

## RUNNING TO CATCH UP:

# Six commitments Member States must make to accelerate SDG action and progress

### Children cannot wait for us

Six years into implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, the slow progress we were making to reach the finish line has been badly hit by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. While children's health appears to be less directly affected by COVID-19, the aftershocks of the outbreak and the measures put in place to contain it will deeply affect children's chances of experiencing life in all its fullness. On top of this, it threatens to set us back even further in the race to the Sustainable Development Goals finish line.

Despite – or because of – the current global crisis, World Vision believes it is more critical than ever that Member States step up commitments and efforts to accelerate action and achieve gains for those at greatest risk of being left behind, especially the world's most vulnerable children. Time is of the essence.



### The six steps Member States must take to redouble their efforts to pick up the pace on progress for children:

1. Focus on ending child poverty in all its forms
2. Invest in ending all forms of violence against children
3. Realise universal health coverage, including nutrition
4. Ensure children living in fragile contexts are not left behind
5. Involve children – as agents of change – in implementing and reviewing the SDGs
6. Support child-centred disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation

## Why now

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities, affecting mostly those already deprived and marginalised. The numbers are terrifying. World Vision's analysis has found: [the secondary effects](#) of the pandemic could put 30 million children at risk of disease and death; [up to 85 million](#) more children could be affected by violence in the coming months as isolation measures force them to stay home; and the [impact of plummeting incomes](#) on families is already forcing millions of children to go hungry, beg, work or be traded into child marriage.

In the midst of addressing COVID-19 impacts, it is vital that Member States remember their commitments to deliver on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In September 2015, national governments committed to 'leave no one behind', pledging to ensure the poorest and most marginalised, the most vulnerable and the unreached, would have an opportunity under the 2030 Agenda to fulfil their potential.

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of the UN General Assembly adopted a Declaration calling for a Decade of Action and Delivery to accelerate actions to achieve the SDGs. As we face the aftershocks of COVID-19, it has become clear how far behind we are lagging in our 2030 Agenda commitments. There is no better time than now to take collective action to address the effects of COVID-19, while dramatically picking up the pace to achieve the SDGs by 2030.



**World Vision believes that each Member State must make the following six commitments in order to fast-track progress for children, especially those who are the most vulnerable, including those living in fragile contexts.**

## 1. Focus on ending child poverty in all its forms

Poverty affects children disproportionately. Before this crisis, every second child in the world was living in poverty. While childhood eventually ends, the effects of child poverty can last a lifetime, negatively impacting children's health, nutrition and education, limiting their economic potential and placing them at greater risk of violence.

**The COVID-19 threatens the ability of caregivers to provide the most basic of rights for their children.**

COVID-19 is now pushing more children closer to the brink, as education is interrupted and families lose income, savings and hope for the future. Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development. Coronavirus threatens the ability of caregivers to provide the most basic of rights for their children.

If the world does not address the clear and present danger to people's livelihoods, this pandemic will irrevocably damage future generations of children, and wipe out gains made to achieving the SDGs. However, we cannot end poverty by 2030 without a concerted focus on ending child poverty in all its forms. Apart from the moral duty to do this – children should be able to live lives free of need and full of promise – focusing on child poverty will accelerate progress on other SDGs and targets relating to health, nutrition, education, economic growth and ending violence.

### **In order to end child poverty, Member States should:**

- **Measure levels of child poverty** – including extreme, national and multidimensional poverty – and identify specific groups of children more vulnerable to poverty. Special care should be made to assess levels of poverty among children who are not captured by household surveys, such as children in institutional care or on the street.
- **Include ending child poverty in national poverty reduction strategies**, policies and programmes or adopt a dedicated strategy and national action plan to address child poverty. Plans should identify national targets to end poverty among all children.
- **Ensure social protection systems target children** living in or at risk of poverty, by urgently scaling up child-sensitive social protection measures (such as food, cash and voucher assistance) to help poor families meet children's immediate food, nutrition and income needs. Even before COVID-19 struck, almost two thirds of all children globally could not access social protection.<sup>i</sup> The best social protection programmes include child protection services and discourage negative coping strategies to supplement family income such as child labour, child marriage or sexual exploitation.
- **Prioritise life-saving interventions for children** under five years of age, pregnant and lactating women. Where school closures limit children's access to school meals, look at delivering food to homes, reducing children's exposure to different forms of violence, exploitation, and abuse and the likelihood that they will drop out of school post- crisis.
- **Provide access to quality public services for children living in or at risk of poverty**, including health, education, water, sanitation, and child protection services. These services should be free at the point of use for all vulnerable families and children.

## 2. Invest in ending all forms of violence against children



Violence against children affects more than 1 billion children each year – in every community, city and country – with devastating impacts on individual children's development, health, education and income potential. It erodes a society's human and social capital, slowing overall economic development and jeopardizing sustainable development outcomes.

The measures in place to contain and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic have further increased the risks of physical, sexual and emotional violence against girls and boys placing an additional 85 million more children at risk<sup>ii</sup>. The global cost of violence against children before this crisis was up to an estimated US\$7 trillion each year and is likely to increase if urgent steps are not taken to prevent further escalation of violence against children<sup>iii</sup>. Despite this cost, financial investments to address violence against children remain low, with only a small fraction of Official Development Assistance allocated to address it<sup>iv</sup>.

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Responding to the imminent threat of increasing violence against children due to the COVID-19 pandemic is essential to protect them from lifelong consequences, and to preserve the progress that has been made so far to achieve violence-related SDG targets.

Ending all forms of violence against children – including physical, sexual and mental violence, physical or psychological punishment, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, harm or abuse, including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child labour and harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage<sup>v</sup> – is essential to achieve peaceful and inclusive societies and economic growth, and realise child-related targets across a range of SDGs.

### To achieve this end, Member States should:

- **Prohibit all forms of violence against children** in all settings and legally ban all forms of violence against children in any settings<sup>vi</sup>.
- **Recognise child protection interventions and services as basic and lifesaving**, guaranteeing their continuity particularly for children in fragile contexts. These should be fully funded and incorporated in all COVID-19 response and long-term recovery plans and efforts.
- **Invest in what works** to prevent and respond to violence. Scale up existing proven and effective solutions, such as INSPIRE<sup>vii</sup> strategies, by ensuring that they are integrated into government strategies and plans, delivered through strong child protection systems, guided by policy solutions that mobilise multi-sectoral responses, and backed by investments that enable their application at scale.
- **Protect and increase funding and transparency in budgets** allocated to interventions to end violence against children at national and sub-national levels, and across all sectors

- **Address harmful social norms and practices** that condone violence, by investing in interventions that promote gender equality, positive parenting, child rights education, and safe learning environments, and by building capacity and collaborating with communities, parents/caregivers and children to challenge harmful behaviours, and adopt positive norms.
- **Fully implement the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration**, which provide a historic opportunity to protect children on the move from violence.

### 3. Realise universal health coverage, including nutrition

While significant progress has been made in global health for young children since 1990, each year 5.4 million continue to die from preventable causes, of which 2.5 million are newborns<sup>vii</sup>, 557,000 children between the ages of 5 and 9 die from pneumonia, diarrhea and other causes, and 1.2 million adolescents are killed by disease, accidents and violence<sup>ix</sup>. Malnutrition is the single biggest contributor to child deaths and is associated with poor cognitive development and physical health, with lifelong implications for health, education and economic growth.

For the most part, children's access to quality primary health care services has remained unchanged. More health services alone will not resolve these issues – multi-sectoral and multiple partner interventions will address the many and diverse determinants like violence, mental health, gender equality and food security – but it is a start.

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#### **In order to achieve healthy and well-nurtured children, Member States should:**

- **Invest no less than 5% of GDP** in their national health budgets. Within these budgets, primary health care plans should be fully funded prior to any other allocations, and fully implemented.
- **Fill health and nutrition staffing gaps at primary health care level**, per WHO guidelines.
- **Formally and fully adopt and accelerate** the 2019 updated WHO Essential Nutrition Actions.
- **Support financing for national nutrition policies and action plans** that have targets to reduce child malnutrition. While many countries have national nutrition policies and targets, financing remains a key challenge to implementation<sup>x</sup>.

## 4. Ensure children living in fragile contexts are not left behind



Today two billion people live in countries where development outcomes are deeply affected by fragility, conflict and violence.<sup>xi</sup> Projections prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were that more than 80% of the world's extreme poor, including children, would be living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts by 2030.<sup>xii</sup> In these places, children face extreme levels of abuse, exploitation, deprivation and violence often with high levels of food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition—conditions and risks exacerbated by the pandemic and efforts to contain the virus.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, children in fragile contexts were also nearly three times more likely to be out of primary school than children in other low-income countries.<sup>xiii</sup> COVID-19 related school closures have disrupted education for more than 1.5 billion learners<sup>xiv</sup>, raising concerns that children in fragile contexts will be unable to access distance learning to continue their studies and will be at increased risk of dropping out when schools re-open, impacting their future prospects.

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Globally, one in five children are also living in areas affected by armed conflict.<sup>xv</sup> The surge in complex, protracted conflicts in recent years, along with violence, persecution, human rights violations and events disturbing public order, has led to increasing forced displacement, with a record 79.5 million people forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2019, including an estimated 30 – 34 million children.<sup>xvi</sup> According to the Secretary General's recent Reports on Children and Armed Conflict, 2018 recorded the highest number of child casualties<sup>xvii</sup> and 2019 recorded the highest increase of any violation since 2018 in denial of humanitarian assistance to children.<sup>xviii</sup>

Achieving the SDGs for children everywhere will require a dedicated focus on reaching those most vulnerable and likely to be left behind, the children living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Fragile contexts are some of the furthest behind in achieving the SDGs and the least able to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Collective efforts will be critical for building a stronger nexus between principled humanitarian, development and peacebuilding interventions toward achievement of the SDGs for these most vulnerable children.

### **To ensure children living in fragile contexts are not left behind, Member States should:**

- **Strengthen protective systems** for children by implementing programmes across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding nexus that primarily focus on strengthening the systems that build and reinforce a protective environment for children.
- **Take all necessary measures to ensure continuity of life-saving and sustaining humanitarian operations**, including classifying humanitarian workers as essential frontline workers, so they can continue to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance.
- **Use measures of success** that are based on the perceptions and self-assessment of children and families themselves, about their ability to survive, adapt to new circumstances, and build a future.

## 5. Involve children in implementing and reviewing the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda recognises children and young women and men as “critical agents of change” who “will find in the new Goals a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world”<sup>xi</sup>. Child participation is also one of the core principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Despite formal recognition, children’s participation in development processes is often overlooked, undervalued or tokenistic.

World Vision’s [experience](#) tells us that when empowered, children are not helpless victims. In fact, they often become the hidden heroes in a crisis. Children and young people’s meaningful participation<sup>xx</sup> can make a significant contribution to achieving the SDGs by providing governments with a better understanding and insight into why progress is or is not being made in relation to children.

**In order to capitalise on the contribution children can make to sustainable development, Member States should:**

- **Support and facilitate effective mechanisms** for children’s meaningful and safe participation in the implementation of the SDGs – such as children’s parliaments, children’s councils and other child-led groups – at national and sub-national levels.
- **Promote sustainable development education** among children and provide opportunities for them to participate in sustainable development activities in accordance with their evolving capacities and increasing autonomy.
- **Empower crisis-affected children and communities** as agents of change, peace and development in their own right. Involve and give them a platform for their voices to be heard on issues that affect them, including those related to recovery from crisis and achieving the 2030 Agenda.
- **Involve children in collecting and generating data and research** to assess progress on the SDGs. A growing body of evidence suggests that child-led research provides promising opportunities to engage children and young people in shaping policies and practices, ultimately creating changes that lead to better lives for them<sup>xi</sup>.

## 6. Support child-centred disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation

Before COVID-19, children were already disproportionately affected by shocks and stresses related to climate change and natural disasters. They face greater risks than adults from vector-borne diseases, undernutrition, diarrheal diseases and heat-related health risks. The physical, economic and psychological impacts of climate-related shocks and stresses exacerbate existing inequalities between children in terms of nutrition, health and achievement in the long term<sup>xii</sup>. Despite contributing the least to the causes of climate change, children are – and will continue to be – the worst affected by its impacts. Children must therefore be at the centre of any recovery responses.

COVID-19 has now struck a double blow to displaced children seeking asylum in countries already affected by acute food insecurity and malnutrition due to conflict, climate and other disaster risk.

### In addressing climate change, Member States should:

- **Ensure children are prioritised** in economic recovery interventions that integrate resilience to climate change and restore environmental assets. National and local disaster risk reduction strategies and national adaptation plans must include short and long-term risks faced by children in a changing climate. Strategies and plans should recognise children's unique needs, vulnerabilities, rights and capacities, identify child-centered disaster risk reduction and social protection needs for children.
- **Promote climate change and disaster risk reduction education** among children – including by integrating them into school curricula – in order to educate and empower children to respond and adapt to climate change and reduce their vulnerability to disasters.
- **Involve children** by ensuring their meaningful participation in undertaking climate and disaster risk assessments, planning, implementing, and raising awareness of climate risks and solutions<sup>xiii</sup>. Children's participation should be facilitated in decision-making, monitoring and review processes related to climate change and disaster risk reduction.

<sup>i</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) (2019), *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019*, p. 22. Online: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2019.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> World Vision International, "Aftershocks Perfect Storm Millions More Children Face Violence Under Lockdown and into the 'New Normal'", May 2020. [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks%20FINAL%20VERSION\\_0.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks%20FINAL%20VERSION_0.pdf); Accessed 16 June 2020

<sup>iii</sup> World Vision International (2018), *It Takes Investment: Financing the End of Violence Against Children*, p. 5. <https://www.wvi.org/fr/node/74216>

<sup>iv</sup> According to one report, less than 0.6 per cent of total ODA spending in 2015 was allocated to projects that contributed to ending violence against children, while just over 0.1 per cent was spent on projects that fully addressed violence against children. See: ChildFund Alliance, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages International, World Vision International, and Development Initiatives (2017), *Counting Pennies: A review of official development assistance to end violence against children*, p. 2. Online: [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Counting\\_Pennies\\_WEB\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Counting_Pennies_WEB_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>v</sup> World Vision International (2019), *Small Cracks, Big Gaps: How governments allow violence against children to persist*, p. 2. <https://www.wvi.org/publications/report/it-takes-world/small-cracks-big-gaps>

<sup>vi</sup> World Vision International (2019), *Small Cracks, Big Gaps: How governments allow violence against children to persist*

<sup>vii</sup> INSPIRE is a set of seven strategies that have shown success in reducing violence against children. Developed by experts, INSPIRE places a strong emphasis on prevention through a multi-sectoral response, with strategies that include health, social welfare, education, and finance and justice sectors. For more information, see: [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/inspire/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/inspire/en/).

<sup>viii</sup> EWEC. 2018. Survive, thrive, and transform global strategy for women's, children's and adolescents' health (2016–2030) 2018 monitoring report: current status and strategic priorities. <https://www.everywomaneverychild.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/EWECGSMonitoringReport2018.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> WHO. 2017. Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!): guidance to support country implementation. Geneva: World Health Organization. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. [https://www.who.int/maternal\\_child\\_adolescent/documents/global-aa-ha-annexes.pdf](https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/global-aa-ha-annexes.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> WHO (2018), *The 2018 Global Nutrition Report*, p. 15. <https://www.who.int/nutrition/globalnutritionreport/en/>

<sup>xi</sup> World Vision defines fragile and conflict-affected contexts as the ones where political and social stresses result in extreme vulnerability of children to violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. In some fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the government is unable or unwilling to ensure the basic rights and well-being of its population and lacks the capacity to manage conflict without violence. In extreme cases, the state may be either non-existent or



actively involved in perpetrating violence against its people. Fragility and conflict are neither fixed nor immutable but move along a spectrum. They can affect entire countries or be contained in particular parts of a country, and they can cross borders to affect neighboring states that are vulnerable to instability.

<sup>xvii</sup> World Vision International (2019), *A Brighter Future for Children: Our approach to fragile contexts*, p. 3. <https://www.wvi.org/publications/brighter-future-fragile-contexts>

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xiv</sup> Figure from late April 2020. According to UNESCO, as of 5 July 2020, 1,067,968,447 learners (including children, youth and adults) remain affected. UNESCO, "COVID-19 Impact on Education," <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>, accessed 6 July 2020

<sup>xv</sup> Save the Children, "Stop the War on Children: Protecting Children in 21st Century Conflict." 2019. <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/ed-cp/stop-the-war-on-children-2019.pdf>

<sup>xvi</sup> UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement 2019," <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>

<sup>xvii</sup> SG's CAAC Report 2018, p2. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1918621.pdf>

<sup>xviii</sup> SG's CAAC Report 2019, p3.

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/15-June-2020\\_Secretary-General\\_Report\\_on\\_CAAC\\_Eng.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/15-June-2020_Secretary-General_Report_on_CAAC_Eng.pdf)

<sup>xix</sup> United Nations, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1, United Nations, New York, 25 September 2015, para. 51.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> World Vision International (2019), *Child-led Research: From participating in research to leading it* <https://www.wvi.org/stories/child-participation/child-led-research-participating-research-leading-it>.

<sup>xxii</sup> The Children in a Changing Climate Coalition (2016), *A View from 2016: Child-Centered Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, p. 8. <http://www.childreninachangingclimate.org/a-view-from-2016.html>.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The Children in a Changing Climate Coalition (2015), *Child-centered Adaptation: Realizing children's rights in a changing climate*, p. 2. <http://www.childreninachangingclimate.org/realising-childrens-rights-in-a-changing-climate.html>.

**Executive Office  
Waterview House**  
1 Roundwood Avenue  
Stockley Park Uxbridge  
Middlesex UB11 1FG  
UK  
+44.207.758.2900

**New York and United Nations  
Liaison Office**  
919 Second Avenue - 2nd Floor  
New York, NY 10017USA  
+1.212.355.1779

**Geneva and United Nations  
Liaison Office**  
Chemin de Balexert 7-9  
Case Postale 545  
CH-1219 Châtelaine  
Switzerland  
+41.22.798.4183

**Brussels and EU Representation**  
18, Square de Meeûs  
1st Floor, Box 2  
B-1050 Brussels  
Belgium  
+32.2230.1621

**[www.wvi.org](http://www.wvi.org)**

For further information please contact:  
Arellys Bellorini  
Senior United Nations Representative  
World Vision  
[arelys\\_bellorini@wvi.org](mailto:arelys_bellorini@wvi.org)

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