

UNICEF Photo of the Year 2021



First Prize 2021

India: Drowned hopes

As the result of a tropical cyclone, the water in the Ganges Delta burst its banks. The floods swept away everything eleven-year-old Pallavi was trying to use to help her family of five survive. She ran a small tea shop in her parents' house on Namkhana Island because her father, a truck driver, only earns the equivalent of less than 100 euros a month. The storm crushed the house made of wood and clay and washed away its tin roof. Indian photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee found the girl 'wandering hopelessly' among the ruins one day after the disaster. For the people in the Sundarbans, a coastal region in India and Bangladesh, which literally means 'beautiful forest', it is becoming more and more commonplace that entire villages are washed away, islands gradually sink and that the children's path to school leads through knee-deep water. Most residents here engage in fishing and shrimping, but the ongoing destruction of the mangrove forests along with rising sea levels and a salinization of former freshwater areas are a growing threat. Extreme weather events caused by climate change are also becoming more frequent in this part of the world. UNICEF estimates that some 530 million children in Asia and Africa are growing up in regions affected by flooding.

Photographer: Supratim Bhattacharjee, India



© Supratim Bhattacharjee, India

Second Prize 2021

India: A small yet great victory over the pandemic

Their classrooms were locked and online learning more fantasy than reality because cell phones and laptops were often simply too expensive or teachers just not prepared: for millions of girls and boys, the coronavirus pandemic has meant no school at all, often for months at a time. And for countless children this is still, or yet again, a reality. Sadly, it is already clear: the pandemic has caused a global education emergency with results that go beyond students no longer getting to learn their ABCs. In many poor countries, closed schools also means that children no longer get their only regular meal of the day. It also means that child labor and early marriages are on the rise again. But there are wonderful exceptions as well! For example, the initiative of Indian teacher Deep Narayan Nayak, who simply moved the school in his village outdoors. He transformed the walls of the houses into blackboards. He painted the precautions against infection on the walls and he teaches his class how to wear masks, allowing them to attend school outdoors while keeping a safe distance from each other. He even teaches them biology including letting them look through a microscope. Indian photographer Sourav Das has captured scenes from the everyday life of this unusually creative and lovable village school. According to UNICEF, 1.5 billion children were unable to attend school at the height of the global lockdown - with a third of them lacking access to distance learning.

Photographer: Sourav Das, India



© Sourav Das, India

Third Prize 2021

Iraq: Open wounds

If a father no longer has any arms, if war has taken his legs - what does that mean for his children? Some of the Kurdish girls and boys in Iraq portrayed by photographer Younes Mohammad are still babies, others are between four and sixteen years old. In some cases, they are simply too young to be traumatized by the scars of war, but they are already part of the story of their fathers, which will also become their own. The fathers have fought against the terrorists of the Islamic State (IS), have been mutilated by mines, snipers or in open battle. Mohammad has portrayed the great strength of children when it comes to dealing with the fates of their families, to accepting the disabilities of their fathers, to loving and to smiling. He also wants to show a feeling of security that can be stronger than all the suffering experienced. And the confidence of the injured, which comes from their children.

Photographer: Younes Mohammad, Iraq (Middle East Images agency)



© Younes Mohammad, Iraq (Middle East Images agency)

Honorable Mention 2021

Syria: The shells of war

Idlib, the last Syrian province not yet recaptured by President Bashar al-Assad's forces. It is feared that it will be the stage for the bloody finale of a civil war that has now lasted a decade. Until then, refugees from other regions of the country are desperately seeking opportunities to earn money in Idlib. Among them are many children who collect scrap metal from the dumps of discarded and sometimes still live ammunition, e.g., mortar shells, projectiles, casings, rocket casings, the remains of cluster bombs. They were born into a war, they grew up in a war, thousands of girls and boys have died in this war. More than five million children have been displaced, within the country or beyond its borders. Syrian photographer Ali Haj Suleiman has documented the children's toil on the massive weapon piles.

Photographer: Ali Haj Suleiman, Syria (Middle East Images agency)



© Ali Haj Suleiman, Syria (Middle East Images agency)

Honorable Mention 2021

Iran: Children of the Zagros

A childhood like something out of an adventure story: being part of a nomadic family in the Zagros Mountains in western Iran. For thousands of years, people here have followed a tradition of leading their herds of goats and sheep through deep gorges and jagged peaks to grasslands and summer pastures. The Farsi name for this journey is 'Kooch'. For two weeks, British photographer Emily Garthwaite accompanied the Mokhtari family, the parents Hossein and Jahan, three of their nine children and several cousins and other relatives, on their 250-kilometer journey. They would travel with around five horses, ten donkeys and mules, and hundreds of goats and sheep. For the children it is one great adventure, riding on the backs of mules, washing in cold rivers, sitting around the campfire at night. But at the same time, it is a hard and strenuous training that aims to enable boys and girls to continue in the paths of their parents.

Photographer: Emily Garthwaite, UK



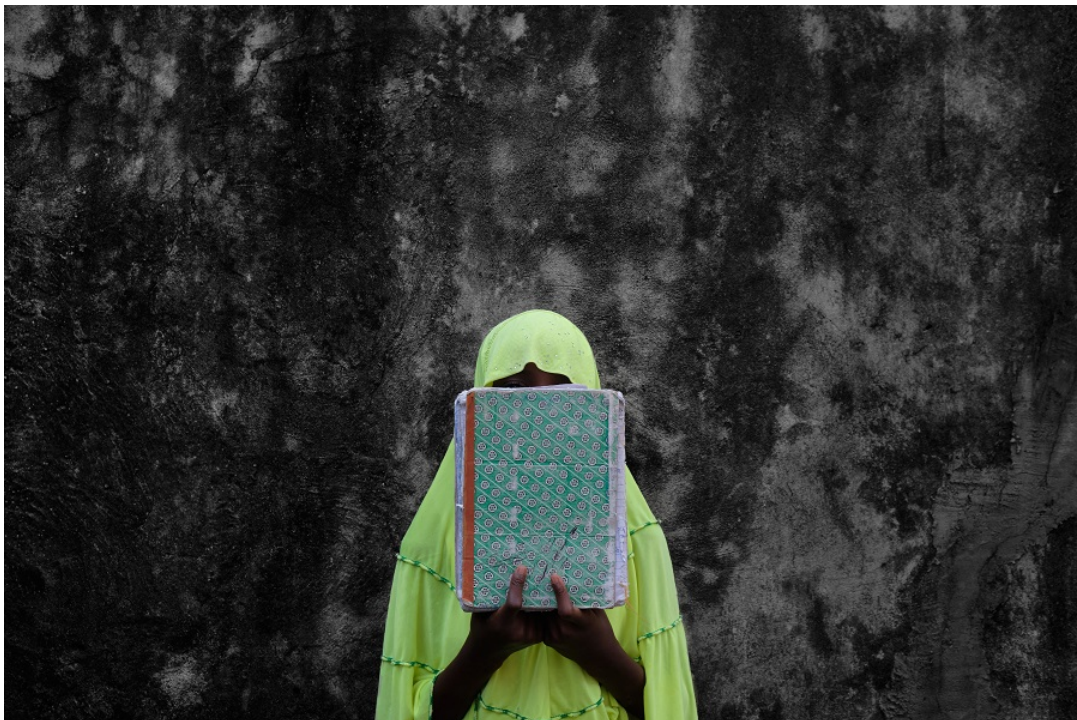
© Emily Garthwaite, UK

Honorable Mention 2021

Nigeria: The happiness of learning

Some of them were as young as 13 when they were kidnapped by the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram. They were brainwashed. They should give up any desire to hope for schooling as a girl. They were freed during an operation by the Nigerian military. Or were able to flee. Now they are back at school. Back where they are allowed to learn and flourish. Where they are allowed to read, write and calculate. Where images are not prohibited. Where a globe shows what the world looks like. Where they can learn English, biology and history. Now they get to look at comics and use pencils again. They are allowed to own exercise books again. And they finally get to be curious young people again. Everything that an extremist ideology regards as Western and depraved - and certainly not in line with the severely restricted rights of a woman who is not supposed to think independently. Some of them are 15 years old, like Fanti, who wants to be a nurse one day. Or 16 or 17. Photographer Emeke Obanor provided them with a safe space by not showing their faces. He knows about their fear and lost ability to trust, despite their bravery.

Photographer: Emeke Obanor, Nigeria



© Emeke Obanor, Nigeria

Honorable Mention 2021

Germany, Switzerland, Singapore: Lockdown thoughts

Even if it's 'only' being grounded in a well-equipped children's room, feelings of loss, loneliness and isolation can also be felt here. Fanny, 17, comforted maybe at least a bit by her puppy, speaks of feeling helpless and of her fear of infecting her sick father with the coronavirus. "Everything will be different" after the coronavirus pandemic, fears 14-year-old Rocco from Zurich. "I miss my friends", says 13-year-old Aisha after three months during which she hardly ever left her apartment in Singapore. She stopped counting the days of the lockdown, says twelve-year-old Sophia from Bochum, because every day was like the next anyway. Feli and Pepita von Ehrenfeld did not travel to the crisis zones of this world, but documented with photos and short interviews how much the global pandemic can negatively impact even presumably sheltered children and young people.

Photographers: Feli and Pepita von Ehrenfeld, Germany



© Feli & Pepita von Ehrenfeld, Germany

Honorable Mention 2021

Germany: Two hearts for Clara

Three-year-old Clara is one of 34 children in Germany in need of a donor heart. With a mobile artificial heart that supports her own heart and her cuddly toy duck, 'Schnatter', Clara waits in her room on Ward H4 of the German Heart Center Berlin for the moment when her life will change. It is an almost unimaginable effort for the little girl to endure the daily routine in a clinic - despite all the touching efforts of the nursing staff and an educator who plays with Clara. And despite the visits from parents and grandparents. Photographer Gordon Welters captured Clara in intimate and sad moments after she had been a resident at the Heart Center for several months.

Photographer: Gordon Welters, Germany (laif agency)



© Gordon Welters, Germany (laif agency)

Honorable Mention 2021

Germany: Brave little butterfly

This is the story of a very brave young girl: Leticia is 15 years old. And for the past 15 years, she has suffered from a rare hereditary skin disease, Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB), also known as 'butterfly skin'. It causes the skin to blister and shear in response to minimal friction and trauma, leading to scarring and permanent, painful wounds. About 6000 people in Germany suffer from this rare genetic condition. Leticia's hands must be bandaged day after day in a lengthy procedure that takes two to three hours and must begin very early in the morning before school. Every night sees the appearance of new wounds. Leticia's loving family, her caring mother, her siblings, are bound to her as thoroughly as they bind her fragile skin. To keep her fingers flexible, she plays the piano and flute. Through meditation exercises and giving up sugar, she hopes to spread those healthy skin patches, which she calls 'islands'. Photographer Jörg Volland has accompanied Leticia for a while through her difficulties and experienced her as a confident and positive girl, despite everything.

Photographer: Jörg Volland, Germany (Graduate of Hanover University of Applied Sciences and Arts)



© Jörg Volland, Germany (Graduate of Hanover University of Applied Sciences and Arts)

Honorable Mention 2021

Philippines, Ethiopia, Haiti: Bringing mobility to children with limb loss

Accidents, diseases, genetic defects, natural and man-made disasters: there are many reasons why around 100 million children worldwide have to grow up with physical disabilities, with missing, underdeveloped or destroyed limbs. CURE, a Christian non-profit organization from Canada, began building hospitals for such children in Kenya in 1998. They did so in Africa and Asia, but also with partner hospitals in Haiti, for example. There, in the Philippine capital Manila and in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Matilde Simas portrayed children who are being fitted with prosthetic limbs and learning to stand up and walk. Among them are very little girls and boys, only five, six or seven years old. Children who are even able to play football or dance at the end of their training. You don't have to look hard to see their new potential for future happiness. And confidence.

Photographer: Matilde Simas, USA, for Limb Kind Foundation



© Matilde Simas, USA, for Limb Kind Foundation

Honorable Mention 2021

Russia: Uliana, who came in from the cold

Uliana is eleven years old. She loves being outdoors, going fishing, eating reindeer meat without a knife and fork, doing handicrafts and embroidery. She flies in a helicopter and dyes her hair. She has both a dog and a laptop. She travels on rivers and in the woods. Uliana belongs to one of the many ethnic minorities in the extreme north region of Russia, the Sámi people. Her ancestors still lived as nomads. Uliana lives in a settlement called Lovozero on the Kola Peninsula, where wooden huts stand next to prefabricated concrete buildings. And sometimes she takes a vacation at her grandmother's in a tiny village with just 400 inhabitants. Or she visits an old woman who is the only one still living in a hamlet with four houses. Photographer Natalya Saprunkova has portrayed a childhood, the kind of which probably doesn't exist too often anymore. Still a little of the old world, though also a little of the new one too. And in it, a strong, hands-on, cheerful girl who can withstand freezing cold as well as swarms of mosquitoes. Who also lends a helping hand when needed. And is playful as only a child can be.

Photographer: Natalya Saprunkova, Russia/France



© Natalya Saprunkova, Russia/France

Honorable Mention 2021

Germany: Being poor in Duisburg

Compared to Niger, Burkina Faso or Haiti, for example, there is no real hardship in Germany. When a family's income is far below the average German income, however, and taking the established costs of living into account, poverty does exist, even in this rich country. According to a UNICEF report on the situation of children in Germany, almost 1.5 million children under the age of 16 were affected by poverty in 2019. And the risk of being one of them has even increased due to the coronavirus pandemic. Duisburg-Hochfeld is one of the places where you can see what that actually means. The partial closure of schools has worsened the already existing educational disadvantages and the social disintegration of many young people here. They have a German passport, but do not feel at home anywhere, they don't feel 'truly German'. They live without a perspective for the future. Biker gangs as well as Arab and Eastern European clans offer themselves as alternatives. Pressure is put on young people from all sides here. Toby Binder has portrayed these young people who often have to live ten at a time in two-room apartments: their boredom between closed shops and abandoned factories, their hanging around on the streets, their posing, their aggressiveness even at the age of only eight or nine. Poverty in Germany looks different from poverty in Niger or Haiti. But it is there.

Photographer: Toby Binder, Germany



© Toby Binder, Germany

Texts: © Peter-Matthias Gaede for UNICEF, November 2021