

The State of the World's Children 2016 : A fair chance for every child



The Unicef Report 'The State of the World's Children 2016' has been published recently. The report contains some compelling stories and statistics concerning the state of the children across the globe which world leaders and policy makers should take note of in a bid to undertake effective and meaningful action towards ensuring a fair chance of a better life for every child. We therefore produce some relevant excerpts from the Unicef report.

A Wake up Call

UNLESS the world immediately focuses on the plight of its most disadvantaged children, 69 million children will die from mostly preventable causes, 167 million children will live in poverty, and 750 million women will have been married as children by 2030 based on current trends, according to a UNICEF report.

The State of the World's Children, UNICEF's annual flagship report released globally yesterday (Tuesday), paints a grim picture of what is in store for the world's poorest children if governments, donors, busi-

nesses and international organizations do not bolster efforts to address their needs.

The 2016 report notes that significant progress has been made in saving children's lives, getting children into school and lifting people out of poverty. Global under-five mortality rates have been more than halved since 1990, boys and girls attend primary school in equal numbers in 129 countries, and the number of people living in extreme poverty worldwide is almost half compared to what it was in the 1990s.

But this progress has been neither even nor fair. The poorest children are twice as much likely to die before their fifth birthday and to be chronically malnourished than the richest. Across much of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, children born to mothers with no education are almost three times more likely to die before they are five than those born to mothers with a secondary education.

At the regional level, glaring disparities in antenatal care and skilled birth attendance exist in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In both Bangladesh and Pakistan, women from the richest households are respectively four and six times more likely to receive antenatal care (at least four visits) than those from the poorest. However, the report commends Bangladesh for making solid progress in reducing mortality rates among children under age 5. Part of its success can be traced to the expansion of community-level health interventions.

Although education plays a unique role in levelling the playing field, the number of children who do not attend school has increased since 2011, and a significant proportion of those who do

go to school are not learning. About 124 million children today do not go to primary- and lower-secondary school, and almost two in five who do finish primary school have not learned how to read, write or do simple arithmetic.

The report points to evidence that investing in the most vulnerable children can yield immediate and long-term benefits. Cash transfers, for example, have been shown to help children in countries including Bangladesh to stay in school longer and advance to higher levels of education. The introduction of school feeding programmes has also been linked to increased learning and cognitive development in Bangladesh, the report mentions. Also, the Reaching Out-of-School Children programme in Bangladesh illustrates how governmental and non-governmental organizations can develop innovative strategies for reaching the most disadvantaged children.

It further lauds Bangladesh's initiatives in enforcing law that restricts marriage before 18 and commends Bangladesh on young girls forming child marriage-free zones in their communities. It sees Bangladesh as a leader in developing a child-focused budgeting framework that is used by the Ministry of Finance to review potential impacts on children.

Finally, the report reminds, inequity is neither inevitable, nor insurmountable. Better data on the most vulnerable children, integrated solutions to the challenges children face, innovative ways to address old problems, more equitable investment and increased involvement by communities - all these measures can help level the playing field for children.



A Chance to learn

Muhammad Modu, 15, supports himself by collecting garbage in Maiduguri, Nigeria. In a gated compound just off the main road that runs through the Mairi Garage Market in Maiduguri, Nigeria, 15-year-old Muhammad Modu is hard at work.

Wielding a twig barely a foot long, Muhammad sifts through the smouldering refuse of his middle class surroundings. With the sun pounding down on him and the smoke eating at his plastic flip-flops,

his body feels like it's on fire. But the hardest part, he says, is waiting for the trash to arrive. You never know if you'll find much to make the wait worthwhile. After two to three days of this painstaking work, Muhammad gathers enough material to sell for N150-200, or US\$0.75-\$1.00. Muhammad is one of the approximately 124 million out-of-school children and adolescents throughout the world. He is also one of an estimated 75 million children whose education has been disrupted by crisis.



Muhammad Modu, 15, supports himself by collecting garbage in Maiduguri, Nigeria.

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

A call to action

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.

Bangladesh shows progress in child survival

IN recent years, Bangladesh has made solid progress in reducing mortality rates among children under age 5. Part of its success can be traced to the expansion of community-level health interventions. Accelerated progress will depend on expanded and more equitable provision of antenatal care and skilled birth attendance.

Starting from a low base, the country has already achieved a rapid expansion of coverage in both areas. The proportion of babies delivered in health facilities increased from 8 per cent to 37 per cent between 2000 and 2014. Antenatal coverage by skilled providers also rose, from 33 per cent to 64 per cent.

Nevertheless, large disparities remain. The wealth gap in access to skilled antenatal care has declined only marginally. Coverage is 36 per cent for the poorest women and 90 per cent for the wealthiest. The ratio of poor-to-rich women benefitting from skilled birth attendance in 2014 was about one to four, with two of the country's divisions - Sylhet and Barisal - lagging far behind the rest of the country. And fewer than one third of women received the recommended minimum of four antenatal care visits in 2014.

Breaking the cycle

FOURTEEN-year-old Jhuma Akhter is back in school and performing at the top of her class thanks to a cash transfer programme. Getting here hasn't been easy. When Jhuma was just eight years old, she left school to work as a maid in an abusive home. She spent three years there, and was never paid for her labour or allowed to attend school. She worked in exchange for her upkeep and the promise that when the time came for her to marry, her employer would pay her dowry.

Eventually, Jhuma's mother allowed her to return home. But every day after school, Jhuma would head to work, going door-to-door to beg for rice. One day, as they sat eating their rice on the stoop of their tin-roofed shack, Jhuma explained to her mother that as she advanced from one grade to the next, the costs of school would increase. She would need tutoring, study guides and notebooks not provided by the school.

So her mother decided it was no longer worthwhile to send her to school - and instead brought her along to work. Working full time supplying water to local businesses, Jhuma brought in approximately

PHOTO ESSAY



Rexona Begum of Kultoli village in Bangladesh, eating potatoes with her children, has learned through a local clinic how to make healthier food choices for her family.

On a more positive note, Bangladesh has been making progress towards equity in terms of deliveries that take place in health facilities. In 2004, the ratio of poorest-to-richest women delivering in a health facility was 1 to 12. By 2014, the

ratio had improved to one to four.

Source: National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, and ICF International, Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2014: Key indicators, Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Rockville, Maryland, USA.



A UNICEF conditional cash transfer programme helped Jhuma Akhter.

US\$7 a month.

That's when Nazma, a community volunteer, spotted Jhuma. "They were looking for kids like us," Jhuma explains. Nazma invited Jhuma and her mother to a few meetings to assess the family's needs and eventually enrolled them in a cash transfer programme conditional upon Jhuma's attendance at school. Now that her mother receives two annual installments of

approximately US\$150, Jhuma has returned to school. She is in the seventh grade.

Today, when Jhuma imagines the future, marriage is no longer part of the picture. In fact, she thinks girls should wait till they're at least 22, well beyond the 18 years minimum dictated by the law. Instead, Jhuma now dreams of one day becoming a doctor. "I want to provide care for everybody."

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 develop-

ment. 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.