

# High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges: Protection and Resilience during Pandemics

UNICEF written statement



## Reflection on outcomes of the virtual dialogues and the way forward

Children, and in particular refugee and other children on the move, disproportionately suffer from the direct or indirect effects of pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis but also a child rights crisis. During a pandemic, essential services that secure the health, education and protection of children and young people are disrupted, inequality is growing, and poverty is rising.

UNICEF calls for urgent action to prevent, mitigate and respond to the worst effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, including refugee children. UNICEF encourages Governments to listen to children and young people and include them in their decision-making. Children and young people will be living with the impact of this pandemic for years to come and must be included in decisions that affect their future. Actions must also be taken to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable children, including girls, children on the move, children with disabilities, and separated or unaccompanied children.

Including refugee children in national systems, policies and plans is the most efficient and effective manner to ensure they receive the health, education, protection, WASH and other services they need. UNICEF supports Governments to strengthen their national and local systems so they can better serve all children.

In order to protect all children during this pandemic, UNICEF has the following six points plan:

### **1) Redouble efforts to protect and support children and their families living through conflict, disaster and displacement**

- Increase and maintain funding for emergencies, to prevent multiple, catastrophic and protracted crises and to save children's lives, alleviate their suffering and preserve their dignity. In all humanitarian response, prioritize child rights and child protection, in line with the Core Commitments for Children.
- Ensure immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access.
- End attacks on children, including civilian infrastructure critical for their survival, such as water, sanitation, and healthcare facilities and personnel. Hold perpetrators of these attacks to account.
- Include internally displaced, refugee and migrant children in national systems, policies and plans – starting with COVID-19 recovery and response efforts

- Fight the virus not each other: implement and uphold the Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire.

## **2) Ensure all children learn, including by closing the digital divide**

- Prioritize reopening schools. Take all measures possible to reopen schools safely and keep them open.
- Increase education funding and ensure equal access to quality, violence-free education so every child learns. This will require a focus on the most marginalized children, including girls; children under attack and on the move; children with disabilities; and children living in rural communities or without access to the internet.
- Close the digital divide by connecting all children and young people to the internet by 2030 and reaching 3.5 billion children and young people with safe, quality, accessible and equitable online learning.
- Protect schools and places of learning from attack and hold perpetrators of these attacks to account.

## **3) Guarantee access to primary health care and make vaccines affordable and available to every child**

- Urgently ensure the continuity of key health and nutrition services for children and young people – especially routine immunization, prioritizing the hardest to reach.
- Unite to fight the spread of misinformation and build back confidence in routine immunization.
- Collect gender, age, and disability disaggregated data on children and young people, including when contracting COVID-19, and invest in research to better understand its impact on their health and wellbeing.
- Ensure every child and young person has equal and affordable access, regardless of where they live, to COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines as part of a comprehensive package of essential care.
- Ensure any new funding expands access to other essential health services for children and young people – including training and supporting healthcare workers.

## **4) Support and protect the mental health of children and young people and bring an end to abuse, gender-based violence, and neglect in childhood**

- Integrate sustainable child mental health and psychosocial support funding in all global humanitarian responses and commit to increased multi-year funding to better meet the protection needs of children in crisis.
- Prioritize the prevention of and response to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in all global humanitarian action, increasing funding for gender-specific interventions.
- Invest in gender-sensitive mental health and psychosocial support for children, young people, and their caregivers:

- Provide parenting support to all those who need it and strengthen child helplines and other child-focused reporting mechanisms.
- Designate and protect formal and informal social service workers and services – including GBV, child protection, and sexual and reproductive health services – as essential.
- Invest in gender-sensitive mental health and psychosocial support services for children, adolescents and their caregivers, including through schools, social services and communities.

## **5) Increase access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene and address environmental degradation and climate change**

- Guarantee universal access to clean water and handwashing for children and families, through national policies, private sector cooperation, community engagement and behaviour change.
- Invest in climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene services in homes, schools, hospitals and public spaces to make communities better prepared for future pandemics and other shocks.
- Integrate child rights into key national climate change and adaptation strategies, policies and planning documents, including the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), as well as COVID-19 response and recovery plans and budgets.
- Continue to pursue, implement and monitor climate and environmentally focused targets outlined in the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.
- Teach children and young people about climate change, the environment and responsible and sustainable consumption and production.

## **6) Reverse the rise in child poverty and ensure an inclusive recovery for all**

- Marshal global resources to ensure an inclusive, gender-sensitive recovery and support national fiscal responses that prioritize children and families:
  - Maintain or increase overseas aid commitments, identifying context-specific new financing options, and direct funding to those countries most affected and least able to take on new lending.
  - Act on debt relief, including extending current debt service suspension to middle income countries. Ensure coordinated action covering all creditors to restructure and, where necessary, reduce debt.
  - Include investment in key services for children and young people as part of domestic stimulus packages and ring-fence existing spending on the most vulnerable children.
- Expand resilient social protection programmes for the most vulnerable children, as well as families with children, including cash transfers for every child and child-friendly services like affordable, quality childcare.