

UNICEF Photo of the Year 2023



First Prize 2023

Ukraine: Under the dark clouds of war

Five-year-old Alina is practicing riding her bike, followed by her friends. A moment of lightheartedness in a meadow in the northwest of Ukraine, that banishes the dark clouds of misery, for a while at least. The night before, a drone strike set fire to an oil depot nearby. This time it was just an oil depot, not a residential building, not a hospital, not a school. The war in Ukraine, which broke out in February 2022, does not overshadow every day and every place in this large country, so that it could utterly destroy the simple joys, needs, and resilience of its children. This can be seen in this stunning picture by Polish photographer Patryk Jaracz. However, he also repeatedly documents the mental and physical injuries suffered by Ukrainian children: a 13-year-old boy who was hit by five bullets while fleeing in a car and had to witness the death of his father. Or a ten-year-old girl whose mother wanted to cut off her hair to make her look like a boy because she was afraid that Russian soldiers would rape her. Children who get panic attacks every time they hear an airplane. It is still difficult to assess the long-term impact of the war experiences of millions of Ukrainian children. Especially as there is no end in sight to the attacks, the flight from danger, and the suffering. It breaks his heart, says Jaracz, to see people suffering like this.

Photographer: Patryk Jaracz, Poland



© Patryk Jaracz, Poland

Second Prize 2023

Afghanistan: In the holes of Chinarak

They have no helmets, gloves, or safety glasses when crawling a hundred meters or more into the mountains of Chinarak. There are also no measuring devices for toxic gases. The supporting beams in the tunnels are makeshift, the air is heavy, the ground treacherous. And some of the boys who mine coal in the mountains north of Kabul for the equivalent of a few euros a day are only ten years old. There has always been child labor in Afghanistan. However, since the victory of the Taliban and the resulting decline in international aid, and because of failed harvests and droughts, more and more families have been forced to make even their underage sons work for a living. That's why there are so many children among the adults here, shoveling coal into sacks, heaving it onto the backs of donkeys and driving them along narrow paths through a deforested landscape, down into the valley. As the German photographer Oliver Weiken shows in his pictures, it is tiring work that leaves little energy, even to go to school. Around 20 percent of all boys and girls in Afghanistan work as street vendors, water carriers, shoe shiners, garbage collectors, helpers at markets or in mines such as those in Chinarak. In hardly any other country in the world are children's rights, as defined by the United Nations, so far removed from being realized.

Photographer: Oliver Weiken, Germany (Deutsche Presse-Agentur)



© Oliver Weiken, Germany, dpa (Deutsche Presse-Agentur)

Third Prize 2023

Russia: The children from the great cold forest

They were once alone with their reindeer herds in the tundra and forests of Yakutia, in north-eastern Siberia. Back then, Moscow was not important to the indigenous Evenki people. Then came the geologists and prospectors in search of gold, diamonds, and other abundant mineral resources. And finally came the lumberjacks. The lives of the Evenki people have changed considerably since then. Many nomads have settled down, industrial plants have cut across the migratory paths of the reindeer, missionaries compete against the traditional shamanism. All of this also changes childhoods in Yakutia. Russian-born photographer Natalya Saprunova documents these changes through images of a time when Russian patriotism is even practiced in kindergarten. For example, every February 23, when Russia celebrates Defender of the Fatherland Day, even three-year-olds are dressed up in miniature versions of Russian military uniforms.

Photographer: Natalya Saprunova, Russia/France (Zeppelin Agency)



© Natalya Saprunova, Russia/France(AgencyZeppelin)

Honorable Mention 2023

Germany: Johannes' four-legged sister

Type 1 diabetes – around 35,000 children and young people in Germany suffer from this autoimmune disease and have to keep a constant eye on their blood sugar levels. Eleven-year-old Johannes is one of them. At least it has led to a very special relationship for him: with a Labrador dog that he calls his sister, and who watches over him like a good nurse. Enya has the ability to recognize dangerous fluctuations in a diabetic's blood sugar level based on their breathing rate and smell. She is also trained to step on a bell with her paw to alert his parents, or to quickly bring Johannes some glucose. Her reward? A piece of dried meat. The ability of some dogs to warn of diabetes has been scientifically observed since the 1990s; such assistance dogs have also been trained in Germany since 2007. German photographer Michael Löwa has captured this unusual and symbiotic relationship in heart-warming images.

Photographer: Michael Löwa, Germany, for Dein Spiegel (Agency laif)



© Michael Löwa, Deutschland, (Agency laif), for Dein Spiegel

Honorable Mention 2023

USA: What is happening to me?

“There’s this feeling that you can’t manage life on your own,” says 14-year-old Josiah. “I always felt safe at school. But the news about all these shootings really scares me,” confesses Collin, eleven years old. “It’s like I’m not able to trust anybody at this point”, regrets Nolan, twelve years old. “I tried to convince myself that I was fine. But I wasn’t fine with what people were saying about me,” says Kayleigh, a victim of harassment and exclusion of people on social networks, also known as ‘cyber bullying’. New Zealand-born photographer Robin Hammond has taken portraits of young people in five US states. His pictures show a fundamental insecurity. According to estimates, about one in three US teenagers struggles with mental health issues. Between 2019 and 2021 alone, the number of drug-related deaths among children aged between ten and 18 more than doubled, according to statistics from the national public health agency of the United States (CDC). News of violence in schools also plays a significant role in the growing fear and anxiety. Between February 2010 and March 2023, there were dozens of shootings at schools and universities that resulted in deaths and injuries – among students and teachers alike. Many young people are also victims of verbal abuse online by their peers.

Photographer: Robin Hammond, New Zealand/UK (Panos Pictures)



© Robin Hammond, New Zealand/United Kingdom (AgencyPanos Pictures)

Honorable Mention 2023

Sierra Leone: Sinking into the sea piece by piece

How it feels to lose the ground under your feet: the inhabitants of Nyangai Island, off the coast of the West African country of Sierra Leone, are experiencing it more drastically every year. As recently as ten years ago, the island measured some 2,300 feet from end to end. Storms and rising waters have left it a patch of sand barely 300 feet long. The pictures of the children on this island, taken by British photographer Tommy Trenchard, are therefore pictures of farewell. The remaining boys and girls will have to leave the island along with their parents. Of three villages, only one remains, the former football pitch is under water most of the day, the sea spills over the thresholds of the houses, there is no more space for new housing in the center of the island, and the trees of a once large forest lie rotting in the salt water. At every high tide, the children have to wade through knee-high water. Trenchard's images document an impending loss of home that threatens 'only' 400 people on this island, but millions of victims of extreme weather and climate change worldwide. "God will decide what happens to us. We're in his hands now", says the island's chief.

Photographer: Tommy Trenchard, UK (Panos Pictures)



© Tommy Trenchard, United Kingdom (AgencyPanos Pictures)

Honorable Mention 2023

China: the high-achieving child

For decades, the Chinese state propagated a one-child policy to curb population growth and poverty. When it became clear that this would lead to an aging society and a shortage of women, because mainly female embryos were being aborted, this policy was changed completely. Since 2021, the rule has been that every married couple should have three children if possible. There is only one problem: the new Chinese middle class, in particular, does not necessarily want more than one child. Two trends are responsible for this, especially in urban milieus characterized by professional advancement: the prioritization of professional careers and the high cost of childcare, which ambitious parents strive for from the moment a baby is born. Hong Kong-born photographer Justin Jin documents this change that is mostly taking place in the cities. His images show, for example, professional nannies providing luxurious care to newborns whose mothers want to return to work as quickly as possible. His photo series is also about the competition among parents to let their children shine in extracurricular fields. Or about those couples in high positions for whom children are generally too expensive, and who would rather have dogs than children. Childhood in China: it certainly looks very different in rural areas. In the big metropolises, however, it is increasingly under the control of new norms; everything revolves around turning children into high achievers.

Photographer: Justin Jin, China / Belgium



© Justin Jin, China / Belgium

Honorable Mention 2023

India: The fate of the little water carriers

Some of them are only three or four years old. Some have to walk four kilometers to the next water source, some seven, some ten. They dig holes in dried-up riverbeds until they come across a little groundwater. They march through barren wastelands. They climb down deep wells. They carry heavy water canisters across the parched landscape when they should be at school or playing. In his pictures, Indian photographer Supratim Bhattacharjee draws attention to a drama that affects millions of boys and girls in India: the severe water shortage in large parts of the subcontinent. There is not only a general lack of water, but above all a lack of clean drinking water, whether in the states of Rajasthan or Gujarat, in the Thar Desert or in the Himalayan region. With all the consequences for the hygiene and health of those affected. As a result, children in particular suffer from diarrhea en masse. This is an absolute emergency situation that cannot be adequately combated with the state-organized tanker network alone. Especially as climate change is exacerbating the situation. Many rivers have reached a ten-year low, and important natural water reservoirs are only filled to a fifth of their original capacity.

Photographer: Supratim Bhattacharjee, India (Agency De Beeldunie)



© Supratim Bhattacharjee, India (AgencyDe Beeldunie)

Honorable Mention 2023

Iran: The power of reading

In the village of Kelab in the mountainous southwest of Iran lives a girl who wants to change the world with books. As the eldest of six brothers and sisters, Tayyiba Atun gathers the other children in the village around her for a few hours every day, if possible, to read to them. She wants the children's thoughts to fly beyond the boundaries of their village. Fantasy should prevail over the narrow horizons of their situation. They should talk to each other, make plans together, get an idea of the wide world beyond the mountains and understand life better by listening to all kinds of different stories. Iranian photographer Atefeh Alsadat Safavi Vanani joined Kelab's young reading activist and her audience for a while. She was present at Tayyiba's gatherings under trees and among herds of goats – with only a few children or with large groups of them. Vanani affectionately describes the girl as a 'seeker'. It is the story of a private call to action, the results of which will become apparent in a few years' time. And when that time comes, the results will be clearly visible.

Photographer: Atefeh Alsadat Safavi Vanani, Iran (SOO Photo Agency)



© Atefeh Alsadat Safavi Vanani, Iran (SOO Photo Agency)

Honorable Mention 2023

Ukraine: The enemy inside

It's like a second front in wartime Ukraine. On this front, the defenders are children and their enemy is cancer. Elina, not yet two years old, who together with her family, was forced to flee her home in Kharkiv. Bohdan, who is suffering from eye cancer, and has fled with his family from Melitopol. Although there are still working pediatric hospitals in Kyiv and Lviv, the hospitals in many other places in the Ukraine have been destroyed. Supply chains for medical equipment and medicines have been interrupted and there is a lack of medical staff. Italian photographer Fabio Bucciarelli has made contact with affected families through his connection to an NGO. In his pictures, he shows the bravery and resilience of children suffering from bone or brain tumors, but also how defenseless they are. Most of them are old enough, seven or eleven or fourteen years old, to know that the world is no longer a safe place, even outside the hospital.

Photographer: Fabio Bucciarelli, Italy



© Fabio Bucciarelli, Italy