TRANSCRIPT
The Reopening

“UNICEF’s Henrietta Fore on Supporting Children and Families Worldwide”

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SPEAKERS
Henrietta Fore
Executive Director of UNICEF

Scott Miller
Senior Adviser, Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy, CSIS

Andrew Schwartz
Chief Communications Officer, CSIS
Andrew Schwartz: You’re listening to The Reopening. The podcast that asks, "How will America work through the Covid-19 pandemic? How will we innovate, and how will it change our global economy?" Each week we invite top business leaders to share their insights on the road to economic revival here at home, and around the world.

Scott Miller: Our guest this week is Henrietta Fore. Since 2018, Henrietta has served as the executive director of UNICEF. The pandemic has upended the lives of children and families, as health systems buckle, borders close, and schools and businesses shudder. We discuss the work of UNICEF to keep children around the world healthy, learning, and safe.

Andrew Schwartz: I’m Andrew Schwartz.

Scott Miller: And I’m Scott Miller.

Andrew Schwartz: And this is The Reopening.

I want to get right to it. But thank you so much for being with us today. This is a real treat to get your insight as to, you know, what’s happening with Covid-19.

And you know what you’re seeing impact with children around the world. And what’s been going on with UNICEF and some of the things that you’re seeing out on the horizon. So, I just want to ask you - this is a broad question - but how have you seen Covid-19 impact children around the world?

Henrietta Fore: Well, Andrew, it is my pleasure to join you and I am a good listener to your podcast. So, thank you to you and Scott.

Covid has really changed children and young people’s world and the biggest change is that they’ve been out of school. So, 194 countries, 1.6 billion children and young people out of school. We’ve never had this in the world. But what it changes for a child or a young person is the structure their lives, they don’t have their friends, there is much more violence online and at home, than many of us realize. So, school is often a safe place where your teachers look after you. It’s also a place where you begin to dream and you begin to learn things and see possibilities around your life.

And without it, you become disappointed and you wonder about the world and you’re very anxious. So, it’s bringing a lot of depression and sometimes anger into the lives of children and young people, in a way that our world has not seen. So, mental health is now a very big issue for our world.

But we also see something that’s happening that we wish we did not see, which is there is a stark difference of inequality between those who are the poorest in the poorest countries. They really do not have the ability to have distance learning. They don’t have the ability to have their teachers coming back to school. They don’t have the ability to actually go to school because their families need them to earn something. So, we are worried that many
children, particularly the poorest will never return to school. So, it’s been a big change, Andrew, and one that we’ve got to face as a world and think about how we can change it for them.

Andrew Schwartz: Scott, this is something that we talked about a lot, you know, I have school-aged children. One’s in college, the other two are in middle school and high school and I hear shades of what you’re talking about. But man, this is – this situation is really dire for some children as you say.

Scott Miller: Well you know what’s interesting to me is that one of the things we’ve learned so far - I think we’ve learned about Covid is it definitely has an age distribution in terms of its effect. And one of the great blessings is this is not particularly serious disease if you’re really young, all right, most of the from Covid are in the elderly or with preexisting conditions. And so, it doesn’t really affect - the disease itself doesn’t affect young people. But we’re so focused on the disease and managing that single risk that we’ve kind of lost sight of other risks.

Andrew and I compare notes on this. I have my youngest daughter is a piano teacher. She gives piano lessons and she’s been doing it via Zoom, but she’s lost contact with her young students. And so, we see this affecting and a lot of ways. And clearly, if you are unable to get instruction at home, unable to connect via the Internet, unable to see your peers, you may lose a whole year of schooling and that’s going to affect the poorest and those with the least resources to the greatest extent. What should we be doing in this, how do we think about it?

Henrietta Fore: Well, Scott, you’re absolutely right. It’s hard on teachers too, because they’re losing contact with their students and their children and their normal approach to life, so it’s hard on everyone.

Well, you’ve mentioned something that I think is a real key - that connectivity. So, if you have a chance in life to have connectivity to back to your school or to your teacher or to your friends, it makes a big difference. We only have half the world right now that is connected to the Internet and online in the digital world. And when you look out around the world, the developing world, you either can get your learning remotely or by distance through radio, particularly for the least developed countries, by television for sort of the middle countries, or through your cell phone or through a tablet or through the Internet.

This connectivity will probably be the greatest gift we can give children and young people, teachers and schools and school systems. So we are hoping to connect every school to the internet in the next three to four years using low earth satellites and WiFi. We think it’s possible. This would be a great equalizer. Because, as you say, Scott, if you’re not connected to someone it’s very difficult. And then you begin to go into yourself, you’re not sure what lessons you should be learning, your school isn’t talking to you, your teachers aren’t talking to you and you just drop out.
And if we have half of the poorest children, particularly the girls, not able to go back to school, it will change the future of our world. So, digital connectivity, really important.

Andrew Schwartz: You know, this is so interesting, Henrietta. We talk about global challenges collectively all the time. We talk about climate change, for instance, but I don’t hear a big discussion about global connectivity, especially to the extent that you’re talking about now.

And it seems like now is really the time when we've seen an example right in front of us. And we’ve seen this now for five and a half months where we know that if you are not connected in this world, especially now where we’re digitally - you know, where we’re isolated, and we need to be digitally connected more than ever. If you’re a have versus a have not, you’re really left out it if you’re a have not.

Henrietta Fore: You are. And in a way that our generations didn't even think about. You know, we weren’t connected and so many of us don’t think about it, just being an absolutely essential infrastructure, but now for this generation it’s essential.

You need it if you’re a farmer, you need it if you’re going to be a nurse or a teacher or an engineer. I mean, you need it in every walk of life. For our health care workers, who are in the villages, if we can get a message to them by social media or texting, it makes a big difference. We can tell them about a polio outbreak or they can tell us about an Ebola outbreak. You need it in every area of livelihood. So, this generation, they have to have it.

Andrew, you’re right that this is the time I think many of us as parents and teachers and workers in offices realize how important it is. So, let’s make that reality for the children and young people. And the technology is there now.

Scott Miller: That’s a wonderful point, Henrietta, because not only is it there, it’s scalable. The more you scale the less expensive it gets in this wonderful - you know this specific space, you know, and, and we’ve all been able to adapt much faster than a lot of us expected to. I mean from going from 5% of us in America working from home, to about 40% and maybe after all this is over 20% will have us will still be working exclusively remotely from an office. That’s an amazing celebration and the technology is there. The bandwidth is there. Nobody’s - you know, we don’t have a brownout in this particular you know recording session despite we’re all way in different zip codes at this point.

And so now what practically are the steps that UNICEF, or the, the agencies that are focused on children around the world, what’s the right first thing to do? And the second thing? How are you envisioning this?

Henrietta Fore: So, we’ve started an initiative called Generation Unlimited, which is to try to get a modernized secondary school education, so that you'll want to stay in secondary school. So, when you are in secondary school, you’re learning
things that are relevant, things that can give you a livelihood, so that by 18 you can be a productive member of society.

And then we paired it with another initiative called Giga that we're doing with the International Telecommunications Union, in which we are gathering as we do for vaccines, we are gathering into common bids the ability to have low earth satellites and connectivity on the top of every school. So, we think this is really possible. We've been working with a lot of the telecom carriers. So, then they will zero rate, anything that is an educational content, so that if you are a student in a poor area you can download for free, your education materials and we would like to do this worldwide for every child and young person.

So, these two initiatives and several others that include getting devices to children. We've gathered into a big initiative that the Secretary General of the United Nations is leading right now called Learning Unlimited. There are lots of private companies that are helping us. So, Microsoft has developed something called the learning passport in which you can learn in your own language. You can download all of your national curriculum so that if you're a refugee, or a child who's internally displaced, you can connect to your school system. So next step to me is join these big public private partnerships. Come join us. Help us. We think we've got a once in a generation opportunity. And we just need public and private sector so that we can get the infrastructure up, so that we can keep the government financing for education, but that we reimagine it in a way that's really useful for children and young people now. This is our chance.

Andrew Schwartz: How long would it take in an ideal world? How long would it take something like this to accomplish? If all the right things, you know, the funding came together, the public private partnership came together, how long would it take to get all this done?

Henrietta Fore: Well, we think that we could actually do it in three to four years, given the technology, because the low earth satellites are already up. The WiFi purveyors think they can do it in a year in Sub-Saharan Africa. One of our great partners is the World Bank and they are now starting to put really important money behind education and the learning crisis and they can help every country think through what a new education system looks like.

So, by the year 2030, Andrew, we hope to have reached every child in the world. That's 3.5 billion that has to get connected. We think that the children who are part of that the 1.8 billion, they can all have connectivity. And if you look at something that would really make the world more equal bring everyone up to a higher base, a higher platform, education is it. And so connectivity will be an amazing gift.

There's lots of content online and many of them are American companies and nonprofit organizations. We think we can get certificates online so many of the young people are going to have to be entrepreneurs and they're going to have to learn how to make their own job they're not going to have jobs the way we do. Eight out of ten in the low- and middle-income countries will be
entrepreneurs, so it has to be a learning system where they can keep learning new skills, they're going to need it in their lives. And this is our chance to give it to them.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, you know, I was going to say, let's just talk about what that would actually mean. If you had connectivity for the first time and you're, you know, as a child and a young adult, that means that not only would you get access to, you know, the primary education, you would be receiving from your school, but you could explore the massive online free courses that are offered by Harvard and Stanford. You could learn how to code. You could, you know, I keep thinking there was an incredible article in The New Yorker last month about the computer science one on one class at Harvard, that's taught and the professor there has been an online pioneer of online teaching and he actually suggested that his students take the class online as opposed to come in person, because it's a better experience and being on person and all of his classes are available for free on YouTube. They're all available for free as part of Harvard's massive - the MOOC classes. And you know, there was an example of a student in Brazil, who, you know, took advantage of this and basically self-taught himself through Harvard without actually going to Harvard paying tuition at Harvard and became you know a really decent computer scientist.

Henrietta Fore: Well, Andrew, you're right. I mean, you can learn everything on the internet now and some of the telecom companies are doing this. You can learn how to install a solar panel or how to repair a motorcycle or how to become a plumber or an electrician. So, it's also the trades in case you are not ready to be a computer programmer. You can learn almost everything, and it becomes a passport into life and an ability to think about your life and your livelihood differently. And that's what they need, and it will keep many of the children and young people from getting too anxious about what the future looks like. They're seeing jobs lost everywhere around them so they don't know what they're going to do. They don't know how they're going to make their way in the world. And if you can learn a skill, in our gig economy that will be a real gift, a real value for them.

Scott Miller: Or you've got the perfect match between conductivity and content and instantaneous translation, all of which are much better than even a year ago, all right, and will be even better a year from now. I mean this is a moment to take advantage of this. So glad UNICEF is working on it.

Henrietta Fore: Excellent. Well, we're doing it with every agency in the UN so UNESCO and the International Labour Organization and I mean everyone. Plus, lots of private companies and the big foundations, as well as the big international financial institutions. So, it's a great time for all of us, if we can just focus our world to deliver this in this next decade, I think we will have a better world for everyone. The young people always tell us where 25% of your world. But we're 100% of your future. And of course, there, right. So, if we want a good future let's educate.
Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, no doubt.

This is probably a lot sadder to have a discussion, but in the immediate sense, what are you all seeing with regard to refugees and children? Are you — is it getting any better? Is there a way to help during Covid? You know, I know it must be really hard, especially during Covid.

Henrietta Fore: It is, it is very hard. So, for refugees and for internally displaced children and young people, it is very hard to keep up on your studies. It's very hard to be concentrated. It is also difficult because of the crowded nature of camps and learning centers. So you know, the children, the Rohingya children that are in Cox's bazar. There are learning centers, but you are crowded so fiscal distancing is just not possible.

But there are now studies out about what happens to learning the actual quality of learning. And if a child misses four weeks of education, an average child goes down into being in the bottom third of their class. So, you realize that learning - we're learning more about how learning works in a child - but learning is something you have to build on. You have to keep at it day after day, or you begin to lose it. Most of us know this from learning a language. But it's really important for children and when their minds are young. This is when they're ready and the learning crisis has taught us that there are three very critical times in learning. The first is that by the age of five, you have to be ready to learn this means early stimulation, early childhood development, good nutrition, so the brain grows strong.

By the age of 10, you should be able to read and understand a paragraph or a simple story. That's not true in much of the world. But the quality of education matters. By the age of 18 that you have a skill that you can make your way in the world, that you can become a productive member of society.

If we can do that, then the learning crisis will change into a learning opportunity for many of the children and young people. But for a refugee child, this becomes even tougher. One out of four children and young people right now are in a conflict zone, which means that they are probably separated from their school.

Andrew Schwartz: That's astonishing. One in four?

Henrietta Fore: One in four. We see it in Yemen, in Syria, and you know about the Venezuela diaspora. I mean, it's just, it's very hard on a child. It's very hard on their parents. Then parents have to look for a job. And teachers as both you and Scott know and it's another reason why, if there is a chance to have a cell phone in the family, you can learn things.

Andrew Schwartz: No question.

Scott Miller: Let me ask a question about public health because I know that's a focus of your organization. Let's start with sort of a first world example. You know one of the things to prepare health infrastructure for a spike in treating Covid - a
lot of the elective procedures at hospitals and clinics were stopped for a couple of months. Well elective procedures include things like cancer screening and a lot of routine care of that were diagnostic or screening for advancing conditions takes place. So, we had a lot of people - more people died of heart attacks at home, because they just wouldn't come to the emergency room. Either they didn’t want to because of Covid or there wasn’t capacity - they were they were told to postpone. Now that’s a rich world problem, okay with the cancer screening.

In the poor world, what you have is things like immunization programs which are suspended because of the of the infrastructure load that the the pandemic causes. What’s your view on this and how is that going to work, and how do we get back to a point of risk management for all the important health risks, not just a single one?

Henrietta Fore: Scott, I'm so glad you asked about this. You're absolutely right. It is a huge need. So, when you're a parent, you will hopefully get for your child vaccinations when children are under one or under five years old and it prevents childhood diseases that we think are in our past. So, measles and chickenpox. Things that we had not realized are really there. They are coming back. So, diphtheria, yellow fever, and on it goes. We are going to lose more children to these preventable childhood diseases, then we will to Covid itself.

Scott Miller: No doubt.

Henrietta Fore: In India, many of our primary health care centers community clinics, the number of parents coming in have dropped by 60%. So, it means that children are just not getting vaccinated. So, we are we are walking into an emergency now on the healthcare side.

At UNICEF, we've been saying that there are four things right now that are absolutely critical one is immunization, and it's to save lives. The second is distance learning, which we've just been talking about to save futures. The third one is water: schools and clinics, hospitals need water and a bar of soap to wash your hands - basic hygiene. The world needs this desperately. And the fourth area is mental health this Covid and the health emergency has underlined how people feel about health and the depression and the anxiety that it can bring. They're very stressed and it is worldwide. We are seeing it now in Beirut after the explosions to Andrew's earlier point for refugees and for internally displaced. It's very high anxiety.

So, these four areas are going to be critical to our world. The mental health is to save families. The water is to save the communities. So, if we can do this as a world, it will change the health situation. We cannot accomplish what we want to with Covid if we don’t accomplish these other things at the same time, but we can leap into this.

The technologies – innovations are there and they are really coming out during Covid. So, we are tapped into innovations in every sector, and we want to hear from businesses that have innovations.
Andrew Schwartz: Are you working closely with the top innovators in the world? Like, can you tell some about that?

Henrietta Fore: So, we've got some big innovation contests, where you apply - whether you're a young person or a corporation - to give us some innovations that need scaling up. Since UNICEF is in all countries of the world, we have a platform for scaling. And what we're looking for are frugal innovations that you might find in a refugee camp or innovations that are really high tech and that are big platforms worldwide like low earth satellites. So innovations are a big part of our future. And I think a lot of creativity is now being unleashed.

Covid has changed us a bit. We're not as distracted, we're thinking about our own basic values and we're thinking about our own creativity. And as such, it means that we've got innovations coming. So, we do this in concert with a lot of other agencies. So, the UN Development Program and lots of others, but we are out there looking for innovations and putting them to work.

Andrew Schwartz: It's so interesting you say that Henrietta, because I do think you're right. It - you know, during Covid a lot of industries and people - creative people have gotten so much more focused during Covid because you have that time to be focused and the problems are obviously there. But no matter what industry, you might be in or what field you're in, I know people are spending so much time really focusing on what's on the horizon and how they can, you know, reimagine whatever it is they're doing. I know you're talking to people in the technology sector all the time out in Silicon Valley and so forth. How are they helping you think through some of these big problems?

Henrietta Fore: So, for some of the companies - I mentioned Microsoft - it is a platform that we can use. I mean to Scott's earlier point about instant translation - a platform that we could use in every country.

When Covid first hit, the number one request that we got from governments, was that they wanted to reach their people and they wanted to reach them in universal languages, as well as in all their local dialects.

So, UNICEF said to doing that handbills and radio broadcasts and signs on buses and at stations. And we put everything that we could think of, on the communications sector, but we don't have that platform as a world today that we could use for education. But we could now. We can see that it's there. So, part of it is that the companies reimagine with us every sector of society. Since we think about the youngest citizens, you know, we're very involved with nutrition and education and health and water and sanitation and protection.

But there's every possibility now and the companies in Silicon Valley and the companies that are high tech are also helping us on platforms for protection of children, because now that they are online a lot, the number of predators online has gone up exponentially. And we wish you weren't, but there's also violence within their homes. It's physical, it's emotional, it's sexual and we
have got to try to protect them and educate them, because they’re going to be online. So, they’re going to have to be educated. So, the big companies are helping us with that. So, they’re helping us on the opportunity side and they’re helping us on the protection side.

Andrew Schwartz: That is amazing. Well Henrietta you know we’ve had a lot of really interesting people on this podcast. Nobody is more interesting and certainly more important to what’s going on in the world than you. How can people at home who are listening to this, how can they help UNICEF get done all these critical things that you’re doing for the children of the world? How can people help?

Henrietta Fore: Well, if you’re a company or a foundation or an individual anywhere in the world, come join Generation Unlimited and Learning Unlimited. We could really use your help. We need mentorship and apprenticeships for almost every young person. And if you don’t have time, but you might have a little bit of money we could use anything: unicef.org. And it’s in every country. So, anything that you can do to help would be great.

Scott Miller: We’ll make sure to add these resources on the csis.org page that features this podcast. So, if listeners are interested in following up, they’ll be able to do it directly from our web page, but it’s been such a delight to talk to you today, Henrietta. Thank you so much for your time and I hope everyone listens to what you have to say.

Henrietta Fore: Well, it’s so kind of you two. I mean, I just, I really appreciate it. It makes all the difference when you can get the word out. And we think we’ve got a big moment. I mean, this is once in a generation chance. And if we can take advantage of it, we’ll all be very proud. So, thank you for helping.

Scott Miller: Thank you for the inspiration.

Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening to The Reopening. If you liked this episode, please write us a review and subscribe wherever you find your podcasts. You can also find other podcasts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies at csis.org/podcasts.