

A woman in a red floral shirt and patterned skirt carries a young child on her back. The child is wearing a red hat and a yellow shirt. The woman is holding a white UNICEF water bucket. They are walking through a refugee camp with makeshift tents made of green and striped tarps. The ground is dry and dusty. The sky is blue with white clouds.

# Prospects for children in 2022

**A GLOBAL OUTLOOK**

## About

In 2021, the **Office of Global Insight and Policy (OGIP)** produced a medium-term analysis of global trends in support of UNICEF's preparation of a new Strategic Plan. The report '[Prospects for children: a global outlook through 2025](#)' examined the nature and consequences of a potential exit from the COVID-19 pandemic and explored the trajectory of longer-term trends identified as being critical in shaping the world and children's lives over the next five years. These were: (i) weakened support for multilateralism; (ii) slowing globalization; (iii) global warming; (iv) evolving rules and norms governing the online world; and (v) the decline of democratization and civic space.

As a follow-up to this exercise, the Global Insight team intends to produce an outlook assessment with a 12-month time horizon at the start of each year. Our aim is twofold: to draw the attention of the global community to the effects of global trends and events on child rights and well-being; and to support UNICEF staff and offices in interpreting and engaging in a rapidly changing world.

Our 2022 outlook draws on the reflections and analysis of staff from UNICEF's Global Insight team, supported by the Atlantic Council and the Pardee Center for International Futures, two organizations with long track records and formidable reputations in risk analysis and foresight. Jointly, we revisited the longer-term trends examined in 'Prospects for children', identified those that we considered to be most relevant for children in 2022, and highlighted new trends or events to be brought to the attention of our readership. Our initial findings were debated and refined during a virtual consultation held with 18 experts, leaders and young activists from around the world on 16 November 2021.

The resulting analysis is organized around ten trends (Figure 1). Annual trends, such as the ten highlighted in this report, are inevitably highly interconnected. They emerge, in part, from megatrends such as demographics, climate change, biodiversity loss and rapid technological changes, which will shape the world in which children live over the course of the next 30 to 50 years.



**Longer-term trends** identified in our 2021–2025 outlook as critical in shaping children's lives:

- Weakened support for multilateralism
  - Slowing globalization
  - Global warming
  - Evolving rules and norms governing the online world
  - The decline of democratization and civic space
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FIGURE 1: ANTICIPATED DURATION OF TRENDS



These six trends are discussed in 'Prospects for children: a global outlook through 2025'

We have not examined these megatrends in detail in this report, but they remain key to any account of the evolving global context. Many of the trends we have identified in this report will be important not just in the coming 12 months, but well beyond that timeframe. At the same time, unexpected events or emerging trends – so-called black and white swans, tipping points and weak signals – may well derail the trends identified here in both positive and negative ways. The trends and events highlighted here should be interpreted in this context.

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# Summary



## Summary

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the harm that been done to children is increasingly evident: a record rise in child poverty, setbacks to hard-won progress on routine vaccinations, and disruption to education for an entire generation of children. That harm has emerged as **an unintended side-effect of the world's efforts to manage the crisis.**

2021 started with a sense of hope with the unveiling of a suite of vaccines, pointing to a potential exit from the pandemic. Yet twelve months later, we instead face the reality of an unequal vaccine roll-out and the emergence of the Omicron variant. **The question is not how soon the virus will be eradicated, but how soon we will be able to mitigate its effects sufficiently that it will no longer disrupt lives. As 2022 begins, we are not there yet and the losses for children continue to accumulate.**

"In 2022, we will come to terms with what COVID really meant. So far, we have been firefighting the pandemic, but the impact will be seen for years to come."

Ms. Priti Patnaik, Founding Editor, Geneva Health Files

What next for the world's children in the year ahead? As in the past two years, **prospects for children will continue to hinge foremost on the pandemic and how it is managed.** Furthermore, **our ambivalence regarding the pandemic's trajectory reinforces the sense that we are in a period of uncertainty.**

Until now, the pandemic response has been characterized by short-termism and lack of cooperation. Myopic thinking has led to school closures being seen as a largely benign and efficient measure to stem the spread of an infectious disease. Yet as we look ahead to 2022 and beyond, the consequences of such steps will increasingly be counted: learning losses that are worse than originally anticipated, school dropouts, negative coping strategies including child labour and child marriage. Without remedial steps, we will continue to count their effects in the years ahead in terms of lost productivity and lower wages. The unwillingness of the global community to truly come together in fighting a common challenge, as it did 15 years ago against the global financial crisis, has resulted in repeated missteps: the difficulty in funding the pandemic response in poor countries, G20 dose pledges not being honoured, and the flouting of the authority of global institutions. **In 2022, the same lack of cooperation puts at risk the G20 target to vaccinate at least 70 per cent of the population in every country by mid-year, ultimately increasing the odds of further escape variants and delaying the virus's eventual containment.** Again, the longer the delay, the more the costs for children accumulate.

COVID-19 has been a uniquely disequalizing crisis. 2021 may be remembered most for the unequal access to vaccines, but inequity has played out in other dimensions: recorded learning losses have been by far the greatest among the poorest children in each country; and job losses have been disproportionately borne by women and youth. **In 2022, inequities are set to take new forms. The supply constraint for COVID-19 vaccines to poor countries will lift, but access to mRNA doses will remain restricted, and access to life-saving treatments like Paxlovid will be even more exclusive.** By the end of the year, rich countries are expected to regain their pre-pandemic economic trajectory, whereas income in low-income countries is forecast to remain 6.7 per cent below trend. Exacerbating this difference is the premature withdrawal of policy support to alleviate the pandemic's economic impact anticipated in many countries – most notably those bound by fiscal constraints. **This puts at risk expanded social protection measures that serve as a lifeline to many families, as well as other public services for children.**

While children living in rich countries can expect to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis earlier than those in poor countries, children living in humanitarian situations face a more permanent crisis. **Record humanitarian needs are forecast in 2022**, reflecting both long-standing conflicts as well as rapidly escalating emergencies from Afghanistan to Ethiopia to Myanmar. **As climate change grows in severity each year, it will trigger new disasters, fuel instability, and exacerbate communities' existing vulnerabilities** in health, nutrition, sanitation and their susceptibility to displacement and violence. If the global response to COVID-19 reveals the ill-health of multilateralism, conflict and climate change serve as a reminder that **the deterioration of multilateralism has occurred when it is needed more keenly than ever.**



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**Other sources of instability are likely to arise in 2022** with consequences for children. **The proliferation of armed drones and their unregulated use is poised to dramatically alter the nature of warfare**, while the increased frequency and intensity of cyberattacks pose a threat to various institutions on which children's livelihoods depend, including schools, other public infrastructure, and banks. **Global inflationary pressures threaten the purchasing power of households, especially in energy and food markets:** the latter is especially concerning in low-income countries where 50 per cent of consumer spending is devoted to food, and in economies disproportionately dependent on global food markets, such as the Middle East which imports 50 per cent of its food. Rising prices have historically often served as a tinder box for social unrest.

The scenario described above paints a bleak outlook for children, especially the most vulnerable. What can be done to improve children's fortunes?

**In 2022, the global community needs to recast its COVID-19 strategy: to focus not only on mitigating the virus but mitigating its effect on society – particularly children.** In practical terms, that means committing to keep schools open, and providing schools and families with the resources they need to keep children safely in school and learning. It means placing them and their families and the goods and services on which they depend at the centre of recovery packages and protecting them from the fiscal adjustments that are expected to follow. It means **investing in restoring losses from the pandemic:** in learning, non-COVID-19 health programmes, nutrition and children’s mental health. And it means doubling down on health system strengthening and expanding access to primary health care.

This task will be made easier with renewed cooperation between countries. Such cooperation will not only strengthen the response to the pandemic, but is critical to tackle conflict, climate and other emerging challenges that shape children's lives. Here we must heed the call of children and young people, who are more likely to **identify as global citizens and express greater belief in international cooperation** as a means of tackling global threats.

Children and young people also express greater optimism that, for all its challenges, the world is becoming a better place over time. 2022 will present opportunities to prove them right. For instance, **some of the technology and infrastructure developed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic can be put to new uses to drive the next revolution in child survival.** The first mRNA vaccine candidates for tuberculosis, malaria and HIV are expected to enter clinical trials in 2022 and 2023, around the time when the recombinant protein-based malaria vaccine (RTS,S) begins to be rolled out in sub-Saharan Africa. Elsewhere, 2022 should see the emergence of green investment as a major growth engine. Electric vehicle sales are expected to more than double in 2022 while renewables are expected to account for 95 per cent of new power generation over the next five years, driving climate mitigation and providing countless new jobs for young people entering the labour market. In addition, emergency policies rolled out in response to the pandemic, including expansions of childcare and mental health services,

"If we expect more youth migration, we should also expect more unaccompanied youth ... There is a huge gap between pledges to accommodate unaccompanied youth and actually accommodating unaccompanied youth in practice."

David Passarelli, Executive Director, UNU Centre for Policy Research

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