

# **Vulnerabilities created and exacerbated by COVID-19 for children in crisis and conflict**

**Submission to the House of Commons' Standing Committee on  
Foreign Affairs and International Development**

**UNICEF Canada**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

UNICEF Canada welcomes the opportunity to submit this brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (the Committee) with regard to the Committee's study on vulnerabilities created and exacerbated by COVID-19 in crisis and conflict-affected areas. UNICEF Canada is thankful to the Committee for the opportunity to provide further contributions, following testimony from UNICEF Canada President and CEO David Morley, and subsequent testimony from Chief Programs Officer Rowena Pinto. Ahead of additional testimony requested from UNICEF in February 2021, UNICEF Canada encourages the Government of Canada to consider the recommendations detailed below.

This study provides a critical opportunity to take stock of how government has responded thus far, and how Canada can best target support to address the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable children in crisis and conflict.

## 2. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### RECOMMENDATION 1:

**Canada must play its part to prevent further rollback of progress to achieving the SDGs by ensuring that existing global commitments are not diverted to COVID-19 response and recovery contributions. This includes protecting essential services such as routine immunization and access to nutrition and education.**

### RECOMMENDATION 2:

**RECOMMENDATION 2: Canada must contribute to a just, inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery by sustainably increasing international support to address vulnerabilities exacerbated and created from the pandemic. This includes strengthening health systems to ensure vaccine readiness, access to quality education for children in conflict and crisis, and prioritizing gender-based violence prevention and response.**

### RECOMMENDATION 3:

**Building on years of bi-partisan support for children's rights, Canada must urgently implement an integrated Agenda for Children through COVID-19 response and recovery, recognizing disproportionate impact of the pandemic on children in crisis.**

### RECOMMENDATION 4:

**Canada's efforts in COVID-19 response and recovery must prioritize crisis and conflict contexts, which have already weakened health, nutrition, education and protection systems, with growing inequality and rights violations due to the pandemic. This includes children's protection from attack, and participation in decision-making.**

### 3. PROTECTING THE 2030 AGENDA

The pandemic has upended the lives of children and families across the world. It has exacerbated poverty and inequality in conflict-affected countries and eroded hard-won progress in child survival, access to education and protection, and anti-discrimination. Unwavering commitment to protect the gains made against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is critical to prevent further rollback. In particular, retaining Canada's longstanding commitments to SDG 2, SDG 3 and SDG 4 is more important than ever, particularly in crisis and conflict.

#### SDG 2: END HUNGER, ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY AND IMPROVED NUTRITION

In November 2020, UNICEF found that there has been a 40% decline in the coverage of nutrition services for women and children across 135 countries<sup>1</sup>. In December 2020, global estimates indicated that in the absence of timely action, an additional 9 million children under the age of 5 may suffer from wasting in 2021-2022 due to the impact of COVID-19.

Entering into 2021 and the Year of Action on Nutrition, Canada's increased support to nutrition will be essential, particularly in addressing child wasting. With the lethal combination of conflict and pandemic, families in crisis and conflict are unable to meet their basic survival needs – leaving more children facing severe malnutrition.

In particular, UNICEF is deeply concerned for the survival of 10.4 million children suffering from acute malnutrition in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), northeast Nigeria, the Central Sahel, South Sudan and Yemen – all areas experiencing dire humanitarian crises while also grappling with intensifying food insecurity, a deadly pandemic and, with the exception of the Central Sahel, a looming famine.<sup>2</sup>

In the DRC, where the pandemic has combined with [Ebola, poverty and armed conflict](#), over 3 million children will suffer from acute malnutrition this year. In [South Sudan](#), more than 1 million children are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition this year – the highest number since 2013. These needs are not limited to Sub Saharan Africa. In [Yemen](#), almost 2.3 million children under five years old will likely suffer from acute malnutrition in 2021. Of those, 400,000 could die if they do not get urgent treatment<sup>3</sup>.

Children suffering from wasting are particularly at risk during this pandemic, experiencing disruptions in the nutritional services that keep them alive, while also facing increased susceptibility to infection. Wasted children also highly rely on parents for daily feeding and care— and so if caregivers are sick, quarantined or unable to secure nutritious and safe food and water, wasted children will suffer disproportionately. In the [Central Sahel](#) region covering Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, almost three million children are now at risk of wasting, a 20 percent rise since the beginning of this year.

While needs have been increasing, UNICEF has been responding. In 2020, UNICEF joined forces with FAO, UNHCR, WFP and WHO to jointly publish a first-ever Global Action Plan (GAP) on Child Wasting, focusing on child wasting as the most life-threatening form of child malnutrition<sup>1</sup>. UNICEF and WFP have developed a joint strategic approach to tackling child wasting in COVID-19<sup>1</sup>, while in humanitarian crises UNICEF continues to lead the Nutrition Cluster, which makes the early detection and treatment of children who are wasted a priority target.

#### SDG 3: ENSURE GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Canada's significant and longstanding leadership in global health has continued through the COVID-19 pandemic, when progress against child and maternal mortality has been increasingly at risk. One major obstacle to achieving SDG 3 is the disruption to immunization exacerbated by COVID-19. In 2021, millions of the world's most vulnerable children are at risk of missing out on life-saving vaccines that protect them from preventable deaths. UNICEF is increasingly concerned at the potential for diversion from life-saving routine immunizations, including in crisis settings such as Yemen, Venezuela, Pakistan and Chad. In these contexts, immunization programs were disrupted as a result of the pandemic, which has only heightened their fragility and the risks to children of dying from preventable diseases like polio and measles.

For example, in Pakistan, child vaccination drives including polio campaigns, were halted in March 2020 to avoid the risk of COVID-19 transmission to caregivers and vaccinators themselves. As a result, polio outbreaks have not been contained effectively in Pakistan, and the virus is now spreading to new regions. In Venezuela, vaccine-preventable diseases including measles and diphtheria, have re-emerged and low immunization coverage is threatening children's survival. Due to COVID-19 interruptions, in 2020 UNICEF was only able to reach 1 out of 5 children we were aiming to reach with the measles vaccine.

Chad is facing conflict-induced displacements, destructive rains, floods, loss of crops and the COVID-19 pandemic. The country's fragile health system is under severe pressure from outbreaks of measles, cholera and chikungunya. In 2021, over 300,000 refugee children are at risk of not being vaccinated. In Yemen, immunization coverage has stagnated, with 37% of children under 1 missing routine vaccinations. The country is seeing regular outbreaks of measles, diphtheria and other preventable diseases.

UNICEF's analysis of countries like these – that have experienced disease epidemics, conflict, political or economic shocks, even for a short period, show that many were not able to return to pre-shock immunization coverage levels without targeted support. Without urgent action to safely restart and revitalize vaccinations to catch-up on missed doses, there is a real risk of significant increase in deaths from vaccine-preventable diseases.

**Getting vaccines to children in conflict is possible, even in the pandemic. UNICEF and partners in Syria helped immunize almost 1 million children against polio since the pandemic began, thanks to continued field presence and adaptations like physical distancing and use of PPE. Ensuring continuity of immunizations is a critical aspect of progress towards SDG3 and must be sustained in Canada's pandemic response.**

#### **SDG 4: QUALITY EDUCATION**

COVID-19 unleashed a learning crisis, with school closures disrupting 91 percent of learners worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Marginalized children are paying the heaviest price; some 463 million young people were not able to access remote learning during school shutdowns, and previous shutdowns demonstrate that children who are out of school for extended periods, especially girls, refugees and children in conflict, are less likely to return. In Venezuela, for example, over one million children have already dropped out of school, with one million more at risk of taking the same path.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, Canada's commitment to refugee and displaced children's education provide a welcome opportunity to address the learning crisis by supporting evidence-based interventions that help build more resilient, adaptive and inclusive education systems, helping bridge the learning gap for refugee and displaced girls in particular.

Additionally, across every sphere, as the COVID-19 pandemic deepens the economic and social stress coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence is increasing exponentially, causing a direct threat to women and girls' health and access to education. Many women and children are being forced to lock down at home with their abusers while at the same time, services to support survivors are being disrupted or made inaccessible. This is further amplified in conflict and crisis contexts, where social cohesion is already undermined and institutional capacity and services are limited.<sup>6</sup> In line with Canada's Gender Response in Humanitarian Action policy, it is imperative for Canada to prioritize the protection and empowerment of women and girls in its COVID-19 response, particularly in conflict and crisis-affected areas. As Canada launches a campaign to ensure access to quality education for refugee and displaced children, it will be critical to ensure a continued focus on addressing gender-based violence as a major barrier to displaced girls' education, building on the historic commitments within the Charlevoix Declaration on quality education for girls, adolescent girls and women in developing countries<sup>7</sup>.

**Recognizing the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by refugee and displaced girls in the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF Canada mobilized support from Canadian philanthropists and the Government of Canada in a new, innovative partnership to scale up evidence-based distance learning methods and support education system strengthening to ensure access to quality education for displaced girls in Burkina Faso, Mali and the DRC.**

## 4. A JUST, INCLUSIVE COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Throughout the pandemic, Canada has demonstrated leadership on the world stage through significant contributions to COVID-19 response. This has included Canada's allocation of approximately \$1.2 billion in additional funding to contribute towards a global effort ensuring equal access to vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics, while also providing additional funding to minimize suffering, protect the most marginalized, and support humanitarian response.

Canada's commitments in the Throne Speech and Ministerial mandate letters to annual increases to international assistance have the potential to provide predictable funding to partners, including in humanitarian contexts. If fully implemented on a sustainable basis, Canada's increases to international assistance can help ensure a just, inclusive response and recovery that contributes to more resilient health, nutrition, education and protection systems, and helps build stronger, more equal societies, including in countries facing conflict and crisis.

In the immediate context, countries facing conflict and crisis have already-weakened health systems pre-pandemic, and urgently need Canada's support to be ready to deploy COVID-19 vaccines as they become available. Canada can build on its legacy of commitments to global health by playing a leading role in supporting countries to ensure vaccine readiness. This can include support to strengthen countries' cold and supply chains so that they have adequate infrastructure to safely transport and store the vaccines, and support to partners in-country to assess cold-chains, warehouse and other logistics capacities to ensure that countries are ready to safely and rapidly distribute the vaccines. In line with Canada's commitment to Feminist International Assistance and the Ministerial mandate letter commitment to support and protect the rights of paid and unpaid care workers, Canada can support training and equipping of frontline healthcare workers, the majority of whom are women; and support women's rights organizations and community leaders at local level to build trust in vaccines.

Countries' contributions to COVID-19 response can also be in-kind. For example, as countries closed borders to travel and trade, logistical constraints reached unprecedented levels. Options for cargo transportation were limited, supply shipments were blocked in airports and charter flight prices skyrocketed, reducing air shipments of UNICEF supplies. As a result, vaccine stocks reached critical levels. UNICEF worked with partners and businesses to increase flight capacities, including through multi-stop charters and dedicated charters for larger countries. Through collaboration with the European Union, UNICEF was able to send more than 50 tons of vital supplies to Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sudan on eight European Union Humanitarian Air Bridge Flights.

**RECOMMENDATION 1: Canada must play its part to prevent further rollback of progress to achieving the SDGs by ensuring that existing global commitments are not diverted to COVID-19 response and recovery contributions. This includes protecting essential services such as routine immunization and equitable access to nutrition and education.**

**RECOMMENDATION 2: Canada must contribute to a just, inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery by sustainably increasing international support to address vulnerabilities exacerbated and created from the pandemic. This includes strengthening health systems to ensure vaccine readiness, access to nutrition and quality education for children in conflict and crisis, and prioritizing gender-based violence prevention and response.**

## 5. AN AGENDA FOR CHILDREN

Recognizing that children do not live siloed lives, Canada should champion an integrated agenda for children through COVID-19 response and recovery, taking urgent action to prevent, mitigate and respond to the worst effects of the pandemic, while reimagining a more just, inclusive world for children. UNICEF and partners have joined together develop a Six-Point Plan for children, who will live with the impact of this pandemic for decades to come.

Through the Six-Point Plan for children, UNICEF and partners are calling for action to:

1. **Ensure all children learn.** This includes provision of targeted education support for children in conflict and crisis such as displaced children, girls and children with disabilities, who are collectively most at risk of being left behind. This should also include increased education funding in line with committed increases to ODA, and targeted efforts to ensure equitable access to quality, violence-free education so every child learns.
2. **Guarantee equitable access to health and nutrition services.** This must include continued leadership from Canada to child health and nutrition, including targeted efforts to make vaccines affordable and available to every child, and ensuring funding expands access to other essential health services for children and young people – including training and supporting healthcare workers.
3. **Protect the mental health of children and bring an end to gender-based violence.** This includes continued prioritization of gender-based violence in crisis and conflict contexts; supporting efforts to designate and protect formal and informal social service workers and services – including GBV, child protection, and sexual and reproductive health services – as essential; and sustaining increased funding for gender-specific interventions.
4. **Increase access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene and address climate change.** This includes investing in climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene services in homes, schools, hospitals and public spaces to make communities better prepared for future pandemics and other shocks, as part of integrated programming for children.
5. **Reverse the rise in child poverty and ensure an inclusive recovery for all,** including through sustained implementation of commitments to annual increases overseas aid commitments and social protection mechanisms like cash transfers.
6. **Redouble efforts to protect and support children and families in conflict and crisis.** This includes increasing funding for emergencies to prevent multiple, catastrophic and protracted crises and to save children's lives, alleviate suffering and preserve dignity.

In all the above six points, decision-makers must prioritize listening to children and young people and including them in decision-making. They will be living with the impact of this pandemic throughout their childhood and beyond, and must be included in decisions that affect their future. To fulfill our shared SDG pledge to Leave No One Behind, any action taken must prioritize the needs of the most marginalized children – including girls; children with disabilities; and children affected or displaced by conflict, and those facing multiple, intersecting barriers to rights fulfillment. In this regard, Canada's commitment to lead a refugee education campaign must ensure the meaningful participation of refugee and displaced children in decision-making through the duration of the campaign.

**RECOMMENDATION 3: Building on years of bi-partisan support for children's rights, Canada must urgently implement an integrated Agenda for Children through COVID-19 response and recovery, recognizing disproportionate impact of the pandemic on children in conflict and crisis.**



## 7. IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS

In crisis and conflict settings, the pandemic is adding growing pressure to already overwhelmed health, nutrition, education and protection systems, while lockdown measures have further exacerbated challenges to humanitarian access. These settings are in increasingly precarious situations, lacking the necessary infrastructure, equipment, technical capacity and resources to adequately respond to the pandemic's unprecedented challenges. As a result, children in conflict and crisis suffer disproportionately in accessing education, health, nutrition and protection.

Even prior to the pandemic, children's rights were increasingly under attack in conflict settings. From Cameroon to Mozambique to Afghanistan, attacks on children continue to increase at a disturbing rate – and the perpetrators of these attacks are rarely held to account. At the same time, negative coping mechanisms are exposing girls to sexual abuse, child marriage and pregnancy, particularly in crisis contexts. In Niger, nearly 76 percent of all girls are married before the age of 18.

Meanwhile, conflict, climate change and economic instability are forcing more and more children from their home. In Mozambique, insurgency has driven an estimated 425,000 people from their homes – a sharp rise from 15,000 in 2018. And over 860,000 Rohingya refugees are still stranded in Bangladesh.

Discrimination and xenophobia are making life even harder for refugee and displaced children, who are routinely denied essential services and now even less likely to access quality education or protection from gender-based violence. Many of these children have suffered grave violations of their rights, with little to no accountability for perpetrators.

To reverse this child rights crisis, Canada can build on years of Canadian leadership on children in crisis by redoubling its efforts to protect and support children and their families in emergencies. This includes continued leadership through the Group of Friends on Children and Armed Conflict, and continued commitments to implementation of the Safe School Declaration and Vancouver Principles. Canada's leadership in the Rohingya crisis and Syrian conflict to pursue accountability has been welcome, and must be similarly reflected in other conflicts. Together with renewed commitment to protect children in conflict through humanitarian assistance, these contributions can help end attacks on children in conflict, including civilian infrastructure critical for their survival. It also means investing in gender-responsive mental health and psychosocial support and combating gender-based violence for children in conflict, particularly girls.

Canada can also ensure accountability to children in crisis, through enabling their inclusion and empowerment within Canada's international assistance, focusing in particular on the most marginalized children, such as those displaced by conflict and those facing gender-based and other forms of discrimination. In this regard, Canada can support the implementation of the new Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian Emergencies and Protracted Crises.<sup>8</sup> Through Canada's response to COVID-19 in conflict and crisis, it will also be critical to support children in the early years, through integrated approach to Early Childhood Development<sup>9</sup>.

Co-led by UNICEF and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian Emergencies and Protracted Crises aim to mobilize commitments to, and action with and for, young people in humanitarian and protracted contexts. The guidelines also call for investment in programs that support young people to develop and reach their full potential and be advocates of their own rights as agents of change across all phases of the humanitarian program cycle.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Canada's efforts in COVID-19 response and recovery must prioritize crisis and conflict contexts, which have already weakened health, nutrition, education and protection systems, with growing inequality and rights violations due to the pandemic. This includes children's protection from attack, and participation in decision-making.**

## 8. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 is the biggest humanitarian challenge of our generation, and no one country or organization can meet this challenge alone. Now more than ever, there is a need for the international community – governments, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, local partners and community networks, to come together as partners.

At local level, working with local actors in particular has been a critical component in UNICEF's COVID-19 response. In the past year, we have transferred more resources to more local responders, than ever before. This is part of our growing commitment to localization of our humanitarian response within COVID-19 and beyond, through recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership and coordination of humanitarian action by national and local authorities, civil society organizations, and communities themselves. In COVID-19 response, UNICEF has found that providing direct support to community-based workers has been particularly instrumental to maintaining the delivery of quality services during the global lockdown. Support to community-based workers has allowed for regular follow-up with families during lockdown, communication of vital health information to community members, learning activities organized for children online, and more.

Beyond COVID-19, UNICEF's updated [Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action](#) includes a commitment to ensure that every UNICEF Country Office invests in strengthening the institutional and technical capacity of local actors to deliver principled humanitarian response. This includes support in areas such as emergency preparedness and risk informed programming, engaging in principled partnership, adopting comprehensive risk management and, where possible, supporting multi-year agreements and funding.

At global level, the Canadian Government has played a leading role in supporting UNICEF's COVID-19 response, and was a top ten humanitarian donor to UNICEF in 2020. In addition, Canada's commitment to provide flexible funds has allowed UNICEF to determine countries most in need of support throughout initial COVID-19 response efforts, where Canada support could fill life-saving gaps in funding.

Canadians from across the country, too, have mobilized to support. It is a testament to Canadian spirit of global solidarity that support from Canadians is now among the top five contributions globally from the public to UNICEF, alongside contributions from people in the UK, the US, Germany and Japan. Canadians have also demonstrated their supported by lending their voice and calling for action in areas like access to vaccines. Canada has a valuable opportunity to leverage increased interest from Canadians in support of UNICEF and other partners' work to ensure a just, inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery, at scale, that progresses the commitment to Leave No One Behind and reimagines a better, more equitable future for every child.

The impacts of this pandemic will be felt for years to come, with increased need across health and nutrition, education, and protection, and particularly in conflict and crisis settings. An integrated approach that helps end the pandemic, contain the spread, address the impacts of the pandemic on children is required, while simultaneously contributing to deliberate efforts to support an inclusive and resilient recovery. In this context, increased Official Development Assistance (ODA) is critical to both immediate pandemic response, as well as to ensure we do not fall even further behind on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in this final Decade of Action to 2030. A continued commitment to protect the critical investments Canada has made in health systems strengthening and routine immunizations, as well as education, nutrition and protection from gender-based violence, will be essential, alongside a commitment to protect, support and empower children in crisis, whose rights are increasingly under attack.

UNICEF looks forward to further collaboration with the Government of Canada and Canadians as we scale up at global level, helping end the pandemic and meet the critical needs of children impacted by the dangerous combination of conflict, disaster, displacement and COVID-19.



## ABOUT UNICEF

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) works in 190 countries through country programs and National Committees. UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. UNICEF is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and strives to establish children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behaviour towards children.

UNICEF is the world's leading child-focused humanitarian and development agency. Through innovative programs and advocacy work, we save children's lives and secure their rights in virtually every country. Our global reach and diverse partnerships make us an instrumental force in shaping a world in which no child dies of a preventable cause. UNICEF is entirely supported by voluntary donations and helps all children, regardless of race, religion or politics. The only organization named in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a source of expertise for governments, UNICEF provides critical information and guidance to those whose decisions impact children's survival and quality of life. For more information about UNICEF's work in Canada and overseas, please visit [www.unicef.ca](http://www.unicef.ca)

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, January 2021. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-calls-averting-lost-generation-covid-19-threatens-cause-irreversible-harm>

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, December 2020. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19-and-conflict-deadly-combination>

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, February 2021. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/press-releases/joint-press-release-acute-malnutrition-threatens-half-children-under-five-yemen-2021>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children, 2021. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/reports/humanitarian-action-children-2021-overview>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> UNSG Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, April 2020. Available at [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_women\\_9\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Government of Canada, June 2018. Available at [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international\\_relations-relations\\_internationales/g7/documents/2018-06-09-quality-education-qualite.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/g7/documents/2018-06-09-quality-education-qualite.aspx?lang=eng)

<sup>8</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, February 2021. Available at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/events/iasc-guidelines-working-and-young-people-humanitarian-and-protracted-crises>

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see the Moving Minds Alliance, at <https://movingmindsalliance.org/>

For more information, please contact:

**Annie Bodmer-Roy, Director of International Policy and Programs**  
UNICEF Canada  
Phone: 343 996 3334  
E-mail: [abodmerroy@unicef.ca](mailto:abodmerroy@unicef.ca)