



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](mailto:globalinsight@unicef.org).



This document is interactive and designed for digital viewing.



Please consider the environment and refrain from printing.

**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.

Staff of Office of Global Insight and Policy who contributed to this report: Andaleeb Alam, Melvin Bretón, Jasmina Byrne, Adam Cathro, Laurence Chandy, Yoonie Choi, Cristina Colón, Bushra Ebadi, Kathleen Edison, Moira Herbst, Dory Li, Amanda Marlin, Shai Naidés, Camila Teixeira, Priyamvada Tiwari, and Steven Vosloo.

**Names of youth consultation participants:** Abdirisak Salaad Ali, Yahaya Alphonse, Layan Alrazihi, Arthur Amadi, Jana Amin, Nour El Assaad, Beatrice Bonami, Abdeldjalil Bachar Bong, Kat Cadungog, Isaac Caverhill-Godkewitsch, Sahlím Charles, Larissa Crawford, A. Mohammed A. Foboi, Ryan Gersava, Rowan Harrity, Kate Herchak, Insia Khan, Manyang Kher, Misako Luther King, Marva Langevine, Fale Lesā, Matthew Sepehr Mahmoudi, Daniel Nwaeze, Efosa Obano, Leonardo Párraga, Ritika Passi, Tamara Richardson, Alfredo Lorenzo Sablay, Catalina Salazar, Sama Shamyar, Ian Soh, Ecem Yilmazhaliloglu

## Photo credits:

Cover: © UNICEF/UNI358734/Oo

Page 4: © UNICEF/UNI280372/Tremeau

Page 7: © UNICEF/UNI355839/Panjwani

Page 14: © UNICEF/UN055820/Sokhin

Page 26: © UNICEF/UNI359091/Zmey

This is a working document. It has been prepared to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and to stimulate discussion. The text has not been edited to official publication standards and UNICEF accepts no responsibility for errors.

The statements in this publication are the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the policies or the views of UNICEF. The designations in this publication do not imply an opinion on legal status of any country or territory, or of its authorities, or the delimitation of frontiers.

# Contents

## 4



[Introduction](#) ↗

## 7



[Part 1](#)

[Exiting COVID](#) ↗

- 8 Prospects of a two-tier recovery
- 10 COVID's legacy

## 14



[Part 2](#)

[Long-term trends](#) ↗

- 15 Weakened support for multilateralism
- 16 Globalization reset
- 18 Living with global warming
- 20 Reshaping internet governance
- 22 Challenges for democracies and open civic space

## 26



[Part 3](#)

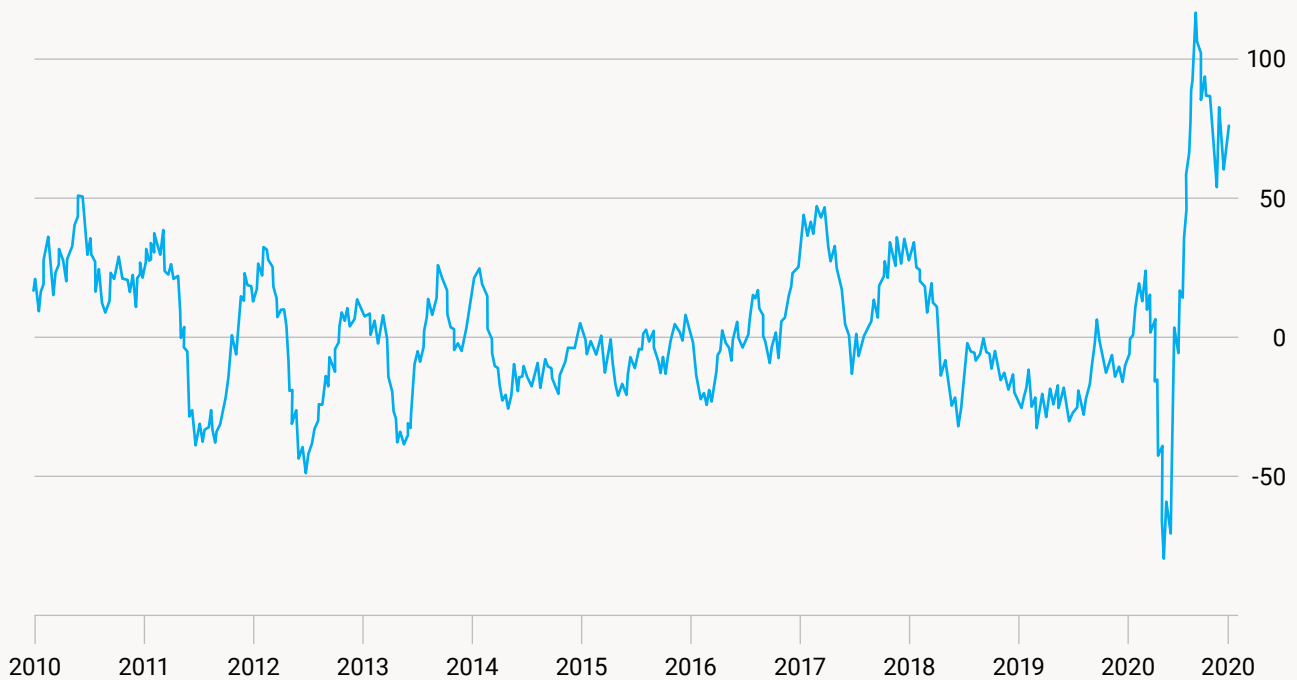
[Tipping points, weak signals, black and white swans](#) ↗

## 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.



Subscribe to  
OGIP's newsletter  
***New Insights***  
to see how our  
expectations and  
recommendations  
evolve over time

---



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, country readiness, and a patchwork of advance purchase contracts. These factors will interact with demand constraints, including vaccine hesitancy and vaccine nationalism, and information constraints, concerning the efficacy of COVID vaccines and the longevity of their effects.

We anticipate a two-tier recovery with rich countries, on average, exiting and recovering faster than poor countries. Rich countries are at the front of the queue for vaccines, having deployed their advanced purchasing power to sweep up vaccine purchases ahead of others, including more expensive vaccine candidates, and those that require the advanced infrastructure of ultra-cold chain management. At the

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

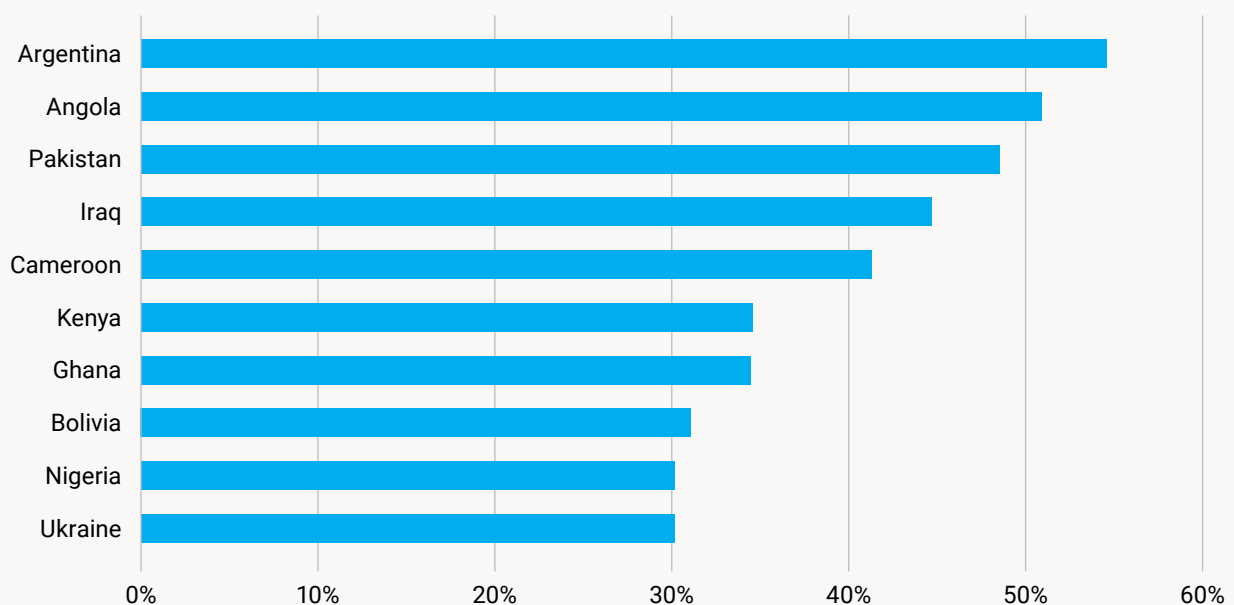
Yahaya Alphonse, 22 years old, Youth in Diaspora

start of December 2020, 7.3 billion vaccines had been pre-purchased for a global population of 7.8 billion. Of the 7.3 billion doses, high-income countries had secured 3 doses per capita, middle-income countries had secured 0.5 doses per capita, and low-income countries had secured 0.1 doses per capita.

Rich countries are additionally advantaged by the economic policy levers at their disposal. They are able to borrow commercially at historically low interest rates, with little fear of inflation or debt overhang. This provides their governments with the resources to support households and businesses while their countries continue to battle the pandemic, and to stimulate their economies' recovery when the virus has been contained. They are supported by central banks exhibiting increasingly supportive and innovative monetary policies.

This stands in sharp contrast to most developing countries which, faced with falling revenues and rising costs of borrowing, have little room to maneuver. This obliges a less muscular fiscal policy, and in its place, sustained austerity over the medium term. For some, debt levels will no longer be sustainable and will need to be restructured. So far in 2020, six developing countries have already defaulted on their debt repayments. The global community has summoned efforts to resolve this issue, but these remain insufficient to rule out the possibility of a sovereign debt crisis over the medium term should the situation deteriorate, which would have devastating consequences for living standards in the affected countries.

FIGURE 2: PROSPECTS OF SOVEREIGN DEFAULT



Note: Implied probability of default in the next five years, according to credit-default swap prices as of November 16, 2020.

Source: IHS Markit via Financial Times

The longer that developing countries take to exit from the pandemic and the slower their recovery, the greater the concern that their governments, economies and societies will face additional crises at a time of greater vulnerability and reduced resilience. We therefore equate the next five years with a greater propensity for instability and heightened political risk.

A two-tier recovery would spell a divergence of living standards between rich and poor countries—a reversal of the trend of the past two decades that drove progress for children. Should this scenario materialize, we face the prospect of a historic disinvestment in children in many developing countries, which will put the Sustainable Development Goals for children out of reach.

## COVID's legacy

The COVID pandemic is much more than a global health crisis. It is a world event of historic proportions and significance, whose broader ramifications will shape many aspects of our future. COVID's legacy will take several years to definitively quantify, but it is already possible to infer some aspects that are especially salient for children.

The pandemic has been a uniquely dis-equalizing crisis. Its effects have been borne disproportionately by individuals with co-morbidities, workers without social protection and unable to perform their jobs from home, students unable to access digital learning tools, and families without healthcare or childcare. They face the longest path to rebuild their lives and consequently risk falling further behind others. Concerns over widening inequalities within countries long precede the pandemic, but now become more urgent. What was previously seen principally as a normative challenge has now evolved into a practical one, as runaway inequality risks destabilizing societies.

An important facet of this inequality is economic scarring as families, communities and entire sectors were forced to abandon the jobs and businesses left in the pandemic's wake, many of which are unlikely to come back. This is reflected in unusually high levels of unemployment and bankruptcy. Recent research estimates that half of all African firms are currently unprofitable as a result of the pandemic. The ratings agency, S&P, has downgraded or cut the outlook on almost 60 percent of the companies it assesses in Latin America. A striking characteristic of this scarring is its disproportionate effect on women. Sectors traditionally led by female business owners have been worst hit by the crisis; women

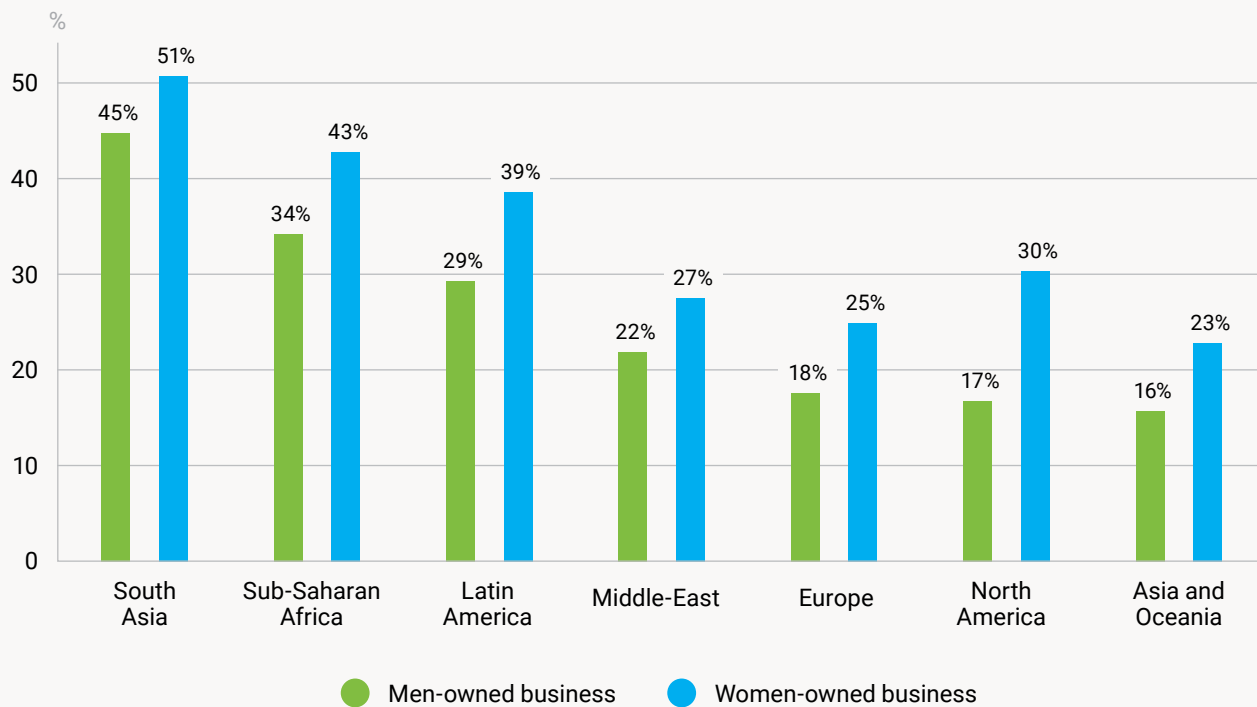
“COVID-19, when paired with other stressors such as climate change, racism, and other barriers, are having unprecedented impacts on youth mental health”

Larissa Crawford, 25 years old, Future Ancestors Services



have borne the greatest burden of increased domestic and care responsibilities; and female business owners have had less access to financial assistance to weather the pandemic’s disruption. Previous crises also point to a longer recovery for women. [A year after the Ebola crisis in Liberia](#), 63 percent of men who lost their jobs had returned to work, compared with only 17 percent of women.

**FIGURE 3: BUSINESS CLOSURE RATES BY GENDER**



Note: Data are drawn from the Future of Business survey, which assesses micro, small and medium enterprises’ (MSMEs) experiences during the pandemic in over 50 countries on a monthly basis. The data displayed here are drawn from May 2020. Source: [The Future of Business survey](#) via [World Bank](#)

Children and youth who are about to enter the job market will likely see their career prospects permanently shaped by COVID’s legacy. [Experience from previous recessions](#) indicates that this cohort will suffer from lower labor market participation and diminished trajectories for their pay and careers.

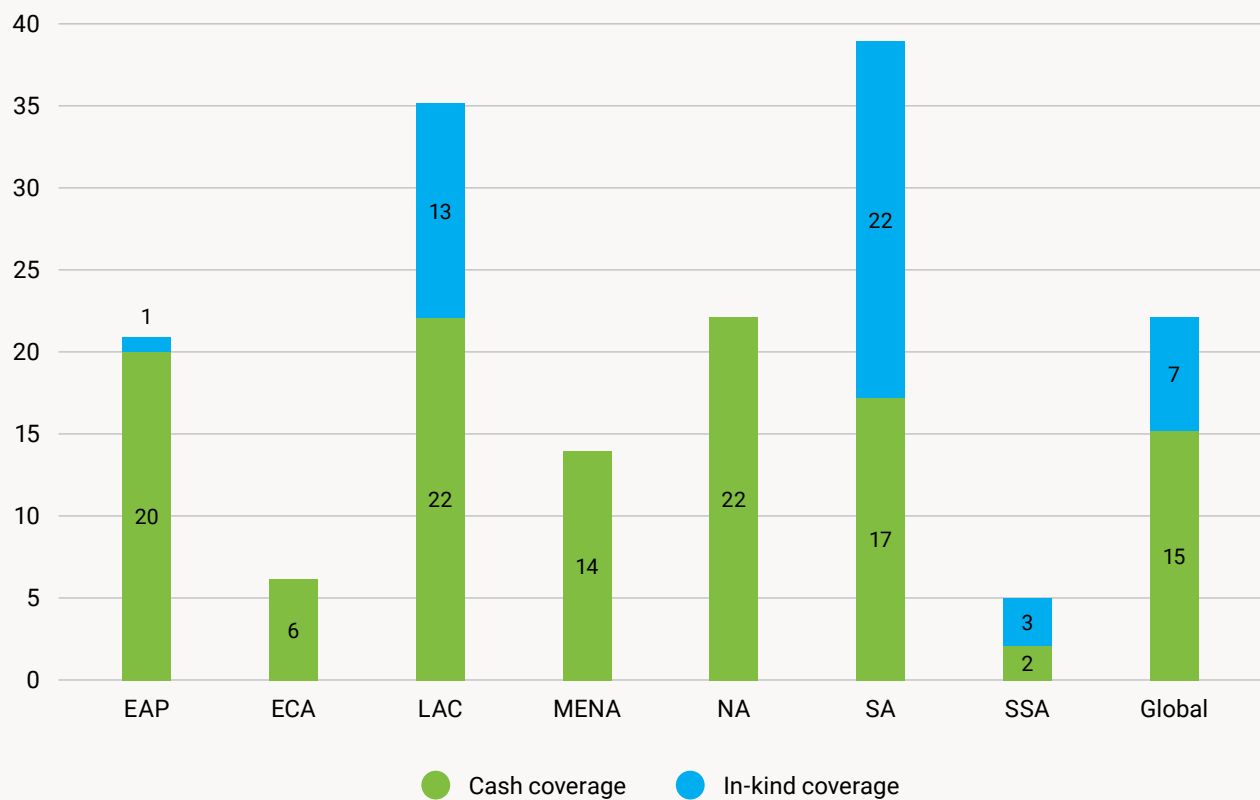
Governments have been at the forefront of efforts to tackle the pandemic and mitigate its worst effects: communicating information about the virus; setting and enforcing physical distancing rules; procuring diagnostics, vaccines and therapeutics; and mobilizing rescue packages and expanding safety nets. These efforts are notable for their scale. For instance, the coverage of social assistance worldwide has been expanded to include an extra [22 percent of the global population](#), or more than a billion people. The upshot is an expanded and more active role for the state—a phenomenon that

is expected to endure. This augurs a greater role for governments in providing services, funding research and development and in policy innovation. This mirrors a similar phenomenon after the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic when many countries embraced the concept of socialized medicine and created or revamped health ministries.

At the same time, the pandemic has witnessed greater use of executive power, surveillance and encroachment on civil liberties, and misinformation by states. This is reflected in an assessment of 13 leading global health law scholars who recently warned that most countries have violated international law in their pandemic response.

FIGURE 4

INCREASE IN SHARE OF POPULATION COVERAGE BY SOCIAL ASSISTANCE DURING COVID



Note: Data reflect coverage as of December 2020.  
Source: Almenfi et al. 2020, World Bank

One unambiguously positive legacy of the pandemic, inspired by the rapid development of COVID vaccines, is optimism for the potential for further medical breakthroughs in tackling the global burden of disease, including those that affect children. This optimism captures not just an emotional reaction to the achievements of vaccine

scientists, but the demonstrable efficacy of new vaccine platforms, and new public-private-academic partnerships that have enabled these discoveries. The COVID response is also expected to lead to reforms in global health governance and financing which could further bolster prospects. This optimism could spread beyond health to accelerate the pace of innovation across multiple domains.

An additional legacy is the accelerated shift to digital services and platforms, most notably in finance, education, health and remote work. These shifts were already underway, but analysts from [multiple sources](#) estimate that the pandemic has moved the world up to five years ahead of its trend in the span of a few months. The shift to digital represents one of several behavioral responses that may persist after the pandemic. Others include a renewed sense of [civic responsibility](#), and [greater thrift and risk aversion](#). The latter has been documented [following previous pandemics](#) with dampening effects on economic returns.

The dis-equalizing legacy of the pandemic will exacerbate the unequal opportunities and outcomes that characterize children's lives, and bring into sharper focus the reality that many children are being left behind. Yet technological innovations and [policy innovation](#) by governments create the possibility of mitigating those inequalities and enabling accelerated progress for children. At a time when the role of the state is being reconsidered, there is an opportunity to place children's rights at its core and to strengthen the social floor that guarantees children's basic needs.



Long-term trends →

PART 2

# Long-term trends



## Weakened support for multilateralism

“Multilateralism must become multistakeholderism. There are a lot more voices that need to be heard.”

Isaac Caverhill-Godkewitsch,  
31 years old, Governance  
Policy Expert, Canada

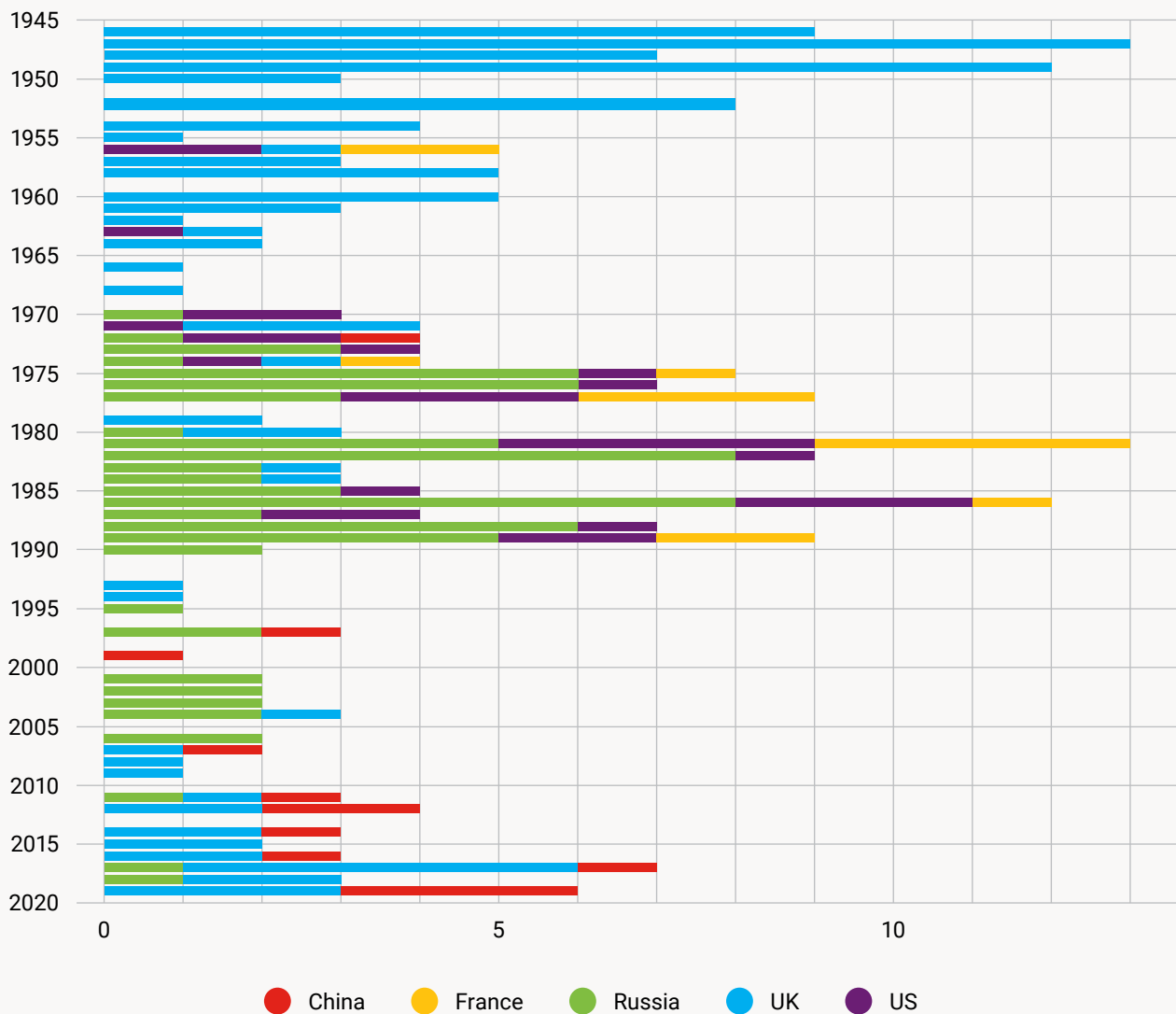
The last decade has seen weakened support for the principle and institutions of multilateralism. This is emphatically demonstrated in the contrasting global response to the COVID pandemic and the global financial crisis twelve years prior. Whereas the latter triggered the rapid mobilization of new multilateral institutions necessary to mount an adequate response and an unprecedented degree of coordinated action across nations, the pandemic has, by contrast, seen multilateral institutions struggle to retain authority and their performance scrutinized, and coordination among countries has arguably been the most conspicuous deficiency in the global response.

While optimists hold out hope that today’s crisis might belatedly lead to an enlightened renewal for multilateralism, we believe the most likely scenario is a persistence of the status quo. The return of great power competition among the most world’s dominant nations, the U.S. and China, risks becoming an aggravating force, reducing the likelihood of collective action when trust between powers is low, and increasing the possibility that multilateral platforms are hijacked as battlegrounds where tensions between powers play out.

In this setting, multilateral organizations and platforms may struggle to perform their roles adequately. We anticipate the growing emergence of multi-stakeholder models, strengthened regional cooperation, and other values-based alliances in many spheres, operating alongside established multilateral entities. The ACT-Accelerator, the global initiative to accelerate equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines, provides a compelling example of such a model, working partially inside the existing system, though outside the norms of multilateral governance.

A weakened spirit of multilateralism risks stifling progress on the world’s greatest collective action problems. These include many of the biggest threats to children’s lives, which today include the global response to COVID and the debt crisis, as well as climate change and conflict. The latter includes the forever wars that today consign tens of millions of children to the most difficult lives, yet which are being met with a growing sense of fatigue, as reflected in humanitarian support. It also includes new conflicts characterized by the use of robots and drones placing international humanitarian law under growing strain.

FIGURE 5: UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL VETOES



Source: R bloggers

## Globalization reset

In sharp contrast to the early 2000s, the past decade has seen a slowdown in the pace of globalization, as flows of international finance and trade have stabilized. Simultaneously there has been a shift in sentiment against the ever-closer integration of economies, driven by a populist backlash against trade and migration. In the next five years, we envisage globalization neither retreating nor advancing, but rather evolving to respond to the changing times including the COVID pandemic.

One important element of this evolution, or reset, concerns supply chains. The COVID lockdowns left manufacturers scrambling to find alternative suppliers and routes, and has highlighted the exposure of complex global supply chains to various global risks. A recent

“Economic superpowers decide what happens to other countries; they feed in their principles, values, and systems to other least developing countries. This is where the losers and winners from globalization come from. As a result, there is a backlash against globalization.”

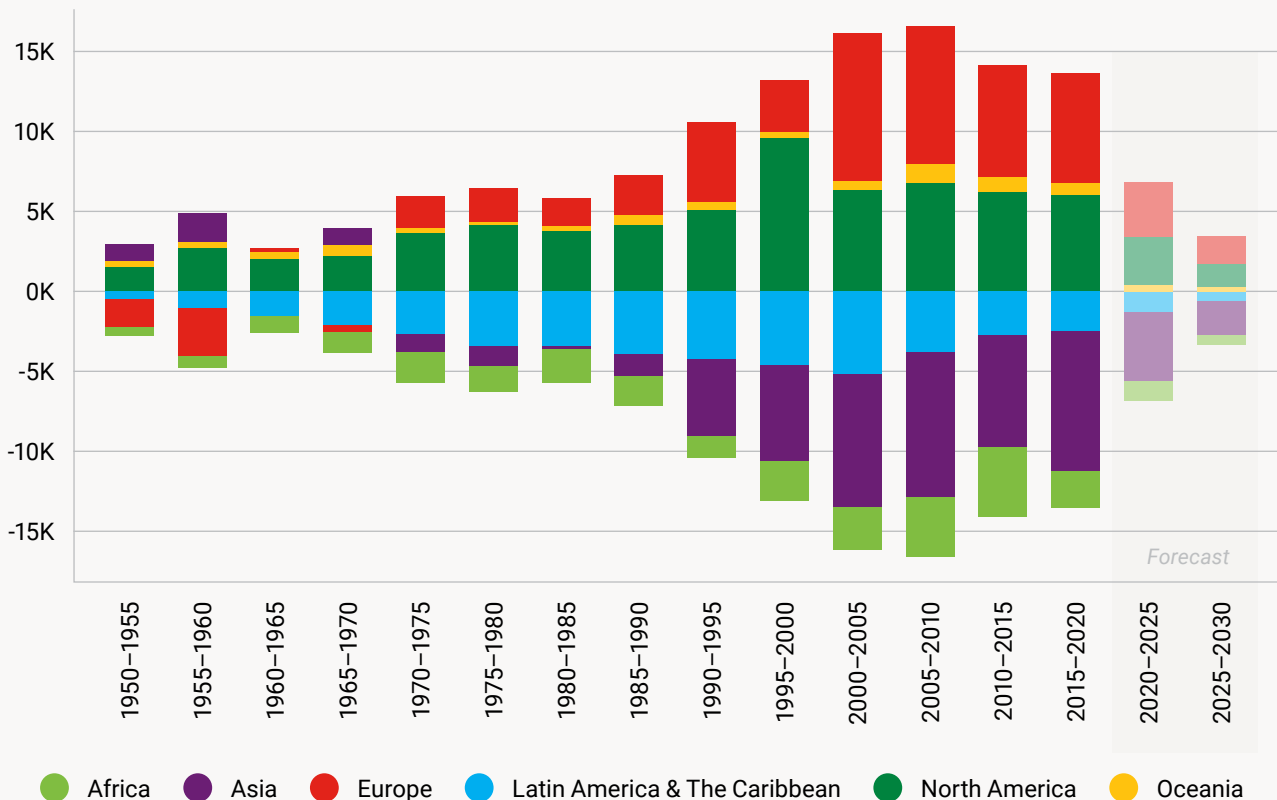
A. Mohammed A. Foboi,  
31 years old, LIFT Liberia

survey found that global companies, on average, expect a month-long disruption to hit their supply chains once every 3.7 years, whether from climate change, cyber attacks, political unrest or trade wars. Firms are responding to this risk not by re-shoring but by diversifying their supply chains. Governments are likely to respond too with selective stockpiling of goods deemed important to national security.

A further shift is expected in the range of services traded across borders. This will expand to include many of the jobs and functions that workers have been able to perform effectively from home in response to the COVID pandemic, spanning from law to medicine, wherever workers overseas can succeed in providing an equivalent service at a lower cost. This could potentially lead to the creation of large numbers of high quality jobs in the Global South, while likely meeting with resistance from incumbent workers and businesses in the West.

The COVID pandemic brought about an abrupt decline in global mobility and migration. While international migration is expected to recover, it will do so gradually and unequally, with opportunities for skilled migration returning faster than for low-skilled migrants. We anticipate governments more readily closing their borders in response to actual or perceived threats.

FIGURE 6: NET MIGRATION



Source: IOM

This has important implications for children. The closure of borders and the narrowing of options to migrate has historically done little to discourage families from migration, but forced them to rely on informal channels that put them and their children in harm's way. Migration also serves as an important pressure valve as populations respond to different shocks, whether economic, environmental or related to conflict. At a time when the world is facing growing risks, closing off this valve implies greater risks for vulnerable families.

## Living with global warming

The impact of climate change and global warming on people and the planet will noticeably intensify over the next 5 years. Global temperatures have already reached 1°C over pre-industrial levels and there's a significant chance that the 1.5°C threshold—associated with far-reaching catastrophic effects—will be breached before 2025. The past couple of years have already seen dramatic warming in the Arctic, the highest temperatures ever recorded in Antarctica and record-breaking wildfires in terms of frequency, intensity and acres of land burned.

The effects of climate change will include severe weather and rising numbers of natural disasters that will increase the vulnerabilities of children and their families, particularly of those living in poor countries. Climate change and global warming will cause food insecurity, loss of livelihood, involuntary mobility and displacement, aggravate conflicts and challenge humanitarian efforts. It will also exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities among and within countries. The gap between the economic output of the world's richest and poorest countries is already 25 percent bigger because of the effects of global warming.

While climate change will not be avoided, the next five years will be critical to longer term mitigation and adaptation. Existing efforts by governments and the private sector, especially in those countries and blocks that are among the greatest contributors to CO2 emissions—China, the US, India, the European Union and Russia—are most important. These efforts will increasingly reshape the global economy through carbon pricing, renewable energy mix, portfolio management, green jobs and climate finance. The incoming US administration's plan to re-join the Paris Accord can significantly strengthen global action including motivating action by others. COVID-19 recovery plans are an opportunity to build back better in a sustainable, inclusive and just way.

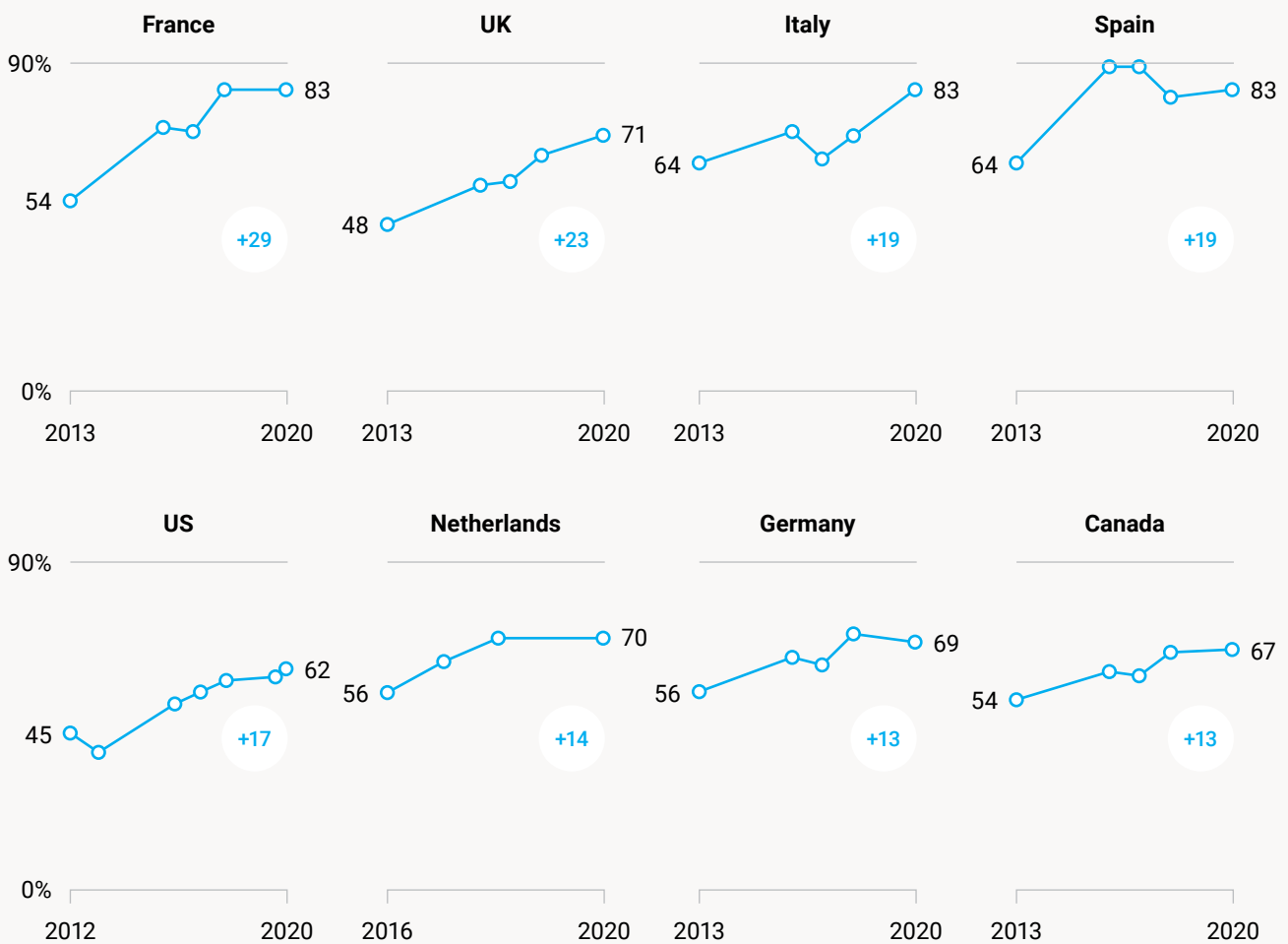
“While engaging high school students...a balance must be struck between communicating climate and educating them on how it works, and scaring them and having their motivation be fear, instead of the promise and hope that something can be done. Our great opportunity is showing what can actually be done at a local level.”

Kat Cadungog, 25 years old, Foundation for Environmental Stewardship



Public concerns about climate change have grown significantly over the past few years and have endured through the pandemic. Young people are at the vanguard, engaging in activism, voting for candidates who have pledged action on the issue, lobbying and demanding action from their governments. This increase in societal concern, consumer action and citizens' protests will increase pressure on governments and companies to act—or risk a growing societal backlash.

**FIGURE 7: VIEWS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AS A MAJOR THREAT**



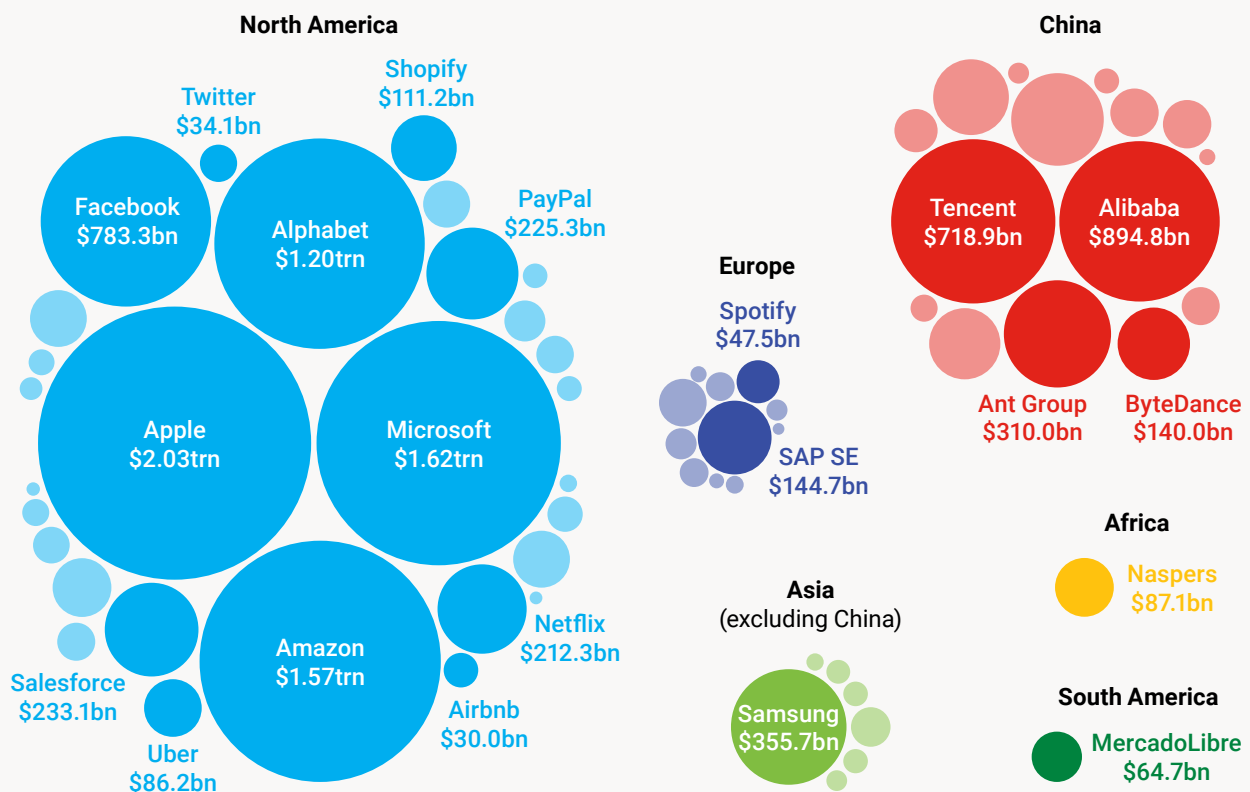
Source: [Pew Research Centre](#), 2020

Over the next five years, the immediate effects of climate change on children's health, development and well-being will become increasingly apparent. As these effects grow, so must the design of child-focused policies and programmes across all sectors, and the way in which children's vulnerabilities are assessed. The role of young people as a formidable force in driving change in attitudes, behaviours and policy concerning climate is likely to grow and become increasingly sophisticated.

## Reshaping internet governance

As digital technology continues to advance, more attention is being given to defining the rules and norms that govern the internet. The current digital ecosystem is dominated by a small number of multinational technology companies in the three largest digital markets of the US, China and the European Union. The net worth of the five biggest tech companies in the US is estimated at over 7 trillion dollars, while the 2 biggest companies in China (Tencent and Alibaba) are worth 1.4 trillion dollars.

FIGURE 8: MARKET CAPITALIZATION OF LARGEST GLOBAL TECHNOLOGY FIRMS



Source: [The Economist](#), November 19, 2020.

These companies will likely continue to grow; they are already exercising dominance over economic markets, digital infrastructure and development of frontier technologies and will exert more power and influence in all spheres of our lives: services, entertainment, finance, education. There are multiple benefits from use of these technologies, but there are also multiple problems. In recent years we have seen growing concerns over the spread of misinformation,

harassment, the spread of child abuse material, privacy and data protection breaches, and anti-trust concerns. Some of the leading apps from these big tech companies are used by children. We also know that data collected from children for marketing and commercial purposes is concentrated in the control of around five to 10 multinational companies based in the US and China.

In the absence of global regulation, and divergent approaches to internet governance by many governments, most of these companies are *de facto* self-regulating and making unilateral decisions about, for example, the level of data protection provided to their users or what constitutes misinformation or hate speech.

As digital technology becomes ever more critical to economic, political, socio-cultural life, the geo-politicization of technology also increases. Growing competition between countries over dominance in cyberspace risks fueling polarisation. This reflects not just the race to secure the largest share of the digital economy and to limit the influence of foreign companies, but also different approaches to the development of frontier technologies (5G, AI) and especially the use of data.

Three different models of governance are emerging along these geopolitical lines and ideologies: First, the US model that so far has favoured private-sector led innovation, which enabled the US tech sector to retain its international competitiveness coupled with loose regulation. This however is changing with growing domestic concerns over anti-trust and consumer data protection. Second, the China model, with state-backed technology and greater investment in geographically strategic infrastructure that somewhat overlaps with its Belt and Road Initiative. With this, greater regulatory powers has been demonstrated recently with the proposed anti-monopoly measures for internet platforms and a draft personal data protection law. The third model is the European one (the EU and the UK) that gives citizens and consumer rights a priority but also favours development of the local market, fair data trade and building its own, sovereign digital or data economy. Along these lines, other economies from high income countries (South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Canada), are hoping to grow their digital economy through a combination of open data flows among countries and strong privacy protections.

The emerging concept of digital sovereignty is embraced by other big countries who are looking to exert more control over tech giants operating in their territories by imposing their own data and internet regulations. This concentration of technological power risks “splintering” the internet, proliferating norms that are not all in the

“The notion of empowerment [through technology] is an empty vessel. If you can’t address the question of education and access to education politically, then technology can only do so much and will end up exacerbating the problem.”

**Matthew Sepehr Mahmoudi**,  
27 years old, Amnesty  
International

best interest of users including children, limiting the enforcement of digital rights, and eroding citizens trust in the digital ecosystem. This leaves low income countries behind not only in terms of technological development but in their ability to govern their digital space. Less than 30 per cent of households in the least developed countries have access to the internet and the world is still far from achieving universal access.

The benefits of safe, free and democratic internet governed by international norms and standards are particularly relevant for children and young people. They are early adopters of new technologies, developers and avid consumers. The implications for education, civic engagement, health, and transition to work are considerable. However, the race for digital dominance has pushed children's concerns further down governments' priorities. While risks for children exist in all countries, the deepening digital divide risks leaving children in the Global South furthest behind in terms of their ability to benefit from digital tools, and most exposed to the deficiencies in digital governance which will be decided by powers beyond the borders of their countries.

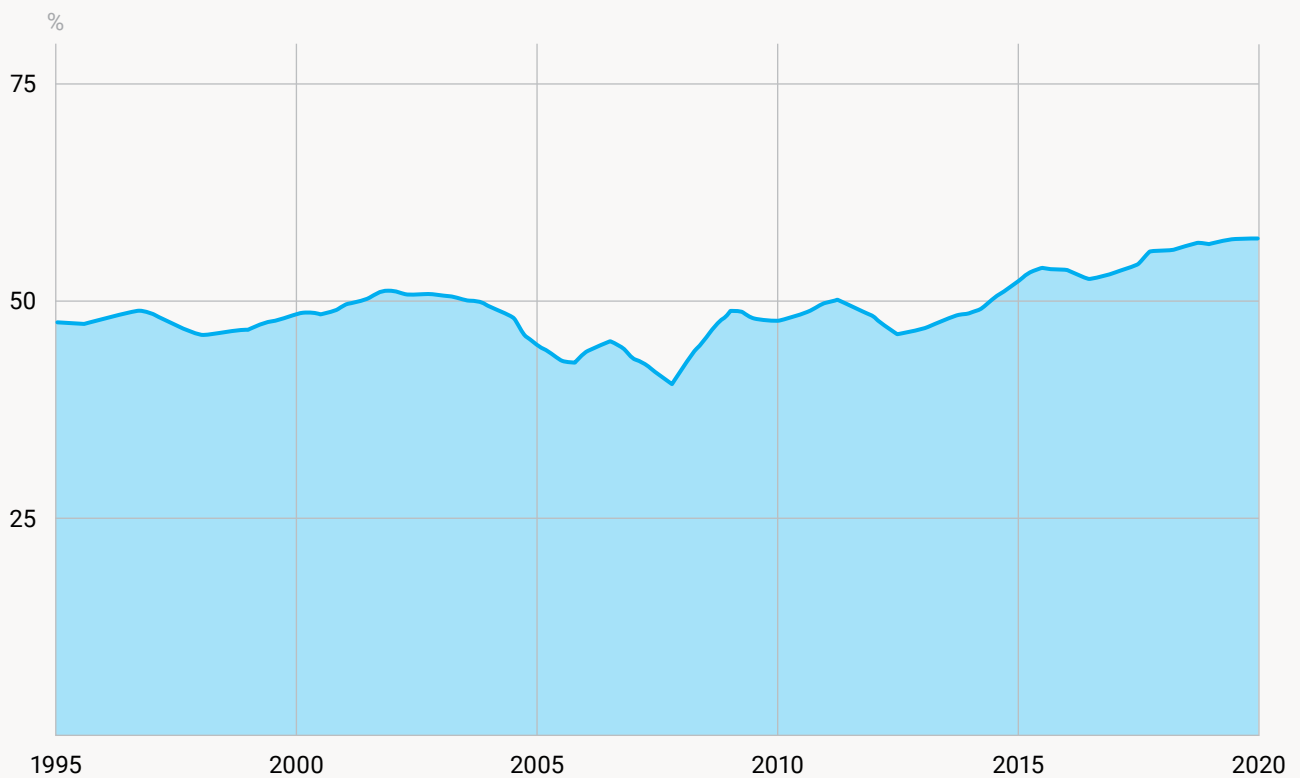
## Challenges for democracies and open civic space

The gradual deceleration and retreat of democratization starting in the mid-1990s has been exacerbated by the global pandemic. In 2020, COVID-19 triggered an extension of executive powers beyond what was necessary to curb the pandemic and protect public health, as well as contributing to a further decline in civil liberties and freedoms and weakening of democratic institutions. According to Freedom House, the condition of democracy and human rights deteriorated in 80 countries in 2020, while Civicus reports that 87 per cent of the global population are now living in nations where civic space is deemed closed, repressed or obstructed. This trend of obstruction of civic space is prevalent in all types of regimes. Since the mid-1990s, public satisfaction with democracy has been in decline, with a notable drop in the past 10 years.

“It can be really difficult to support sustainable structures [for civil society] and to hold collective power. If the [diminution of civic space] is not sufficiently shown through the media and other channels, it is less likely that citizens are going to act and transform their environment.”

Leonardo Párraga, 28 years old, BogotArt Foundation and Juventudes por la Paz

**FIGURE 9: REPORTED DISSATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY IN ALL DEMOCRACIES**



Source: University of Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy, reproduced in [The Atlantic](#) by David H. Montgomery

Decline in democracy often goes hand in hand with a rise in right-wing populism. While populist parties in power claim to make politics more representative, they often undermine the accountability of democratic institutions and checks on executive powers. The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, growing inequality and a potential return to austerity policies can be fertile ground for populist forces and for a rise in xenophobia and discrimination. Support for populism declined in Western democracies in the first months of the pandemic, particularly in those countries where governments have been successful in shielding their societies from the coronavirus and its economic costs. However, the risk of a rise in right-wing populism and nativism is strong as underlying causes persist, with consequences for the realisation of human rights, inclusion, diversity and migration policies, all of which affect children and young people. COVID-19 has in fact exacerbated xenophobia, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment worldwide.

Media censorship, manipulation and the spread of misinformation is now persistent in all types of government regimes. A combination of democratic and technological factors are affecting press freedom including repressive government policies, absence of appropriate

regulation of digital and global communication, increased public suspicion and distrust in the media. This has been further exacerbated by the spread of misinformation, increasingly by state actors, to manipulate public opinion by spreading pro-government propaganda, the use of computational propaganda tools to drown out political dissent and the spread of polarized messages to create divisions in society. [Oxford Internet Institute](#) shows that organized social media manipulation has more than doubled since 2017, with 70 countries using computational propaganda to manipulate public opinion. Use of mis- and disinformation will likely expand with further evolution of algorithms, automation and big data and through use of so called “deep fakes”.

On the upside, we are seeing renewed commitments to democracy through the establishment of Alliance of Democracies and US President-Elect Joe Biden’s pledge to hold a summit for democracy in 2021. Several foundations are strengthening their work to support accountability, open governments, racial and social justice and civil society. The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought opportunities for policy innovation and greater citizen demand for [accountability](#).

The past few years have seen a rise in modern youth activism, social movements and youth led protests. This trend is expected to continue as young people opt out of traditional forms of political participation, [distrust](#) the electoral processes and express [dissatisfaction with democracy](#). It is motivated further by young people’s perception that [their values and aspirations are under threat](#) (climate crisis, gender equality, race relations, gun violence, economic opportunities), and the amplifying effect of social media, which allows for new forms of civic engagement and more efficient organising.

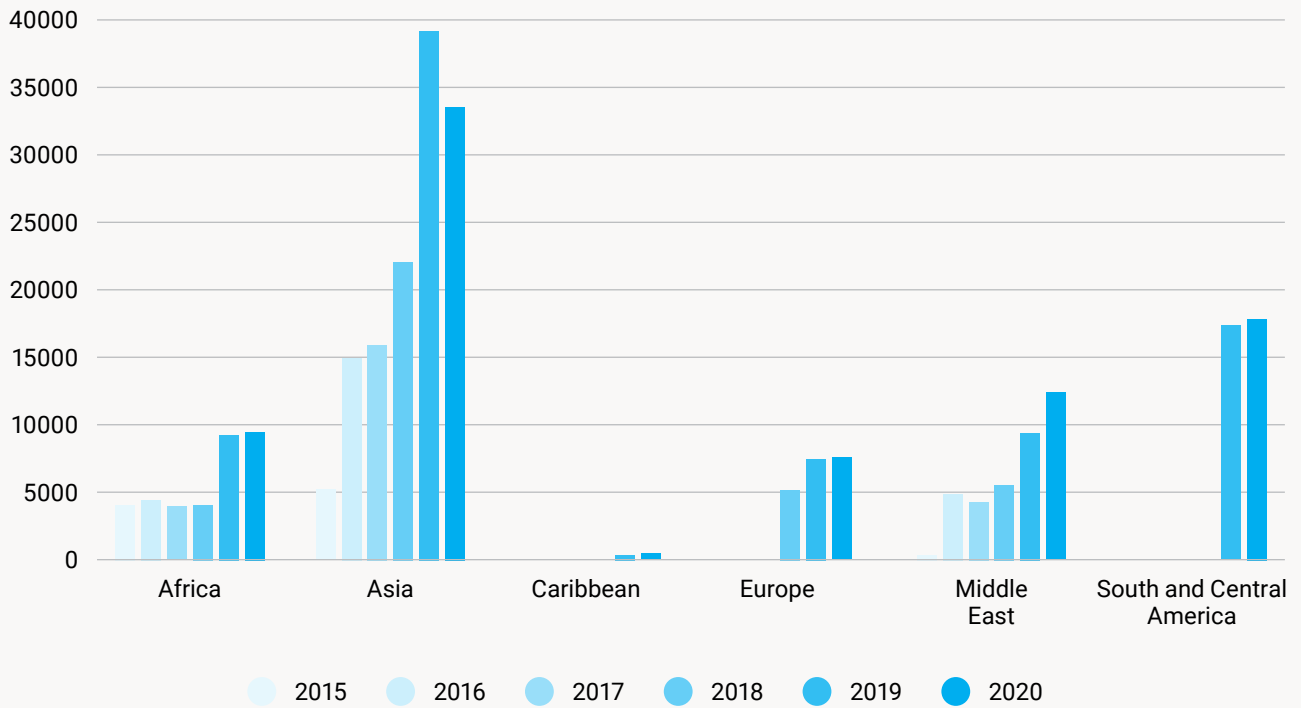
However, in many countries opportunities for young people to participate and engage in activism are severely restricted. There is often less representation of youth from different ethnic groups or social classes due to systemic exclusion. Girls in particular have limited opportunities for civic engagement, while girl activists and girl-led groups and organisations face a disproportionate level of discrimination and attacks. Groups working on girls’ and women’s rights are identified as [the number one target](#) for closing civic space. Further deterioration of democracy and shrinking civic space will present growing challenges for the realisation of children’s rights and strategies to support young people’s activism.



Read OGIP's  
rapid analysis on  
***Digital Civic  
Engagement by  
Young People***

---

FIGURE 10: NUMBER OF PROTESTS (2015–2020)



Source: [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#); Data export December 2, 2020



**Tipping points, weak signals,  
black and white swans** →

# Tipping points, weak signals, black and white swans

Drawing on the above analysis and beyond, we identify a number of possible events and trends that appear less significant today that have the potential to define the next five years.

The rollout of COVID vaccines could trigger a **vaccine hesitancy crisis** undermining containment efforts and control of other infectious diseases that disproportionately affect children. The rapid spread of misinformation online, vaccine nationalism, and the behavior of political and other leaders in building or eroding trust could play a critical role.

Excessive use and misuse of antibiotics by humans and in livestock is driving an increase in microbial resistant infections that could rapidly spiral. In poorer countries the number of available antibiotics is smaller, so the likelihood of **drug resistance to antibiotics** is greater, placing in danger those whose lives depend on them.

The application of new technology platforms used in COVID-19 vaccines may propel a **breakthrough in the development of new vaccines** against infectious diseases and shorten the development process from several years to several months. At the same time, public pressure has increased on pharmaceutical companies to voluntarily grant licenses or release patents on their medicines, treatments or equipment, which may lead to the waiving of intellectual property rules on life-saving medication and vaccines.

Artificial Intelligence-generated content, including 'deep fakes' are increasingly recognized for their potency as a means of political warfare and propaganda. The widespread use of deep fakes could trigger a **global misinformation campaign**, while putting in doubt any evidence of wrongdoing; "if anything can be faked, anything can be denied too."

The gig economy, which disproportionately engages young people, could witness a reset in norms entailing greater **respect for labour rights and guarantees for gig workers**. Protests and litigation by people who work on digital platforms are on the rise and are happening in every region of the world.



**Weak signals** are data points that augur an emerging trend



**Tipping points** are emerging trends that precipitate irreversible, systemic effects if they pass a threshold



**Black swans** are highly infrequent and unexpected events



**White swans** are highly infrequent and anticipated events

---



A growing web of 64 carbon pricing initiatives across 46 national jurisdictions now place [22 percent of global emissions](#) under market forces. A further expansion and interconnection of these initiatives could establish a unified **global carbon price** and carbon market by 2025, providing a powerful new tool in climate change mitigation.

Existing multilateral initiatives—the Debt Service Suspension Initiative and the Common Framework for Debt Treatments—are helping developing countries to weather a turbulent period for debt sustainability; but they don't go far enough. Further economic headwinds in 2021 and beyond, coupled with the unresolved challenges of privately held debt and debt overhang in middle-income countries, could trigger **contagion and a full-blown sovereign debt crisis** with catastrophic effects for living standards.

A concerted push by donors and other actors could see a **rapid expansion in the adoption of GM crops across the developing world**, spurred by [recent evidence](#) of their potential to drive up agricultural yields and strengthen the resilience of food production to climate change.



Subscribe to  
OGIP's newsletter  
***New Insights***  
to see how our  
expectations and  
recommendations  
evolve over time.

---