Save the Children’s submission for the UN Human Rights Office Report on Child Rights & SDGs:
“Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”

**Introduction**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a crisis in children’s rights and intergenerational justice, with marginalised children being particularly affected, including the poorest, children with disabilities, girls, migrants and displaced children or children living in conflict affected settings, to name a few. Rapidly increasing child poverty has serious and long-term negative effect to all SDGs under review. Without urgent action, we risk seeing a wholesale reversal of progress on children’s rights achieved in recent decades, putting the world further off track for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) remains as critical now as it ever has been. Children’s rights must be upheld, protected and fulfilled, and duty bearers and caregivers should ensure all possible protective measures are in place. The rights and principles of the UNCRC are reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The pledge to Leave No One Behind lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, in recognition that progress towards the SDGs must be inclusive and all efforts must be made to reach the furthest behind first. Save the Children believes that the SDGs are a vehicle to drive the realisation of children’s rights for all, and conversely, the rights of the child are a fundamental enabling factor for sustainable development. Children’s rights and their active and informed participation need to be at the heart of recovery from COVID-19 and the global community’s efforts to build back better.

1. **Risks and impact of COVID-19 on child rights and achievement of the SDGs**

This submission draws on a **global survey[[1]](#footnote-1) conducted by Save the Children during the COVID-19 pandemic** with children, parents and caregivers from around the world as well as new research and evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on children. The survey was implemented in 46 countries, and is one of the largest and most comprehensive surveys of children and families undertaken during the COVID-19 crisis, covering 31,683 parents and caregivers and 13,477 children aged between 11-17 years old. Our survey revealed that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the lives of children around the world, and is widening gaps within and between countries. In the first six months of the pandemic, the most vulnerable children have disproportionately missed out on access to education, healthcare, food, and protection. Millions of families were pushed into poverty by loss of income but already poor households were even more likely to suffer income losses. In this section, we provide an overview of the status of children’s rights in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the SDGs under review in 2021 at the HLPF.

**No poverty (SDG1) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10)**

The economic fallout of COVID-19 will likely reverse a positive, downwards global trend on SDG1, increasing and deepening multidimensional and monetary child poverty. Joint analysis by Save the Children and UNICEF estimates that 150 million children have been pushed into multidimensional poverty in low and middle income countries since the start of the pandemic, bringing the global total to 1.2 billion.[[2]](#footnote-2) The number of children living in monetary poor households could soar between 90 to 117 million in 2020 alone.[[3]](#footnote-3) More than three quarters of households participating in our global survey reported an income loss since the beginning of the pandemic, with poorer households more likely to suffer income loss (82%) than those not classified as poor (70%). Families from at least 594 million children in low-and-middle income countries did not receive any child and family-specific financial support from their governments to face the pandemic.[[4]](#footnote-4) Increasing poverty deeply affects children and even short periods of deprivation can have life-changing impacts on children’s health, development and life chances.

School closures have exacerbated existing inequalities and set progress back even further, particularly for the most marginalised and deprived children. At the peak of school closures, it is estimated that 1.6 billion learners worldwide were out of school, approximately 90% of the entire student population[[5]](#footnote-5). In our global survey, fewer than 1% of children from poor households said they have access to the internet for distance learning, despite more than 60% of national distance learning initiatives relying on online platforms. The crisis has also exacerbated digital divides along lines of gender and disability. More than half the girls (55%) had lost access to learning material compared to 45% of the boys, and half the child respondents reported not having any learning material at all.  According to our predictions almost 10 million children will not return to school following the pandemic, due to the increasing numbers of children and families that are pushed into poverty because of COVID-19.

**Zero hunger (SDG 2)**

Economic downturn, food supply disruptions and disruption to essential health and nutrition services caused by the COVID-19 crisis are increasing risk of hunger and malnutrition for children across the world. This is hampering progress towards SDG2 and the rights to life, development and nutrition enshrined in Articles 6 and 24 of the UNCRC. Even before the pandemic there was great cause for concern: 144 million (1 in 5) children under-five were stunted, and 47 million children were wasted[[6]](#footnote-6); more than 820 million people were already identified as chronically food insecure, with 135 million people categorized as at crisis level of food insecurity. Analysis published in the Lancet suggests that an additional 6.7 million children under five could suffer from wasting and become dangerously undernourished this year due to the impacts of COVID-19, with 57% of cases in South Asia and 22% in Sub-Saharan Africa.[[7]](#footnote-7) During the early years of life, children are most vulnerable to irreversible damage from chronic malnutrition. Almost two thirds of respondents to our global survey said that they are finding it difficult to provide their families with meat, dairy products, grains, fruits and vegetables. The primary reason noted was cost, with over half (52%) of respondents reporting that food is too expensive.

The impact of the crisis is particularly stark in conflict-affected contexts. Analysis carried out by Save the Children in Yemen found that the number of children receiving essential care for severe malnutrition has dropped by 74% since March 2020, and it is predicted that 27,500 children will miss out on vital, life-saving treatment every month[[8]](#footnote-8).

**Good health and well-being (SDG 3)**

The pandemic has revealed weaknesses in health systems around the world and has caused disruptions to essential health and nutrition services. Even before the pandemic struck, children faced huge health challenges – 5.2 million children under five died in 2019[[9]](#footnote-9) and half of the world’s population did not have access to basic health services[[10]](#footnote-10). Projections show that over six months in low and middle-income countries, 1.2 million more children could die due to increased strain on health systems, disruptions to routine healthcare and increased wasting[[11]](#footnote-11). This is a 10–45% increase in child mortality.

According to the WHO, 90% of 105 countries reported disruptions of essential health services during the pandemic, with low- and middle income countries more affected than high-income countries.[[12]](#footnote-12) This was reflected in the results of our global survey, in which almost 9 in 10 participants reported that their access to healthcare, medicine, and medical supplies had been impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Routine immunisation is one of the worst affected services, with at least 68 countries experiencing disruptions. This could result in an estimated 80 million children being left unvaccinated following the pandemic.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Increasing poverty is also reducing access to health services in many countries as health care costs remain a huge barrier, preventing the poorest from accessing care. 45% of respondents from poor households reported having trouble paying for medical supplies during the pandemic. Based on our analysis, countries with lower levels of public investment in health faced bigger disruptions to essential services.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Climate Action (SDG 13)**

The coronavirus pandemic has temporarily diverted attention away from what is undoubtedly the biggest crisis facing humanity: the environmental crisis, reflected in the issue of climate change and environmental degradation. This is essentially a children’s crisis, as it is impacting the health, nutrition, education and protection outcomes for children adversely. The projected impact of climate change on children’s nutritional and health outcomes is expected to be worsened by the disruption of routine health services by the pandemic.

However, children already disadvantaged by poverty, discrimination, migration, gender inequality and social marginalisation and disability –are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The World Bank, for example, estimates that climate change impacts could push an additional 100 million people into poverty by 2030.[[15]](#footnote-15) Marginalised girls in least developed countries are often more vulnerable to the climate crisis due to gender, social and intergenerational discrimination.

**Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)**

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to revert what little progress has been made towards SDG 16.2 on ending violence against children, and SDG 5.2 and 5.3 on efforts to end gender-based violence, including child marriage, female genital mutilation, and other harmful practices against women and girls. The UN Population Fund estimates the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are projected to result in 13 million additional cases of child, early and forced marriage that otherwise would have been averted by 2030[[16]](#footnote-16). The impact of COVID-19 on child rights and child protection will be even greater in humanitarian contexts, including those where there is armed conflict. Children from refugee and internally displaced populations are particularly vulnerable to negative coping strategies. In Cox’s Bazar, it has been reported that the number of GBV cases, including child marriage, have increased during the pandemic[[17]](#footnote-17).

In Save the Children’s global survey, nearly 32% of households had a child, parent or caregiver reporting violence in the home since the start of the pandemic, including children and/ or adults being hit or verbally abused. The survey suggests that the loss of income during the pandemic has been a major stressor. 19% of households in which children reported that violence had taken place had lost more than half of their household income due to COVID-19, compared to 5% of them reporting violence in homes with no loss of income.

The COVID-19 crisis also revealed an extra surge in online distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM)[[18]](#footnote-18). Sufficient resources are needed to combat child sexual abuse and exploitation taking place on the Internet during COVID-19. This requires a comprehensive approach which seeks to empower children and their caregivers, including human rights education, media education, sexual education, and digital skills especially about safety skills, including how to be safe online.

1. **General principles for a resilient and sustainable recovery from COVID-19 and Building Back Better**
	1. **Building back better: setting the foundations for a longer-term recovery beyond the short-term responses to COVID-19**

The first principle for a resilient and sustainable recovery is that it should be transformative and seen as an opportunity to build back better, greener, sustainable and in ways that address widening inequalities, which made many children and their families so susceptible to adversity and vulnerability in the first place. The world cannot afford to go back to business as usual. World leaders have an opportunity to put in place bold and ambitious solutions that respond effectively to COVID-19 now, but also to build or strengthen systems to respond better to future crises, considering both present and future generations. The climate crisis and increases in climate-related disasters such as storms, floods, droughts and temperature extremes – all of which create additional risks for children – only makes this more urgent. The pandemic has also brought to the fore the urgency of closing the digital divide. As the UN Secretary-General has said, technology has the potential to turbocharge the recovery from COVID 19 and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, but to do so will take vision and investment[[19]](#footnote-19).

Child-sensitive social protection should be an integral part of the response and recovery to COVID 19 as a well-proven approach to help realize the rights of children, help families out of poverty, and to cope with stresses and shocks - enabling families to invest on an adequate and continuing basis in their children’s development and well-being. It is critical for ending child poverty (SDG1) but also fundamental in achieving several other SDGs including ending hunger (SDG2), healthy lives (SDG3), education (SDG4) and empowering girls (SDG5). Social protection can also reduce inequality (SDG10), build resilience to climate shocks (SDG13) and reduce various forms of harm to children (SDG16.2). For instance, In Mexico and Brazil, social assistance reduced the number of young children dying by 9 to 11 percent, while a combination of cash and food transfers in Niger led to a substantial reduction in infant death rates.[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, when combined with complementary interventions, such as information sessions on child health and feeding practices, cash transfers can be used to achieve significant reductions in chronic malnutrition (stunting). Save the Children has successfully pioneered this approach in several countries, including Nigeria and Myanmar,[[21]](#footnote-21) among others. There is also substantial rigorous evidence from social assistance programmes globally that they increase the number of children able to attend school, even when that was not the main objective of the program[[22]](#footnote-22) and can help protect children from harm, by resulting in lower cases of early marriage and child labour.[[23]](#footnote-23)

* 1. **Recommitting to the pledge to Leave No One Behind**

A commitment to equity must drive the recovery from COVID-19, based on the UNCRC General Principle of non-discrimination which is embodied in the 2030 Agenda pledge to Leave No One Behind. The pandemic has exposed and deepened inequalities within and between countries, disproportionately affecting the lives of the most marginalised children least able to enjoy their rights. The economic impact of pandemic has pushed millions of children into poverty that not only risks their lives today and tomorrow, but also undermines the future of societies they live in. Groups of children that are furthest away from achieving SDG targets must be prioritised within COVID-19 response efforts and wider public policy decisions, programming, budgeting and monitoring.

* 1. **Prioritising the ‘best interests’ of the child in COVID-19 Preparedness, Response, and Recovery**

Children have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Yet blanket responses to contain COVID-19 have often not taken impacts on children into account, especially those that are marginalized and most deprived of their rights. Children’s best interests should be taken into account in all measures taken by the government in response to COVID-19. This includes involving children in assessing what is in their best interests. The ‘best interests of the child’ demand a continuous process of assessing the impact of policy on children and the enjoyment of their rights, including an evaluation of the impact of the implementation.

* 1. **Children as Agents of Change and Active Stakeholders in COVID-19 Responses and Recovery Plans**

Agenda 2030 explicitly recognises children as agents of change, in line with the right to be heard and other civil rights and freedoms enshrined in the UNCRC Articles 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17. Throughout the crisis, children have been active stakeholders in responding to COVID-19 sharing information, raising awareness and contributing to solutions within their communities. They should be involved in all stages of the response, preparedness and design and monitoring of recovery measures and their participation should be in line with the CRC Committee’s 9 basic requirements outlined in its General Comment 12[[24]](#footnote-24) . An enabling environment that fully supports and respects children's civil and political rights is critical. Children should receive age-appropriate, accurate, regular and accessible information necessary for their well-being and physical and mental health in a language they understand, and measures should be taken to protect them from misinformation and to safeguard their rights. Governments, civil society and other stakeholders should work together to ensure that spaces of participation meet the needs and requirements of different groups, particularly marginalised groups.

Save the Children has documented and supported the direct engagement of children with decision-makers to inform and influence COVID-19 responses[[25]](#footnote-25). One such example is the Kids MAProtect mobile application developed by Save the Children Philippines to allow children from urban poor settlements sites in the Philippines to monitor and provide feedbacks about government services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this app children users are able to identify and geotag unsafe, dangerous/hazardous and unsanitary places in a digital map. This information is then sent directly to the local authorities for their response or action. During the pandemic, child leaders consulted their peers and encoded findings into the Kids MAProtect app. The results were collected by the children into reports submitted to their local governments. Experiences and feelings of children on the COVID-19 and lockdown were also included by the child leaders in their reports.

**e. Indivisibility of SDGs and human rights**

Save the Children strongly reaffirms the indivisibility and interconnectedness of all the SDGs with international human rights frameworks as exposed by the pandemic. Just as Agenda 2030 recognises the indivisibility of the 17 SDGs, all human rights are essential to the achievement of sustainable development and should be given equal attention and priority. For instance, the COVID-19 crisis has shown how the ability to access the internet affects the right to education. Access to information about the pandemic has proved vital for children and their communities to protect themselves and others and to participate in decisions that affect them.  A resilient recovery from COVID-19 must fully recognise the interlinkages between all the SDGs and international human rights principles and standards, including non-discrimination and requires a holistic response addressing the full spectrum of rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

1. **Recommendations to accelerate transformative action on SDGs and children’s rights**

**Overarching Recommendations to Member States**:

* **Use the SDGs and child rights framework as a compass to guide recovery**: As an established, comprehensive and integrated global framework for addressing some of the biggest challenges of our time including those laid bare by the COVID-19 crisis, the SDGs and the human rights framework should be used as a political and practical policy framework for recovery. Taking an integrated approach should always be a starting point when it comes to SDG implementation in recognition of the indivisibility between the goals. Data from existing human rights frameworks and reporting mechanisms, including from the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Concluding Observations, and from broad civil society consultations, including children, should be harnessed to identify gaps and areas to prioritise for early action.
* **Continuous child rights impact assessments and the need for disaggregated data:** All policies, programmes, and investments, including stimulus and recovery packages, must be designed with an age, gender and disability lens, supported by disaggregated data, so they do not overlook or have unintended consequences for children, girls, women, and gender equality. Child rights impact assessments are critical to design preparedness, response and recovery plans in a way that protects children’s rights and their best interests. Inter-sectoral coordination and mainstreaming of a child rights-based approach to COVID-19 response across the UN system and within country team strategies is crucial. This approach should include proven best practices such as child-sensitive and gender-responsive analysis and budgeting.
* **Involve children as key stakeholders in recovery strategies and processes**: Governments need to create and strengthen existing infrastructure to enable children to communicate with each other, and advocate on issues that matter to them – recognising these as critical mechanisms to enable children to navigate this crisis and its consequences. Children’s meaningful participation in decision-making processes needs to be systematised in local, national and global public decision-making processes, in order to hold every decision-maker impacting a child’s life accountable in accordance with the UNCRC and other human rights principles[[26]](#footnote-26). Social Accountability mechanisms spearheaded by children in their communities to track the progress of SDGs at the local level should be integrated with national, regional and global monitoring mechanisms.
* **Close the digital divide**: Governments should accelerate action and investment to close the digital divide while minimising the risks, so that all children can enjoy the transformative benefits of digital technology.
* **Leave No One Behind Impact Assessments and Action Plans:** Governments and their partners must take active steps to understand the differential impacts of the crisis on different groups, including children facing intersecting inequalities along the lines of gender, geography, ethnicity, income and other forms of marginalisation, work with them to design policies and interventions that meet their needs, and monitor progress. System strengthening to track all children in vulnerable situations wherever they are through mechanisms such as the Child Protection Information Management Systems (CPIMS)and data management tools is also key to ensure sufficient allocation of resources and effective monitoring of responses.

**Specific Recommendations to Member States related to SDG goals under review at HLPF in 2021:**

**Child poverty (SDG1)**

* **Urgently create more fiscal space and aim towards investing at least 1% of GDP to progressively expand the coverage of social protection schemes for children**. Coverage of these programmes must be gender-responsive and include the most marginalized and deprived, progressively working towards universal child benefits over time while ensuring they meet the needs of children with disabilities, and integrate them with complementary services. We also encourage governments to strengthen the child-sensitivity of existing social protection programmes. Governments need to ensure these systems are shock-responsive – allowing for efficient and effective additional payments to help families cope before, during or after e.g. climate related shocks.
* **Routinely measure child poverty and recognize it as an explicit priority area** in national poverty reduction strategies (NPRS), policies and programmes to eliminate poverty in all its dimensions. Measurement of child poverty is critical – without knowing how many children are living in poverty, we cannot assess SDG progress or understand the impacts of different policies and programmes on child poverty.

**Child health and nutrition (SDGs 2 and 3)**

* Maintain and strengthen routine health and nutrition services during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond and **improve** **equitable coverage**, by removing financial and non-financial barriers and prioritising efforts and resources to make services available free at the point of use, at least for vulnerable children and families and those with pre-existing health conditions.
* **Increase investment** and support for **strong, resilient and equitable health and nutrition systems**, which is critical in preparing for and responding to public health emergencies, and to deliver quality, essential services for all, as part of universal health coverage.

**Climate action (SDG 13)**

* **Acknowledge that the climate crisis affects children first and worst**. Without the urgent and concerted action on climate change – taken in the rapidly closing window that scientists say we have to act upon – the future for children will be bleak. Developed industrialised countries that have a unique responsibility for the problem should ensure that poorer counties that have contributed far less are supported to transition to net-zero carbon economies and to adapt. Decision makers must recognise children’s right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
* **Put children and their best interests at the centre of their climate crisis mitigation and adaptation actions, including by ensuring a comprehensive focus on children, especially on the most marginalised and deprived groups, in international and national climate-related frameworks and policies**. To address this, governments must ensure that children and their rights are explicitly included in revised national climate plans, including the Nationally Determined Contributions, and increase climate financing using specific criteria to ensure child-sensitive investment and fulfilling pledges to poorer countries through new and additional financial support given as grants. The specific needs and situation of vulnerability must be given attention to. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) decision-making processes must integrate a stronger focus on children’s rights and those furthest behind as a cross-cutting priority and ensure safe and meaningful opportunities for children to influence these processes.

**Protecting children from violence (SDG 16)**

* **Prioritise and support** well-resourced and inclusive child protection, gender-based violence and mental health services, designating the social service workforce as essential workers with humanitarian access to reach all children needing protection support.
* **Scale-up urgently needed flexible funding for child protection** programming and gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response and mental health and psychosocial support in COVID-19 response plans.
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