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UNICEF report: COVID-19 exacerbating hunger and other maladies facing South Asia's children

South Asia, home to around one-quarter of the world's population, has emerged as an epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 1.4 million cases with over 32,000 fatalities have been recorded from the region's eight states, which range from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—respectively, the world's second, fifth and eight most populous countries—to tiny Bhutan and Maldives.

India, with 910,174 infections and 23,779 deaths as of yesterday, is the worst affected country in the region and has the third highest number of infections globally.

A report published last month by UNICEF, the United Nations International Children's Fund, gives a sense of the terrible consequences of the pandemic for children. Entitled "Lives Upended: How COVID-19 threatens the futures of 600 million South Asian children," the report documents mass poverty, a lack of healthcare and education, and increased dangers of child malnutrition, abuse and neglect.

The appalling living conditions for the vast majority of the population in South Asia, including a lack of clean water and proper sanitation, dilapidated healthcare systems, massive urban slums and congested public transport, have contributed to the unchecked spread of the virus.

Meanwhile, the pandemic is further exacerbating the horrific living conditions facing workers and the rural poor across the region.

Those worst affected include children from migrant families that have moved from the countryside to the cities, and marginalized or oppressed communities, like India's

Muslims or Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, who are stigmatized and accused of spreading the virus. As the report notes, “deep-rooted inequalities in societies are being exposed.”

Of the 600 million children in South Asia in 2016, 240 million lived in “multidimensional poverty.” The report details how the disruption of health services and education, deteriorating sanitary conditions, and weakened child protection due to the pandemic will cause poverty and social distress to rise sharply. It estimates that more than 120 million additional children will fall into poverty during the next six months.

“The side-effects of the pandemic across South Asia, including the lockdown and other measures, have been damaging for children in numerous ways,” said Jean Gough, UNICEF regional director for South Asia. “But the longer-term impact of the economic crisis on children,” she warned, “will be on a different scale entirely. Without urgent action now, COVID-19 could destroy the hopes and futures of an entire generation.”

According to the report, immunization, nutrition, and other vital health services have been severely disrupted, threatening the lives of almost half-a-million children and mothers over the next six months.

776 million people live in homes where there are no hand-washing facilities, making it impossible to follow the basic hygiene recommendations to avoid infection by COVID-19. An estimated 7.7 million children under five years of age already suffer from severe wasting caused by inadequate dietary intake or diseases, and over 56 million are stunted. Of these stunted children, 40 million live in India—a country that boasts more than 130 billionaires, and the world’s third largest military budget, alongside mass destitution.

The disruption to routine health services, which are totally inadequate at the best of times across South Asia, will result in children with other diseases going untreated. As examples, UNICEF cited severe outbreaks of measles with 250 cases in Nepal, and a 55 percent drop in routine vaccinations given to Bangladeshi children in April as compared to February.

In early May, a UNICEF survey found that 30 percent of Sri Lankan families had already reduced their food consumption. A similar percentage had lost all their income. In Bangladesh, some of the poorest families can no longer afford three meals a day.

Food insecurity in war-ravaged Afghanistan is emerging as a huge problem. Around 10.9 million people, 35 percent of the country's population, could face acute food insecurities in

the second half of 2020. The number of young children suffering from wasting has increased by 15 percent compared to last year.

These economic hardships have encouraged a surge in underage marriages, as families seek to reduce the number of mouths they have to feed by marrying off their daughters. “Too many South Asian women give birth to undersized, low birth-weight infants because they are too young, thin and short during pregnancy,” said UNICEF Regional Nutrition Adviser Harriet Torlesse.

The report cites research by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, which notes, “In the worst-case scenario, South Asia could see the additional deaths of as many as 881,000 children aged 5 or under and that of 36,000 mothers over the next twelve months. [Or 2,400 additional deaths daily] The bulk of these deaths would occur in India and Pakistan, although Bangladesh and Afghanistan could also see significant levels of additional mortality.”

Among the factors contributing to this disastrous situation are the disruption to the global pharmaceutical and medical supply chains, and the reassigning of limited health resources to fight COVID-19. This will result in the undermining of vital and essential maternal, new-born, and child health services.

The education of 430 million students has been interrupted as schools closed to stop the spread of the pandemic. Due to the worsening social conditions children and their families confront, observers are concerned that many of them may never return to school. Nearly 32 million children were not being schooled even before the pandemic. Millions of South Asian children end their primary education without acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills.

In India alone, school closures have impacted 247 million children in primary and secondary education and 28 million children attending preschool education at Anganwadi centers (child care centers) in rural areas. Even before the pandemic, more than 6 million children were not in school education. Most students from poor families have no access to the internet and related technology to participate in distance learning.

In India and Nepal, hundreds of schools were converted into makeshift quarantine centers. “Communities will need to be reassured that these schools have been safely disinfected before children are allowed back to class,” noted the report.

In India, millions of migrant workers, in many cases with their families, had to walk long distances to return to their native villages following the Narendra Modi-led, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's ill-prepared coronavirus lockdown. When the lockdown was imposed with less than four hours forewarning on March 25, Modi and his BJP provided no assistance to these workers, many of whom worked in the informal sector and lost their jobs and all income overnight. The government also failed to establish mass testing and systematic contact tracing, or to pour massive resources into strengthening health infrastructure.

The UNICEF report took note of the fate of the children of migrant workers, stating, "The journey for these children was arduous enough. And many of them have continued to suffer from abuse, uncertainty, stigma, and discrimination even after they reached home."

The UNICEF report criticises the region's governments for their failure to allocate adequate spending to social programmes to assist the hundreds of millions of impoverished working people who have lost their livelihood, or at a minimum weeks of income, during the pandemic. It says, "The current level of fiscal responses has been inadequate, and some countries have offered almost nothing." The report recommended that governments "direct more money towards social protection schemes, including emergency universal child benefits and school feeding programs."

Such appeals will fall on deaf ears. For decades, governments across South Asia have allocated meagre resources to public health care and other social programs, while pursuing "pro-investor" policies such as massive corporate tax cuts, tax-free enterprise zones, and the fire-sale of public assets. They thus bear full responsibility for the horrendous levels of poverty, ill health, and social misery that have facilitated the rapid spread of the pandemic. These policies have been implemented at the behest of domestic capital and the international banks and financial institutions, like the International Monetary Fund, in order to shift the burden of the crisis of world capitalism onto the backs of working people and impoverished toilers.

As the spread of the virus continues to accelerate, South Asia's governments have responded by stepping up attacks on the working class. They are imposing further cuts to budgets for health and education so as to service debt payments to the IMF and big banks, while at the same time reopening the economy so that the corporate elite can extract profits from highly exploited workers, regardless of the cost in human life. This is summed up in the ruling elite's embrace of a policy of "herd immunity," i.e. allowing the

virus to spread unchecked throughout the population, even though this will cause hundreds of thousands of additional deaths.

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