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**CALL FOR INPUT**

**UN Human Rights Office Report on Child Rights & SDGs: “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic”**

***Impact of COVID-19 on children***

Already before the pandemic the world was far from being on track to fulfil to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 and yhe promise to children to eradicate violence against children by 2030. However, it should be noted that all 17 of the SDGs touch children’s lives in one way or another while the drivers of violence against children span the political, economic, social and cultural policy environments. The importance of the interconnectedness of the SDGs is being highlighted more than ever due to the multi-dimensional effects of COVID-19 on the lives of children the surrounding environment.[[1]](#footnote-1)

School closures, confinement, movement restrictions, disruption of provision of already limited child protection services, added family stress related to job loss, isolation, and anxieties over health and finances resulting from mitigation measures in response to COVID-19, significantly increased the risk of children experiencing or being exposed to violence at home.[[2]](#footnote-2) Multiple countries have reported an increase in domestic violence, demand of emergency shelters and helplines, and online sexual exploitation of children, at the same time as the capacity of essential services to effectively prevent and respond to violence has significantly decreased.

At their peak, school closures due to COVID-19 affected almost 90 per cent of students around the world – including 743 million girls. More than 111 million of them are in the least developed countries.[[3]](#footnote-3) The impacts of disrupted education services are compounded by young people missing out on peer interaction and support, due to lockdown and school closures, including access to the protection and early warning signs that are provided by school staff and community members.

Widespread use of online platforms can mitigate the education loss caused by school-closures, but the poorest children are least likely to live in a suitable home-learning environment with adequate internet connection. Some 463 million students were not able to access remote learning during school shutdowns and previous shutdowns demonstrate that children who are out of school for extended periods, especially girls, are less likely to return.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Furthermore, increased unsupervised on-line internet use has exacerbated issues around sexual exploitation and cyber-bullying. Europol has highlighted that its law enforcement partners are reporting “increased online activity by those seeking child abuse material” due to increased time spent and opportunities presented online because of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on children’s mental wellbeing. In various consultations of children undertaken by different organizations including CSOs and the OSRSG - VAC[[5]](#footnote-5), children expressed that they feel unsafe, insecure, scared, lonely and isolated. It is known that stress and anxiety can have negative and long-lasting effects on children’s mental health, including sleep and eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression - approximately 70 per cent of mental health services for children and adolescents have been disrupted by the pandemic[[6]](#footnote-6)

In less than a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global economy, triggering the deepest global recession in decades, including estimates of up to 150 million people being pushed into extreme poverty by 2021, affecting mainly women and children**[[7]](#footnote-7).** As poverty is a main driver, the risks of child marriage, child labor, child sexual exploitation, and child trafficking are all increased, as is child enrolment in criminal, armed, violent extremist groups. ILO reports that a one percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7 per cent increase in child labour in certain countries which will reverse the progress on decreasing child labour for the first time in twenty years.[[8]](#footnote-8) . UNFPA projects that an additional 13 million child marriages may take place over the next 10 years.[[9]](#footnote-9) In short, the crisis is having life-altering consequences for millions of children and youth worldwide.

***State responses***

According to data from UNICEF, at least 31 countries have released children from detention in connection with concerns about the spread of COVID-19 which begs the question of why they were kept in detention in the first place versus other more child rights-based responses.

The number of children in Scotland contacting the child helpline about problems with their mental or emotional wellbeing increased by 20 percent during lockdown and in Australia the helpline saw an increase of 40 percent. Several countries introduced or strengthened the capacity of helplines to respond to the current situation. Jamaica launched thirty-six helplines to offer psychosocial care to parents across the country and in Georgia a specialized hotline was launched to help children and their families.

At the same time, hotlines for reporting abuse and exploitation saw a decrease in the number of calls. This is most probably due to lack of access during lockdowns by the victims, but also by teachers, social workers and other childcare providers. Colorado in United States reported a drop of 45 percent and in the United Kingdom, there were 49 percent fewer calls to domestic abuse hotlines. This raise concerns that the most vulnerable children are not able to access the support that they need. In France, the government strengthened its hotline reporting, coupled with a public communications campaign.

In Sweden, the government decided to keep pre-schools and primary schools open during the pandemic based on considerations of the best interest of the child as schools not only provide education but also play an important role in maintaining social equality and child protection. With the same motivation, Iceland also kept their schools open, although hours of physical presence were reduced, and teachers continued providing children with education both locally and through distance education.

In countries that included school closures as part of their response, many countries took action to mitigate the negative impact by school closures by scaling up options for distance learning. Jordan ensured education continuity for all children, including Syrian students, through distance learning from televised lessons and digital platforms. In Colombia, the Ministry of Education also worked with teachers and educators on violence prevention, including online, and created a system where over 3,000 headmasters can report and follow up on cyberbullying and cybercrime cases.

Lockdowns and voluntary stay-at-home orders severely undermined children’s access to social services. For this reason, Scotland issued special guidance for managers, social workers and social care workers undertaking home visits and other face-to-face direct contact with service users and significant others in community settings. Japan mobilised local and multi-sectoral networks and established monitoring mechanisms for vulnerable children through (at minimum) weekly visits and phone calls, which targeted children and pregnant women.

Several countries organized press conferences specifically targeting children, including Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden, which were excellent opportunities for child participation and a meaningful dialogue between policy-makers and children .

Many countries that presented their VNRs in 2020 HLPF expressed their concerns on the effects of COVID-19 on their national development plans. Some Member States also shared how they are strengthening the protection of children during this time. In Ecuador, after the onset of Covid-19, in order to provide services to people victims of domestic violence, the government implemented a large-scale information strategy, which reached over 54,000 people psycho-social and legal services. Ecuador and Georgia reported that the government established a toll free helpline to support the victims of violence. The government of the Gambia reported that it provided food support to 84% of households to mitigate the effect of COVID-19. To support children staying at home during school closures, the government of Seychelles introduced a measure to allow parents of children under the age of 15 to seek special leave from their employers until school institutions reopened. The government of Trinidad and Tobago reported that the government introduced a special measure to ensure the continuation of food support for children who received meals at their schools pre-COVID.

***Recovery***

The pandemic has revealed how inequality, discrimination and social disparitiescan have devastating consequences for children. The recovery is an opportunity for governments worldwide to build back better, to reassess priorities - advance human development and reduce inequalities.

Restoration of child services should be prioritized as lockdown measures wind down, including schooling, nutrition programmes, maternal and newborn care, immunization services, sexual and reproductive health services, HIV treatment, mental health and psychosocial and core protection services. Conduct outreach and re-enrollment drives to ensure that no child is left without education and protection.

In order to counter negative risks with the increased online presence of children, messaging on safe and responsible behaviour online and supporting children to develop digital skills and resilience should complement concrete action including reviewing of user-generated content and take-down as well as reporting of harmful content and hate speech. Provide guidance and tools for parents and carers on how to better protect children online and offline, including how to respond to and, if needed, report harmful contacts, conduct and content. Update current safeguarding policies of educational institutions to reflect online risks and potential harms facilitated through online schooling. Private sector stakeholders should take appropriate technical measures – such as parental control tools, age verification, safety-by-design, age-differentiated experiences, with password-protected content, block/allow lists, purchase/time controls, opt-out functions, filtering and moderating – to prevent underage access and exposure to inappropriate content or services.

Provide practical support to parents and caregivers, including how to talk about the pandemic with children, how to manage their own mental health and the mental health of their children, and tools to help support their children’s learning. Strengthen trainings for health, education and social service workers on the impacts that COVID-19 may have on child well-being, including skills development support in talking to children about anxiety and insecurity.

Provide universal social protection, including universal health coverage, to help poor and other vulnerable families to meet their basic needs without resorting to child labor or child marriage. Strengthen interministerial coordination, as well as within relevant SDGs multi-stakeholder partnerships, such as Alliance 8.7, and redouble efforts to prevent, identify, mitigate and remediate child labour, paying particular attention to increased risk of child trafficking.

Economic assistance should also include measures to decrease the digital divide between different groups of children by increasing the accessibility and affordability of internet access to children as part of the response to maintain children’s learning, support and play. Possible measures include financial packages to improve connectivity, data packages and telecommunications subsidies, lending devices and providing technical support hotlines.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased hate speech as well as activities of violent extremism groups. Action must be taken against racism and xenophobia, including that which is directed to certain groups who are perceived to be linked to the corona virus. This may include information sharing on the nature of the virus and its spread, monitoring of hate speech and related activities, etc.

Reformulate social priorities and develop a strategic plan for the future of public services, in particular social and child protection services, and reduces inequalities in order to establish sustainability resilience and readiness for any future national or global crisis.

The release of children from situations of deprivation of liberty has created an opening to re-engage in child justice reforms and bring about sustainable long-term change to ensure that deprivation of liberty as truly a measure of last resort for all children, and for the increased use of alternatives to detention, such as diversion and restorative justice.

Effective government responses to the increased risk of violence against children must ensure that social and child protection services are recognized as life-saving and essential services, along with health, mental health and education, as part of an intersectoral and child rights-based response. These services must be built on a solid foundation of a permanent social protection system, including universal child grants, universal health coverage that will protect children and their caregivers from economic risks, in good times and bad.

Even the most economically advanced countries are struggling to cope with the health, social and economic fallout of the pandemic, but the poorest and most disadvantaged countries will inevitably be hit the hardest. Without support from the international community, the crisis could destabilize the economies of already impoverished nations with devastating effects on children. Strong multi-sectoral mobilization of governments, the international community, civil society, faith-based organizations, private sector, and leaders is needed now more than ever. The United Nations and its agencies must a strong partner in this mobilization. For this, the Office of the SRSG-VAC has worked together with the members of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Ending Violence against Children to establish an Agenda for Action to ensure a child rights and multi-sectoral approach to responding to COVID-19 [[10]](#footnote-10)

Allocating budgets and strengthening services for the wellbeing and protection of children from all forms of violence is an investment in the future and will be key to the recovery phase as we build back.

The SRSGVAC office joined #COVIDUnder19, an initiative led by Civil Society Organizations, children, academia child human rights activists, experts and other key stakeholders that conducted a survey to capture children’s experiences and views regarding their lives and their rights under COVID-19. Over 30,000 children from all geographical regions responded to the questionnaire. The preliminary results show that:

1. over half of children report that they have experienced, heard of or witnessed the same degree or more violence, both in the real world as well as online since the pandemic started.
2. Some groups experienced higher levels of violence, including children from minorities, children from migrant communities, children with disabilities, and LGBT children.
3. Almost half of children who reported feeling less safe where they live, also said they have less knowledge now than before lockdown on how to get help and support.
4. Nine out of 10 children said their friends have been able to help them during confinement but connecting with them has been challenging.
5. In a post-COVID-19 world, over 90 percent of children want to help their families and two thirds want to get involved in their communities or get involved with other children and young people in schools, youth groups or through other channels.

Children must be included as part of the solution and governments should provide opportunities for children’s views to be heard and taken into account in decision-making processes as part of “building back better” , through consultation, dialogue and other opportunities for meaningful participation. Children are using digital technology to support each other, exchanging views and identifying gaps in government responses. Children and young people will have to face a new different reality after the crisis and their future seems uncertain, therefore they will have to be part of the solution.

1. <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/vnr_doc_final.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UN Women, ‘COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls’, Issue Brief, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, ‘Education: From disruption to recovery’, May OECD, London, 2020. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/ educationresponse [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Malala Fund, ‘Malala Fund releases report on girls’ education and COVID-19’, Report, April 2020, https://malala.org/ newsroom/archive/malala-fund-releases-report-girlseducation-covid-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. CovidUnder19 Initiative Questionnaires developed with children by Queens University of Belfast and UNICEF’s U-Report, (not published yet) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. United Nations, ‘COVID-19 and the need for action on mental health’, Policy Brief, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. MSN. (2020). [World Bank chief warns extreme poverty could surge by 100 mn](https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/world-bank-chief-warns-extreme-poverty-could-surge-by-100-mn/ar-BB18cPtr), August 20; World Bank (2020). [COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021), October 7th [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms\_747421.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/2020/agenda_for_action/agenda_iawg_on_vac_27_april_ready_for_launch.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)