

# UNICEF's Recommendations for the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union



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- 1 in 26 children died before reaching age five
- Stunting continues to affect over 20% of children
- 10% of children still do not complete primary education, and among those who do, many have not received an education relevant to the 21st century
- Up to 1 billion children aged 2-17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the past year
- There are about 50 million children on the move, including asylum seekers, refugees, migrant and internally displaced children



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Yet, studies have shown consistently that **investing in children is one of the best investments one can make**. Therefore, in alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is critical that **child rights are made an integral part of EU policies and investments**, in a holistic and comprehensive way, to achieve measurable and sustainable results for children within EU member states and worldwide.

*The German Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2020 comes at a crucial time for children*

The unprecedented crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is battering essential services that secure the health, nutrition, education and protection of children in and outside Europe. The socio-economic consequences are threatening to roll back years of progress for children as envisioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Agenda 2030. The most vulnerable children – such as girls and those affected by poverty, displacement, conflict, exclusion or violence – are facing even greater risks.

- An additional 40 - 70 million children could fall into **extreme poverty**
- Some 1.2 billion children are **out of school** because their schools have closed
- 368 million children **relied on school meals** in developing countries
- **Child malnutrition** is expected to increase.
- **Child mortality** could increase by 2 million death a year because health services are over-stretched by COVID.

Without urgent action, **this COVID-19 health crisis risks becoming a child-rights crisis.**  
**UNICEF calls for global action to:**



As we are entering the Decade of Action to deliver on the SDGs until 2030, UNICEF continues to work closely with EU Institutions and Member States to accelerate progress for children and prevent the loss of a generation. **UNICEF is calling on all partners to join forces for child rights, reimagine and build a world for children, including:**

## A COMPREHENSIVE EU STRATEGY ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD - including meaningful participation

EU decisions - legislation, policy and funding - have an enormous impact on children's lives inside and outside Europe. For decades, the EU has invested significant resources and has adopted policies and tools to promote child rights while delivering life-changing programmes for children globally. However, EU action on children is not always visible to governments or the general public, and there is only a fragmented understanding of its impact. Global phenomena like epidemics, economic crises, climate change, migration and conflicts often affect children first and foremost.

The realization of children's rights, especially for the most vulnerable, **requires a holistic framework on child rights aligned with the CRC and SDGs** that



Children and young people participate at the European Youth Parliament at the European Parliament in Brussels, November 2018. ©Rambaldi/Eurochild

translates EU political commitments into a set of coherent and concrete measures necessary for achieving results for children worldwide. Building on

the adoption of the European Council's agenda 2019-2024, the Commission's priorities 2019-2024, and the European Parliament's resolution adopted on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CRC, such a child rights strategy will be a key contribution to the EU objectives and to improving the lives of over two billion children, including 100 million in the EU.

UNICEF welcomes the initiative by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and fully supports the development of a **Comprehensive EU Child Rights Strategy** under the steer of Vice-President Dubravka Šuica by promoting **targeted investments in children, ensuring efficient and effective coordination, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of EU activities** in this area.

**UNICEF calls for such a Child Rights Strategy to:**

- be adopted by the EU Council and apply to EU Institutions and Member States

- include a Child Rights Marker to measure and monitor EU investment, as part of the EU support to children-related SDGs
- steer EU action on current and new challenges for child rights such as strengthening child protection and health systems to meet child rights obligations, also in the light of global crisis, such Covid-19, challenges due to new technologies, climate change, the lack of due diligence on human rights, and gaps in guaranteeing the rights of children under attack and on the move
- institutionalize mechanisms within EU institutions to enable inclusive and meaningful participation of boys and girls in policy dialogues, programming, implementation and reporting

## An impactful PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND AFRICA FOR CHILDREN - based on child rights and focused on the most vulnerable

With almost half of the African population under the age of 18 - accounting for about 25 per cent of the world's children - targeted investments in children will be critical to building human capital and establishing a strong foundation for the future of African countries.

Despite significant progress in the past decades, poverty, chronic malnutrition, poor education, lack of health care and child labor continue to impact the lives of children, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Children are severely affected by humanitarian crises, with millions of them forced to leave their homes due to armed conflict and insecurity. While contributing the least to climate change, Africa is one of the continents the most affected by its effects. The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic is high due to the limited capacity of states and families to prevent or mitigate it. At the same time, Africa is rich in resources, people and



*A young person is interviewed as part of the #AfricanYouthVoices event in the run-up to the African Union-European Union Summit, Brussels, November 2017. © UNICEF*

innovations - children and young people are critical agents of change, and their voices must be heard.

UNICEF welcomes the **EU comprehensive Strategy with Africa**, with its focus on enhancing learning, knowledge and skills, research and innovation capacities, protecting and improving social rights, and eradicating child labour, and calls on the EU to

**fully integrate child rights in the EU-Africa partnership.** In the light of COVID-19 it is more important than ever to ensure that targeted investments in education, health and nutrition, child protection as well as in water and sanitation are made in a comprehensive way to help making families and communities more resilient. And we must listen to children and young people, working alongside them to design a better future.

Investing in children's and youth's education reduces poverty, drives sustainable economic growth, prevents inequality and injustice, empowers girls and boys, leads to better health (particularly for women and children) and helps protect the planet. The socio-economic benefits of education can be reaped if not only all boys and girls go to school, but also if they learn the competencies and knowledge that they need to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as digital skills. The current learning crisis starts with children at a young age. Therefore, and in order to leave no child behind, UNICEF recommends the introduction of an explicit reference to **early childhood education** (for children aged 3 to 5 years) and a life-cycle approach in the EU Strategy with Africa.

UNICEF also welcomes the clear reference to the protection of children's rights in the Strategy. UNICEF calls on the EU to **include birth registration** in its Strategy with Africa and to support concrete initiatives to strengthen national civil registration systems, ensuring they are accessible and confidential and investing in safe and innovative technological solutions. A birth certificate is proof of legal identity of a person and a pre-requisite to the realization of other rights, such as the right to a nationality, education, justice and protection from violence and exploitation. Some 94 million children under the age of five have never been registered in sub-Saharan Africa and, unless progress is accelerated, over 100 million children will be unregistered by 2030.

2020 is a pivotal year for the Africa-EU partnership, during which the African and EU leaders will come together at the 6th EU-AU Summit to define the future direction of this partnership. Listening and engaging directly with young people on the issues and services that affect them is key for a successful engagement between Africa and Europe, now and in the future.

## A STRENGTHENED CHILD-FOCUSED HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

In conflict and disaster, children suffer first and suffer most. Today, **one in four of the world's children lives in a conflict or disaster zone** and lack access to protection and social services. Those in conflict situations face the worst kind of violations of children's rights. Sadly, the number of countries experiencing conflict is at its highest point since the adoption of the CRC in 1989. Around the world, more than 30 million children have been displaced by conflict and violence. Diseases such as Ebola and measles continue to emerge, especially in conflict zones.

At the same time, extreme weather events are creating more frequent and destructive natural disasters worldwide. More than half a billion children now live in



*A health worker provides vaccination to a child, as part of an EU-funded nutrition programme in Somalia © UNICEF Somalia.*

areas with extremely high flood occurrence, and almost 160 million are in areas with high drought severity. The evidence for the impacts of air pollution on children is also firm and growing.

The humanitarian situation has been **aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic**, particularly in conflict-affected countries where health infrastructures are damaged and weakened. The situation for internally displaced people and refugees is heightened as measures for prevention of contracting COVID-19, such as social distancing and hand washing, cannot be effectively implemented due to crowded camps and limited access to water and sanitation facilities.

UNICEF calls on the EU to **promote child-centered humanitarian responses**, including for the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative that support (including funding) is not diverted from existing humanitarian needs to respond to the pandemic but is rather increased and focused on the most deprived and fragile areas.

While children are not the primary victims of the pandemic, the reality for children in humanitarian crises has worsened due to the closing of schools and loss of school meals, closure of borders and impact on

movement of essential humanitarian supplies, and increase in protection issues such as sexual abuse and trafficking.

**A coherent and integrated approach across the EU to Disaster Risk Reduction, disaster preparedness, including climate change related disasters** - bringing together humanitarian action and development work - needs to be articulated both in terms of policies but also funding instruments. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that flexible and adaptable funding will bring not only immediate services, but will also enable investments in medium to long term solutions. Focusing on adaptation and strengthening of education, health (including WASH services) and protection systems accompanied by targeted investments in sustainable energies across the humanitarian and development divide builds on community's resilience to shock and ensures that investment in the lives of the most vulnerable – especially children, is not short term.

## COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK TO PROTECT CHILDREN ON THE MOVE - strengthening child-sensitive and child rights-based commitments for refugee and migrant children in the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

Across the EU, 1 in 4 new arrivals and 1 in 3 asylum-seekers is a child. There are close to 7 million migrant children in the EU, and 30,000 migrant children have been reported missing according to the European Migration Network. Too many refugee and migrant children have limited access to essential services such as water, sanitation, hygiene, health care, education and protection. Thousands spend their days in overcrowded and unsafe facilities, or fending for themselves on the streets, facing stigma and discrimination. Many of them are forced to leave



On 8 March 2020, children line up for fruit juice in the Reception and Identification Centre in Moria, on the island of Lesbos, in Greece. © UNICEF/UNI31260/Romenzi

their homes by conflict, poverty or climate change. Far too many encounter danger, detention, deprivation and discrimination on their journeys, at destination or upon return.

The suffering and exclusion of migrant and displaced is not only unacceptable, but also preventable.

**A child is a child. Every child deserves protection, care and all the support and services it needs to thrive.**

The new **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum** provides an opportunity to address the most pressing issues affecting migrant and refugee children and to align to the child rights commitments from the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration.

Every child, unaccompanied or with their family, deserves **child-friendly border and asylum procedures** whereby their needs and vulnerabilities are identified and addressed as early as possible.

Special attention and care should be given to unaccompanied and separated children with fast family reunion mechanisms.

Good migration management demands **timely and child-sensitive durable solutions for children**, including integration, return to the country of origin, resettlement or reunification in line with the best interests of the child.

Improving minimum standards and procedures for returns in EU legislation and policy, making them child-rights compliant for all children, including children in families, should also be at the center of an EU policy framework. Finally, children should be protected in countries of origin and along migratory routes with a continuum of care and access to health, education and child protection services.

## PROMOTION OF CHILD RIGHTS IN A MANDATORY DUE DILIGENCE FRAMEWORK

Although a rising number of businesses and financial institutions are already taking steps to meet their responsibility to respect human and child rights in their operations, voluntary self-commitment has not proved effective enough to address human and child rights violations in global supply chains. Increasingly, EU Member States are discussing or have already implemented national laws to ensure that **companies meet human rights due diligence obligations**.

Countries, civil society and companies are calling for EU policy and legislation to provide adequate orientation for companies and financial institutions in the EU to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for human and children's rights abuses, level the playing field across Europe and provide legal certainty.

As part of the measures serving a robust recovery of the European economy, the European Commission has proposed drafting a possible horizontal framework on mandatory due diligence for EU companies' global supply chains by 2021 to strengthen the sustainability dimension of global value chains.

Based on the current German National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights, UNICEF calls on the EU to **adopt a mandatory human rights due diligence framework** by requesting the Commission to present a 'Corporate Social responsibility' Communication – including strong child rights commitments as set out by the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), the [Children's Rights and Business Principles Initiative](#) and the [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct](#).

**For more information**, contact the *UNICEF Office for Relations with EU Institutions* [nalonsocano@unicef.org](mailto:nalonsocano@unicef.org) or visit us at [www.unicef.org/public-partnerships/european-union](http://www.unicef.org/public-partnerships/european-union)