

## **Response to request for input into the SG Briefing on Children and COVID-19**

Consortium for Street Children (CSC) is collecting information from the organisations in its network working with children in street situations around the world via an online survey as well as discussions with individual members.

### **1. Data, and information that speaks to the prevalence of violence against children during the COVID-19 crisis.**

Some of CSC's network members have reported increases in violence against children in street situations during the pandemic. For instance, in Nigeria, where Lagos, Abuja and Ogun are in lockdown, a CSC partner reported that children were already being chased in the street by paramilitary officers and this situation has worsened since the pandemic began. Likewise, a CSC network member in Uganda reports that the Uganda People's Defence Forces are enforcing social distancing by beating people, including children in street situations. We do not have quantifiable data on the total number of victims, but CSC has been told that 5 boys walked over 20km seeking assistance from one of our partners (Dwelling Places). Another organisation in Uganda, SASCU, reported that over 200 individuals, including many children in street situations, have been arrested. Since normal judicial proceedings have been suspended, they will be in remand custody for the foreseeable future.

In India, CSC network member Safe Society reported that children in street situations and their families are "facing high discrimination and torture" as a result of public perceptions of the pre-existing respiratory diseases to which their living situations make them particularly susceptible. Safe Society reports that according to Childline Foundation India, the volume of calls to the national childline soared by 50% between the 25th and 31st of March, of which 30% were related to abuse and violence.

Sexual abuse of children in street situations is another area of concern. For example, according to a CSC partner in Mwanza, Tanzania, two children (9 year old and 15 year old boys) have reported sexual abuse, after which one of them was refused acceptance in a foster care type placement for fear that the child might have contracted COVID-19. Partners across Tanzania have also recorded an increase in police round-ups, but there is no data yet on the exact number of children arrested.

In addition, increased rates of domestic violence and abuse during lockdowns have been reported in several countries. For instance, in Uganda, according to information received from our member Dwelling Places, police reported that domestic violence cases (including sexual violence) have tripled. They attributed this increase to the lockdown; but for the same reason, care workers cannot respond. This could lead to increased numbers of children fleeing violence at home and ending up on the street.

### **2. Data and information on the need to invest more in social protection, child protection and mental health during the COVID response, exit and recovery from the crisis**

Information received from partners in Tanzania, and India (The Concerned of Working Children, in Karnataka) shows that children in street situations and their families are lacking special economic support in the wake of the current public health crisis, despite the fact that most of these families live below the poverty line and rely on daily wages in order to get food or water. At present, children and families are fulfilling such basic necessities through the organisations with whom they are in contact. With school closures imposed worldwide by many governments to contain the spread of the virus, as partners in Tanzania warn, children and families in street situations lose their main access to free daily meals, which may push them back onto the streets to find sources of income and food.

SASCU reported that in Uganda, the government has committed to providing relief food and other essential items to 1.5 million vulnerable people in Kampala and Wakiso Districts as part of its efforts to mitigate the harsh impact of COVID-

19. Unfortunately, the house to house distribution efforts exclude homeless groups including children in street situations, indicating a gap and need for social protection measures reaching the homeless.

CSC Network Members around the world have expressed concern that their governments are overlooking the psychological distress that vulnerable children such as children in street situations face during the pandemic. In Uganda, Dwelling Places reported that when the government announced the lockdown, it caused panic among the children forcing a few of those who have homes to start walking back to their villages, many of which are over 200km away from Kampala. SASCU, another organisation in Uganda, reported that the children in street situations that they interviewed feel mentally tortured and are living in fear. In Tanzania, CSC partners reported that the very news of the coronavirus outbreak proved so emotionally-charged for the children they work with in Tanzania, that 3 asked to be returned to their family homes. In Karnataka, India, according to the organisation Concerned for Working Children, uncertainty about potential access to basic needs such as food, housing and medical services affects in particular children working on the streets, who fall out of the protective measures, as well as children dismissed from care institutions due to the coronavirus outbreak and children who are mentally disabled. The organisation, however, reports that the government of Karnataka has not taken action to prevent these vulnerable children from being further traumatised.

Many CSC Network Members operate child helplines, but for most it is too early for them to analyse a change in numbers of children reaching out. In Uganda, Dwelling Places reported that the child helpline service has been suspended since the lockdown started in Uganda. Due to the lockdown, staff were unable to continue operating the helpline. In addition, the probation officers who would normally follow up on cases were not considered essential workers, and have therefore officially been off duty since the lockdown started. Dwelling Places is concerned about the increase in domestic and gender-based violence that will now likely go unreported.

More positively, in Mombasa, Kenya, CSC Network Member Glad's House has successfully negotiated with local government officials to get authority to continue street outreach work. This gives an example of the need for collaborative social protection measures.

### **3. Concrete examples on how children are perceiving this crisis and taking leadership in protecting themselves and each other during COVID-19 crisis.**

Children in street situations in Tanzania have been showing resilience and a proactive response to the pandemic, as reported by CSC partners. They have replaced their sense of hopelessness with a sense of solidarity, supporting one another by collecting and sharing information about the disease, as well as directly seeking for medical help or reporting to social workers in case their peers show symptoms.

Similarly, Street Invest and CINI operating in India informed CSC that children in street situations in Kolkata have been leading the community response to the coronavirus outbreak. Apart from preparing, informing and reassuring the community in light of the lockdown announced on 24th March, these children have been helping the local government support the most vulnerable families by identifying several issues regarding access to food, medical services and social care within their community and the categories at highest risk, such as pregnant women and girls and people unable to access food.

Apprentis d'Auteuil and Fondation Apprentis d'Auteuil International report that the children in street situations their local partners are working with are taking leadership. For example, in a centre in Madagascar, initiatives included a presentation by children on COVID-19 and a discussion during which children shared their understanding of a government briefing with their peers.