

Statement at the 31st Special Session of the General Assembly in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic delivered by H.E. Mr. Xavier Bettel, Prime Minister and Minister of State of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg on behalf of 63 countriesⁱ in their national capacities and as members of the Group of Friends of Children and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Mr President,

I address you today on behalf of Members of the *Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs*, a group of Member States committed to advocating for child rights, child well-being and meaningful child participation in UN intergovernmental processes and beyond.

2020 has been a momentous year. As we embark on the Decade of Action, the Group of Friends also celebrates its five-year anniversary. Our Group was formed in 2015 to make sure that the child rights agenda is at the heart of the SDGs. Since then, we have infused this agenda into our work at the United Nations.

2020 has, above all, been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. If we do not act swiftly and decisively, this crisis risks being compounded by the creation of *a lost generation of children*. Even before the onset of the pandemic, we were not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030; programmes to advance child rights – through education, health, nutrition and protection systems – did not reach all children. These realities were both exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19.

Over 91% of children and youth globally – over 1.8 *billion* young people – were affected by school closures, with 463 million of those unable to access online and remote learning during this time. Over 80 million children will miss out on life-saving vaccinations this year due to disruptions in routine healthcare and fragile health systems that have been overwhelmed by the COVID-19 response. In addition, children already at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse, find that they are cut off from key support services at the same time as they are suffering the additional physical and mental stress placed on fragile households. This is especially acute for girls.

In April of this year, the Group of Friends partnered with the European Union and the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States to issue a joint statement on protecting the lives and rights of children. This statement received overwhelming support, with 172 alignments from Member States and Permanent Observers.

However, words alone will not protect children's lives, rights and futures. We must take urgent action to ensure that the COVID-19 crisis does not become a child rights crisis. To this end, I would like to highlight three key actions.

First, in our immediate and longer-term COVID-19 response and recovery, we must commit to providing adequate financing to protect and promote child rights and well-being both in domestic budgets and through the mobilization of increased flows of external finance, including international development assistance.

Investing in the services and systems that will keep our children learning, healthy and safe must be an integral feature of the COVID-19 response and recovery worldwide.

Second, it is imperative that we engage with children and youth as stakeholders and solution creators, both at the UN as well as in local and national planning and monitoring processes.

Incorporating children's views and perspectives in the design and delivery of policies, programmes and services adds to their sustainability and, ultimately, the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. It is only by ensuring the meaningful participation of children that proceedings at the United Nations remain inclusive of, and relevant to, future generations, whose lives are most at stake in the achievement of the SDGs.

Third, all of these efforts must be underpinned by our collective recommitment to achieve the SDGs and combat the existential threat posed by climate change and environmental degradation.

Before the onset of this pandemic, the world was already facing the twin crises of climate change and environmental degradation. While COVID-19 may not have been directly caused by climate change, environmental degradation, including habitat and biodiversity loss, is a common underlying risk factor. Humanity has been on a collision course with nature for too long, and the emergence of this pandemic, coupled with our vulnerability to similar risks in the future, will only increase if we do not change course.

Is this the world we want today, for our future and for our children?

Our medical researchers have now developed vaccines that will enable us to ultimately put an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of this pandemic, however, will likely be felt for years to come by this generation of children, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable among them.

We must come together as an international community to build a more resilient, more equal and more empowered generation of children: a generation that will be best equipped to both face the challenges and harness the opportunities that the future will bring.

Thank you.

ⁱ Andorra, Antigua and Barbuda, Austria, Argentina, Armenia, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, India, Ireland, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Republic of Korea, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Lesotho, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Poland, Qatar, Romania, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Uganda, United Kingdom, Uruguay, European Union.