steven have argued, "at a time when solidarity is more necessary than ever, forces that polarise and divide societies are gaining force... Tens of millions of lives now depend on whether we choose a 'Larger Us' approach to the crisis, or instead polarise into 'Them and Us' dynamics."¹⁶⁴ That choice will ultimately get made at a national and community level and be revealed in millions of different actions taken by political parties, cultural and religious leaders, thinkers, editors, academics, local leaders, activists and ordinary citizens. Populism and polarisation may be widespread responses to crisis, but they

are not inevitable. In every region there are politicians trading in fear and division but there are also leaders and communities committed to working across lines of difference. The dynamics of our increasingly online lives make this harder, with bots and trolls having a growing and pernicious influence on the discourse, but young leaders are showing the way. Governments and regulators must intervene to tackle online drivers of polarisation if technology companies themselves do not show the will to act. Recent work by the Youth Against Misinformation group, formed between Restless Development and the Center for Countering Digital Hate, shows the powerful role that youth activists can play in countering division and online misinformation.¹⁶⁵

Transfer power between generations and empower children as agents of change

Empowering children is both fundamental to the idea of children's rights and a necessary condition for overcoming the inequalities and injustices that prevent many from enjoying those rights.¹⁶⁶ The pandemic has coincided with a period in history where child- and youth-led activism has become increasingly visible and increasingly global. Examples include the school strikes for the climate, which were largely led by children, and the Black Lives Matter protests, which young people have contributed to substantially. Young people are also taking practical action to lift up their communities during the pandemic. At Save the Children, we are working with children all over the world to help them protect their communities – for example, running radio shows in Sierra Leone and supporting a youth-led campaign to help children living in lockdown in Albania. The Covid Generation is full of leaders and potential leaders, and millions of members of this generation are passionate rights defenders, invested in the idea of global citizenship and in helping to shape their world.

In June 2020, Save the Children convened an unprecedented online dialogue between children across Africa and decision-makers in the African Union.¹⁶⁷ And we are now organising national digital 'hangouts' between political leaders and young people in Albania, Bangladesh, Colombia, Ethiopia, Georgia, India, Kosovo, Nepal, Norway, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and South Africa, as well as globally. However, this sort of engagement with child-led civil society is too often the exception, not the rule.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is explicit that states have positive obligations to remove any barriers to children exercising their right to participate in decisions that affect them.¹⁶⁸ A number of obstacles and barriers can prevent children's meaningful participation in public decision-making, including where children's views are not taken seriously, where there is a lack of visible action on children's views and where societal attitudes devalue or limit children's voices. According to a study conducted by Save the Children, the most significant barrier to child participation is children accessing information.¹⁶⁹ As adults, all of us have a critical role in promoting children's voice and agency. By creating spaces for children to speak and to act, by sharing what we know, by listening to what they have to say, by responding and by celebrating them as citizens and as leaders, we can help the members of the Covid Generation to develop their own voices and power, and, in doing so, to shape their world.

4.4 Summary

Millions of children are currently being held back from the realisation of their rights through deep inequalities that run through our societies, reflecting imbalances of power entrenched by systems of governance. In many ways, the pandemic has reproduced and deepened these inequalities. It has also shown that, unless they are addressed, we are all more vulnerable and less resilient in the face of collective threats. In rebuilding from the pandemic, all institutions and individuals who hold disproportionate power need to recognise this and must then act to make sure power is shared more equally between groups and, crucially, between generations. Governments must be challenged to move towards greater transparency, respect for human rights and the promotion of social cohesion as a fundamental basis of better policy and politics.

And those in positions of power must do more to empower young people and children, elevating their voices, listening to what they have to say and enabling them to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. This generation is perhaps the most effective – and certainly the most globally networked – generation of activists the world has ever known. Their voices are indispensable in our emerging global dialogue. They must and will be heard.

5 Governing for children's rights – through international cooperation

“I speak with a tearful heart because I know that children suffer and that children simply should never suffer, especially during times of conflict and war. In my country thousands of children lose their enthusiasm for life and their dreams at the same time. There is an urgent need for justice.”

Mariam, aged 15, member of the National Children's Parliament of Mali, speaking at the virtual UN Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict in June 2020.

“I am not in my country. What I would ask is that you please help us because even if we are not from here, we are human beings.”

12-year-old girl, now living in Peru¹⁷⁰

5.1 In the years leading up to the pandemic, international cooperation was already in retreat

One of the most important drivers of progress in fulfilling children's rights and achieving intergenerational justice over the past century has been the emergence of rules and norms set at the international level. These have been enshrined in treaties and agreements, enforced by global institutions and invigorated by the creation of international bodies to coordinate action on global public goods in areas such as health and the environment. However, over the past decade, multilateralism and the spirit of cooperation among nations that underpinned these advances have become increasingly threatened, driven in large part by the shift in domestic politics of powerful nations towards populism, isolationism and protectionism. This has manifested itself on the global stage through increased inter-state competition and diminishing cooperation. In particular, the retreat from global leadership of the USA since 2016 has created instability and inertia in global forums and institutions. We now live in a world in which it seems that no country or group of countries has the political or economic leverage to drive an international agenda or to provide global public goods.¹⁷¹

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has described the situation in stark terms:

Relations between the most important powers, the USA, China and Russia, are more dysfunctional than ever. Unfortunately, where there is power, there is no leadership, and where there is leadership, there is lack of power. Furthermore, when we look at multilateral institutions, we have to recognise that they have no teeth. Or, when they do, they do not have much of an appetite. They do not want to bite.¹⁷²

This breakdown has perhaps been seen nowhere more vividly than in the fields of conflict and peacebuilding. The short-lived consensus around the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine has evaporated,¹⁷³ peacebuilding remains chronically neglected,¹⁷⁴ progress on disarmament appears to be stalling, weapons continue to flow to perpetrators of atrocities¹⁷⁵ and powerful states routinely turn a blind eye to violations committed by their allies. One consequence of this inconsistency, politicisation and apparently deliberate undermining of international norms is that the number of children living in areas affected by conflict is going up – a 75% increase since 2010 – while the number of verified incidents of grave violations against these children has skyrocketed by 300%.¹⁷⁶

A similar picture can be drawn for displaced and migrant children. Prior to the Covid crisis, at least 79.5 million people around the world had been forced to flee their homes from conflict and violence and were still living in exile; at least two-fifths of them are under the age of 18.¹⁷⁷ This represents an extraordinary annual increase of 13%. Three-quarters of refugees – 77% – are living in protracted situations and, as countries fail to find durable solutions, the average length of displacement has grown to ten years. Nation after nation is flouting some of the most fundamental rights held by refugees and asylum-seekers, including the right not to be pushed back to the countries they are fleeing from or to unsafe third countries, such as Libya.

Millions more children were living in such tough conditions, even before the pandemic, that they were dependent on humanitarian relief for their survival. These numbers were exceptionally high and growing, even while overall humanitarian aid fell between 2018 and 2019.¹⁷⁸ In December 2019, the UN estimated that nearly 168 million people would need humanitarian assistance and protection in 2020.¹⁷⁹ This represents 1 in 45 people in the world and is the highest figure in decades. The world's eight worst food crises are all linked to both climate shocks and conflict. Even without Covid, it was clear that the situation will keep getting worse unless climate change and the root causes of conflict are better addressed. The number of countries experiencing protracted crisis has more than doubled over the last 15 years, from 13 in 2005 to 31 in 2019. These countries are home to over half of the world's people living in extreme poverty.¹⁸⁰ Achieving intergenerational justice means finding solutions to these widespread, long-lasting, yet acute needs.

The breakdown in international cooperation is being seen in many other areas too – including environmental protection, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and measures to tackle illicit trade and finance. In short, states are failing collectively to invest in, promote, defend and ensure respect for international legal and other normative frameworks that exist to protect individuals, to restrain destructive behaviour and to meet shared global challenges.

5.2 The international response to the coronavirus crisis has starkly demonstrated the breakdown of multilateralism

Competition between nations, not cooperation, has defined the pandemic response. The pandemic has exposed profound weaknesses in much of the world's governance. At the international level, we have seen the major multilateral forums, such as the UN Security Council, the G20 and G7, fail to show leadership. Disagreement and competition between some of the world's most powerful nations has resulted in paralysis, while also encouraging parochial, uncooperative approaches to a global challenge that demanded a joined-up global response. Weakening support for international cooperation on public goods and threats has been exposed by the virus, notably in the hit-and-miss support for the World Health Organization in its attempts to lead the health response, including threats of defunding by the USA.¹⁸¹ While the UN has attempted to coordinate members through its institutions, the overall global response to the virus has been inadequate, contributing to the unnecessary loss of many lives and inflicting huge harm on millions of children.

Conflict and violence have thrived as a result of the pandemic. In May 2020, months into the coronavirus crisis, gunmen entered a maternity hospital in the Afghan capital, Kabul, and opened fire, killing babies and 12 mothers and nurses. For a moment, images of newborn babies being rescued, swaddled in blood-stained blankets, interrupted the coverage of the pandemic. One month later, as fighting intensified in Libya, government forces came across a cuddly toy taped to a mortar shell hidden under a table with a tripwire – the desperately cynical targeting of a child in order to defeat adult enemies. These are affronting and extreme examples of the violations to children's rights that the so-called 'rules-based international order' exists to prevent.¹⁸² The malaise in multilateral cohesion was made starkly evident by the three-month delay between the UN Secretary-General putting out a call for a global ceasefire in response to the pandemic in March 2020 and the Security Council's eventual agreement of a resolution in support. Emerging data indicate a 2.5% increase in violence against civilians since the pandemic began.¹⁸³ In the first

three months since declaration of the pandemic, political violence rose in 43 countries and remained steady in 45, according to data collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.¹⁸⁴ Some of the largest increases were in Libya, Yemen and Mali, each enmeshed in civil wars with a web of international links. These countries and others – the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Burkina Faso, Afghanistan to name just four more – are places where concerted international action on prevention, peacebuilding, accountability for violations and on-the-ground protection would save lives.

Refugees and other migrants have been put at particular risk by the international response to the crisis. In some places, the pandemic has seen a hardening of border policies that deny refugees a route to asylum and that contravene their established legal rights. In addition, new asylum claims cannot be registered in countries like Italy, where immigration offices have been reassigned for emergency coronavirus-related duties.¹⁸⁵ Many children live as migrants for reasons other than forced displacement and the pandemic may well cause these numbers to increase further, its interlocking health, socio-economic and protection impacts deepening their suffering.¹⁸⁶ Many child migrants are detained in overcrowded and unsanitary centres – such as in Greece, Honduras, Malaysia and Panama – where they are at risk of infection, as well as forced return to fragile health systems. These examples are symptomatic of a pervasive institutional violence against migrants, which includes detention of children, violent returns and the denial of statehood.¹⁸⁷ Evidence suggests that attitudes to immigration – at least in Europe – are positively correlated with GDP growth and employment levels;¹⁸⁸ as Alexander Betts at the University of Oxford has warned, with a global recession looming, the coronavirus crisis may result in hardened attitudes to migrants, leading to further violations of children's rights.

The international humanitarian response is falling far short of needs. The humanitarian impacts of the pandemic are likely to be more brutal and destructive than the direct health impacts. Estimates suggest over six months from July 2020 up to 6,000 children could die every day from preventable causes as a result of direct and indirect impacts of Covid.¹⁸⁹ Diverted health resources could mean the annual death toll from HIV, tuberculosis and malaria doubling. Economic downturn, rising

unemployment and reduced school attendance increase the likelihood of civil war, which drives famine and mass displacement. However, as of the end of August 2020, only 22.8% of the UN-managed global humanitarian response plan for Covid had been funded.¹⁹⁰ To put the figures into perspective, Mark Lowcock, the UN's Humanitarian Relief Coordinator, has estimated that the cost of protecting the poorest 10% of the global population from the worst effects of the pandemic and global recession is less than 1% of the stimulus package wealthy countries have already put in place to protect their own economies.¹⁹¹ We have seen versions of this pattern many times before – that is, clearly visible and predictable slow-onset humanitarian crises emerge but the international system is unable or unwilling to mobilise resources early enough or at sufficient scale to prevent the entirely foreseeable advent of widespread human catastrophe.¹⁹²

5.3 International cooperation in the decade of recovery must be characterised by new coalitions and partnerships and by transferring power to local actors

Come to terms with multilateral dysfunction while protecting the core

An outbreak of public-spirited internationalist collaboration between the world's most powerful states does not seem likely any time soon. If political scientist Ian Bremmer is right, and the 'G Zero' world is here to stay, then we need to plan for a decade – or decades – where no country or group of countries will be both willing and powerful enough to act as a guarantor for and pioneer of global cooperation.¹⁹³ If international cooperation is a necessary condition for the fulfilment of children's rights and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, then we are going to need to find some workarounds. A starting point is to be clear that there are important global institutions and frameworks that need to be protected. The pandemic has shown how vital it is to have a functioning World Health Organization, for example. And Ngaire Woods is surely right to argue that now is the time to reform and protect key multilateral institutions, not to undermine them in the middle of the global pandemic that most urgently demonstrates their value.¹⁹⁴

We need to defend the best of what we have got. But in such a fraught international political context, new ways of promoting international collaboration that do not depend on universal consensus will also need to be found. Informal alliances and ‘coalitions of the willing’ should be encouraged between those states that still value international collective action, even if their combined influence will never be as great as a fully functioning United Nations or G20 would be. It will also be necessary to find and strengthen new centres of energy. Alliances should be encouraged between a much more diverse range of actors – between multilateral bodies, governments at the national, regional, city and local level,¹⁹⁵ the private sector, faith communities, local civil society and international NGOs. António Guterres calls this model “networked and inclusive multilateralism”.¹⁹⁶ Crucially, this form of multilateralism must include seats at the table for the most marginalised and vulnerable people. This is the approach advanced by the Together First coalition, whose *Stepping Stones for a Better Future* report lays out a 10-point agenda for change in the multilateral system.¹⁹⁷ Regional bodies and alliances – such as the regional development banks and trade alliances already emerging around the world – may also go some way to plugging the gap in global cooperation. If efforts such as these are not made – if the internationalists of the world admit defeat and allow nationalist self-interest to undermine and destroy the multilateral system – then the chances of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will disappear entirely, and with them will go the dreams of a better future for millions of children.

Redouble efforts to prevent conflict and atrocities and to mitigate their impacts on children

Many governments could do more to help prevent conflict and atrocities through proactive political engagement and sustained resourcing of community-level peacebuilding. Governments can and should strengthen regulation and transparency of international arms transfers, making these explicitly conditional on respect for international legal and normative standards. Even in a fragmented world, they could also usefully set higher standards through their own military conduct – for example, systematically recording civilian casualties and avoiding practices that overwhelmingly harm civilians, such as the use of explosive weapons with wide-area

effects in populated areas¹⁹⁸ or the military use of schools.¹⁹⁹ There is also a set of practical measures to protect children that governments must prioritise in the spirit of intergenerational justice; increasing the proportion of funding for humanitarian action and peacekeeping that is spent on child protection would be preeminent among these. Above all, finding ways to ensure accountability for violations is key – where international mechanisms exist to prosecute cases of violations of children’s rights in conflict these should be supported, and where they do not, governments should use bilateral political or economic sanctions against perpetrators.

Adapt the international aid system to meet humanitarian realities

For the millions of children in need of lifesaving humanitarian aid, action cannot come fast enough. In part, this is simply about funding. With money and leadership, the acute crises that we know are coming can be averted. More broadly, the international humanitarian aid system needs to accelerate its long-running efforts to reform itself by, among other things, making sure funding flows as directly as possible to frontline responders, avoiding short-term funding cycles, aligning humanitarian programmes with existing national and local approaches so as to avoid duplication, making greater use of cash-based programming, increasing transparency and making itself more accountable to the communities that it serves, including children.²⁰⁰ But even with these measures, millions of children will continue to find themselves dependent on emergency relief unless the wider international system takes far more seriously the responsibility of preventing crises in the first place. One of the big lessons from the pandemic is not only that shocks happen, but that shocks are, by and large, foreseeable – the emergence of a coronavirus-type pandemic had been widely predicted for decades, though the precise timing and location of its emergence could not have been known. The same thinking applies with respect to other shocks that drive humanitarian harm – from weather events to sudden economic downturns, other disease outbreaks and even conflict. This means investing much more in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, and designing longer-term development programmes that anticipate shocks and crises by design, and that build in flexibility to respond on a ‘no regrets’ basis before they get out of hand.

Decolonise international cooperation, dismantle its underlying racism and establish transparent partnerships with locally rooted movements that value local expertise

The need for global action on this has long been urgent but now, in the midst of a long-overdue global debate about structural racism and the ways the legacies of colonialism and slavery are still playing out in the international system, the excuses for not moving on it are less tenable than ever. The centuries-old notion that higher-income countries – or multilateral bodies or INGOs headquartered in higher-income countries – are in a position to impose solutions on the Global South has never stood up to scrutiny, but the pandemic has given the imperative to decolonise international cooperation a new urgency. Many rich countries have demonstrated weaknesses in their own governance that have so far contributed to far higher rates of infection than in many parts of the so-called 'developing world'. Some of the best Covid-containment responses have emerged from places such as Vietnam and Ghana, though innovations from the Global South are often being overlooked or belittled.²⁰¹ Our global interconnectedness has been amply demonstrated, as has the shared need for strong local capabilities everywhere. Concentrations of power across the international system are not only unjust, but they have been shown by the pandemic to be deeply dysfunctional. Intergenerational justice will only be achieved by breaking these up in favour of devolved approaches that more directly empower the most deprived and marginalised children.

5.4 Summary

Global cooperation has been fundamental to the historic advance of child and human rights over the past century and to the creation of global public goods and institutions designed to tackle collective challenges and protect us from collective threats. The past decade has seen multilateralism in historic retreat, driven by a revival of nationalism and the emergence of a new generation of populist leaders. The damage this has done to our ability to take collective action for our children has been exposed by the coronavirus pandemic, and the turn towards competition and away from cooperation may deepen further as the economic and social consequences of the crisis unfold over the coming years.

Rather than hope for a resurgence of good will and leadership, a new *ad hoc* and informal model of global cooperation is our best bet for protecting and promoting children's rights in the coming decade. The new model must build on our existing frameworks but be based on new partnerships and coalitions, reformed institutions, approaches that take account of changed realities and a more equal, less colonial framework for cooperation between richer and poorer nations. Only then will the cooperation that recognises our fundamental interdependence be matched by a generosity of spirit that recognises our fundamental equality.



Salam, 10 and his brother Rami*, 13, in a camp in north-west Syria. Their family fled their home in eastern Ghouta in 2018 when their community was shelled.

Conclusion

In her celebrated essay, *The Pandemic is a Portal*, Arundhati Roy wrote:

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”²⁰²

Without diminishing the extraordinary toughness of the current time – the deaths, the illness and the enormous social and economic pressure that millions of people are under – this idea of a portal invites us not simply to accept a future that is already laid down, but to play an active part in shaping a better one. The children who are growing up around the world now – Covid’s kids – have the biggest stake in what that future looks like, but we – Covid’s adults – have the biggest role in determining whether the 2020s will see a great reversal or a historic advance in children’s rights.

Some responses to the pandemic offer real grounds for hope. All over the world, communities are coming together, understanding and supporting each other in new ways. In many places, there is increasingly widespread recognition of the indispensable contributions to society made by those whose work is often underpaid or unpaid and most often done by women, girls, people from ethnic minorities, migrants and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.²⁰³ That is, a realisation that there’s no correlation between the size of one’s contribution to society and the size of one’s pay packet. During periods of lockdown, the natural world has enjoyed some partial respite from humanity’s relentless impact and there is some emerging evidence of a more active global conversation about mental wellbeing and the simple things that can help protect it.

For many of us, including and perhaps especially for children, the experience of the pandemic has also been an experience of personal growth. Amid the stress, fear and grief that the pandemic has

caused and is still causing, there is also hope and excitement about future possibilities. Children have been raising their voices and making themselves heard as part of these conversations, seeking to be agents of change in their own futures.

Potentially most significant of all, there is now an unprecedented awareness of our interconnectedness, not least as none of us is safe from the virus until all of us are. Despite the huge divergences that exist between us in terms of power, privilege and experiences, there seems to be greater consideration of our commonality too. These are all grounds for deep optimism.

Optimism, however, is only a prerequisite for action, not a substitute for it. All of us, whatever our profession or location, have to commit to take action for child rights. We began this report with a quote from Save the Children’s co-founder, Eglantyne Jebb. Here’s another:

I believe we should claim certain rights for the children and labour for their universal recognition, so that everybody – not merely the small number of people who are in a position to contribute to relief funds, but everybody who in any way comes into contact with children, that is to say the vast majority of mankind – may be in a position to help forward the movement.

If you are reading this report we assume you are part of that community that ‘in any way comes into contact with children’ and that you are interested in helping to ‘forward the movement’. If you have taken nothing else from this report, we hope it has encouraged you to think anew about the various dimensions of intergenerational justice, and

to consider your own role in helping make sure that the response to the coronavirus pandemic now strengthens rather than diminishes children's potential to flourish in the future.

We hope this report will help spark conversations that will seek to answer the question of how, together, we can make sure the futures of the Covid Generation are defined not by the virus and its attendant evils, nor by the undirected resurgence of politics and economics as usual, but by the spirit that created and nurtured the idea of children's rights over the past century.

In taking seriously the need to act in ways that tilt the balance in favour of today's children, we will all be taking a step towards what philosopher Roman Krznaric calls "deep-time humility", the recognition that we have obligations to be "good ancestors" and that we should aspire to act in ways that have positive effects beyond our own lifetimes.²⁰⁴ On all fronts there are big battles to be won. In this report, we have set these out using a five-pillar framework:

- Creating economies in which all children can thrive
- Rescuing childhood for the Covid Generation
- Saving children's natural inheritance
- Governing for children's rights – by sharing and building power
- Governing for children's rights – through international cooperation

The challenges associated with each of these are enormous, but so too are the rewards from overcoming them.

To say that 'children are our future' is a cliché. Unlike many clichés, however, this one captures a fundamental truth: the values, skills, capabilities, hopes and dreams that we engender in Covid's kids represent our greatest hope for a more prosperous, more peaceful and fairer world. We are in a time of great hardship, but let us work so that the Covid Generation becomes synonymous not with disease and despair but with a time where we came together and gave the gift, one generation to another, of a world in which all children everywhere can live the life of their choosing in a world designed to deliver their rights. Those are the kind of ancestors we should aspire to be.

Papiya, 15, from Sylhet, Bangladesh



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