

Delivering Progress for the Most Excluded Children



“As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.”

UN General Assembly, A/Res/70/1,
“Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



- To ensure that no child is left behind in progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), governments must pay more attention to tackling exclusion and its causes.
- A critical cause of exclusion is poverty and the many discriminatory barriers that children and their families face in pursuing their own development and realising their rights.
- To break down these barriers, expanded data collection and the participation of children and young people themselves must be stepped up.
- Governments should explicitly lay out how much they will spend on services essential for children; which sectors and types of services they will prioritise; and which groups they will ensure are reached by those services.¹
- These investments should be accountable to, and planned together with, the most excluded.

Critical data and problem analysis

Since the adoption, in 1989, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), progress for the world's children has been unprecedented. Despite this, inequalities, discrimination and exclusion have denied huge numbers of children their full rights. Governments have recommitted to addressing this in the SDGs – pledging to “*leave no one behind*” and to give priority to those who are worst-off. These commitments encompass SDGs for children's health, wellbeing, protection, participation and learning.

Yet the pledges of the 2030 Agenda are being broken for millions of children.² Children are being left behind, and risk being pushed further to the margins. On current trends, almost two-thirds of developing countries will miss SDG targets for basic needs such as food, health, education, water, sanitation, and energy. For fragile states, this proportion rises to four-in-five. These countries have proportionately large and rapidly-growing populations of children. Their public sectors have limited capacity to meet the basic needs of children and families and help them cope with the gathering climate crisis and environmental destruction.

The poorest children are most likely to be excluded

In most middle- and high-income countries, deprivation is increasingly concentrated in certain geographic areas and social groups. But in all situations, it's the poorest children who are being left furthest behind:

- ➔ Children in the poorest 20% of households are 40% more likely than average to die before their fifth birthday.
- ➔ Young children in the poorest families, as well as in rural and remote areas, are 2 to 3 times more likely to suffer stunted physical growth.
- ➔ At the same time, due to huge inequalities within cities, the poorest urban children often have higher stunting rates and lower sanitation access than their rural peers.³
- ➔ In rich countries, one child in five lives in poverty⁴ and is likely to suffer deprivations such as low-quality housing, poor diet and lack of school and leisure opportunities.⁵
- ➔ Children worldwide are twice as likely as adults to live in extreme poverty. They account for half of all the people who remain extremely poor.

Children face exclusion based on sex, disability, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, family status and migration

The exclusion of children is not caused by poverty alone. Discrimination – underpinned by harmful social norms and practices, as well as by inadequate laws and policies – undermines the rights and life chances of many groups of children:

- ➔ A child's right to education (UN CRC Article 28):
Despite many improvements in the status of girls, 5 million more girls than boys of primary age are out of school; girls are more likely never to enrol; and less than one-third of countries have reached gender parity in secondary education.
 - ➔ Protecting girls from marriage before they're 18 (UN CRC General Comment No.4):
Every year 12 million girls are married as children, in some cases before the age of 15, effectively denying them their right to education and opportunities to advance in life. Here, poverty and discriminatory gender norms strongly interact.
- "Child marriage in Chabota is caused by poverty... parents use small girls as capital to wipe away poverty"***

Child, Zambia
- ➔ A disabled child's right to special care and education (Article 23):
The estimated 150 million children who live with a disability are far more likely to be out of school. In Bangladesh, for example, some 30% of people with a disability had completed primary schooling compared to 48% of those with no disability.⁶ They are also roughly 4 times more likely to be victims of violence.
 - ➔ A child's right to protection against discrimination (Article 2):
Adolescent children who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and/or Intersex, or who are identified as such by those around them, are often ostracised, and face extreme vulnerability to violence and self-harm.⁷
- ➔ A child's right to a good enough standard of living (Article 27):
Tens of millions of children live and work on the streets. Often, they have already faced serious violations of their rights, whether at home, in care or in juvenile justice institutions. They are often unable to access essential services, and report that they suffer abuse at the hands of police and criminal gangs.
 - ➔ A child's right to protection in times of war (Article 38):
Conflict, humanitarian and environmental crises intensify the exclusion and exploitation of children. Child labour in countries affected by armed conflict is estimated to be 77% higher than the global average. Hostilities are increasing in highly populated urban areas, turning children's homes, schools and playgrounds into battlefields. And the number of children living in conflict zones has been steadily increasing, reaching roughly 420 million – nearly one child in 5 – by 2017.
 - ➔ A child's right to an identity (Article 8):
For millions of children, a lack of identity documents and full citizenship rights lies behind their exclusion from essential services and protection. Nearly 150 million children under the age of five have not had their births registered. An estimated 3.7 million refugee children are out of school. Children in these situations are 5 times more likely to be denied their right to education, often because identity documents have been lost or registration systems have broken down.
 - ➔ Providing information to all children regarding their rights (Article 42):
Lastly, a fundamental cause of exclusion among children is a lack of knowledge and awareness of the rights they have under the UN CRC and the claims they hold on adults to meet these rights. Deprivation and lack of awareness of rights among children go hand in hand.⁸



Intersecting inequalities

Sources of exclusion intersect and reinforce each other. In almost all societies, coming from a marginalised ethnic or religious group will intensify discrimination. A girl from a discriminated ethnic minority group is likely to be even more disadvantaged than a girl from the dominant ethnicity. Equally, a child with a disability who comes from a background of poverty or who has lost their parents is doubly vulnerable.

Migrant children are widely denied their rights, not only because they are often from a minority but because they are “on the move”, lack parental support, or come from a foreign land. Their plight is exacerbated by the segmentation of government departments, leaving many of the worst-off children falling between the gaps in responsibility.

The missing millions⁹

Children who are most excluded are also those about whom the least is known. While investments in data collection and analysis have stepped up, notably in lower-income countries, they are skewed to cover people in stable household settings. Children in other situations, or who are “hidden” (because they have a disability or are unable to attend school or clinics because of conflict, insecurity, extreme poverty or lack of identity papers) are often left uncounted and unrepresented by national data.

The impression of how well we include all children can become seriously biased if we rely on published statistics alone. A continuing lack of access to public spending and services, at both national and local government levels, is a further consequence of the exclusion of children from official data.



To realise the UN CRC and Agenda 2030, governments must invest first in the children who are most left behind

Investing in those children furthest behind

Fulfilling the commitments of the UN CRC and Agenda 2030 requires governments to invest first in the children who are most left behind. However, budget classification systems often don't enable spending on children to be tracked. This, and the lack of disaggregated data, make informed decisions on public spending very difficult. Fundamentally, this stems from a lack of political determination to find who and where the worst-off children are, and to address the reasons for their exclusion.

Low public spending on basic services, and spending biased towards better-off people, is especially damaging for the families and children who depend on these services the most. In the absence of decent safety nets, catastrophic health expenses and sudden environmental shocks are major causes of families being plunged into poverty and destitution.

Children as agents in tackling exclusion

Across all societies, no group is more likely to be denied a voice and a say in decisions than children. Although marginalised groups often lack opportunities for participation, a lack of voice particularly reinforces the invisibility of children. Despite the UN CRC's landmark recognition of children's right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, few governments allow the legal registration of child-led organisations.

Speaking up for their needs and demands carries risks for children, especially those least protected to begin with. They may face stigma and bullying from parents, teachers and peers, or be exposed to state-sponsored or vigilante violence. Discrimination against already-marginalised children further limits their ability to participate in decision-making. Girls, children with disabilities and children who speak minority languages are among those who face particular barriers and risks of reprisal.

Increasing reliance on social media and the internet to get and share information, express themselves and to organise further creates risks for children. Few countries have adequate legal protection of children's right to privacy or capacity to manage their digital footprint.

Removing the obstacles that children face in participating in the issues that concern them, based on their wishes and maturity, is a goal in itself. But it is also one of the most important keys for unlocking progress on the SDGs for those who are most left behind. Respecting the voices and agency of children – not only being seen, but also heeded - will help them to influence legal, policy and budgetary decisions in their favour.



What works to deliver progress for excluded children

Countries and governments can draw on a wide range of measures that are emerging as “good practice” in reaching children and families who are most left behind. Examples include:

- ➔ Moving towards comprehensive social protection provisions for children, such as universal child grants, as in Mongolia, Argentina and South Africa, together with school feeding and support for child care services; and including cash benefits for people with disabilities in wider anti-poverty programmes, as in Ethiopia and Ghana.¹⁰
- ➔ Community-based health insurance schemes, with subsidies or exemptions for very poor families and their children, as pursued by Ghana and Rwanda.¹¹
- ➔ Supporting very poor households with economic assets such as livestock, coupled with regular training on business development and nutrition, which in Bangladesh has been found to substantially improve nutritional growth among young children.¹²
- ➔ Removing primary and secondary school fees to ensure that students can access schooling equally, and targeting financial support to girls at risk of dropping out, as in Rwanda; and providing special accommodations for young mothers at school, such as time for breast-feeding or to attend health clinics, as in Cape Verde and Senegal.¹³
- ➔ Setting up children’s parliaments and providing information so that children can act as human rights defenders –promoting their own rights and those of their more disadvantaged peers– as in Sierra Leone, Guatemala, El Salvador and Scotland.¹⁴



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In Yemen, for example, Save the Children and partners support children’s participation in parliamentary structures to promote, monitor and defend their rights and to influence policy-makers. Through these structures, children have contributed to a decrease in child marriage and in corporal punishment.¹⁵

Other measures to ensure excluded children benefit from basic services and protections include: making vital information available in mother tongue to caregivers among linguistic minority groups and displaced populations; enabling disadvantaged children to access and safely benefit from digital technology; and using graduated responses (universal, targeted or specialist support) to include children with disabilities in basic education.¹⁶



Calls to Action: ensuring that no children are left behind

The Child Rights Now! alliance calls on countries to apply a child rights approach to Agenda 2030, ensuring that no child is left behind, by adopting laws, policies and budgets that promote equality and social cohesion, tackle discriminatory attitudes and practices, and overcome exclusion.

- ➔ **Pledges made at the UN to include all segments of society must translate into actions** directed to the most marginalised children and their families, as part of wider strategies for combating inequalities and the many forms of discrimination which hold them back.
- ➔ Governments, together with communities and civil society, should **conduct “Leave No One Behind Assessments”** to identify the barriers faced by deprived children. This will provide a basis for incorporating specific strategies to include these children in all sector plans and budgets¹⁷. They should include proactive measures, such as social protection and local outreach, to ensure that the most excluded children, including those with disabilities, benefit from basic services.
- ➔ All governments must tackle the **root causes of the gender inequality, violence and harmful social norms** that undermine the rights of the poorest girls and other groups of children.
- ➔ **Humanitarian responses must protect children’s rights and promote gender equality from the outset.** Children and families whose lives are ravaged by conflict, climate crises and environmental degradation must be supported with the necessary skills, information, technologies, care and assets to adapt, heal and recover.
- ➔ Governments and their partners should **track and demonstrate progress for all children, especially those most left behind**, by strengthening systems for the collection, analysis and dissemination of high-quality disaggregated data.
- ➔ **Data should cover all groups of children, including those who are stateless, refugees, displaced, living without parental care, or with disabilities.** Surveys should include methods to assess the situation of the most disadvantaged children¹⁸. This should include full recognition of evidence produced by communities and young people themselves.¹⁹
- ➔ Governments, with civil society, should **support the participation, voice and visibility of children who are among the most disadvantaged**, both as a right and as an essential pathway to ensuring their inclusion as full citizens. Governments should welcome children holding adult decision-makers to account for ensuring that they, too, are not left behind.



NOTES

1. See for example, "Follow the Money: Equitably Financing Child Survival", Save the Children, UK, 2019
2. Except where indicated, data are taken from "A Second Revolution: Thirty Years of Child Rights and the Unfinished Agenda", Child Rights Now!, June 2019, on which this Policy Brief is based.
3. UNICEF, "Advantage or Paradox? The challenge for children and young people of growing up urban", 2018
4. Children in households who fall below 60% of median income. See UNICEF, Innocenti Scorecard 14, "Building the Future: Children and the Sustainable Development Goals in Rich Countries", 2017
5. OECD and Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, "Poor Children in Rich Countries: Why we need policy action", Brief, 2018
6. <https://theirworld.org/explainers/children-with-disabilities>
7. Joining Forces (2019). CRN! National Reports Brazil, Colombia, Germany, Philippines and Spain.
8. "A Comparative Study on Children's Rights Awareness in 16 Countries", Piia-Kaisa af Ursin et al, Child Indicators Research, Vol 11 Issue 5, 2018
9. See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/may/03/how-can-you-leave-no-one-behind-when-millions-of-children-are-uncounted>
10. ILO, "World Social Protection Report, 2017-19", 2018
11. ILO, "Progress towards Universal Health Coverage: Rwanda", 2016
12. Raza, Wameq & Poel, Ellen, "Impact and spill-over effects of an asset transfer program on malnutrition: Evidence from a randomized control trial in Bangladesh", 2016
13. Human Rights Watch, "Leaving No Girl Behind in Africa", 2018
14. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRC/Discussions/2018/CRC_DGD_2018_OutcomeReport.pdf
15. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRC/Discussions/2018/SaveTheChildren.pdf>
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17. "Still Left Behind? Tracking children's progress against the pledge to Leave No One Behind", Save the Children UK, 2018
18. "The Missing Children: child poverty measurement and monitoring", Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, 2019
19. "100 Hotspots: Snapshot of LNOB Groups and SDGs in India", International Civil Society Centre, 2019

"Delivering Progress for the Most Excluded Children" is a product of Child Rights Now!, an initiative of the Joining Forces alliance.

Joining Forces is an alliance of the six largest international NGOs working with and for children to secure their rights and end violence against them.

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