***Guyana's Response to the OHCHR Request for information in preparation of its Report to the High Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Rights of the Child- Human Rights Council Resolution 37/20 “Rights of the Child”***

November 25, 2020

**Question 1**

**How the rights of the child are being upheld as a priority in your country in the face of the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?**

Prior to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a visible slippage in the progressive gains that Guyana had been making in the fight against poverty and inequalities. Over the last five years there was an increase of the poverty rates as 30,000 lost their jobs and the imposition of new and heavy taxation had a significant impact on the cost of loving, social safety nets were removed or inequitably distributed, widening of disparities between the interior regions and the coastal regions, shortage of vaccines, drugs and medical supplies in the public health system led to increased cost of health care, and increased incidents of violence, abuse and exploitation of children.

Coming on the heels of these downturns, Guyana began to experience the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic within its borders with no annual budget for 2020 and no sitting of the Parliament for over a year with a caretaker government that was recklessly disposing of national assets.

The new government installed on August 2, 2020, 5 months after the General and Regional Elections on March 2, 2020, focused on an immediate comprehensive and multifaceted approach to managing the Covid-19 pandemic.

A national multi-stakeholders taskforce was assembled; increased testing capacity and turnaround time with the procurement of equipment and supplies as well as donations; acquired adequate supplies of personal protective gear for health workers; procurement of ventilators, oxygen concentrators and other equipment necessary for treating patients; enhanced capacity of regional hospitals to treat coronavirus patients; and acquired much needed drugs to improve patients’ recovery; made wearing masks mandatory. Guyana also signed on to the facility being provided by the Vaccine Alliance to allow it to access a Covid-19 vaccine.

It is recognized globally, so too in Guyana, that there are numerous risks and challenges that the Covid19 pandemic will have in the short, medium and long-term on children and adolescents and the entire nation. As a result, the well-being of children is a high priority on the Government of Guyana agenda.

Government implemented immediate economic relief measures in October 2020; it launched an almost 5 Billion Guyana dollar COVID-19 relief grant which is providing every household with G$25,000 ($125USD); the 4 interior regions where the majority of the indigenous (Amerindian) peoples live were the first to benefit from this grant; to date almost 60% of the population have already benefitted. Frontline workers will also benefit from a G$150M risk allowance. It removed Value-Added Tax (VAT) on water, electricity and data services and restored tax exempt status on essential food, medical and educational supplies and services.

Government expeditiously commenced a nationwide food-distribution programme for vulnerable families shortly after the implementation of a partial lockdown. This programme brought much relief to families whose livelihoods were severely affected as a consequence of loss of income or salary cuts. This is being coordinated by the Office of the Prime and the Civil Defence Commission.

The Family Support Services Unit under the Child Care & Protection Agency has expanded its programme to ensure that families with children do not go hungry. Food supplies continue to be distributed to vulnerable families so that no child should go hungry. The unit also offers long-term support service that helps parents to become independent in order to lift their children out of extreme poverty in accordance with **SDG1**.

A Sustainable Livelihood initiative has been developed – "The Garment and Accessories Cottage Industry Initiative," as a long term measure to assist persons especially single parent women to recover from the economic shock of the pandemic. Guyana has approximately 30% of its households headed by women. This initiative creates employment for women by increasing their access to economic opportunities while contributing to improving the livelihood of their families, specifically their children.

Guyana is also one of the countries which will be benefitting from the UN/EU Spotlight Initiative which will focus on violence against women and girls.

These measures target poverty reduction and aim to reduce unemployment among vulnerable groups of women with the goal of helping women become self-sufficient over a sustained period and is in accordance with our commitment to **Sustainable Development Goals 1&2**: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger and **SDG 8:** Decent Work and Economic growth which all are all inextricably linked to upholding the rights of our children.

Due to the closure of schools and limited access to connectivity in several regions compounded by levels of poverty, the government has used a multi- faceted approach to provide children with lessons through regional radio stations, the Learning Channel (tv), newspapers and the distribution of worksheets and work books to children, especially those in the interior regions.

To minimize learning loss due to the closure of schools, consultative sessions were held virtually with teachers across the country, parents/caregivers, and other stakeholders regarding the new delivery mechanism to keep children engaged during the pandemic and ensure that children have access to inclusive and equitable quality education which is aligned to **Sustainable Development Goal 4.**

Government has restructured the national Learning Channel to deliver timetabled instructions daily that cater for all levels of students at different times and is in keeping with the national curriculum.

Worksheets, workbooks and other learning materials have been distributed to students at all levels across the regions; blackboards have been mounted in poor and low income communities with learning materials, and, home-based learning packages for nursery pupils have been delivered.

Radio is now being utilized as one of the primary avenues for education delivery throughout Guyana. Broadcast to schools is now being aired weekly in all the administrative regions. The interactive radio instruction programme has been strengthened and more indigenous and remote communities have access to this programme.

Under the Family Assistance Unit support is given to families to enable students to actively participate in virtual classes by providing students with laptops and internet access to facilitate online learning.

Face-to-face classes resumed for Grades10, 11 and 12 only under strict COVID-19 protocols.

The Government reintroduced and increased the amount of the “We Care” education cash grant to each child registered in school. The Ministry of Education’s school uniform and school supply voucher has been increased by 100% and with the “we Care” grant are presently being distributed to school children across the nation although schools are not open.

These measures will ease the financial burden on parents and allow children to remain connected to the educational system after too long a hiatus of 9 months. These interventions will help to prevent children from falling to far behind in their educational attainment and try to bring children back to the school system who have dropped out during this interruption of their studies.

Guyana has rapidly responded within a matter of 2 months with adapting and expanding its existing economic and social protection programmes to ensure that the human rights and well-being of our children are protected in light of the challenges of the pandemic.

**Question 2**

**Particularly noteworthy examples of good practice towards realizing the rights of the child in your country, in relation to sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the goals under review - including specific laws, policies and actions to advance the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

Guyana will continue to do all that is possible to uphold children’s rights as guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the current context of restrictions to address the COVID-19 outbreak.

Guyana recognizes that the immediate effects of COVID-19 impact disproportionately on women and children; loss of family members ( particularly bread-winners), family pressures, job loss, isolation, restriction on in-person schooling and anxieties over health and finances have led to the escalation of violence in homes. Globally it has been acknowledged that the incidents and reports of violence against women and children have increased alarmingly as result of the victims being forced to be isolated with their abusers.

School closures due to the pandemic have increased the number of cases of child abuse that go unreported, since many children have lost their safe spaces, as teachers are often best positioned to identify and report children who may be experiencing violence in the home and seek appropriate intervention to ensure that they are protected.

In our efforts to ensure that there is sustained resilience, recovery and continuity with the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Child Protection Services under the Child Care Protection Agency have been expanded to allow greater access with an increase in the number of hotlines numbers. With the support of UNICEF, Senior Child Protection Officers in all the regional districts can now receive reports of suspected cases of child abuse via mobile phones with internet access. Home visits continue to be conducted in accordance with the COVID-19 guidelines so that children at risk are monitored during the pandemic.

Government with the support of international partners and NGOs continue to expand Child Advocacy Centers throughout Guyana. These centers conduct forensic interviews on camera with child victims and provide support during court sessions and psychosocial support to help victims cope with the trauma of sexual abuse. The Child Advocacy Centers also facilitate training sessions with parents and caregivers on the care of child victims; provide capacity building training to stakeholders who engage and support child victims; and conduct public education and awareness campaigns for the prevention of child sexual abuse. There are currently eleven centers and two additional centers are expected to be established in early 2021. These centers provide a safe space for children and are critical entities that will facilitate sustainable and resilient recovery from the pandemic and implementation of the UNCRC.

Government’s Parenting programme works with parents on child development and non-violent methods of discipline and provides parents with assistance to overcome personal dysfunctions that affect their parenting role. Training is done in small groups and includes a monitoring and evaluation process to measure effectiveness.

The Family Court which was not operational during the initial stage of the pandemic is now functioning through the use of virtual sessions and cases are now processed through the client’s lawyers on their behalf. Cognizant of the importance of this Court and the impact that a significant back log of cases will have with regards to the delay in justice for our children, the Government with the Judiciary sought to introduce alternative measures to ensure that vulnerable children receive the support and swift justice they are entitled.

Guyana continues to expand its public education and awareness campaigns on domestic violence and child abuse, including prevention ways of identifying warning signs of potential violence at home and how to access services. These are in keeping with the implementation of **Arts 19 and 34 of the UNCRC- Protection from violence and abuse.**

A Multi Media Awareness Campaign- "Communication 4 Development" is ongoing. Ads and other programmes are broadcast via radio and television across the country including remote locations in indigenous communities. They are presented in the two main indigenous languages.

Information pertinent to child abuse, the laws and the functions of the Child Protection Agency can be accessed through social media while weekly articles “4 Minutes 4 Change” is placed in the national newspaper.

The current awareness programmes target issues related to COVID-19 to assist families to cope with the pandemic. While non- traditional methods are being implemented to reach underprivileged families that have no access to television, radio or internet.

Cognizant of the trauma of family separation, Government is working to avoid institutionalizing children, giving priority to family-based care, including extended family (kinship) care once there is no violence of any kind.

The National Alternative Policy aims at the reunification and reintegration of children; the prevention of unnecessary separation by providing assistance and capacity building for parents thus reducing the number of children in out-of-home care.

Families experiencing difficulties can access the services of the Family Care Centre. This Centre was designed to reduce the unnecessary separation of children from families who are encountering difficulties, while providing support to help families become independent. It is accessible 24hrs to provide assistance to children at risk or in need of protective care. This center offers an alternative to caregivers at-risk for abandoning or placing their child or children in residential care and is a refuge for vulnerable children and families during the pandemic.

Guyana has expanded services for at-risk households, including home visitation services through the Family Enhancement Services Programme established in March 2020, an outcome of a USAIDS pilot project. This Programme targets at risk youths and consists of seven phases that is completed over an average of seven months. Throughout the implementation cycle, trained family counselors hold regular face-to face sessions with participating youth and their families. During these meetings, typically held in the family’s home, counselors aim to strengthen the bonds that hold family members together and connect the family to the wider community. Family Counselors work with youth on an individual basis to help them adopt positive and safe behavior.

Government is assiduously working to ensure that domestic violence services are not interrupted by COVID-19, Guyana has sought to expand those services to ensure these are available to those in need through a 24hour hotline service that will offer support, referral to victims and survivors of domestic violence and child abuse. Additional support staff will be employed for this programme to guarantee its efficiency.

Government’s Child Care Subsidy for Essential Workers Programme will soon provide child care coverage for approximately 1,500 children of essential workers throughout Guyana. This Programme has taken an all-rounded approach to not only facilitate child care subsidy for essential workers but also to improve the conditions of the 224 registered child care centres nationwide ensuring they open safely under the minimum COVID-19 guidelines, follow early childhood education best practices and improve mental health and work performance in essential workers, caregivers and administrators of child care centres. This initiative also aims to provide a safe and secure environment for children of essential workers while they are at work.

While significant resources have been allocated to our health care system to fight COVID-19, access to health care services for children has not been hindered during the pandemic. Primary health care delivery across the country continues to be provided and no child or any patient is turned away from a public hospital.

Psychological support services for children and adolescents continue to be offered through the Ministry of Human Services and non-governmental organizations

As Guyana seeks to maintain its objective to work towards achieving the SDGs by 2030, and the implementation of the UNCRC, Government is cognizant that its responses in relation to public policy and specifically, social protection, on the recovery of the COVID-19 crisis must be sensitive to the needs of future generations, not only in terms of maintaining the quality of lives of families and individuals, but also in addressing the multiple and complex risks that an unprecedented crisis brings to economies, societies, communities, families, and children.

Guyana recognizes that the human rights of every child are inextricably linked to the development of the nation and the well-being of future generations.