Looking to the Future
Risks and Opportunities for Children
Climate change, rising inequality, and political instability and conflict represent the biggest risks for the world’s children over the next 15 years, according to a survey conducted by UNICEF of 460 members of its staff around the world.

At the same time, science and technology, the elimination of contemporary scourges, and the potential of the children themselves are among the best hopes for improving their lives.
Methodology

The data come from a Global Risks and Opportunities for Children perception survey of 460 UNICEF staff members from around the globe. The survey was conducted online and was optional and open to all UNICEF staff.

The methodology borrows heavily from the Global Risks Perception Survey of the World Economic Forum (WEF).

The survey’s list of 19 risks and 13 opportunities was identified by a UNICEF group of experts using a Delphi consultative process. These experts represented perspectives across different sectors and regions of UNICEF.

During the fall of 2015, survey respondents were asked to rank each risk and opportunity on a 0-6 scale according to their likelihood and impact on children (defined as 18 or younger) in the next 15 years. The survey also asked respondents to provide other significant threats and opportunities that were not listed in the questionnaire. Those answers, referred to as “free responses,” provided additional insights beyond the survey’s main findings.

To capture the voice of youth, the UNICEF survey was complemented by a survey with 112 young people. Using the Voices of Youth platform, young people were asked to list their top three worries and hopes for the future. Respondents were a sample of young people (primarily between 10 and 24 years old) who were connected to the platform (i.e., had access to a computer and Internet connection).

This exercise has several limitations. First, we collect attitudinal and perception data that do not necessarily reflect the objective reality. However, the aim of the survey is to gauge the perceptions of various groups of people, which is useful for understanding UNICEF positioning. Second, our sample of UNICEF staff and youth is not representative of the populations from which they are drawn. As such, our findings are valid only for these groups. However, these data are useful as a springboard to understanding some of the future concerns of UNICEF staff and others and to inform and engage staff members in UNICEF strategic planning activities.

Definitions

What is a trend?
A trend is an issue anticipated to be of significant importance in the future, based on:

1) Strong indications of change that can already be detected in data or analysis; or

2) Weak indications (signals) of potential change such as new events, ideas, plans, or information that you perceive will be of greater importance in the future.

What is a risk?
A risk is a trend, event, or condition that is likely to impact the future of children negatively.

What is an opportunity?
An opportunity is a trend, event, or condition that is likely to impact the future of children positively.

Respondent profiles

Affiliation

- Country Office 70%
- Headquarters 14%
- National Committee 6%
- Regional Office 10%

Gender

- Female 58.5%
- Male 41%
- Other 0.5%

Age

- 46 and older 47%
- 45 and younger 53%
Global Risks for Children in the Next 15 Years

Top 5 Risks by Impact
1. More political instability and protracted conflicts
2. Climate change
3. Rising inequalities within countries
4. Major environmental degradation
5. Persistent poverty

Top 5 Risks by Likelihood
1. Climate change
2. Rising inequalities within countries
3. Major environmental degradation
4. Violent extremism
5. More political instability and protracted conflicts
Global Opportunities for Children in the Next 15 Years

Top 5 Opportunities by Impact

1. Elimination of contemporary scourges
2. The exponential power of girls
3. Increased political will for universal access to services
4. Scientific discovery and technological innovation
5. The rise of clean energy

Top 5 Opportunities by Likelihood

1. Scientific discovery and technological innovation
2. Data revolution
3. Elimination of contemporary scourges
4. Horizontal cooperation
5. Technology for last mile service delivery

For full descriptions of risks and opportunities, and to explore the survey results, click here.
Anxiety Over the Environment

The survey found that climate change and major environmental degradation ranked one and three, respectively, in concerns among staff members when looking at how likely they are to happen and their potential impact on children. Climate change also ranked second in the list of worries of young people. Environmental degradation was a big concern for young respondents as well.

Related issues – food and water crises – did not rank highly for likelihood but were deemed significant in terms of potential impact on children in the future. A male staff member from the Netherlands wrote that he was concerned about “monopolization in industry sectors, without governance structure to effectively protect (the) environment.”

Environmental degradation can lead to droughts, air pollution, floods and severe storms, and diseases, among other dangers. These threats disproportionately undermine the rights of children, especially the most disadvantaged. Over half a billion children live in extremely high flood-risk zones, nearly 160 million live in high or extremely high drought-risk zones, and half of the world’s children live in urban areas, where air pollution is at its worst.

The rise of clean energy, with its contribution to climate change mitigation, was in the UNICEF staff’s list of top five opportunities with significant impact on children’s future. And as a complement to opportunities identified in the original questionnaire, sustainable development came in as the fifth highest opportunity listed in staff members’ “free responses.”

Worry for Those Left Behind

Progress on all development indicators over the past decades masks persistent and at times rising disparities within countries, threatening the social, economic, and political stability and development of countries. The fact that many children are being left behind on the ladder of progress was reflected in the survey. So was the fact that they are disproportionately affected by poverty, with 47% of those living in extreme poverty worldwide under 18 years old. Rising inequalities within countries and persistent poverty ranked in the top five of risks facing children over the next 15 years.

UNICEF staff members also highlighted racism and other types of discrimination high among their additional concerns. They wrote about “rising xenophobia and racism leading to violence towards minority groups,” “racial and ethnic profiling that negatively affect children,” and “gaps in access to technology by children deepening other inequalities.” Staff members noted how these trends could contribute to “greater social instability and increased social polarization.” And a 20-year-old female from Egypt is “afraid of the rejection in the movie making career because of [her] being categorized due to her hijab.”

Additional Global Risks (% of free responses by staff)

- 8.1% Erosion of socio-cultural values
- 7.7% Violence against children
- 7.1% Failure of national governance
- 6.3% Increasing polarization
- 5.0% Racism and other discriminations
- 4.4% Inadequate global/regional governance
Concern About Armed Conflict and Political Instability

Growing political instability and protracted conflicts ranked as the most impactful risk for children over the next 15 years. Related issues such as violent extremism and the growing number of displaced people also ranked in the top 10 of risks in both likelihood and impact. Echoing UNICEF staff members, young people also ranked wars and conflicts as their third top concern and terrorism as their sixth. These threats already affect 246 million children living in countries or areas affected by armed conflict.

Not surprisingly, concerns over these issues were highest in the Middle East and North Africa. UNICEF staff members in that region rated instability and protracted conflicts, violent extremism, and displacement as the top three global risks with the largest impact.

In the “free responses,” UNICEF staff members highlighted issues that relate to conflicts and political instability. Erosion of socio-cultural values, violence against children, failure of national governance, and increasing polarization emerged as the top risks, in that order. Responses included comments about “vanishing cultural heritage,” “sustained corruption,” “violence against women and girls,” and “unbridled nationalism.”

Enthusiasm About Science and Technology

Across the board, the survey found a strong belief that scientific discovery and technological innovation, along with the data revolution, represent the biggest opportunity with the highest likelihood to improve children’s well-being over the next 15 years. For young people, scientific discovery and technological innovation came in second in the list of opportunities for the future after access to better education.

For the most excluded and marginalized, science and technology are considered important for improving access to clean water, transportation, and financial services, also known as last mile service delivery. A staff member from Togo is confident that “digital technology will ease access to information and services even in the least developed countries.”

What came as a surprise was that the enthusiasm over technology was not matched by technology caution for UNICEF staff members while the youth survey offers a more balanced picture noting possibilities of technological warfare or robots taking over.
Belief in Girl Power and Youth Engagement

The exponential power of girls was rated as the second opportunity with the highest potential for global impact. The confidence in the positive benefits generated by today’s investments in girls comes despite the violence children in general, and girls in particular, still encounter.

**Every five minutes**, a child dies somewhere in the world as a result of violence. And **every 10 minutes**, violence is responsible for an adolescent girl’s death.

A theme that emerged from the youth survey is the confidence in the ability of children to create more opportunities for themselves and to make the world a better place. The youth polled pointed to the rise of youth as a key opportunity going forward. From a 17-year-old in Mexico to a 20-year-old in India, the testimonies of young people are strong and encouraging: “Young entrepreneurs who are not afraid or defeated by the social and cultural barriers. Always giving the best of themselves to us,” and “Children and youth are willing to be integrated and make a change for the world.”

They also sounded a cautionary note about future opportunities for children and young people. Poor employment prospects ranked as the top risk in their responses while it is only marginal in the UNICEF staff members’ responses. This is another surprising discrepancy as **2 out of 5 young people** of working age are either unemployed or have jobs that do not pay enough to escape poverty.

Faith in self and faith in humanity are notable in the youth survey. They are not reflected in global opportunities by staff but are featured in regional opportunities (see pages 9-10).
Regional Risks and Opportunities for Children in the Next 15 Years

In the survey, staff members were asked to identify top risks and opportunities for children in the region where they work. The following graphs present the findings.

Central and Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States

- **Top Risks**
  1. More political instability and protracted conflicts
  2. Rising inequalities
  3. Displacement

- **Top Opportunities**
  1. Private sector engagement
  2. Scientific discovery and technological innovation
  3. The rise of youth

East Asia and Pacific

- **Top Risks**
  1. Changing climate
  2. Major environmental degradation
  3. Rising inequalities

- **Top Opportunities**
  1. International/regional cooperation
  2. Economic growth
  3. Private sector engagement

Eastern and Southern Africa

- **Top Risks**
  1. More political instability and protracted conflicts
  2. Persistent poverty
  3. Rising inequalities

- **Top Opportunities**
  1. The rise of youth
  2. Economic growth
  3. Scientific discovery and technological innovation

Note on maps: All maps included in this publication are stylized and not to scale. They do not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or area or the delimitation of any frontiers. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. The final boundary between the Republic of the Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not yet been determined.
**West and Central Africa**

**Top Risks**
1. Displacement
2. Changing climate
3. More political instability and protracted conflicts
4. Rising inequalities

**Top Opportunities**
1. Scientific discovery and technological innovation
2. Private sector engagement
3. The rise of clean energy

**Europe**

**Top Risks**
1. Displacement
2. Changing climate
3. More political instability and protracted conflicts
4. Rising inequalities

**Top Opportunities**
1. Scientific discovery and technological innovation
2. Private sector engagement
3. The rise of clean energy

**Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Top Risks**
1. Rising inequalities
2. Changing climate
3. Violence

**Top Opportunities**
1. Horizontal cooperation
2. Increased political will for universal access to services
3. Private sector engagement

**Middle East and North Africa**

**Top Risks**
1. More political instability and protracted conflicts
2. Violent extremism
3. Displacement

**Top Opportunities**
1. The rise of youth
2. Scientific discovery and technological innovation
3. Education

**North America**

**Top Risks**
1. Rising inequalities
2. Increasing polarization
3. Changing climate

**Top Opportunities**
1. Private sector engagement
2. Data revolution
3. The rise of youth

**South Asia**

**Top Risks**
1. Major environmental degradation
2. Rising inequalities
3. Changing climate
4. Food and water crises
5. Gender inequality
6. Poor employment prospects
7. Violence

**Top Opportunities**
1. Education
2. The rise of youth
3. Gender equality
4. Scientific discovery and technological innovation

**West and Central Africa**

**Top Risks**
1. More political instability and protracted conflicts
2. Changing climate
3. Failure of national governance

**Top Opportunities**
1. Scientific discovery and technological innovation
2. The rise of youth
3. Demographic dividend
Additional Findings

Some responses and findings in the survey did not represent a consensus as a major risk or opportunity. However, there were some additional takeaways that were worth noting:

Ranking patterns

Overall, risks were ranked higher in likelihood and impact than opportunities. Colleagues also responded with more risks than opportunities to open questions. Is it easier to be pessimistic than optimistic?

On average, female respondents tended to rank the impact and likelihood of risks higher than did males. That difference is even larger in rating opportunities. Younger staff members generally were more likely to rank the impact and likelihood of risks and opportunities higher than their older colleagues did. Similarly, staff members at UNICEF headquarters, on average, rated the likelihood and impact of risks higher than did those located in other countries. The opposite tended to be true with the rankings of the likelihood and impact of opportunities.

Uncertainty

The likelihood and impact of advances in human genomics generated the most “Don’t know” answers. Many UNICEF employees also responded “Don’t know” when asked about the likelihood of increasingly powerful nuclear, biological, and cyber weapons with the potential for significant destruction. Does it indicate a relative novelty of some of these issues or the lack of a direct connection to these issues in UNICEF’s daily work?

Conclusion

Although it represents a small sample, the survey provides valuable perception-based intelligence, building on UNICEF’s extensive expertise and field presence.

The survey shows that much needs to be done over the next 15 years to ensure the best possible future for the world’s children. Threats to the environment, the growing divide between the haves and have-nots, war, instability, and violence all represent significant risks.

At the same time, there is room for hope. There is a great deal of enthusiasm that science and technology can improve the lives of children, from eliminating scourges such as polio to improving access to clean water.

The survey also found that despite the violence girls face around the world, there is confidence in their ability to make better lives for themselves. And youth in general are seen as more involved and capable of making positive changes for themselves and the world around them.

Surprises

The low ranking of health- and education-related trends by UNICEF staff came as a surprise. Education tops the opportunities list for youth but is much less prominent in the staff survey. The spread of communicable diseases makes the top 10 of the WEF’s 2016 global risks but not that of UNICEF. These are areas warranting further investigation.

Economic and financial risks or opportunities are also notably absent from the top UNICEF lists while they feature in the WEF top 10. Would the different background of survey respondents influence the ranking outcomes?

Interconnectedness and international/regional cooperation are perceived as both risks and opportunities by staff.