**Children`s rights**

B Y A I D A G I R M A 2021-11-20

EVERY year, Nov 20 marks the World Children`s Day a reminder of the pledge made by world leaders 32 years ago by signing the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified human rights treaty highlighting critical issues affecting children`s lives. On this day, we reiterate the pledge to act for children for their overall well-being, for giving them the start in life they deserve and ensuring that no child is left behind.

This year is also the 75th anniversary of the United Nations Children`s Fund. As the global flagbearer of children`s rights, Unicef has come a long way in helping governments realise and ensure the delivery of these rights. Yet, a lot remains to be done as millions of children are still deprived of their most basic needs health, education, sanitation and protection against violence and abuse.

The Covid-19pandemichasfurtheremphasised the inequalities that affect the rights of every child. Unicef continues to help children and young people raise their voices on issues that matter to their generation and calls for adults to create a better future. This World Children`s Day, it is more important than ever that the world listens to their ideas and demands.

For CRC and Unicef, Pakistan has special relevance. The country was one of the first to ratify CRC within a year of its signing. Unicef owes a lot to an eminent Pakistani for its very existence. Initially established as a shortterm fund for relief for children following World War II, Unicef was all set to be disbanded in 1950 when Pakistan`s first representative to the UN, Ahmed Shah Bokhari stepped in.

Mr Bokhari, a diplomat par excellence, was chairing the session when Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, chief US delegate to the UN, announced the closing of the fund. At that point, Mr Bokhari, made his historic statement, `You were willing to help post-war needy children in Europe, but now you are not ready to come through for the equally needy children of the developing world.` This led to Unicef becoming a permanent body of the UN system.

In Pakistan, Unicef started its operations only a year afterits inception in1948.Since then, it has supported the country in accelerating progress for children. Whether it`s the national development agenda or humanitarian operations during emergencies, Unicef has delivered through strong partnerships with authorities, teachers and health professionals, front-line workers and social mobilisers, communities and families, and of course the children and adolescents themselves.

Led by its global priorities in the pandemic Vaccines for All; Revolutionise Learning;Invest in Mental Health; End Discrimination; Address the Climate Crisis Unicef is collaborating with Pakistan`s government and its development partners to sync these with national priorities. As a member of the Covax facility, Unicef has delivered nearly 40 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines to Pakistan, with more in the pipeline. It continues to work with the health ministry to disseminate messages around Covid SOPs, vaccine acceptability and strengthening of cold chain management.

Closureofeducationalinstitutionsaffected the learning process of nearly 40m Pakistani children. Resorting to remote learning highlighted the need for bridging the digital divide and more access to the internet.

Working with the education ministry, Unicef is piloting a blended learning approach `Learn Smart Pakistan`, which encompasses learning both via digital means and traditional learning practices.

Covid-19 has unlocked attention on children`s and young people`s mental health and well-being. Unicef is breaking the silence sur-rounding mental illness through addressing stigma and promoting better understanding of the issue, calling upon the government and other partners to commit, communicate and act to pro-mote mental health for all children, adolescents and caregivers, protect those in need of help and care for the most vulnerable.

Due to Covid-19`s economic impact, the World Bank estimates that poverty in Pakistan has increased from 4.4 per cent to 5.4pc in 2020. Children belonging to the poorest communities are not only the least able to protect themselves from the virus but also the least able to access remote learning and handwashing tools and services. Unicef is making a strong case for increased public and private sector investment in the social sector.

Climate change is impacting health in a big way. Resilience of the health system is the answer. Unicef is supporting the Clean Green Pakistan by engaging youth champions who create awareness in their communities about the pandemic, its symptoms, and precautionary measures. Innovations like portable handwashing stations have been set up in public places and schools to protect children from viruses and bacteria. At 75 and counting, Unicef reaffirms its commitment to all children in the world and in Pakistan to help them survive, thrive and flourish.  The writer is Unicef representative in Pakistan.