

Child rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastating short-, medium- and long-term consequences for children and their rights and poses a significant challenge to the realization of the 2030 Agenda. It can also have a grave physical, emotional and psychological effect on children, especially in countries which have established mandatory stay-at-home, lockdown or confinement measures and for children in situations of vulnerability.¹ While children who contract COVID-19 seem to have fewer symptoms and lower mortality rates than other groups, there are several immediate socio-economic impacts directly affecting children and child protection risks that are emerging daily due to the measures taken to prevent and contain the virus.

Stay-at-home orders, lockdowns and confinement measures have severe effects on children's rights to physical and mental health, education, play, family environment and freedom from violence, among others. Children may be confined in homes that are overcrowded or do not meet the adequate standard of living.² Children in vulnerable situations such as those on the move, in conflict zones, in detention, or street children may not have access to an adequate standard of living, including housing, food, water, sanitation and hygiene. Furthermore, children's rights to information, participation, and access to justice are often not being respected, protected and fulfilled in State responses to the pandemic.

The right to education has been disrupted for more than 1.5 billion children globally as 188 countries have closed schools.³ Online learning is being employed as an alternative and more than two-thirds of countries have introduced a national distance learning platform. However, before the pandemic, almost one-third of young people worldwide were digitally excluded.⁴ Therefore, children who have limited or no access to technology and/or the Internet or inadequate support from family may not be able to access education and risk falling further behind.⁵

COVID-19 poses a significant threat to children's rights to survival and development and highest attainable standard of health. The physical and mental health impacts are significant, particularly confinement and physical distancing. Access to key services, including both basic and lifesaving health care and services such as vaccinations, have been disrupted. Child deaths could increase due to financial hardship and the global economic downturn. Furthermore, child nutrition is of vital concern as some children cannot regularly access nutritious food during lockdown or because of financial hardship related to COVID-19. 368.5 million children in 143 countries normally rely on school meals for daily nutritious meals.⁶

Lockdowns and confinement can expose children to increased risk of witnessing or experiencing physical and psychological violence, including maltreatment and sexual violence.⁷ There is a

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), COVID-19 statement, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CRC_STA_9095_E.pdf.

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response," <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

⁴ United Nations (UN), "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

⁵ CRC, Covid-19 statement.

⁶ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

⁷ <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/news/un-rights-experts-call-urgent-action-mitigate-heightened-risks-violence-against-children>; Agenda for Action, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/COVID-19/Agenda_for_Action_IAWG-VAC.pdf.

heightened risk of exposure to inappropriate online content and online predators because of increased use of online platforms, including for distance learning.⁸ Girls are particularly at risk and face increased threats of sexual violence, exploitation, discrimination and abuse.⁹ Children on the move, in conflict zones, and street children also face increased risk of violence due to instability, uncertainty and/or an inability to comply with virus-related lockdown measures.

COVID-19 disproportionately affects those living in poverty and the poorest countries, including children. It exacerbates existing inequalities and risks pushing those affected by poverty deeper into poverty. Low-income and conflict-affected countries are less likely to be able to respond effectively due to weaker health and social protection systems, fewer households with access to technology and internet for distance learning, and more of the population lack access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.¹⁰

As a result of COVID-19, millions of children will face poverty as their families face financial hardship due to illness, an inability to work, loss of employment and income, and other related economic insecurity. In addition to the estimated 386 million children living in extreme poverty, an estimated 42-66 million children could face extreme poverty due to COVID-19.¹¹ There is also an increased risk of children being pushed into child labour to support their families and, for girls in particular, of early, child or forced marriage and exploitation and trafficking.¹²

Leaving No Child Behind in COVID-19 responses

COVID-19 has demonstrated how societal inequalities affect enjoyment of children's rights, particularly health, survival and development, education, and adequate standard of living, among others. The pandemic has already exacerbated these inequalities and risks having a long-term effect on the realization of the 2030 Agenda. This will in turn negatively affect children and the realization of their rights, particularly those already at risk of being left behind.

Furthermore, government responses risk further exacerbating existing inequalities for the most marginalized children and those in vulnerable situations. Their impact will disproportionately affect certain groups, including children living in poverty or the poorest countries and neighbourhoods, in street situations, migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee children, child victims of trafficking or smuggling, children affected by conflict, minority and indigenous children, children with underlying health conditions including HIV/AIDS, and children with disabilities. It will particularly affect children deprived of liberty, who live in crowded or unhygienic conditions and are often more vulnerable to abuse and neglect.¹³

Indeed, the pandemic may not just delay implementation of the 2030 Agenda, it risks reversing significant progress made since its adoption. In their responses to COVID-19, States must adopt an effective, child rights-based response that protects and benefits those in most vulnerable situations while advancing efforts to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights and achieve the 2030 Agenda for

⁸ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

⁹ Plan International, "Girls at the center of the COVID-19 response," <https://plan-international.org/un/girls-center-covid19-response>.

¹⁰ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Human Rights Watch, "COVID-19's Devastating Impact on Children," <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19s-devastating-impact-children>; Plan International, "Girls at the center of the COVID-19 response."

¹³ For more on children deprived of liberty, see Technical Note: COVID-19 and Children Deprived of their Liberty: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/ChildrenDeprivedofLibertyandCOVID.pdf>.

Sustainable Development. States should pay increased attention to child protection and child rights in emergency responses, maintain the provision of basic services including healthcare, water, sanitation, education and birth registration, and take targeted measures to protect children in vulnerable situations. The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration.