

Background Guide for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

Committee Overview and Mandate

Introduction

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) was established in 1946 through UN General Assembly resolution 57 (I) on “Establishment of an International Children’s Emergency Fund.”¹ It was founded as a relief organization for child refugees in Europe post-World War II and named the UN International Children’s Emergency Fund.² In 1953 the UN extended the mandate of UNICEF indefinitely, as the UN saw the continued need of all children to get support for their survival and well-being.

Governance, Mandate, Membership, and Structure

UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs, and to expand opportunities to reach their full potential, guided by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. UNICEF mobilizes political will and material resources to help Member States, particularly developing Member States, ensure a "first call for children" and to build their capacity to form appropriate policies and deliver services for children and their families.

The Executive Board is the governing body of UNICEF, which reviews UNICEF activities and approves its policies, national programs, and budgets. It is comprised of 36 members, representing five regional groups. The Executive Board allocates 8 seats to Africa, 7 seats to Asia, 4 seats to Eastern Europe, 5 seats to Latin America and the Caribbean, and 12 seats to Western Europe and Others. Its work is coordinated by the Bureau, comprised of the President and four Vice-Presidents, each officer representing one of the five regional groups.³ The Office of the Secretary of the Executive Board supports and services the Executive Board, maintains an effective relationship between the Executive Board and the UNICEF secretariat, and helps to organize field visits for the Executive Board.

The work of UNICEF is guided by two important documents: *The Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* (1989). The *CRC* was created over a period of more than 10 years with the help of various groups such as intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), lawyers, health specialists, educators, and religious leaders. After the *CRC* was adopted, UNICEF organized *the World Summit for Children* in 1990 that convened world leaders on issues relating to the wellbeing of children globally. This helped to increase awareness of children's issues, particularly those in conflict situations, and prompted discussions on the topic in the UN Security Council (UNSC) during the 1990s. Despite these efforts, however, the situation of children remains critical as

¹ United Nations, UN System; UN General Assembly, Establishment of an International Children’s Emergency Fund (A/RES/57 (I)), 1946.

² UN General Assembly, Establishment of an International Children’s Emergency Fund (A/RES/57 (I)), 1946. p.1.

³ UNICEF, *UNICEF Executive Board*.

poverty, inequalities, and lack of access to education and healthcare persist, as evidenced by General Assembly resolution 61/146 on *The rights of the child* (2006).

Ensuring Access to Education for Marginalized Children

Background

Article 26 of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* states, “Everyone has the right to education”.⁴ However, globally, 262 million children and adolescents do not have the opportunity to enter or complete school. To achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4—Quality Education—national and local governments must accelerate action plans to close the access gaps and ensure all children are in school, with a focus on marginalized children and children in emergency settings.⁵ UNICEF’s own goal “Every Child Learns” is fully aligned with SDG 4 and other education-related targets which seek to ensure that this applies in all contexts, including humanitarian crises and in developing Member States, regardless of wealth, location, gender, disability, migration status, language, or minority status.

Young people who prematurely leave school face various vulnerabilities, such as unemployment, poverty, early marriage, and pregnancy. Factors contributing to high dropout rates include poverty, gender disparities, disabilities, family crises, conflicts, and the perception of limited benefits from education. It is crucial to develop alternative learning options that address these underlying causes of dropout rates. These alternatives should provide young people with suitable opportunities to strengthen their fundamental knowledge and skills, enabling them to secure employment, establish businesses, become entrepreneurs, or engage in other productive work.

Poverty

Globally, an estimated 356 million children live in extreme poverty. Multidimensional poverty acknowledges that poverty is not only reflected through income, but also in the deprivation of access to basic resources, such as education, clean drinking water, and child nourishment. Children living in poverty are less likely to have access to school and drop out sooner. In addition, children from poor households are less represented in higher levels of education, which receive much higher public education spending per capita.⁶ They are also more likely to live in remote and rural areas that are generally underserved and on the wrong side of the digital divide. According to UNICEF’s *Technical Note on Impact of COVID-19 on child poverty*, 1.2 billion children are estimated to be multidimensionally poor – a 15% increase since 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis. Schoolchildren in low-and lower-middle income countries were the least likely to access remote learning, the least likely to be monitored on their learning loss, the most likely to have delays to their schools reopening, and the most likely to attend schools with inadequate resources to ensure safe learning. Children living in slums are often left out of the formal education system altogether. They may need to work in the streets to earn a living, making it a struggle to meet school requirements, and fit into its routine, rules, and code of discipline. Since 2014, UNICEF has played an instrumental

⁴ Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights

⁵ UNICEF’s *Key Asks for 2020 SDG Voluntary National Reviews*

⁶ UNICEF’s Report, *Transforming Education with Equitable Financing* (2023)

role in directing global attention to child poverty. The Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, chaired by UNICEF, has become a powerful initiative for raising awareness about child poverty and accelerating global efforts to tackle it.

Girls are particularly at risk of dropping out of school due to extreme poverty, as they are more likely to be forced into child marriage or live in impoverished homes where a male child will receive an education first, perpetuating the cycle. UNICEF works with partners to help girls stay in school by covering school fees and the cost of uniforms, books, and learning supplies. For example, UNICEF created the *K.I.N.D. Fund* scholarship program to help girls in Malawi get a quality education. The *K.I.N.D. Fund* identifies girls at risk of dropping out due to extreme poverty and other vulnerability factors and provides them with the opportunity to continue their education. The scholarships cover school fees, uniforms, books, and learning supplies for four years of high school.

Conflict-affected children

Children who are displaced by conflict or a natural disaster can easily end up in poverty, which will limit their educational opportunities. Approximately 20% of children globally reside in areas affected by conflicts, with approximately 142 million children living in intense conflict zones. The education of these children is significantly impacted by violence associated with conflicts, especially when schools become direct targets. The immediate repercussions of such attacks involve the harm or even death of children, destruction of educational facilities, and disruption of learning opportunities. Over time, these attacks can result in reduced quality of education, a shortage of teachers, and weakened education systems.

Children and youth on the move with low levels of education are at increased risk of exploitation. Of the 7.1 million refugee children of school age, 3.7 million - more than half - do not go to school.⁷ At secondary level, 23 per cent of refugee adolescents go to school, compared to 84 per cent of non-refugee children globally. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is working with other agencies on implementing *the Secondary Youth Education Programme*, which is aimed at increasing school enrolment and boosting retention and completion of secondary education, and is dedicated to improving secondary education prospects for refugee children and youth. This initiative is placing advisors within education ministries, increasing the number of female teachers, building and refurbishing infrastructure, and providing cash directly to households, allowing them to cover the cost of sending their children to school.

In countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV), girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys, and are 90% more likely to be out of secondary school than those in non-FCV contexts.⁸ UNHCR is supporting programs aimed at educating refugee girls, such as the *TIGER (These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading)* program, which is mainly working with secondary school girls, aimed at facilitating the girls' lifelong learning and personal and professional development by organizing learning in small teams of ten girls who meet daily in community learning centers.

⁷ UNHCR's Report *Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis* (2019)

⁸ World Bank's *Education as a Right for Children in Western and Central Africa* (2021)

Climate-affected education

Nearly 40 million children a year have their education interrupted because of environmental disasters such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, landslides, and hurricanes. In crises, children and young people in particular are at risk of losing more than just their home and shelter, but also access to education, training, and opportunities that could open the door to their future. When environmental disasters occur, schools are frequently destroyed, damaged, or repurposed as temporary shelters. As a result, children's education can be disrupted for extended periods, ranging from months to years. This disruption leaves them vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including child labor, gender-based violence, early marriage, and trafficking.

In 2019, 24.9 million people were internally displaced as a result of disasters. In 2020, the number jumped to 30.7 million.⁹ However, gradual climate-related events also pose a threat to education. As sea levels rise, entire communities are forced to relocate permanently, disrupting education in the process. Families experiencing frequent flooding not only face the destruction of their assets but also suffer from poverty caused by climate change, which affects their ability to afford education. Those who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods may experience losses due to drought, compelling them to relocate to urban areas in search of employment. Unfortunately, in these urban centers, access to quality education for their children is uncertain. Additionally, some individuals are unable to relocate due to the destruction of their assets by climate change, leading to trapped populations who continue to face significant barriers to education as a result of recurring climate-related disasters.

Many regional initiatives emerged from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) policy brief, *The Impact of Climate Change and Displacement on the Right to Education*, such as *the Caribbean Safe School Initiative*, which promotes safe schools and better disaster management practices, as well as serves as a platform for discussing the challenges of climate displacement and policy ideas that can be promoted.

Conclusion:

It is crucial to prioritize and provide education to marginalized children, with a particular focus on those affected by climate change, conflict, and poverty. UNICEF's mission of achieving universal access to primary education aligns with the recognition that education is a fundamental human right, as emphasized in documents like the *UDHR*. Education not only equips individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to lead productive and fulfilling lives but also empowers them to make meaningful contributions to their communities. By ensuring that all children, regardless of their circumstances, have access to quality education, we can break the cycle of inequality and create a brighter future for generations to come.

⁹ UNESCO's Report, *The Impact of Climate Change and Displacement on the Right to Education* (2022)

Questions to Consider

1. What are some ways that UNICEF could support girls and displaced children in receiving education in areas that lack school or digital infrastructures?
2. How does displacement caused by conflict or natural disasters contribute to the limited educational opportunities and potential poverty for affected children?
3. Why are refugee children, especially those with low levels of education, at a higher risk of exploitation and lack of access to education?
4. How can UNICEF utilize collaborative partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help ensure every child has access to education?
5. What are some of the challenges faced by children living in remote and rural areas in terms of accessing quality education and bridging the digital divide?
6. How does multidimensional poverty impact children's access to education and contribute to higher dropout rates, especially among those living in extreme poverty?

Helpful Links

1. <https://www.unicef.org/education>
2. <https://www.unicef.org/education/programmes>
3. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview>
4. <https://smartereducation.worldbank.org/projects>