

**Committee on the Rights of the Child – 86th session**  
**Opening of the session, 18 January 2021**  
**UNICEF statement**

Mister Chair, dear Committee members, dear colleagues,

On UNICEF's behalf, let me start by wishing each and every one of you a happy 2021, and by reiterating our commitment to working closely with all of you in this new year.

As you well know, we have ended 2020 with human and child rights violations and inequalities further exposed and deepened by the pandemic and with decades of progress in CRC implementation at stake.

The closing of schools – which at the peak of lockdowns affected 90 per cent of students worldwide and left more than a third of schoolchildren with no access to remote education – has been particularly devastating. We estimate that the number of out-of-school children is set to increase by 24 million, to a level we have not seen in years and had fought so hard to overcome.

We in UNICEF have continuously adjusted our programme interventions throughout the year and worked with governments, civil society and communities in 192 countries to minimize the impact on children and their families. We will continue to do so this year, maintaining our focus on the most vulnerable children and learning from the systemic weaknesses exposed last year, including as we design our next strategic plan (that will start in 2022).

Another important trend throughout 2020, that you will no doubt have witnessed as well, has been the continuing, and possibly growing, push back against human and child rights. As Freedom House found that 2019 was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, 2020 is expected to follow the same negative trend, with Governments using the pandemic as a pretext to crack down on free expression and access to information. At the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council last Fall, we have witnessed a strong, well-coordinated push back against child rights – with some States even questioning children's status as rights holders.

We believe that this trend calls for increase child rights advocacy from our part and look forward to continuing working with all of you in this respect. We also see this as one more reason for the Committee to resume some of its dialogues with State parties in the May session, as most of the other committees have done, so as to send the clear message to Member States that child rights are as important as the rights of other human beings.

I will now share some highlights of our work, that may be of particular relevance to you.

In December, we have launched our report on the impact of human rights mechanisms, prepared with the Universal Rights Group, that demonstrates how UNICEF's engagement with human rights mechanisms – including the CRC Committee – brings measurable results and positive change in children's lives.

Participants in the launch event, including the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the President of the Human Rights Council, welcomed the report as a groundbreaking and timely contribution to closing the gap between human rights obligations and implementation on the ground, especially at a time when human rights mechanisms are challenged by the push back I mentioned earlier, the pandemic and the UN financial crisis.

This year, we will continue to promote these positive findings and lessons learned, including in a series of online events in each of the regions, during which we will outline the relevant international and regional human rights mechanisms and discuss how to best leverage them to bring results in children's lives. We would be very pleased to have some of you participate in these regional discussions.

Last year, we have also continued to disseminate the child-friendly CRC, that the Committee supported, and started to develop an animation explaining child rights to children aged 3 to 6.

We have also followed up with our commitments from our joint workplan as agreed during our Biennial meeting one year ago – including the preparation of a draft note articulating children's right to a remedy and suggesting ways to enhance reporting on this issue; two new sections for our internal toolkit on CRC reporting – one on Public Finance for Children and one on OPAC reporting; and the revision of our child participation section of the same toolkit, together with Child Rights Connect and OHCHR. From now on, we will hold webinars with country colleagues ahead of each session to encourage greater child participation in the process, together with Child Rights Connect (and some of you who have indicated interest). As per the Biennial workplan, we have also approached several States with long overdue reports to suggest that they opt-in to the SRP as a way to resume and accelerate reporting. This triggered a resumption of reporting efforts in several and one of them, Chad, decided to opt-in.

In closing, we wish to again acknowledge the challenging working circumstances for the Committee in these pandemic times and express our hope that the Committee will resume some of its dialogues with Member States in the next session.

And I will end with commending Amal, Olga, Renate and Cephas for their contribution to the Committee's work in the past years, wishing them all the best as they move on, and wishing you all a productive session.

Thank you.