

A call to action

THE life prospects of children trapped in intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage might seem like a matter of chance - an unlucky draw in a lottery that determines which children will live or die, which have enough to eat, can go to school, see a doctor or play in a safe place.

But while children's origins are largely a matter of fate, the opportunities available to them are not. They are the result of choices - choices made in our communities, societies, international institutions and, most of all, our governments.

We know that the right choices can change the lives of millions of children - because we have seen it. National action, new partnerships and global commitments have helped drive tremendous - even transformational - change. Children born today are significantly less likely to live in poverty than those who were born 15 years ago. They are over 40 per cent more likely to survive to their fifth birthday and more likely to be in school.

But far too many children have not shared in this progress.

Reaching these forgotten children must be at the centre of our efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, which pledge to leave no one behind. The goals cannot be reached if we do not accelerate the pace of our progress in reaching the world's most disadvantaged, vulnerable and excluded children.

Unless we act now, by 2030:

■ Over 165 million children will live on no more than US\$1.90 a day - 9 out of 10 will live in sub-Saharan Africa.

■ Almost 70 million children under the age of 5 will die of largely preventable causes - and children in sub-Saharan Africa will be 10 times as likely to die as those from high-income countries.

■ More than 60 million children aged 6 to 11 will be out of school - roughly the same number as today.

■ 750 million women will have been married as children.

We must reverse this course - and we can. Inequity is not inevitable; nor is it insurmountable. With the right investments, at the right time, we can reduce the inequities that limit children's life chances today, so that they can lead more productive lives as adults and pass on more opportunity to their own children. We can transform the vicious cycle of disadvantage into a virtuous cycle of equity that benefits all of us.

The State of the World's Children 2016 report is UNICEF's call to action, urging governments and development partners to translate

2030 commitments into concrete actions to reach the most disadvantaged children.

Drawing from the work of UNICEF and partners, the five key areas that follow - information, integration, innovation, investment and involvement - represent broad, often overlapping, pathways to equity. They encompass operating principles and critical shifts that can help governments, development partners, civil society and communities shape policies and programmes with the potential to make that fair chance a reality for every child.

Pathways to equity

Information - broadly encompassing data about who is being left behind and how programmes are reaching or failing to reach those in greatest need - is a first operating principle of equitable development. Data broken down by the factors that contribute to disadvantage - including wealth, gender, ethnicity, language and location - help



identify the most disadvantaged children. Equipped with such data, governments and development partners can target programmes to expand opportunity - for instance, through cash transfers to help families pay school fees.

By establishing national equity targets - and milestones towards achieving them - governments can drive progress towards the 2030 goals and improve the lives of their youngest and most disadvantaged citizens.

Integration is how we approach programming, policy and financing can better address the overlapping dimensions of deprivation, which affect children's health, education and so many other aspects of their lives. Integrating interventions across these separate sectors is more effective than addressing them individually. For example, the introduction of school feeding programmes has been linked to increased learning and cognitive development in Bangladesh.

And as conflicts grow more protracted and crises more numerous, bridging humanitarian and development efforts can help countries to be better prepared to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children when crises strike - while using emergency response to lay a foundation for stronger, more resilient communities and systems.

Investment that targets the most disadvantaged children can give them the opportunity to compete on a level playing field with those from more privileged backgrounds. Budgeting decisions should pay close attention to the impact on the poorest, most disadvantaged children and families. Public-private partnerships can also create innovative mechanisms for financing development and delivering critical supplies such as vaccines, insecticide-treated mosquito nets and nutritional supplements to the most excluded children and communities. Among the most successful examples of such an innovative partnership is GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, which helps shape markets and make vaccines more affordable for developing countries.

Innovation in development can help deliver essential goods, services and opportunities to the hardest-to-reach children and communities more efficiently and cost-effectively. Innovations range from ingenious applications of promising new technologies, like drones delivering blood samples for early infant HIV diagnosis, to creative local solutions like floating schools in flood-prone areas, to new kinds of financing partnerships.

Involvement is critical to sustainable development. Durable change won't come from the top down - its fuel comes from social movements and engaged communities, including children and young people themselves. Governments, international organizations and civil society, working closely with communities, can better address common challenges, such as coping with the effects of climate change, lifting children out of extreme poverty, promoting the rights of girls and women and, fundamentally, expanding opportunity for all, so that children born into poverty, conflict and disadvantage can realize their right to a fair chance in life.

With concerted action, guided by these five principles, we can drastically reduce inequalities in opportunity for children within a generation. It's the right thing to do, and the smart thing to do. Now is the time to chart our course towards a more equitable world.

The choice is ours. ■