



# The UN & You

BY TERESA KOTTURAN SCN – DECEMBER 2019

## Convention on the Rights of the Child is 30 years old

Thirty years have gone by since the adoption of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) in 1989. It was an historic moment—when world leaders agreed to become part of an international treaty affirming the world's commitment to protect and fulfill children's rights. It opened up greater opportunities and more rights for children not only to survive, but to thrive. The world has made great progress in ensuring children lead better lives: more children are receiving primary education; the number of stunted children under five years have been reduced; polio has been almost eradicated, except in three countries; better coverage of vaccinations have reduced many childhood diseases and consequently child mortality rates.

“Children dream of a world of peace and nonviolence, a world in which they can grow up happy, cherished, supported, safe, confident, empowered, and in which no child is left behind.” Yet, all over the world children are subjected to abject poverty, hunger, inadequate healthcare, lack of accessible, affordable, quality education, clean water, air and sanitation, homelessness, inequality, discrimination, impacts of climate change and disasters, violence and conflicts, displacement and migration, life in refugee camps and detention centers, lack of an identity and statelessness, trafficking and exploitation and much more. UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore states “The children of today are facing a new set of challenges and global shifts that were unimaginable to your parents. Our climate is changing beyond recognition. Inequality is deepening. Technology is transforming how we perceive the world. And more families are migrating than ever before. Childhood has

changed, and we need to change our approaches along with it.”

“How we treat our children is a reflection of our societies and values,” states Guy Rider of the International Labor Organization (ILO). Besides the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the world has the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to build a better future for children. How is the world meeting the needs of its children? Let us take a look at some of the prob-

lems they are confronted with and enduring today to see if they really reflect our Gospel and Vincentian values.

### Poverty

According to the World Bank, 385 million children around the world live in poverty. One in four children is living in poverty in the world's richest countries. Poverty can cause children permanent damage, both physically and mentally. It can lead to stunted growth, low performance in school,

health problems, etc. Poverty is a denial of their human rights, which contributes to further deprivations. Children living in poverty are prone to absenteeism and are seven times more likely to drop out of schools. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty.

### Hunger

Poverty is often the cause of hunger. Eight hundred million children go hungry every day. Adequate nutrition in early childhood can ensure healthy growth and development in children. With proper nourishment, children can learn better and acquire new skills as they develop. Malnutrition is a concern for every country in

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*Henrietta Fore, executive director, UNICEF*

the world. Globally, about 151 million under-5-year-olds are estimated to be stunted in 2013. In 2017, about half of all stunted children lived in Asia, and over one-third in Africa (UNICEF). Every year, 3.1 million children die (8,500 children per day) due to poor nutrition. Children who are undernourished suffer up to 160 days of illness each year. According to the World Food Program, 66 million primary school-age children attend classes hungry across the developing world. Another aspect of malnutrition is obesity, and according to World Health Organization, there are 41 million children under 5 years old who are overweight or obese.

### **Education**

We can take comfort in the fact that more children are enrolled in pre-primary, primary and secondary education; but that does not mean they are learning. Besides the 260 million children out of school, the global community is faced with a challenge called “learning poverty.” All children should be able to read by age 10, for learning is a gateway to progress through school. There is a lack of trained teachers, inadequate learning materials, makeshift classes and poor sanitation facilities which make learning difficult for children. Many children come to school hungry, sick or exhausted from work at home. Poverty is the biggest barrier to education. Children with disabilities and from ethnic minorities are deprived of opportunities for learning. Education is denied to a vast number of girl children in many developing countries; parents prefer to educate their male children. Only 66 percent of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education. “Children who can read can lead.”

### **Displacement and Migration**

Millions of children are on the move across international borders – fleeing violence and conflict, disaster or poverty, in pursuit of a better life. According to UN DESA, there are 37.9 million child migrants (aged 19 years and under) in 2019, accounting for 14 percent of the total migrant population. Many children move alone and face grave risks within and between countries; they become easy prey for traffickers and others who abuse and exploit them. Thousands of children face harsh border enforcement policies in countries that consider migration as an infringement of their laws and close borders, trapping them into a limbo-like situation. Some countries are separating migrant children from their parents and detaining them at the bor-

der, which is a human rights violation. Any given day, at the southern U.S. border, more than 2,000 children are held in the custody of U.S. Border Patrol without their parents. Children on the move are children, and they need protection. The Convention on the Rights of the Child protects every child everywhere, regardless of legal status, nationality or statelessness. Yet children on the move suffer violations of their rights in most countries; their rights don’t stop at the borders.

### **Child Labor**

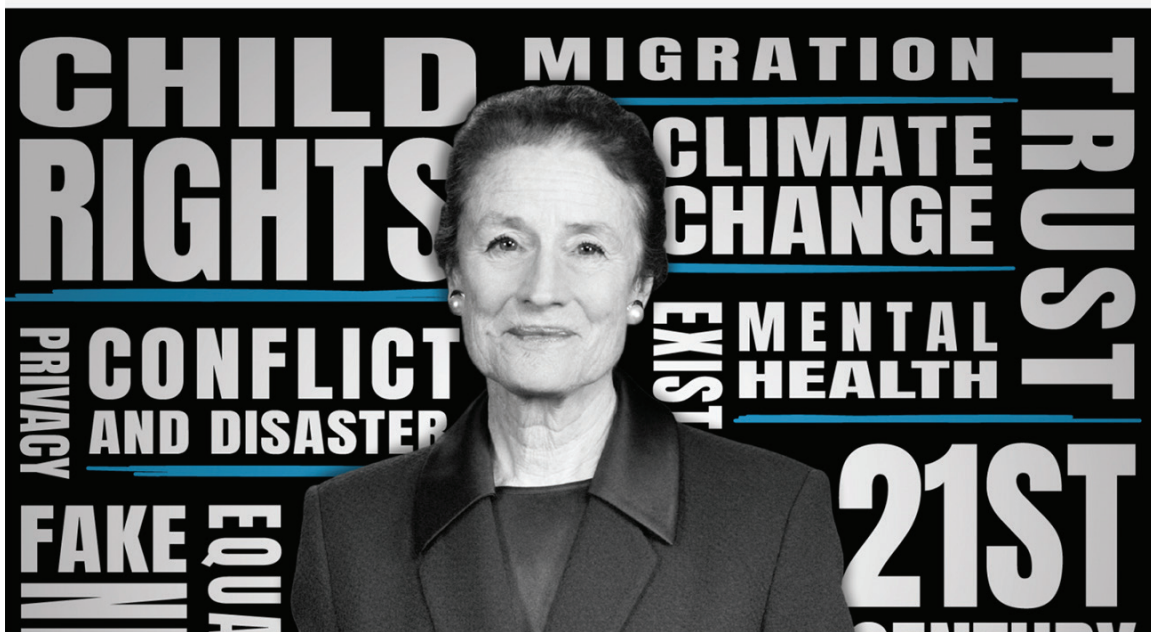
We all dream of a day when there will be no child labor, I am sure. According to the International Labor Organization, “child labor” is defined as “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It also refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and interferes with their schooling, by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school...” Some of the worst forms of child labor are: trafficking of children, debt bondage, forced labor, recruitment of children for use in armed conflict, prostitution, pornography, illicit activities, like production and trafficking of drugs, working in mines, operating dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, etc. As per ILO data, 218 million children between 5 and 17 years of age are in employment. Among them 152 million are victims of child labor, and 73 million of these are engaged in hazardous work. We are certainly robbing the childhood of these children. There is an urgent need to address the root causes that push children to work, like poverty and violence and ensure families have social protection and access to basic services.

### **Violence**

Every child has a fundamental right to grow up free from violence, abuse and exploitation. According to the World Health Organization, one in two children ages 2-17 years suffered violence in the past year. Girl children are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. According to a UN report on violence against children, “for countless millions of children, life is a nightmare, as they are exposed to appalling levels of violence in their neighborhoods, in schools, in institutions for their care and protection, and within the home. Children are too frightened to speak up; they lack the information they need to seek advice and protection in their healing, recovery and reintegration. SDG 16.2 aims to end all forms of violence against children.

# An open letter to the world's children

8 reasons why I'm worried, and hopeful, about the next generation



Faith-based organizations and religious leaders can play a major role to mobilize people from all walks of life to end violence against children. We have a responsibility to end violence against children. Learn how can do this from the video link given below.

Henrietta Fore, the executive director of UNICEF, is concerned about these challenges children face. In her [open letter](#) to children of today and tomorrow, she states “8 reasons why I’m worried, and hopeful, about the next generation.”

Children of our times are very aware of the problems they face, and they want to be part of the solutions. They want the adults to take note: “Nothing about us, without us.” They are not mere bystanders. It is evident from the happenings of this year, how children

are playing a significant role in the existential threat the planet and all living beings are facing. The adults have failed listen to the warnings from the scientists and alarm bells ringing in different parts of the world through extreme heat, excessive floods, destructive typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones. So the children of the world are leading the fight for urgent climate action, for drastic changes in our lifestyles, or as Pope Francis would ask, for an “ecological conversion.”

If all the countries and their governments take concrete steps to implement the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), with a special focus on investing in children, there is reason to hope and dream of a better future. What role will you and I play to ensure that the rights of every child, everywhere is respected?

## Links

Video: What Rights Do Children Have? [View on YouTube](#)

Short video: An open letter to the world's children  
[View on YouTube](#)

Video: Ending violence against children  
[View on YouTube](#)

UNICEF Report: [Convention on the Rights of the Child at a Crossroads](#) (PDF)

