

## CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN ZAMBIA

### Health Impact Assessment of COVID-19 on Families with Children with Disabilities Living in Three Communities in Lusaka - December, 2020



#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most families reported a major loss of income resulting in food insecurity (79%), housing instability (67%), stress (36%), and increased risk of child separation and neglect (18%).
- Many families reported loss of access to health services for their child such as physiotherapy (33%). Most children did not attend school prior to the pandemic.
- Most families reported receiving little to no financial assistance.
- COVID-19 and related containment measures have impacted the lives of children with disabilities and their families to a great extent. There is an urgent need for disability-inclusive responses that deliberately address the needs of children with disabilities and their families, notably uninterrupted access to adequate food, inclusive education, rehabilitation therapy, and income-generating activities.

#### BACKGROUND

It has been recognized by global leaders that children with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. However, it is not yet known how exactly and to what extent. As governments and civil societies adapt their policies and programs in response to the pandemic, inequities and a lag in progress for children with disabilities persist. This assessment describes the perceived impacts of COVID-19 on children with disabilities and their families in Lusaka, Zambia.

#### METHODOLOGY

In October and November 2020, the Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB) Zambia, in collaboration with St. Catherine's University (Saint Paul, MN, USA) and SPOON (Portland, OR, USA), conducted semi-structured interviews at the family, community, health

facility, and government levels in three low-income communities in Lusaka (Misisi, Kanyama, and Chawama). Thirty-nine families with children disabilities, six community leaders, seven health facility staff, and two government officials were interviewed.

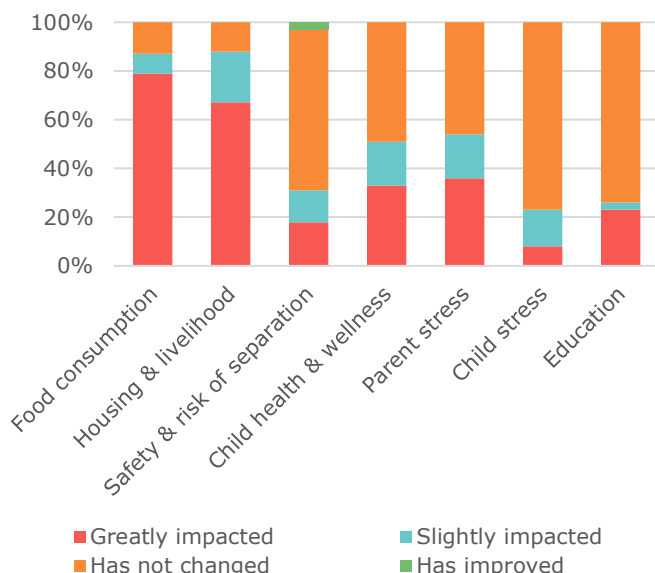
#### RESULTS

No family interviewed reported a confirmed COVID-19 illness in their household. However, 31% of respondents reported having a family member with symptoms. **Figure 1** presents the perceived negative impacts that COVID-19 and related containment measures had on children with disabilities.

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*"I am not able to fully take care my child because I have to look for money so I leave him home."* **Female, 60+ years, Kanyama**

**FIGURE 1. PERCEIVED NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES**



Families reported that the pandemic greatly impacted their food consumption (79%) and housing and livelihood (67%). This, in turn, impacted their stress levels and caregiving practices. Key health services like physiotherapy were no longer available. Of the few children who attend school (28%), most report schools have closed or reduced hours.

**79%** reported eating less or consuming food with lower nutritional value due to COVID-19

Major themes reported by families and corroborated by community leaders, health facility staff, and government representatives are summarized in **Table 1**. Key stakeholders interviewed reported the need for interventions, such as consistent and adequate food support and cash transfers, for households with children with disabilities.

**TABLE 1. MAJOR THEMES AROUND PERCEIVED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES**

MAJOR THEMES	
<b>COVID-19 knowledge &amp; practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community-level COVID-19 prevention messages widely shared and accessible</li> <li>Absence of specific interventions for children with disabilities</li> </ul>
<b>Food consumption, housing &amp; livelihood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased food insecurity (lower meal quantity and quality)</li> <li>Family loss of income, livelihood, and housing</li> <li>Renters at highest risk for housing instability</li> <li>Increased household crowding</li> </ul>
<b>Child safety &amp; risk of separation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child left alone as caregivers leave the house in search of employment and food</li> <li>Increase of children begging in the street for food</li> </ul>
<b>Child health &amp; wellness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced access to primary care</li> <li>No access to physiotherapy</li> <li>Unable to afford medicine</li> </ul>
<b>Parental &amp; child stress</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loss of income and food insecurity as major stressors</li> <li>Families coping with the help of family, community, and church</li> </ul>
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No school attendance prior to COVID-19</li> <li>Lack of special education resources</li> </ul>

## NEXT STEPS

These findings will inform the design of a larger, more in-depth assessment in Zambia to 1) evaluate the disparate impact of COVID-19 and its response measures on children with disabilities compared to children without disabilities; and 2) provide an evidence base that stakeholders can use in their COVID-19 response and recovery planning.

*"It's often difficult when I think of my future with my child."* **Female, 20-29 years, Misisi**