



Prospects for
children: a
global outlook

About

The Office of Global Insight and Policy serves as UNICEF's internal think-tank, investigating issues with implications for children, equipping the organization to more effectively shape the global discourse, and preparing it for the future by scanning the horizon for frontier issues and ways of working. With dedicated expertise in seven policy areas — digital technology, human capital, governance, the environment, society, markets, and finance — the Global Insight team assists the organization in interpreting, and engaging in, a rapidly changing world. Send inquiries to globalinsight@unicef.org.



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This report was prompted by an internal request for an assessment of the changing external environment, and its impact on children, to inform the preparation of UNICEF's next Strategic Plan. It was produced collectively by staff from UNICEF's Global Insight team and reflects their views and perspectives. The report benefited from feedback from various UNICEF staff. In addition, its initial findings were presented and debated at a virtual consultation held with 32 youth experts, leaders, and activists from around the world on January 8th 2021. We are especially grateful to participants of the consultation, some of whose views are presented throughout this report.

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Introduction

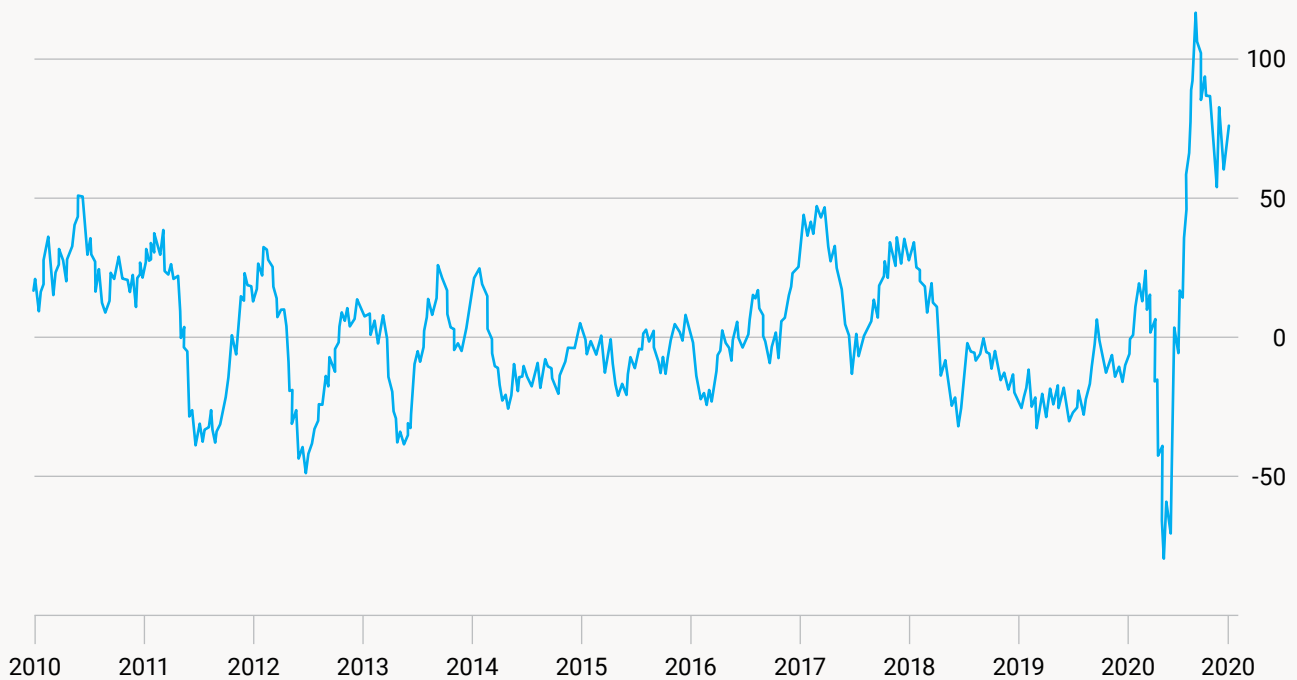


Introduction

This paper assesses prospects for the world’s children over the next five years based on a review of the global context. This medium-term horizon covers half of the remaining period to 2030—the year for which the global community has set ambitious goals for sustainable development including for children. Progress in these five years will determine whether the vision of those goals, and the accelerated rate of progress they demand, remains a possibility.

Our analysis has been undertaken during a time of global crisis and heightened global uncertainty. This is an environment in which prognostications are in high demand but are especially hard to do well.

FIGURE 1: CITI ECONOMIC SURPRISE INDEX



Note: CESI compares economic data against economists' expectations, rising when data exceeds consensus estimates and falling when data are below estimates. Data is provided up to December 3, 2020.

Source: [Refinitiv via Financial Times](#)

This backdrop also risks detracting attention from the broader context that has shaped the lives of children over the last two decades—a period of undeniably historic progress. That context has been defined by two overarching forces. The first is a convergence of living standards, driven by rapid economic growth in developing countries. This marks a reversal of the pattern from the previous several decades when rich countries consistently forged ahead. The second

force is an improvement in children’s lives irrespective of gains in income, resulting from the diffusion of new technologies, knowledge and norms—including the use of antiretroviral drugs that have almost ended the transmission of HIV/AIDS during childbirth, the widespread adoption of antimalarial bed-nets, and demands for gender equality in access to schools.

The persistence or reversal of these two forces over the coming years will be critical in any final assessment of children’s lives five years from now. The proceeding analysis suggests that the first trend is likely to reverse while the second could potentially accelerate.

The outlook is organized into three parts. Part 1 examines the nature and consequences of the exit from the COVID pandemic. Part 2 considers the trajectory of longer-term trends that we currently consider most important in shaping the world and children’s lives. Part 3 identifies possible events and trends that are less significant today that have the potential to define the medium term.



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Exiting COVID →



PART 1

Exiting COVID

Exiting COVID

The COVID pandemic has brought about the biggest disruption to progress for children across the world in modern history: the largest increase in extreme poverty since the start of the contemporary time series, with catastrophic implications for child hunger; the suspension of immunization campaigns for children against preventable diseases, setting back coverage rates approximately 20 years; and an unprecedented shuttering of schools worldwide, resulting in over a billion children being sent home with profound consequences for their learning and future productivity. While children have largely been spared from severe COVID infections, the broader effects of the pandemic on children have already proven to be multidimensional, dis-equalizing and grave. The persistence of these effects will vary and hinge in no small part on humanity's ability to navigate a sustainable exit from the pandemic in the shortest time possible. The success or failure of this exit is likely to be the most critical factor in shaping progress for children over the next five years.

Prospects of a two-tier recovery

The rapid global spread of COVID infections in early 2020 serves as a powerful reminder of the deeply connected and globalized world we inhabit and the necessary involvement of all countries in a definitive exit from the pandemic. At the same time, the divergent experience of countries, both in containing the virus and in the toll of human suffering in 2020, points to the likelihood of an unequal recovery ahead.

The prompt emergence of multiple vaccine candidates demonstrating high levels of efficacy seemingly puts an exit within reach. Yet the global rollout of vaccines promises to be a long affair—current models forecast the process will take three years—and a fraught one, both ethically and logistically. That timeframe is largely defined by supply factors including manufacturing capacity,

“Economic issues are not only negatively impacting jobs but increasing instability and crime rates. Mobility restrictions have impacted women in particular”

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