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**Promotion and protection of the rights of children:
follow-up to the outcome of the special session on children**

Follow-up to the outcome of the special session of the General Assembly on children

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In the present report, the steps taken in 2019 to achieve a world fit for children are assessed and gaps in achievement and strategic shifts necessary to improve the situation of children are highlighted.

The report was prepared in response to General Assembly resolution [S-27/2](#), which was adopted at the twenty-seventh special session in 2002, and resolutions [58/282](#) and [61/272](#), in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report regularly on progress made in implementing the Plan of Action included in the annex to resolution [S-27/2](#).

* [A/75/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. At the special session of the General Assembly on children, held in 2002, delegations from 190 countries adopted the Declaration and Plan of Action entitled “A world fit for children” (resolution [S-27/2](#), annex), in which Governments made a commitment to a set of specific, time-bound and measurable goals and targets for children and young people, with a particular focus on: (a) promoting healthy lives; (b) providing good-quality education; (c) protecting children against abuse, exploitation and violence; and (d) combating HIV and AIDS. Many of the targets contained in the Plan of Action were effectively stepping stones towards the Millennium Development Goals, and subsequently the broader Sustainable Development Goals. The present report provides the eighteenth update on progress made in follow-up to the special session.

2. At the global level, the past decade has seen improvements in many aspects of child well-being. The under-5 mortality rate fell from 93 deaths per 1,000 births in 1990 to 39 deaths per 1,000 births in 2018, with the most remarkable progress recorded in low- and middle-income countries, indicating the potential for further progress by 2030. The number of children suffering from stunting declined from 194 million in 2002 to 144 million in 2019. More children than ever before were enrolled in primary and secondary school, with gender parity achieved in primary and secondary school completion rates worldwide. The rate of child marriages has continued to decline, in particular in South Asia, with an estimated 25 million child marriages averted over the past decade. The degree of antiretroviral treatment coverage in pregnant women living with HIV almost doubled, from 44 per cent in 2010 to over 80 per cent in 2018, reducing the number of new child infections resulting from mother-to-child transmission, from 240,000 in 2010 to 130,000 in 2018.

3. The world, however, continues to face daunting challenges in upholding child rights, as global progress masks uneven outcomes. Many children, including those in the poorest households, without family care, in remote rural and poor urban areas, in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia and in fragile and conflict-affected settings, are being left behind. Some 15,000 children under the age of 5 years still die every day, mostly from preventable and treatable diseases and malnutrition. More than 50 countries are still not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 2 and 3 and targets 2.2 and 3.2, on child malnutrition and child mortality, and countries that have already achieved the targets need to do more to reduce in-country inequities. Stunting still affects 144 million children and 47 million suffer from wasting. The prevalence of anaemia among girls and women has remained unchanged over the past decade. An estimated 1.6 million adolescents (aged 10 to 19 years) were living with HIV in 2018, including 190,000 who had been newly infected. The world is not on track to achieve Goal 4 on quality education for all, with more than 258 million children, adolescents and young people out of school,¹ while a crisis in learning is undermining access to good-quality education even for those who do attend. An estimated 650 million women and girls today were married before the age of 18 years, and at least 200 million have been subjected to female genital mutilation. Millions of children without family care, including children in street situations, unaccompanied and separated children, or those living in alternative care, are particularly at risk of being left behind.

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, “New methodology shows that 258 million children, adolescents and youth are out of school”, Fact Sheet No. 56 (Paris, September 2019).

4. Humanitarian crises continue to pose a grave threat to global development and the enjoyment by children of their rights. In 2019, 1 in 45 people (nearly 167 million) required urgent humanitarian assistance. Prolonged armed conflict remained the primary driver of humanitarian need, followed by displacement, food insecurity, disease outbreaks and natural disasters. Some 149 million children were living in high-intensity conflict zones. The year 2019 concluded a deadly decade for children in conflict. More than 170,000 grave violations against children have been verified since 2010, and the number of countries experiencing conflict is greater now than at any time since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989. In 2019, climate change continued to cause more extreme weather events and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, with especially serious consequences for children in such conflict-affected areas as the Sahel region of Africa. Worldwide, more than half a billion children were living in areas of extremely high flood occurrence and nearly 160 million in areas of high drought severity.²

5. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has ignited an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions as countries shut down their economies in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. The long-term socioeconomic impact of the crisis for children, families and communities, especially for the most disadvantaged, is likely to be devastating and prolonged. A crisis in terms of rights of the child is looming as the pandemic and measures to contain it, including lockdowns, disrupt livelihoods and social services that children depend upon for their well-being, health, safety and learning. Children who are excluded, including those in street situations, are faring worst of all. The Secretary-General's call for a decade of action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals has taken on still greater urgency.

II. Follow-up to the General Assembly special session on children

A. Planning for children

6. In 2019, which marked the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 110 countries aligned themselves with the voluntary global pledge, "For every child, every right",³ in which they took note of threats such as climate change, rapid urbanization, the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, protracted conflict and humanitarian crises, forced displacement, risks associated with digital connectivity and multidimensional and intergenerational poverty. During the high-level meeting of the General Assembly to commemorate the anniversary, speakers drew attention to the link between fulfilling the rights of the child and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Participants called for the meaningful participation of children in global deliberations and decision-making processes, including in official meetings of the United Nations system, to be institutionalized.⁴

7. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, 142 countries have submitted voluntary national reviews to the high-level political forum on sustainable development. In 2019, around three quarters of the 46 Member States presenting reviews mentioned work undertaken by them to uphold the rights of the child in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda. Another 51 countries are

² United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Humanitarian action for children: 2020 Overview" (New York, 2019).

³ See www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/global-action.

⁴ See the Chair's summary of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at www.un.org/pga/74/2020/04/09/summary-of-the-high-level-meeting-on-the-thirtieth-anniversary-of-the-adoption-of-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child.

scheduled to report at the forum in 2020, signifying a substantial appetite among Governments to showcase their efforts to achieve the Goals. As is increasingly recognized, in part owing to advocacy by young people, the rights of children and the threat posed to them by climate change and environmental degradation should be addressed explicitly in such processes as those relating to nationally determined contributions and national adaptation plans under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

B. Promoting implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

8. Progress has been made with regard to children's rights in some areas but a renewed commitment is needed from Member States to address threats that undermine enjoyment of those rights and to fulfil the ambitions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2030 Agenda.

9. In 2019, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) continued to support the monitoring of the enjoyment by children of their rights conducted by global human rights mechanisms by submitting reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the situation in 31 countries and providing guidance to 62 countries undergoing reviews relating to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the universal periodic review. Recommendations made to States parties by those mechanisms focused on priorities relating to the rights of the child, thereby ensuring greater accountability on the part of those States. UNICEF engaged systematically with the universal periodic review, flagging children's rights priorities in 11 countries and contributing to the recommendations made to States. It also developed an online toolkit to guide its country offices in their work with human rights mechanisms in areas such as flagging violations, suggesting policy recommendations and supporting the implementation of the latter.

10. Considerable progress has been made in advancing gender equality in the context of children's rights over the past two decades. Efforts to address gender-related barriers in education, health care and protection from violence have resulted in a more level playing field for women and girls and improved outcomes for children. Considerable challenges persist, however. Nearly two in three girls are enrolled in secondary school, compared with one in two in 1998, and the literacy rate for young females aged from 15 to 24 years has increased from 80 per cent to 90 per cent since 1995, but 1 in 10 remain illiterate. The incidence of harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation has declined since the mid-1990s but 1 in 20 girls aged from 15 to 19 years (around 13 million) have experienced forced sex in their lifetime. The rate of new HIV infections among adolescent girls has halved since 1995. Nevertheless, they still account for nearly three in four new infections among adolescents. Many girls, especially those from the poorest households and marginalized communities, those who are on the move and those in conflict-affected or fragile settings, continue to face discrimination that prevents them from fully enjoying their rights.

C. Collaborating with partners and leveraging resources for children

11. Official development assistance (ODA) from members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development amounted to \$152.8 billion in 2019, an increase of 1.4 per cent in real terms from 2018, according to preliminary data collected from official development

agencies. Between 2018 and 2019, bilateral ODA to Africa and least developed countries rose by 1.3 per cent and 2.6 per cent, respectively. As in 2018, the same five Committee members (Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) met or exceeded the 0.7 per cent target. Among non-members, Turkey, the ODA of which is not counted in the total amount of assistance provided to the Committee, provided 1.5 per cent of its gross national income in development aid. ODA accounts for more than two thirds of external finance for the least developed countries. Committee members are helping developing countries to combat the health and economic crises caused by COVID-19 and some donor countries have already announced the reallocation of ODA to underpin basic living conditions, build emergency health facilities and provide liquidity to banks in developing countries.

12. In 2019, the European Union chose the rights of the child as its human rights priority for the year. With UNICEF, it launched #therealchallenge, a global children's rights campaign on TikTok that received 336 million views, 20 million likes and 1.2 million shares in 41 countries that year alone. In response to a call from the European Parliament, the European Commission announced that it would develop a comprehensive strategy on children's rights with a dedicated budget, a child marker and input from consultations with children. In the European Parliament, the Intergroup on Children's Rights, a cross-party coalition, was re-established and, for the first time, World Children's Day was marked by a high-level event, in which children took part in a plenary session of the Parliament.

13. Results continued to be obtained for children, especially the most disadvantaged, under Global Programme Partnership initiatives. By working with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, UNICEF has helped to mainstream equity, including with regard to gender-related barriers in global immunization campaigns. Immunization demand and acceptance has been included in the Gavi 5.0 strategy, which is expected to draw an estimated \$9 billion for global immunizations in the period 2021–2025. In October 2019, \$14.2 billion was pledged to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for the period 2020–2022. The Global Financing Facility for Women, Children and Adolescents continued to help Governments in low- and lower-middle-income countries to transform the ways in which they prioritize and finance health care and nutrition and eliminate preventable maternal, child and adolescent deaths. In 2019, the Global Partnership for Education supported access to good quality education, receiving new grants for Cameroon, Kiribati, Nepal, South Sudan and Tajikistan. Twenty-five new Governments joined the Sanitation and Water for All partnership, bringing the total to 68 Governments among 255 partners overall.

14. In July 2019, the Executive Director of UNICEF briefed the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund on social spending for children, resulting in broad agreement to further collaborate on improving social spending. UNICEF and the African Development Bank began to work together on children's rights in several sectors, including cobalt mining and cocoa farming. UNICEF and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development signed a memorandum of understanding at the 2019 session of the General Assembly to cooperate on youth, gender, sustainable infrastructure and access to services, data and research. The Global Muslim Philanthropy Fund for Children was launched at the 2019 session of the General Assembly, with the aim of facilitating public-private partnerships to finance development and humanitarian programmes in member countries of the Islamic Development Bank.

15. The Secretary-General called on United Nations agencies working on nutrition to prepare the first global action plan on child wasting in response to slow progress in achieving the related Sustainable Development Goal target and to growing calls for a more coordinated and streamlined approach to the crisis of acute malnutrition. The

global action plan framework was released at the end of 2019, with the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF co-leading the normative and operational roll-out, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP) supporting. The global action plan for healthy lives and well-being for all (SDG3+GAP) was launched in 2019, bringing together 12 multilateral health, development and humanitarian agencies to better align, accelerate and account for progress on the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.⁵ In 2019, the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda, which brings together 14 United Nations agencies, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Economic Commission for Africa and the Identification for Development Initiative of the World Bank, reached unprecedented consensus on a common approach to civil registration, vital statistics and identity management and produced operational guidance on implementation for United Nations country teams.

16. UNHCR and UNICEF formalized a joint blueprint to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugee children and host communities. It is focused on education, water, sanitation and hygiene, child protection and the inclusion of refugee children in national policies and plans. The two agencies continued to lead the Coalition on Every Child's Right to a Nationality, under which joint strategies to prevent and end statelessness among children have been developed in 23 countries established to date. They are also developing capacity-building tools with the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion. UNICEF and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict co-led the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, working throughout 2019 to establish strategic links with country development agendas, notably to contribute to the achievement of targets 8.7 and 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

17. The decade of action offers an unprecedented opportunity to make long-term gains for children left behind, such as those in street situations. United Nations country teams, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNICEF will implement joint programmes on various issues, including poverty reduction, social protection, prevention of family separation, protection of children from violence and exploitation, equal access to justice, access to good quality and inclusive education and making cities safer for children.

D. Monitoring progress

18. UNICEF continued to support Governments in carrying out multiple indicator cluster surveys, a leading international household survey programme for collecting data on the situation of children, adolescents and women. For the current sixth round, about 250 indicators are being compiled and data are being provided for 33 Sustainable Development Goals indicators. Some 70 surveys have been rolled out in more than 65 countries and the current round is expected to be completed by 2021.

19. As custodian (solely or jointly) of 19 child-related Sustainable Development Goal indicators, UNICEF has developed internationally agreed definitions, tools and guidelines for compiling indicators and helped Governments to fill data gaps. The agency expanded its global database to include almost 300 indicators on children and women as a source of authoritative data and information for advocacy and analysis.

⁵ Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance; the Global Financing Facility for Women, Children and Adolescents; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); UNICEF; the International Drug Purchase Facility; the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); the World Bank; WFP; and WHO.

It has also fostered greater national statistical capacity through increased investment, the adaptation of internationally agreed statistical and data standards and the sharing of good practices. As a result of strengthened support for routine and administrative data systems, more than 50 per cent of countries have good coverage in terms of child-focused Sustainable Development Goal indicators and at least moderate disaggregation.

20. More is being invested in information management systems for case management in the area of child protection in humanitarian and development contexts. *Primero*, a digital platform supported and used by UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and dozens of other development actors, helps to manage protection-related data with tools that facilitate case management, incident monitoring and family tracing and reunification. There are now 33 active instances of *Primero* in 26 countries. In 2019, UNICEF and partners launched the Responsible Data for Children initiative in order to tighten data privacy and encourage best practices in that regard.

21. Although progress in monitoring has been made, challenges remain, especially in fragile and conflict-affected States. They include a lack of capacity and financing, and limited coordination within and among partners. Monitoring systems for the collection of routine and administrative data will be strengthened or established in order to improve the availability of information regarding progress towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Lack of data on children without family care is of particular concern. Many who live in residential care or on the street are not captured in household surveys. In its general comment No. 21 (2017) on children in street situations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child set out the obligation of States parties to apply a child rights approach to strategies and initiatives for such children and underlined the crucial importance of systematically collected data. Absent from official statistics, the children in street situations remain politically and socially invisible, amplifying their marginalization and potential exposure to rights violations.

E. Participation and self-expression of children

22. Supporting the meaningful participation of children and adolescents in matters that concern them is a guiding principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and a fundamental component of the 2030 Agenda. Children and adolescents should be consulted on the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and services and they should be supported in exercising influence over decisions and fostering change in their communities and beyond. That requires the establishment of sustainable mechanisms and opportunities for participation, support for the skills and capacities of children and adolescents, investment in social norm change and the implementation of policies and legislation to foster an enabling environment.

23. In 2019, 4 million adolescents in 113 countries, including 440,000 in 23 countries affected by conflict or disaster, participated in or led civic-engagement initiatives through UNICEF-supported programmes. In Jordan, the National Youth Engagement and Volunteering Movement (*Nahno*) has helped to institutionalize mechanisms encouraging social and civic engagement by young people. *Nahno* has become the national platform for coordinating volunteers contributing to the Government response to COVID-19. More than 30,000 young people have volunteered and 190 companies, non-governmental organizations and public institutions have agreed to host them. UNICEF and the Government of Azerbaijan have worked together to raise awareness of children's rights through educational round tables and training sessions involving children, parents and teachers. Mexico created a national network of adolescents, comprising representatives of the country's 32 states. In Bangladesh, more than 530,000 adolescents aged from 13 to 17 years

participated in policy dialogue through the Generation Parliament, an innovative platform launched in 2019 to engage young people in child rights advocacy.

24. In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, youth groups were supported in forming a nationwide youth climate organization, Consejo Juvenil por la Madre Tierra (Youth Council for Mother Earth), with initiatives that included drafting legislation, organizing a nationwide awareness-raising campaign on reducing the use of plastic bags and hosting Friday for Future marches in municipalities and schools. Young Bolivians now have a collective agenda in which local voices are represented and their engagement alongside domestic and international policymakers is facilitated. In Nigeria, 67,540 girls participated in the Girl for Girl initiative in 2019, gaining knowledge to empower them to stand up for themselves, complete school and improve their learning achievements, while HeForShe groups promoting equitable gender norms and positive masculinity engaged 67,540 boys across 1,326 schools.

III. Progress in the four major goal areas of “A world fit for children”

A. Promoting healthy lives

25. Despite progress, ensuring children’s rights to survival and healthy development remain urgent global challenges. Between 1990 and 2018, the global under-5 mortality rate declined by 59 per cent and the total number of deaths among children under 15 years of age dropped by 56 per cent.⁶ Nevertheless, 6.2 million children and young adolescents died in 2018, including about 5.3 million children under 5 years of age. Of those, approximately 2.5 million died within the first month of life, when children face the highest risk of dying.⁷ Furthermore, more than 2 million babies are stillborn each year. Most child deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia and in poor households worldwide. On current trends, 52 million children under 5 years of age and approximately 10 million 5- to 14-year-olds will die between 2019 and 2030.⁸ To end all preventable newborn deaths by 2030, countries need urgently to expand care to reach all newborns, particularly those born too soon or too small or who become ill. Globally, up to 30 million newborns require inpatient care each year.

26. While the global maternal mortality ratio declined by 38 per cent between 2000 and 2017, from 342 to 211 deaths per 100,000 live births, some 295,000 women died in childbirth in 2017. Maternal mortality needs to be reduced by 6.4 per cent annually, compared with the current rate of 2.9 per cent, to achieve the global target of 70 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. A lack of access to skilled birth personnel or emergency obstetric and newborn care endangers millions of mothers and babies around the world. That is especially so in Africa and parts of Asia, where maternal mortality is highest.⁹ A huge gap remains in terms of delivering affordable, good-quality care to the world’s poorest mothers. According to one study, more than 5 million families spend over 40 per cent of their non-food household expenses on maternal health services every year.¹⁰

27. Access to essential packages of maternal and newborn services, including skilled birth attendance, institutional delivery and high-quality delivery care, are critical to reducing maternal and newborn mortality and intrapartum stillbirths. In

⁶ Lucia Hug and others, *Levels and Trends in Child Mortality: Report 2019* (New York, UNICEF, 2019).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/maternal-health/maternal-mortality>.

¹⁰ UNICEF, *Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies: Taking Stock of Maternal Health* (New York, 2019).

2019, 27.4 million live births took place in health facilities in 52 high-burden countries implementing the UNICEF-WHO Every Newborn Action Plan. The Government of Ecuador reported that 97 per cent of births to mothers aged 10 to 14 years in 2018 were attended by skilled health personnel, compared with 55 per cent in 1990.

28. Immunization has been one of the most successful public-health undertakings. In 2019, UNICEF and partners supported the vaccination of 65.7 million children with three doses of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis/pentavalent vaccine in 64 priority countries and the vaccination against measles of 41.3 million children in humanitarian settings. Eight more countries introduced the human papillomavirus vaccine in 2018, including Italy, which supported informational campaigns favouring its use, and an additional two introduced the meningococcal A vaccine. With the addition of Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2019, 47 of 59 countries at risk have now eliminated maternal and neonatal tetanus. Nigeria maintained its wild poliovirus-free status for a third year, paving the way for the potential certification of Africa as wild poliovirus-free in 2020, although that country and other countries in Africa and parts of Asia saw a surge in cases of vaccine-derived poliovirus.

29. The world, however, is not on track to achieve immunization targets. Coverage has stagnated at about 86 per cent, with inequities within and between countries. Polio has not been eradicated and measles is undergoing an alarming resurgence. The plateau in coverage is compelling the global immunization community to address inequities and reach “zero-dose” children (those who have never received any vaccine), who are approximately twice as numerous as those who have received partial vaccinations.

30. Pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria remain the leading causes of death among children under 5 years of age, accounting for 15 per cent, 8 per cent and 5 per cent of global deaths, respectively. Combating those preventable, treatable childhood conditions requires ensuring adequate access to health care, both at facilities and through community health workers, and encouraging the public to seek it. Progress is being made: between 2016 and 2019, 26 million children with suspected pneumonia (9.5 million in 2019) received antibiotics through UNICEF-supported programmes in 25 high-burden countries and 190,315 community health workers enhanced their disease management skills. In 2019, UNICEF distributed insecticide-treated nets for use against malaria to 24.8 million people in 21 countries, including 1.6 million in humanitarian situations in 20 countries (5.4 million since 2016).

31. In 2019, more countries adopted and scaled up multisectoral stimulation and responsive care for young children. However, only 72 per cent of children aged from 36 to 59 months in 74 countries for which comparable data are available are developmentally on track in some of the following areas: literacy and numeracy, physical development and social-emotional development and learning.

32. The world is now home to 1.2 billion people between the ages of 10 and 19 years, the largest cohort of adolescents in history. An estimated 1.2 million adolescents die each year, mostly from such preventable causes as road traffic injuries and drowning. Many lack access to the essential information, good-quality services and protective environments they need to stay healthy and well. Girls are especially at risk. Each year, an estimated 23 million adolescent girls become pregnant and maternal mortality, often linked to child marriage, is a leading cause of death for girls aged from 15 to 19 years. In 2019, 74 per cent of live births to adolescent mothers aged from 15 to 19 years in 52 high-burden countries were attended by skilled health personnel.

33. Adolescent mental health remains a pressing issue. Depression and anxiety account for 16 per cent of the global burden of disease and injury among young people aged from 10 to 19 years. Suicide is among the top five causes of adolescent deaths in high-, middle- and low-income countries, with higher rates among adolescent girls.

In 2018, some 70 per cent of Australian schools joined the national initiative on mental health in education. Primary health care that is responsive to adolescent health priorities is critical to advancing the health and well-being of adolescents and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

34. While the number of children suffering from stunting globally has declined, inequities persist and malnutrition in all its forms remains a challenge. More than half of all stunted children under 5 years of age live in Asia, and two out of five live in Africa, where their number has increased. In 2019, 47 million children under 5 years of age suffered from wasting and over one third (14 million) from severe wasting. While wasting is often associated with emergencies, the vast majority of such children live in non-emergency settings and in South Asia. At the other end of the spectrum, 38 million children under 5 years of age were overweight in 2019, up from 30 million in 2000. In 2019, Armenia initiated fieldwork in schools for its Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative, surveying 3,800 second-grade students.

35. In 2019, nearly 5 million children with severe acute malnutrition obtained access to treatment services in 70 countries. The number with access to treatment and care services continues to increase but more must be done to prioritize prevention. In 2019, for example, Colombia launched its plan against child malnutrition for the period 2019–2022. Its aim is to reduce under-5 mortality linked to malnutrition through intersectoral work, measures for compliance with regulations and guidelines for the care of children with moderate and severe malnutrition.

36. The proportion of children exclusively breastfed has increased by over 20 per cent in the past decade. For instance, a mother in Poland may combine maternity and parental leave to care for a child for more than one year, and upon returning to work has the right to breaks for breastfeeding. However, the latest data show that only 45 per cent of infants under 6 months of age are exclusively breastfed.

37. In low- and middle-income countries, approximately half of children between 6 and 23 months of age receive the minimum number of meals, and fewer than one third eat meals with enough diversity to meet their daily nutrient needs and support healthy growth. Only 18 per cent of children receive a diet that meets both the minimum meal frequency and minimum dietary diversity needed to reduce the risk of malnutrition. Home fortification using micronutrient fortificants now reaches almost 18 million children in 41 countries.

38. Millions of children continue to suffer from vitamin and mineral deficiencies, which can lead to poor growth, delayed cognitive development, weakened immunity, disability, disease and even death. The latest available data from WHO indicate that 42 per cent of preschool-aged children and 33 per cent of women suffer from anaemia, often because of iron deficiency. Large-scale food fortification remains a proven means of sustainably controlling micronutrient deficiencies in children. In 2019, 147 countries had mandatory legislation to fortify at least one of the following: salt, edible oils or cereal grains. Through programmes supported by UNICEF, 250 million children worldwide received potentially life-saving vitamin A supplements. Deworming prophylaxis reached over 194 million. As a result of global efforts to control iodine deficiency disorders over the past two decades, 89 per cent of the world's population is consuming iodized salt and the number of countries with iodine deficiency in the general population has fallen from 113 in 1993 to 25, with only 13 classified as being at risk of excessive iodine intake.

39. In 2019, while resource and capacity shortfalls resulting from a lack of political prioritization underlay shortfalls in terms of water, sanitation and hygiene services in some regions and schools, 2.8 million children in emergency contexts had access to such services and programmes at school and in other learning spaces. One million girls and women were provided with menstrual hygiene management services. Efforts

have been stepped up to mainstream climate resilience into water, sanitation and hygiene programmes but substantial work remains to be done.

B. Providing quality education

40. Children are threatened by a learning crisis. In low- and middle-income countries, 53 per cent of 10-year-olds (80 per cent in poor countries) cannot read or understand a simple story by the end of primary school.¹¹ At the time the present report was compiled, up to 1.6 billion learners worldwide (92 per cent) were at a high risk of having their education interrupted owing to measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²

41. Education contributes to reducing poverty, driving sustainable economic growth, preventing inequality and injustice, improving health (particularly for women and children), empowering children and adolescents and protecting the planet. It is not just a matter of having children attend school. Learning must be effective. Education challenges are greater in low- and lower-middle-income countries, but even in upper-middle- and high-income countries, in which access is universal or almost universal, significant challenges remain in terms of learning and equity.

42. If the learning crisis is not resolved with urgency and current trends continue, by 2030, 420 million school-age children in low- and middle-income countries will not learn the most basic skills in childhood and 825 million will not acquire basic secondary-level skills.¹³ Data on and awareness of the depth of the learning crisis have created a growing consensus on the urgent need for coordinated action, as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals.

43. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute of Statistics, the world has achieved gender parity at all levels except in tertiary education. However, that is not true for all regions, countries or income groups within countries. In some low-income countries, the national gender parity index masks severe inequities for the poorest girls.

44. The learning crisis starts early. Children who attend pre-primary programmes are more than twice as likely to be on track in early literacy and numeracy skills compared with those who do not. Worldwide, half of preschool-aged children are missing out on pre-primary opportunities; in low-income countries, where less than 2 per cent of the overall education budget is allocated to pre-primary education, the figure is 80 per cent.¹⁴ Pre-primary education continues to be a blind spot for domestic and international financing. Failure to reverse these trends and tackle the challenges of financing, quality and equality of access would represent a major missed opportunity to cultivate the world's human capital and help children to fulfil their potential.

45. There is an urgent need to expand, rethink and transform education and learning systems to provide all children and adolescents, especially those who are marginalized or in emergency settings, with opportunities for good-quality education that provides the skills they need to succeed in school, work and life. The latest global figures show one quarter of young people aged from 15 to 24 years not in employment, education or training. More than twice as many girls and women (37 per

¹¹ World Bank, "Learning poverty", Brief (Washington, D.C., 15 October 2019).

¹² UNICEF, "UNICEF response to the COVID-19 pandemic: background paper for the Executive Board" (New York, June 2020).

¹³ International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, "The learning generation: investing in education for a changing world" (2016).

¹⁴ UNICEF, *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education* (New York, April 2019).

cent) than boys and men (14 per cent) are in that situation, which underlines the overall disadvantage faced by women in the labour market.¹⁵

46. Children and young people with disabilities face various barriers to education, including school infrastructure and learning materials that are not adapted to their needs and poor leadership and management by Governments. Promoting education sector planning that is inclusive of children with disabilities is key to improving school attendance, learning processes and outcomes. There are no internationally comparable data on disability-inclusive education, due in part to a lack of data collection and common definitions to inform disaggregation. Through the Inclusive Education Initiative, a multi-donor trust fund overseen by the World Bank and launched in 2019, UNICEF and the World Bank are working to enhance the collection of data and evidence for children with disabilities, develop the capacity of Governments and non-government actors in inclusive education sector analysis and planning; and review scalable screening, assessment and referral systems for children with disabilities.

47. Education for children in emergency situations is severely under-resourced, with only 2.6 per cent of humanitarian funds going to education.¹⁶ This stands in stark contrast to the learning needs of children during and in the aftermath of conflicts and emergencies. An estimated 128 million primary- and secondary-school-aged children, including 67 million girls, are out of school in crisis-affected countries. Only half of refugee children attend primary school, and less than a quarter are in secondary school.¹⁷ Children in conflict-affected countries are 30 per cent less likely to complete primary school and 50 per cent less likely to complete lower secondary school than children in other settings.¹⁸

48. Nonetheless, the humanitarian sector continues to give education low priority and inadequate funding. As of December 2019, humanitarian sector financing for education was 67 per cent unfunded for the calendar year.¹⁹ In 2019, more than 7 million children in emergencies were reached with formal and informal education. Some countries are making provisions to ensure that migrant and refugee children can enjoy their right to education; for example, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia has affirmed that child refugees who meet certain conditions should have access to education.

C. Protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence

49. In 2019, progress continued to be made in upholding the right of children to protection against abuse, exploitation and violence, with significant improvements in integrating multisectoral approaches to the issue. UNICEF reached more than 2.7 million children in over 150 countries who had experienced violence with health, social work or justice and law enforcement services, 17 per cent more than in 2018. Nearly 2.3 million parents and caregivers were reached with parenting programmes to prevent violence, 10 per cent more than in 2018.

50. The Safe to Learn global coalition was launched to end violence in and around schools and UNICEF helped 24 countries to implement the WeProtect Global Alliance's model national response to tackle online child sexual exploitation and

¹⁵ International Labour Organization and UNICEF, *GirlForce: Skills, Education and Training for Girls Now* (Geneva and New York, 2018).

¹⁶ Financial Tracking Services, *Humanitarian aid contributions 2019*.

¹⁷ Ben Sadek, *Left Out, Left Behind: Adolescent Girls' Secondary Education in Crises*, p. 30 (Plan International, 2019).

¹⁸ International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, "The learning generation".

¹⁹ Financial Tracking Services, *Appeals and response plans 2019*.

abuse. National approaches to address online protection take various forms, including a technology-facilitated project in Portugal, with the participation of children; the development of the national strategy on the protection of children in the digital environment in Slovakia; and legislative and administrative measures to strengthen parental controls and introduce cyber-safeguards proposed by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

51. In 2019, focus was placed on the role of the social-service workforce in scaling up action and investment to strengthen child protection systems. Of the 137 countries supported in that regard, 35 reported having strong quality-assurance systems, a 9 per cent increase over 2018. UNICEF and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance issued guidelines on the matter and Luxembourg developed guidelines on mandatory procedures for professionals working on cases of child physical or sexual abuse or neglect. Mongolia increased its budget for child development and protection services almost sevenfold between 2017 and 2019.

52. In 2019, the United Nations Legal Identity Agenda forged an unprecedented consensus approach to civil registration and vital statistics and identity management, including birth registration. Thirteen priority countries, accounting for slightly more than one in three of all unregistered children worldwide, are being helped to accelerate action. The agency supported 80 countries in 2019 in providing legal identity for all, including birth registration, and the number of birth registrations increased by 35 per cent over 2018, to 21.7 million. Malawi continued the roll-out of compulsory birth registration in 2019, slated to reach all districts in 2020 and aimed at registering and issuing birth certificates to all children under 16 years of age.

53. Independent joint evaluations of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage and their Joint Programme on Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation were completed in 2019. The findings reinforced their standing as examples of ways in which joint United Nations action can provide essential political, policy and programmatic leverage to identify and implement collective solutions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically target 5.3 of the Goals on eliminating harmful practices. In 2019, more than 5.7 million adolescent girls in 45 countries received prevention and care assistance addressing child marriage, and more than 150,000 girls and women in 15 countries were reached with prevention and protection services regarding female genital mutilation, a 59 per cent increase over 2018.

54. In 2019, the United Nations stepped up collective action for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian situations, resulting in an increase from 16 priority countries in 2018 to 32 countries in 2019 across six regions.²⁰ The humanitarian community acted to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse from the very outset of the Cyclone Idai humanitarian response in Mozambique. Overall, more than 8.9 million people had access to a channel to report sexual exploitation and abuse in 2019, a 27 per cent increase compared with 2018.

55. In 2019, work to champion the rights of children without parental care, including children with disabilities, was boosted by the adoption of the landmark General Assembly resolution [74/133](#) on the rights of the child, which focuses on preventing family separation and ending the institutionalization of children.

56. UNICEF helped 106 countries to advance care reform and 128 countries to take measures to improve children's access to justice; 22 countries reported having specialized justice-for-children systems.

²⁰ See www.unicef.org/about/execboard/files/2019-10-ED_annual_report-EN-ODS.pdf.

57. In 2019, two critical platforms were established to strengthen coordination and policy coherence for migrant and refugee populations: the United Nations Network on Migration, to coordinate system-wide support for Member States, and the Global Refugee Forum, to identify concrete commitments on the implementation of the monitoring framework for the global compact on refugees. In 2019, protective services were provided to 1.7 million children on the move. Services included mental health and psychosocial support, legal aid to enhance access to justice and asylum procedures and alternative care arrangements in response to child immigration detention.

58. Concerted efforts have been made to bolster the reach, impact and sustainability of humanitarian assistance. In 2019, 3.3 million women and girls received humanitarian assistance relating to the prevention and mitigation of and response to gender-based violence and 3.7 million children and adolescents received community-based mental health care and psychosocial support. Millions of children affected by armed conflict, natural disasters and public-health emergencies in more than 70 humanitarian situations were given support. More than 4.3 million girls and boys in areas affected by landmines and other explosive weapons in 22 countries benefited from prevention and survivor assistance. In 2019, nearly 52,000 children received support services, such as tracing or alternative care. UNICEF supported 14,400 children in 19 countries who had exited armed forces or armed groups in obtaining access to care and reintegration services.

D. Combating HIV and AIDS

59. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) supports a multi-agency response that includes HIV prevention and treatment and care and support for people living with HIV and alleviating the impact of the epidemic. Under the Start Free, Stay Free, AIDS Free framework (the “three frees”), which was launched in 2016 by UNAIDS and the United States President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a set of approaches is outlined to end AIDS as a public-health threat among children and adolescents, with “super fast-track” targets. The framework is aimed at catalysing focused action in 23 priority countries where large numbers of children, adolescents and young people live with HIV.²¹

60. Antiretroviral treatment coverage for pregnant women living with HIV almost doubled from 44 per cent in 2010 to over 80 per cent in 2018, reducing the number of new child infections from mother-to-child transmission from 240,000 to 130,000. The increase in coverage fell short of the 2020 super fast-track target of 95 per cent and the pace of progress has slowed in recent years. The rate of mother-to-child transmission of HIV remains high, at 12.7 per cent globally. In HIV high-burden countries, even those with high treatment coverage, factors such as poor retention in care, suboptimal treatment adherence and new maternal infections acquired during pregnancy and in the breastfeeding period continue to drive high rates of mother-to-child transmission.

61. “Three frees” partners have implemented several strategies to improve HIV outcomes for mothers and prevent HIV in their infants, including: prioritizing HIV prevention in pregnant and breastfeeding women; increasing access to comprehensive antenatal care; and, once antiretroviral treatment is initiated, addressing the factors that lead to poor retention in care, including weak health systems, an overreliance on facility-based services with weak community-facility linkages, distance, the

²¹ Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

inadequate decentralization of services and reliance in many countries on user fees, which deter service uptake.

62. Antiretroviral treatment coverage for children aged up to 14 years saw only a modest increase and remains well below the 2020 super fast-track target of 95 per cent. More than 600,000 children living with HIV worldwide have no access to antiretroviral treatment. That gap highlights shortfalls in diagnosis and in the initiation of antiretroviral therapy in infancy and early childhood, which resulted in 100,000 HIV-associated deaths among children in 2018. Children missed by early infant diagnosis services or those infected during the breastfeeding period often have limited access to HIV testing. Although there are numerous entry points for testing, services are inconsistent, even in potentially high-yield settings and for children identified as positive, and children are not always given antiretroviral treatment.

63. In 2018, an estimated 1.6 million adolescents (aged from 10 to 19 years) were living with HIV globally, including 190,000 who were newly infected (five times the super fast-track target for new infections). Among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, four in five new infections occurred in adolescent girls. Despite a 25 per cent decline in new infections in adolescent girls and young women (aged from 15 to 24 years) since 2010, infection in that population group is still more than three times higher than the super fast-track target for 2020.

64. Between 2010 and 2018, the percentage of new infections among adolescents and young people aged from 15 to 24 years decreased by 23 per cent globally. However, there was little progress in West and Central Africa or Latin America and the Caribbean, and a significant rise in the number of new infections took place in the Middle East and North Africa and Europe and Central Asia. Young people account for a sizable share (20 to 40 per cent) of the most-at-risk risk populations.

65. In order to reach the most-at-risk adolescents, assistance needs to be targeted and personalized. Doing so efficiently and at the necessary scale requires careful planning and delivery. The bottlenecks constraining scale-up include: (a) weak geographical targeting of subnational areas in which HIV transmission is occurring; (b) the incomplete identification and targeting of adolescents at risk; (c) the limited availability of population-size estimates of adolescents at risk for planning investments; (d) the fact that assistance provided to adolescents only partly matches their risks and broader developmental needs; and (e) poor monitoring and implementation of service packages across sectors.

66. In 2018, there were still almost 15 million children who had lost parents to AIDS. However, remarkable gains have been made in mitigating the economic and social impact of HIV and AIDS on children and families over the past decade. Evaluations of national social protection programmes have documented that social protection, in particular cash transfers, can contribute to improved access to health, education and nutrition, strengthening social networks, increasing access to HIV and AIDS treatment and prevention and reducing adolescent vulnerability and risk-taking.

IV. Ways forward

67. Following the year of the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention of the Rights of the Child and on the threshold of the decade of action, the world is not on track to achieve many of the Sustainable Development Goals relating to children. The fulfilment of their rights is at the heart of sustainable development. If more is not done to achieve those Goals, the promise of the 2030 Agenda cannot be fulfilled. That will require substantial investment in transformative, large-scale initiatives to promote children's health, nutrition, learning and protection, giving

priority to the most vulnerable, including those in fragile and humanitarian contexts. The United Nations system is working closely to support Member States, strengthen national systems and enhance their resilience, engage new partners and tap new financing modalities, scale up measures that have proven their worth and identify innovative solutions to reach the children at greatest risk of being left behind.

68. Emerging in a world already lagging behind on its commitments to children, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis further threaten progress towards the fulfilment of child rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. The pandemic and the measures taken to mitigate it are disrupting essential social services for children and putting huge strains on national systems, compromising children's education, safety, health, well-being and future. The most vulnerable children, including those living in poverty, refugee and migrant children and those affected by conflict or fragility, who already face heightened risks and contend with limited access to basic services and learning opportunities, are being hit hardest.

69. COVID-19 threatens to unleash a crisis of children's rights. Swift and concerted action by United Nations agencies, Governments, the private sector, civil society and other partners is needed to safeguard the progress the world has made for children and to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind. To address threats arising from the pandemic and its socioeconomic impact, UNICEF, together with other development partners, has outlined a series of priority measures to keep children healthy and safe: ensure that children have access to water, sanitation and hygiene; keep children learning; support families to cover basic needs and care for their children; protect children from violence, exploitation and abuse; and protect refugee and migrant children and those affected by conflict. Our collective response to the COVID-19 crisis will set the tone for the decade of action. Meeting the ambition of the Goals and building a world fit for children will require significant acceleration to achieve sustainable gains and uphold children's rights.
