

## COVID-19 OUTBREAK AND ITS AFTERMATH

# A CALL TO ACTION: PROTECTING CHILDREN WITHOUT OR AT RISK OF LOSING PARENTAL CARE

May 2020

This position statement presents the key asks that are necessary to ensure that the rights and needs of children without or at risk of losing parental care are prioritised by national, regional and international governments as they adopt measures to mitigate the short and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world.

Given their multidimensional conditions of vulnerability that could lead to a downward spiral in the context of the projected socio-economic crises, we ask that:

- Child welfare and protection services, and their staff be designated as essential and resourced accordingly.
- Social protection services that support families' income and wellbeing are scaled up.
- Inter-agency coordination delivering services to the community is strengthened.
- Safeguarding prevention and support is redoubled to pre-empt and promptly address increased risks of abuse, violence and neglect.
- Progress achieved in quality in alternative care is not jeopardized, but rather enhanced.
- Support and protection of care leavers is scaled up.
- Children on the move are protected and their access to adequate care as national children is ensured.

## The impact of the COVID-19 outbreak and long-term consequences on children and youth around the world

The current COVID-19 outbreak has laid bare the challenges we face in protecting and promoting the wellbeing of children, young people, their families and communities, especially those in vulnerable situations worldwide. As the pandemic expands its reach, there will be not only short, but long-term negative impact on children's health, development and overall wellbeing.

The outbreak, the containment measures imposed and their unintended immediate consequences represent only the beginning of the challenges we will face. All projections point to an extended and deep global economic crisis. The consequences will be felt by families all over the world; no country, no community will be spared. According to some estimates, **“the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic could push half a billion more people into poverty”** unless urgent action is taken<sup>1</sup>. Some estimate we could see a reversal of approximately a decade of progress in reducing poverty.<sup>2</sup>

And even when we will all feel the long-term consequences of the pandemic, existing inequalities and vulnerabilities will dictate the impact of this crisis in each region, country, or household. We are already seeing that under-resourced hospitals and fragile health systems are likely to be overwhelmed. This may be further exacerbated by a spike in cases, as **up to 75% of people in least developed countries lack access to soap and water.**<sup>3</sup> **Income losses are expected to exceed \$220 billion in developing countries.** With an estimated 55% of the global population having no access to social protection, many will be left to fend for themselves without access to income, welfare support, or social safety net to fall back on.

In addition, the growing number of families on the move – forcibly displaced by conflicts, climate change and other driving factors - is likely to even further increase due to the rise of poverty and the potential consequent violence and conflicts that this could generate. Today, already 52% of all refugees and 12% of migrants worldwide are children<sup>4</sup>.

**Over 89% of the students currently enrolled worldwide in education are out of school because of COVID-19 closures** – representing 1.54 billion children and youth enrolled in school or university<sup>5</sup>. **Three hundred million primary school children who depend on school meals are missing out due to closures triggered by the coronavirus pandemic**, which could increase food insecurity<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, school closures disrupt learning for children and young people living in vulnerable conditions, unable to access distance learning tools, or whose schools lack the capacity to offer them<sup>7</sup>, hence deepening current inequalities. Some of them may not return to school once the outbreak is contained and the lockdown is lifted.

Some families are living in overcrowded conditions, from inadequate and insufficient housing arrangements in cities and shanty dwellings to warzones or refugee settlements. In many of these cases, entire families share a room or makeshift tent or hut, and hygiene and self-isolation may be deemed impossible.

<sup>1</sup> Oxfam. “Half a billion people could be pushed into poverty by coronavirus, warns Oxfam”; April 9th 2020.

<https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/half-billion-people-could-be-pushed-poverty-coronavirus-warns-oxfam>

<sup>2</sup> Summer A., Hoy C., Ortiz-Juarez E. “Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty”. Working paper 2020/43 UNU-WIDER; April 2020. <https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Working-paper/PDF/wp2020-43.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> “COVID-19: Looming crisis in developing countries threatens to devastate economies and ramp up inequality”; UNDP; March 30th 2020.

[https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2020/COVID19\\_Crisis\\_in\\_developing\\_countries\\_threatens\\_devastate\\_economies.html](https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2020/COVID19_Crisis_in_developing_countries_threatens_devastate_economies.html)

<sup>4</sup> Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2018. UNHCR, Geneva, 2019.

<https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>

<sup>5</sup> “COVID-19, educational disruption and responses”; Unesco. Accessed on March 30th 2020.

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

<sup>6</sup> The Guardian. “Coronavirus: 300 million children to miss school meals amid shutdowns”; March 21st 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/coronavirus-300-million-children-to-miss-school-meals-amid-shutdowns>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/coronavirus\\_from\\_pandemics\\_to\\_poverty.pdf](https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/coronavirus_from_pandemics_to_poverty.pdf)



## Children without or at risk of losing parental care are among the most vulnerable

While data suggests that children often do not show significant ailment from the virus, they are nonetheless exposed to it and are already suffering from the lockdown due to school closures, and other isolation measures. Their care situation will also be impacted if their caregivers at home or in alternative care settings fall ill or perish.

Of the 2.2 billion children worldwide<sup>8</sup>, an estimated 140 million have lost one or both parents<sup>9</sup> due to various reasons. Furthermore, SOS Children's Villages estimates that **approximately 10% of all children (1 in 10) worldwide are at risk of losing or have already lost the care of their family**<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, we learned from the past Ebola epidemic that at least 16,600 children lost a parent or caregiver, while 3,600 lost both parents.<sup>11</sup> The projected reach and scope of this current pandemic could dwarf these numbers, and we must ensure that child protection systems are prepared to respond to it by preventing unnecessary family separation and guaranteeing good quality alternative care when needed.

The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 will be felt hardest by the world's most vulnerable children.<sup>12</sup> The measures imposed will risk plunging them further into hardship and potentially bringing millions of children into poverty. Children without or at risk of losing parental care are particularly exposed to these mounting challenges, compounding these conditions of vulnerability to situations of fragile family environments or living in alternative care placements.

In many of the countries where SOS Children's Villages provides services, we are already seeing these challenges. Families within our family support programmes are experiencing increased fragility due to loss of income, lack of access to health and education services, and limitations or interruptions of family strengthening programmes upon which they depend.

Children already in alternative care placements are having additional challenges in this context too. From our experience directly in the field, we know that the lockdown is already restricting or even eliminating visits from their families of origin. There are reports that these restrictions are in some cases indefinite.<sup>13</sup> We have also seen a reduction of access, visits and contact with social workers and specialized experts in charge of assessing their situation during and after placement or of addressing specific and individual treatment for some children. While we see care professionals continue to support children and young people, and peer-to-peer support remains available, we need to be mindful of the negative long-term impact the reduced services will have.

The temporary or permanent closures of some care facilities puts children in absolute danger, at times of death. We are learning that some children may be sent back from their care placement to families of origin who are not in a position to care for them and guarantee their protection, exposing them to potential neglect and abuse.

Finally, young people aging out of care and transitioning into independent living are facing extremely fragile situations. Some of them are losing their jobs and lack protections and safety nets to survive. Some are unable to connect remotely to continue their education, and may lack the resources and family support to overcome the anxiety and uncertainty that the isolation and lockdown may create.

For all these reasons, we call on governments to accelerate preparedness to support those living in the most vulnerable circumstances. Governments must mitigate the long-term adverse consequences of the pandemic on the livelihoods and wellbeing of individuals and societies as a whole.

<sup>8</sup> Unicef data center: <https://data.unicef.org/>

<sup>9</sup> State of the World's Children Report 2015; Unicef

<sup>10</sup> The care effect: why no child should grow up alone, 2017, SOS Children's Villages International, [https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/cbf6820c-e8ab-4940-8e67-4618d19fe098/SOS\\_ChildrensVillages\\_The-Care-effect\\_English.pdf](https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/cbf6820c-e8ab-4940-8e67-4618d19fe098/SOS_ChildrensVillages_The-Care-effect_English.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Policy Brief. The impact of COVID-19 on Children; United Nations; April 15<sup>th</sup> 2020. [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_children\\_16\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_children_16_april_2020.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> "Unicef's Agenda for Action. UNICEF calls for six actions to protect all refugee and migrant children". <https://www.unicef.org/children-uprooted/agenda-for-action>

<sup>13</sup> Chan M. "Pandemic Shutdown Separates Parents From Their Children in the Foster System"; April 13<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<https://bettercarenetwork.org/news-updates/news/pandemic-shutdown-separates-parents-from-their-children-in-the-foster-system>



## SOS Children's Villages International calls on governments and international institutions to prioritise children without or at risk of losing parental care

**All actions to address the pandemic should secure the full respect of children's rights.** All children's rights must be protected, promoted and taken into consideration in the response to the COVID-19 outbreak and its aftermath. The best interests of the child must be the primary consideration when developing these measures, which should abide by the principles of non-discrimination, right to survival and development, and participation as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children and young people must be actively engaged and participate in decisions pertaining to their wellbeing and care situation.

- **Children without or at risk of losing parental care should be recognised and formally classified as a priority group** when developing short and long-term measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath given the increased risks and conditions of vulnerability they experience, and which are projected to worsen due to the pandemic and its long-term impacts.
- **Child welfare and protection services and workers must be designated as essential and resourced accordingly** (including personal protective gear) during the lockdown and isolation measures. Social workers are at the forefront to contain and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on our children, families and communities. No resources should be spared to ensure their wellbeing, health, protection, training, preparedness and labour rights so that they can continue to do so.
- **Social protection services that support families' income and wellbeing should be scaled up.** This includes, among others, implementing or augmenting cash transfer programs, improving access to health, education, disability services, and housing during and after the outbreak; and directly delivering food, hygiene items and kits, education/play materials; enhancing connectivity access for remote education to bridge the digital divide, and to provide parenting support; and expanding access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to address the consequences of isolation on children and their families.
- **Inter-agency coordination among different areas of government and with non-governmental organisations delivering services to the community must be strengthened** to address the multi-dimensional support that children in alternative care or in fragile family environments need, and ensure effectiveness and efficiency of interventions.
- **Safeguarding prevention and support must be redoubled.** In person monitoring of children, families and care settings must continue to reduce risks of abuse, violence and neglect of children during lockdown. This can be complemented with enhanced reporting mechanisms, innovative long distance and remote monitoring processes, direct access for children and parents to hotlines, as well as dissemination of age appropriate information and resources.
- **Ensure that progress achieved in quality in alternative care is not jeopardized** in the roll out of the response measures and the long term plans; and continue aligning ongoing and new measures with the UN Guidelines for the Alternative care of Children (UNGL)<sup>14</sup> and with the related-commitments made through the adoption of the 2019 UN Resolution on the Rights of the Child on children without parental care<sup>15</sup> – including:
  - o **Robust and adequate gatekeeping** and monitoring processes ensuring the necessity and suitability of every child's placement and avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions when selecting alternative care placements. Assessment mechanisms should be adapted to situations of lockdown and isolation when necessary.
  - o **Appropriately supported and resourced care settings** to ensure the emotional, psychological, physical, educational wellbeing and development of all children in alternative care. This must

<sup>14</sup> General Assembly resolution 64/142. Guidelines for the alternative care of children. <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/64/142>

<sup>15</sup> General Assembly resolution 74/133. Rights of the Child. <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/133>



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include maintaining contact between the child and his or her family of origin, albeit remotely during lockdown. Care settings should be equipped with education and didactic tools, as well as space for recreation and exercise to ensure the physical and emotional wellbeing of children while in lockdown.

- **Adequate and prompt process for the reintegration of children in their families of origin.** Planned, supported, supervised and suitable reintegration of a child should continue to be made on a case-by-case basis, giving due consideration to the child's best interests. Regarding the readiness of the family to receive the child, support needs of the family should be assessed and met to ensure a successful reunification. Monitoring must continue during lockdown periods, guaranteeing access to adequate support if necessary. Closures of alternative care settings must not force unplanned reintegration without these considerations.
- **Additional alternative care placements should be foreseen and planned for**, as short and/or long-term loss of caregivers {who may fall sick or die due to the pandemic} may lead to additional care placement needs. Any expansion of the system should follow the quality standards and be aligned with the UNGL.
- **Improve and scale up support and protection of care leavers** who are faced with increased uncertainty, risks and vulnerability in the context of lockdown and isolation during the immediate response. In the long term they might be confronted with a deep recession and have far less opportunities for an independent life:
  - **Enhance mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)** to help them cope with the lockdown and isolation.
  - Provide direct **social protection support** (through the delivery of resources and goods; **access to training, education and didactic materials; increased employability opportunities; direct cash transfers; housing allowance**).
  - Promote youth-led initiatives and **peer-to-peer support** and establishment of networks to provide guidance and outreach.
- **Substantially enhance the protection of children on the move** by ensuring that the most vulnerable children, including unaccompanied migrant and refugee children, benefit from adequate care services as nationals.

### All hands on deck

The time to act for the global community to prevent short-term and long-term harm for individuals and societies as a whole is now. We recognise that these are extraordinary times, requiring bold action, political will, commitment and an "all hands on deck" approach.

SOS Children's Villages stands ready to share our expertise and do our part to secure the rights of all children without or at risk of losing parental care. We can only do this in collaboration with the global community. We need to come together to help every child to build a future, support every family to stay strong, and strengthen the well-being of societies.

Effective collaboration and coordination among governments, civil society organisations, care providers, families and children themselves, are not only desirable but essential to counter projections of the increased need for care and support of children and families.

Promoting and protecting the rights of the child and investing to support the most vulnerable children and young people to develop to their full potential is a moral obligation. It is also critical to reduce poverty and inequalities, and to reinforce social peace and cohesion.



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COVID-19 should never be used as a reason or excuse to regress or neglect the protection of the rights of all children, especially those most vulnerable. Achievements the global community made in raising standards of quality alternative care for children have to be upheld and further promoted.

Supporting children and families today can help prevent further need of alternative care placements tomorrow. Investing in children and families today means investing in the future and in the well-being of future societies.

