**Children`s future**

B Y A I D A G I R M A 2020-11-20

MARKED as World Children`s Day (WCD) every year, Nov 20 is a global day of action, for children, by children. It is also the commemoration of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty adopted 31 years ago by world leaders to highlight critical issues affecting children`s lives and to resolve them.  
  
With WCD now taking place during one of the most unique and challenging moments in recent human history, the theme this year is `a day to reimagine the future, for every child`. At Unicef, this is exactly what we plan to respond, recover and reimagine a postpandemic world for every child.  
  
The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the deep inequalities in our societies; millions of children are missing out on basic healthcare, cut off from education and left without protection. Children will never accept that we should return to `normal` after the pandemic, because they know `normal` was never good enough. And children have a unique and unparalleled ability to reimagine a more equal, just and sustainable world.  
  
In these trying circumstances, Unicef is encouraging young people to highlight their issues like education, employment and mental health. We also encourage them to suggest solutions and promise to amplify their voices. We will also respond to the young activists who have been demanding climate action for several years and, since coronavirus struck, calling for leaders to ensure that the recovery makes the world a better place for them.  
  
As is the case in most emergencies, children are at particular risk in these times.  
  
Termed a children`s crisis, the impact of the pandemic will affect lives of young people for years to come. Unless the global community urgently changes priorities, the potential of this generation of young people may well be lost. To avert this, Unicef is calling for a six-point plan to protect children a list of urgent actions to mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic, and a practical recovery plan to safeguard child rights now and to reimagine a better future.  
  
The plan calls upon governments and partners to: ensure that all children learn, including by closing the digital divide; guarantee access to health and nutrition services and make vaccines affordable and available to every child; support and protect the mental health of children and young people and bring an end to abuse, gender-based violence and neglect in childhood; increase access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene and address environmental degradation and climate change; reverse the rise in child poverty and ensure an inclusive recovery for all; and redouble efforts to protect and supportchildren and their families living through conflict, disaster and displacement.  
  
When it comes to the pandemic having a negative impact on the lives and future of young people in the world, South Asia is no exception. One third of the world`s children and adolescents live in this region. Over the past 30 years, concerted efforts by governments, UN and other development partners have seen positive changes in children`s lives in this region. However, unexpected and unprecedented circumstances caused by Covid-19 have brought these efforts to a virtual halt, and could cause irreparable damage to future progress led by the throbbing young population of the region.  
  
The situation of children in Pakistan due to the social and economic impacts of Covid19 resonates with that of other children in the region. The disruption of services and its impact on children are both a supply and demand issue. Government lockdowns and the shutdown of schools and health centres restrict access, while fear of infection, distrust of institutions, discrimination, trans-portation challenges and other factors play into the decisions by parents, caregivers, and children and young people to stay away from facilities and services.  
  
With nearly 22.8 million out-of-school children prior to theoutbreak of the pandemic, closure of around 300,000 education institutions during the first wave of coronavirus impacted the education of over 40m children. Four out of every 10 children under five years of age are stunted, and an estimated 5m children suffer from wasting every year. Over half of the population in the country is anaemic. And besides being a public health issue, the observed level of malnutrition is a major constraint to socioeconomic development, as various forms of malnutrition cost the country an estimated $7.6 billion every year.  
  
Response to the pandemic has severely stretched the health system in the country.  
  
This WCD, while Unicef is taking stock of the global impact of Covid-19 on children and young people, and urging the world to take bold and unprecedented steps to reimagine a better future for children, we in Pakistan reaffirm our commitment to continue supporting the government and help it bounce back by taking all precautionary measures to mitigate the spread of coronavirus in the country. The writer is Unicef`s representative in Pakistan.