

14<sup>th</sup> April 2020

## OPEN LETTER ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CHILD RIGHTS – JOINING FORCES INITIATIVE

Presidents, Prime Ministers, Governments, Mayors

We recognize and respect that government leaders are taking unprecedented measures to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, which poses a grave threat to the lives of many millions. Urgent steps are absolutely necessary to overcome the disease, and we understand that measures will vary in intensity from country to country as required.

COVID-19 is inflicting great pain and suffering throughout the world. We extend our deepest sympathies to those who have lost, or may lose, loved ones to this dreadful disease.

While adults are hardest impacted by COVID-19, as the world's six leading child rights organisations, we urge authorities to also recognise that the pandemic is deeply affecting the environment in which children grow and develop, from early childhood to adolescence.

We know that the disease and efforts to stem it will affect the health, well-being and future of the world's children. It is vital that governments design their responses in a way that protects children's rights to survival and development, their physical and mental health, nutrition, protection, education, well-being and care, as well as their right to be informed and to be heard.

Children comprise a disproportionate percentage of the poorest and most vulnerable and are the population group that will suffer the greatest from the virus spreading into low-income countries with weaker healthcare systems. The millions living in crowded slums, informal settlements and refugee camps will be unable to practice social distancing or adequate sanitation and are especially at risk of infection. COVID-19 creates immediate threats to the income and food security of families and to children's safe and appropriate care, should they be separated from or lose their caregivers.

We are particularly concerned for the 420 million children affected by conflict, especially the 30 million girls and boys on the move. It is essential that confinement measures in response to COVID-19 do not curtail the delivery of the humanitarian assistance on which millions of these children rely for their survival.

Already 1.5 billion learners are out of school. Experience from other crises teaches us that many will never return, damaging their prospects for a lifetime. And without the protection afforded by educational systems, including access to school feeding programmes, millions of children, particularly girls, are at higher risk of violence, exploitation, neglect, malnutrition and online abuse.

As Meg Gardinier, Secretary General of ChildFund Alliance and CEO Chair of the Joining Forces Initiative has said, "In the desperate fight against coronavirus, we need to ensure that children are protected not only from COVID-19, but from the unintended consequences of the confinement procedures required to combat it."

As the Joining Forces group of child rights organisations, we ask governments to put concrete steps in place to protect children during the COVID-19 crisis. These measures need to ensure access to nutritious food, appropriate supervision, healthcare, protection from violence, alternative education

at home and reliable information on the crisis to help them cope with the psychological impact of the disease and the confinement measures adopted to contain it.

We are experiencing an unprecedented global public health crisis, which calls for an unprecedented response by all humanity. The highest degree of international and regional cooperation, information sharing, and solidarity is required to truly protect all people in all parts of the globe.

Lastly, we note there have been exceptional restrictions imposed on personal freedoms to curb the spread of the virus. We urge that such restrictions be temporary and regularly reviewed in accordance with each country's human rights commitments. They should be necessary and proportionate to the evaluated risk. With respect to children, all measures should remain in their best interests and ensure the protection and fulfilment of their rights.

Signed:

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The CEOs of the Joining Forces alliance of the six largest child- focused international NGOs: ChildFund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Villages International, Terre des Hommes International Federation, and World Vision International.

This statement has been endorsed by: Child Rights Connect.

Child Rights Connect is a strategic partner of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the largest global network of child rights organizations.

## DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS

Joining Forces calls on all governments to support:

### COORDINATED GLOBAL RESPONSE

- Support efforts by global and regional institutions to spearhead a coherent and effective global response to COVID-19, including efforts undertaken by the WHO, G7, G20, UN bodies and agencies, global health authorities, human rights bodies, multilateral finance entities, and the international humanitarian system.
- Work closely and openly with civil society organizations to ensure that global policies, guidance and measures are rights-based, inclusive and equitable, including global access to public goods like new vaccines, medical treatments and equipment; and to ensure the responsiveness of global policies to the people most affected and most in need.
- Ensure that global, regional and national authorities that are planning and implementing measures to prepare for and respond to the COVID-19 outbreak recognise that disease outbreaks affect girls and boys, women and men differently. They should ensure that measures to prepare for and respond to the outbreak are equitable, gender-aware, child-sensitive, protective of human rights, inclusive of the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable people, and responsive to the different needs and risks faced by individuals.
- Donors must protect and increase aid spending. Funding should offer flexible protection for jobs, help to guarantee basic family incomes and continued access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance. Too many children have already fallen into poverty. Many more will follow unless international support and national assistance target the most disadvantaged.
- Recognise that, whilst the level of public health threat caused by the pandemic can justify temporary restrictions, States cannot ignore their international human rights obligations to children, including obligations under the UNCRC and other UN and regional human rights treaties.

### RIGHT TO HEALTH

As the virus spreads to low-income countries with weaker healthcare systems, the lack of access to basic health services will be particularly acute among the poorest and most marginalised children and those facing unequal access due to their sex, location or identity. Children living in crowded slums, informal settlements and refugee camps will be unable to practice social distancing and will be especially at risk. In addition, evidence from the Ebola crisis showed a stark increase in maternal and infant mortality as a result of an increased number of unwanted and/or unintended births to adolescent mothers during the crisis.

The closure of schools, increased rates of child, early and forced marriage, increased levels of sexual violence and exploitation and limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and services all contributed to the rise in teenage pregnancy rates and the number of maternal and child deaths. These trends can be anticipated in the current COVID-19 crisis. Evidence from past epidemics also indicates that resources are often diverted from routine health services, which

exacerbates already limited access to maternal, neonatal and child health and other basic health services.

- With the disruption of social, educational and health infrastructure, new ways of providing information and support to adolescents and young people to meet their health information needs and rights must be established. The need for mental health services and psychosocial support services is paramount, as everyone, including children, adolescents and youth, are facing high levels of anxiety and stress related to COVID-19.
- It is critical that health workers are properly trained and able to provide non-discriminatory health services (including sexual and reproductive health) to adolescents and young people. Ensuring adequate supplies of personal protective equipment as well as supplies and facilities for proper basic hygiene including menstrual hygiene care and management is essential. Support and provision for health and social care workers must also recognize that a large majority of them are usually women.
- Girls' and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights must continue to be prioritised, funded and recognised as life-saving, along with essential health services for young children's survival and healthy growth.

## RIGHT TO FOOD

The COVID-19 response must consider where malnutrition may cause additional vulnerability - both immediately and longer term - and protect children's right to food and nutrition. The pandemic is impacting already fragile food systems, highlighted by the visible strain on the supply chain and retail sector in many countries. In the short term, employment uncertainty, closing of schools, closing of borders, periods of isolation and widespread sickness has implications for the poorest and most marginalised children and communities, who are already vulnerable to food insecurity. Projections of a related economic downturn which could last for several years means that measures to end child poverty and equitably strengthen food and nutrition security will be crucial to avert longer term health crises. Economic impacts will be felt, not just by the poorest but also increasingly the middle classes. Countries will need to expand income support to avoid families going hungry and prevent life-long negative impacts on children.

- Governments must prioritise actions to ensure children, pregnant and lactating women, and older people are well nourished, alongside other critical health interventions. These actions should be part of preparedness and protection strategies and treatment protocols;
- Governments should follow Operational Guidance on infant and young child feeding in emergencies (IYCF-E) to confirm that appropriate and timely support of IYCF-E saves lives, protects children's health and development, and benefits mothers.
- Furthermore, governments should ensure appropriate, safe, healthy and nutritious food is affordable and accessible for all by financing and scaling up social protection schemes to protect the poorest and most vulnerable
- In other contexts (where safety nets do not exist or reach) humanitarian responses must be allowed to continue operating, and expand if necessary.

## RIGHT TO PROTECTION

Sadly, our extensive experience of emergencies and conflict tells us that situations of gender-based violence (which can disproportionately affect girls), harmful coping mechanisms and exploitation rise in response to these restricted environments and external shocks. Quarantine measures imposed as a response to the COVID-19 outbreak are putting children, especially girls, and women, at heightened risk of violence in the home, and cutting them off from essential child protection services and systems as well as social networks. Within isolation, children will spend more time online, increasing the risks to children from online abuse, including child pornography and online bullying. Secondary impacts of the outbreak, such as loss of jobs and disruption to education, may also cause an increase in sexual violence, exploitation, trafficking and child labour. This situation grows even more worrying for children in conflict settings, who are incarcerated, those placed in institutions and other forms of alternative care or living with disabilities. Street children, those in camps and on the move face discrimination and exclusion from health, information and protective measures.

- Governments need to maintain and scale up investment in child protection systems and social welfare services as part of their preparedness and response plans.
- Rigorous protection and safeguarding of all children, and of girls and women from gender-based violence must be prioritized in all policies, information, guidance at all stages of the response and be adequately funded. Protection and social welfare services should be adapted, including by switching to remote forms of provision.
- We also call on governments to prioritise and identify the most vulnerable and at-risk children for prevention and response interventions
- Governments should ensure all children can access health care, and that they prevent separation of child and caregiver during any treatment and isolation. They should account for the needs of children in institutional care settings and ensure special measures for treatment and prevention of infection spread.
- Governments should prepare contingency plans to strengthen families and prevent unnecessary family separation. When necessary, safe alternative care should be provided for children, respecting best practices and taken in the best interest of the child. For those children leaving or who have left care, special measures should be taken to support their independent living.
- Child protection service workers, whether paid or unpaid, should be regarded as essential, provided personal protective equipment, and encouraged to continue supporting children and communities.

## RIGHT TO EDUCATION

With over 1.5 billion learners out of school globally there are immediate and long-term concerns for their access to education as well as qualifications and employment in the future. Families (especially those already facing difficult circumstances) are having to provide “home-schooling” and face challenges to ensure food security and adequate nutrition for their children. Governments need to ensure continued access to education provision as well as to food and shelter.

- Consider innovative ways to address the needs of the most vulnerable children and youth who miss out on vital services when schools are closed, specifically school meals and social protection (e.g. cash, vouchers or food packages)
- Governments should work closely with teachers, school staff and communities at large to ensure inclusive methods of distance learning are socialized in an accessible manner and

distance learning materials coordinate with and promote public health messaging to strengthen the pandemic response and combat disinformation.

- Ensure that girls are not deterred from returning to school when they re-open by ensuring flexible learning approaches and appropriate opportunities in future admissions processes that recognise the challenges they face. This includes pregnant girls and young mothers who often face stigma and discriminatory school re-entry laws.
- Support teachers and school staff to maintain their central role in children's education, so that out of pocket expenses such as textbooks, printing and data services to access email and new education platforms are reimbursed, and their employment is maintained so that the workforce is not depleted.

## RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION

With an estimated 20% of the world population following government restrictions on social distancing, children face significant challenges to their right to be heard and their freedom of association, assembly and expression. Whilst these restrictions are necessary to prevent viral spread, challenges will increase for children over time, with increasing isolation from extended family, friends and community, and severe restrictions with respect to their right to play. We note significant concern with respect to safe access to, and increased usage of, online technologies/platforms and the increased risk with regards to online violence, abuse and exploitation.

The Committee of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child underlines that the right to be heard does not cease in situations of crisis or in their aftermath. Children are not just passive subjects of disease control: they are active and engaged citizens who want to be involved in understanding the pandemic and protecting themselves and their families from the disease.

- We urge governments to recognise the need for all children to have access to child-friendly advice and guidance on staying safe and healthy.
- As countries build understanding and evidence to develop their policies and long-term strategies to deal with the crisis we call upon them to recognise the rights of children to participate in research and monitoring and be involved in shaping policy, through appropriate consultation and civic engagement mechanisms. This includes strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of girls and young women, as well as boys and young men, in all decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard and needs are met.

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