CONSORTIUM FOR STREET CHILDREN

COVID-19 and street-connected children

Impacts, responses and opportunities

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a biological phenomenon and is laying bare social, political and economic inequalities in a way not witnessed in recent times. Society's most vulnerable and most invisible populations, including marginalised populations in low- and middle-income countries, are on course to suffer disproportionately from the social and economic effects.[1] As vaccines are developed and countries compete to purchase them it becomes increasingly clear that those in the Global South will be the last to receive sufficient numbers of vaccines for their populations. This overview considers the effect of the pandemic on street-connected children, meaning those who live or work on or have another strong connection to the street, and those who work with them. It draws on data gathered from members of the Consortium for Street Children's network of over 180 community organisations, national and international non-governmental organisations, researchers, advocates and on-the-ground practitioners working in 135 countries.

Due to the on-going nature of the pandemic, evidence of the impact of COVID-19 remains limited, including a lack of empirical research into the effects on street-connected children. This overview is based on the experiences and observations of CSC network members and the children they support. Information was gathered about impacts and responses via email, online forms, and regionally based network meetings, as well as phone-based interviews.[2] Much of this data collection was undertaken in the first few months of the virus's spread around the world, with supplementary information added as circumstances continue to change. Information was compiled into a spreadsheet and thematically analysed to discern the core impact and response categories and descriptions.

This overview is divided into three main sections:

- **Section 1** presents key categories of the **impacts** of the pandemic on street-connected children, including the effect of the virus itself, the measures to constrain its spread and the socio-economic conditions it has brought about.

- **Section 2** presents key categories of the **responses** being launched by community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the authorities that are concerned with street-connected children populations.

- **Section 3** offers some potential **opportunities** for street-connected children and the wider sector in view of these impacts and responses to the pandemic.

1. Impacts of the pandemic on street-connected children

Street-connected children typically live in some of the most densely populated and unsanitary environments in the world where measures such as washing hands and self-isolation are either extremely challenging or simply impossible. Previous attempts to model the transmission of infectious diseases that spread through the air (like COVID-19) have shown that larger epidemics and earlier peaks can be expected in informal settlements (Wilkinson, 2020).[3] In such environments there is a devastating combination of poor and limited health services and ubiquitous ill health making street-connected children an especially vulnerable population in the context of COVID-19.

Two distinct kinds of impacts of COVID-19 are being felt across the world. The first refers to the health issues and vulnerabilities that result from the virus itself and the second relates to the associated regulatory measures and policies undertaken to limit the spread of the virus. This section presents both kinds of impacts on street-connected children through four key categories as reported by CSC network members over the first year of the pandemic, and recognising that the situation is fluid and that children and organisations' experiences vary depending on their context and individual circumstances. Notably, there are different impacts depending on the current local or national restrictions in place, which have diverged since the early months of the pandemic when most of the world was united in locking down.
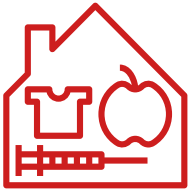
1.1 Street-connected children have been struggling to meet their basic needs and are likely to be more inherently vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19.

What has been happening?

A combination of restrictions on movement, fewer people being out and about, and shops, markets and businesses closing has caused **reductions in street-connected children's income-generation opportunities,** or made them impossible, including casual labour such as portering bags and market goods, rubbish collection, petty trade, or watching over parked cars. This is because they usually perform these activities in public spaces, they typically require movement around the cities to make them happen and they depend on the wider activities of both the formal and informal economy and community.

Street-connected children have been suffering disproportionately from **unequal access to medical services, food support and support within the justice system** at a time when such services and support are severely stretched, as well as highly politicised in terms of their distribution. For example, disruptions to food supplies, including shortages and higher prices, have particularly affected street-connected children who cannot access limited food items at higher costs and they have also been denied access to hospitals or denied visitation rights and legal assistance in prison.

Street-connected children have also been facing **difficulty accessing specific COVID-19 related support,** such as sanitation facilities and supplies, for example newly installed water taps and soap, shelters, medical care, and economic support packages.

Such difficulties in meeting their basic needs are further **compounded by the fact that street-connected children represent a highly vulnerable or at-risk population,** with many having weakened immune systems and respiratory problems due to their poor living conditions as well as underlying health issues, such as HIV or drug addiction.

What does this mean for street-connected children?

- They find it **difficult to maintain good health and hygiene,** follow handwashing rules and access hygiene facilities in environments which are some of the most conducive to disease spread.

- They face **increased retribution** from both the authorities and the general public when they violate regulatory measures such as self-isolation and social distancing and are seen as a population to remove from the streets as quickly as possible, rather than a population to be provided with basic hygiene, medical and food support.

- They **struggle to access basic needs,** especially food, which pushes them (back) onto the streets to find sources of food and income.

- They are **unable to afford to buy face masks,** which are now mandatory in many places, nor the fines that are handed out for not wearing them.

- They are at **increased risk of suffering from mental health issues** due to increased fear of the disease and insecurities about accessing food and other necessities.

- They are **returning to family homes and villages,** now that the city cannot support them, running the risk of transporting the virus from urban to remote rural communities; exposing them to dangers both on the journey and at home, and removing an important cohort of young people who form a vital part of the street-based support network for others.

Examples

> Rich people can stay home …. because they have a store well stocked with food. For a survivor on the street your store is your stomach.
> (Street-connected child, Mombasa, quoted in Griffin, 2020.) [4]

"Street children at Barisal water transport terminal [...] work as porters or waste pickers. Since there [are] no passengers crossing the water terminal so there [are] no porter jobs or discarded plastic bottles to collect. Sometimes the passengers give their left-over food to these street children while crossing the terminal. Through income from porter jobs, selling of re-filled plastic water bottle[s] to poor passengers [...] they used to [cover] their daily expenses. Moreover, leftover food items were also source of food for them. Due to lockdown situation now they are in crisis [of] earning and getting food." (Grambangla Unnayan Committee, Bangladesh, 29 April 2020.)

> At the closure of schools as a result of the COVID-19 in Sierra Leone [...] I had to hawk from morning to evening [...] or else you will go to bed without any food.
> (Street-connected child speaking to We Yone Child Foundation, Sierra Leone, 15 January 2021.)

"In Mwanza children on the street report to be denied access hygiene facilities placed by the government at markets and bus stands. They are told that they do not need to wash hands because they are used to dirtiness." (CSC Network member, Tanzania, 8 April 2020.)

> I feel much more insecure because there is no way to cope with the disease especially with some measures taken by the authorities (curfews). Two of my friends and I have not had the chance to be hosted in a shelter for the moment. To avoid police blunders, at night we took refuge in the mosques that are in the bus station [...] but we were also chased away from there. Now it is under the slabs of the gutters that we hide to sleep at night. In order to comply with hygiene measures, we used to wash our hands with soap in front of restaurants and big shops, but we were also chased away from these places [...] I don't know where to go anymore, I am lost...
> (Street-connected child speaking to Caritas Segou, local partner of Fondation Apprentis d'Auteuil and Fondation Apprentis d'Auteuil International, Mali, 21 April 2020.)

"Even before the pandemic, stigma and discrimination meant that most street-connected children were unable to access vital healthcare, and a lack of legal identity documentation continues to be a barrier to accessing universal services. As COVID-19 takes hold in street populations […] street-connected children […] are much more likely to be immunocompromised due to underlying health conditions. In Mombasa, respiratory conditions related to solvent use are common, meaning those who rely on inhalants such as glue to survive, stay warm or ward off hunger are particularly vulnerable to complications should they be infected with the virus." (StreetInvest, 2020a.) [5]

1.2 Street-connected children have been facing a lack of support.

What has been happening?

Restrictions on operations, combined with cuts to funding, have meant that **formal and non-formal services provided by NGOs and CBOs for street-connected children and their families have been shut down or temporarily suspended,** for example drop-in centres, feeding centres, residential services, street and outreach work.

Services that have continued have been struggling to respond to the rapidly evolving situation and challenges that COVID-19 presents for street-connected children. They have been increasingly stretched due to staff sickness or isolation, the removal of funding streams and an increased demand from children who may have previously gone elsewhere for support. For example, some shelters that stayed open during lockdown have needed to turn away children due to such a high demand. Some organisations' staff and volunteers are concerned about safety and some have refused to take in children due to fears that they may be carrying the virus.

Formal and non-formal **services have been facing new challenges which they do not have experience in, or responses developed for**, such as how to conduct street work in the context of lockdowns.[6] In some places, street-based support has been reduced or removed altogether. Many small, volunteer-reliant organisations have been fearful of jeopardising the safety of their staff members or the safety of the children they support but lack resources to develop new ways of reaching vulnerable communities. In some cases, the authorities tasked with responding to COVID-19 are not equipped with the right knowledge or expertise to work with street-connected children and are not trusted by the children.

Informal networks of support, depended on by street-connected children, such as street-based peer groups, market traders and other community members, have been becoming increasingly stretched and unable to cope. For example, children who sleep on the streets have sometimes found they are denied access to the usual places they sleep due to fears about them spreading COVID-19 or backlash from the authorities. Some street-connected children have left the street and travelled to family homes and villages. Whilst there are good examples of resilient informal peer and community support for street-connected children in times of crisis, the pandemic has the potential to stretch street-based support networks to their limits, testing their elasticity to breaking point and making it difficult for such informal support mechanisms to 'bounce back'.

What does this mean for street-connected children?

- Their **needs are not always met when they need it most,** for example the withdrawal of food programmes, sometimes with little or no warning, leaves children's most basic need for food unfulfilled.

- They have been **pushed back onto the street** as residential homes and boarding schools have closed and due to the need to source income and food in the absence of a daily meal at school or in a shelter.

- They have been **sent back home but have quickly returned to the street** due to problems at home or the need to source income and food.

- They **spend an increased amount of time on the street** in order to gain money and meet their basic needs, especially now schools and shelters are closed.

- They are **exposed to a range of physical and mental health issues** affecting their well-being due to the lack of consistent support, for example, falling back into addiction behaviours, being pushed into early marriage or caring roles, experiencing poor health which is left untreated, suffering from gaps in education and learning and facing challenges in terms of transitioning back to residential units and schools.

- They **feel increasingly removed from their known and trusted informal support networks** on the street and from the relationships of trust they have developed with street workers who are unable to move around the streets, or are replaced by others, such as the police and authorities, who are not known and trusted amongst street-connected children and their communities.

- They **lose contact with organisations that have supported them,** making it difficult to reconnect when activities are resumed.

- They can be **exposed to the detrimental consequences of emergency and makeshift support measures** that are put in place, such as exposure to domestic and sexual abuse associated with the rapid removal of children back to family homes and overcrowd shelters.

Examples

"We had to close our centre and send all the kids home because we couldn't continue keeping them, because the government said we had to close all training areas and everything else. Some children we are in contact with. We are intending to at least assess on how they are surviving in their home. Some didn't go back to their homes. We are still discussing with the government [whether] we can just get them off the streets and bring them back to our centre." (Samaritan Trust, Malawi, 23 April 2020.)

"Caritas Ségou [a local partner of Apprentis d'Auteuil in Mali], reported that because there are fewer shelters operating in Ségou, some children have run away to Bamako in search of shelter there - a distance of about 230 kilometres." (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

"We had to suspend our open-air educational activities for two reasons: firstly, there was a rush of children towards our counselling centre ('maison d'écoute'), so much so that the host centres quickly filled up. Next, we sought information from the Ministry of Social Affairs regarding measures to protect from COVID-19, in vain. Not knowing what to do we decided to close the counselling centres. However, the host centres continue to function with the children who are there, with the challenge of protecting them from the illness while giving them all the necessary support." (Local partner of Fondation Apprentis d'Auteuil and Fondation Apprentis d'Auteuil International, Cameroon, 4 April 2020).

"Drop-in centres in Mwanza, Tanzania had to put in place social distancing measures that reduced the number of children they can support in their drop-in centres despite an increase in demand, leaving more children vulnerable on the streets." (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

It's the breakdown of that trust which is our biggest fear. If children aren't made to feel part of their communities now, in three years' time all that work to integrate them will be wasted. It's a potential breakdown of trust in the wider community [which we are worried about].
(Sian Wynne, StreetInvest, 25th March 2020.)

"One of the challenges this time for the organisation working with the children, is we do not have a centre for accommodating them. It is very difficult to continue monitoring, and also managing to have the information on them on a daily basis." (CSC Network Member, Rwanda, 23 April 2020.)

"Many of these children might still be in difficult situations that we are not able to trace [...] we can't trace over 1,000 children." (CSC Network Member, India, 29 April 2020.)

1.3 Street-connected children lack accurate, readily available information and are recipients of misinformation and disinformation.

What has been happening?

Whilst there has been a large amount of information circulating about COVID-19 and the associated regulatory measures put in place to limit its spread, **very little information has been made specifically available and accessible to street-connected children.** Child-friendly information about COVID-19 has been especially lacking, particularly in terms of how street-connected children, given their particular needs and vulnerabilities, can protect themselves. The use of digital communication technology to communicate official messages about the pandemic and restrictions is a particular challenge for street-connected children who may not have access to this technology and cannot, therefore, receive vital information first-hand.

At the same time **a large amount of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 and how to prevent infection, widely termed the "infodemic", has been circulating.** This has been responsible for the spread of myths and rumours about COVID-19 amongst street and informal settlements.[8] Without access to accurate, up-to-date and child-friendly information about the virus, how to keep themselves safe, and what new measures are being taken by authorities, street-connected children are susceptible to rumour, 'fake news' and gossip on the street, and through mobile phones and social media.

Street-connected children are also often unaware of regulatory measures in place, such as curfews, or changes to these in the context of a rapidly evolving pandemic. The challenges of not having reliable and regular access to information are further exacerbated by the continually changing situation, both in terms of the disease itself and how to stay safe, as well as the regulatory measures being imposed.

What does this mean for street-connected children?

- They are **not able to effectively protect themselves or others** during the pandemic, even when they are practically able to do so.

- They **engage in potentially harmful practices to stay safe,** for example, using discarded face masks so they can be compliant with regulatory measures in place.

- They are **at greater risk of being a target of police or military enforcement measures,** potentially exposing them to abuse and violence because they are not aware of the regulatory measures and curfews in place.

- They have to rely on second-hand information, **are susceptible to 'fake news', myths and rumours,** and have to observe and copy the practices and behaviours of others.

- They experience negative impacts on their mental health, especially due to **increased anxiety associated with not knowing what to believe** and which guidance to follow.

Examples

> [There is a need to] develop posters, leaflets and even visible banners with emergency lines to be called and distributed widely to areas where the children are. This can serve a good purpose in the absence of street workers on the streets [...] Currently the children are not having adequate information on what is going on.
>
> (Tijani Mahmoud, MFCS, Kumasi, Ghana, quoted in StreetInvest, 2020a.) [5]

"While street workers visited [street-connected children] to impart accurate information about being safe, the children expressed their panic because there is so much spread of other misinformation – as a result they do not know what to believe or what guidance to follow." (StreetInvest, 2020a.) [5]

> We clean cars for drivers […] now we only see few drivers here and they cover their nose and mouth but we don't know why they are doing that as nobody talks to us. So, when we see the ones they throw away, we pick it [up] and cover our own nose and face too. Sometimes we go around looking for it. But now I and my friends know and understand the reason because of what you have told us. I will tell my other friends when we met together and we will never pick those ones they throw away anymore.
>
> (Street-connected child speaking to a CSC Network Member, the Gambia, 6 January 2021.)

"There's been a lot of education on TV and radio, but the issue is they may not have access to any of those things. So, it's a big challenge. There are only small, limited efforts, maybe by churches, to reach out to children on the streets to educate them [...] It's mostly been TV and radio – you hope that those people who access that talk to people around them. But there are definitely children who don't have access to that information. But I don't know how you solve it, other than actually physically going out which is challenging." (Child Life Line, Nigeria, 22 April 2020.)

> The first day I heard about COVID-19, especially the way it kills, I had the idea to run away to my parents' home in Burkina Faso. But when I heard that it's already killing there, I was anxious.
>
> (Street-connected child speaking to Caritas Segou, partner of CSC Network Members Apprentis d'Auteuil and Fondation Apprentis d'Auteuil International, Mali, 21 April 2020.)

1.4 Street-connected children are facing increasing amounts of unchecked violence and abuse both on the streets and at home.

What has been happening?

With various regulatory measures and policies in place which restrict people's movement and presence in public spaces, street-connected children have been facing **increased violence and abuse from the authorities** attempting to enforce these measures, with COVID-19 effectively becoming a validation for the use of force and violence in some cases. **Increased stigmatisation** of street-connected children by the public and the authorities and increased mob justice and vigilantism have also been reported. **Violence between street-connected children has been increasing** due to greater competition for scarce resources.

Violent and abusive responses by the police and others have been going unchecked, with reports of increased surveillance, roundups and arrests, and the removal of street-connected children to detention centres, prisons, and closed schools. When children have been arrested, they may be held for long periods of time because judicial systems have slowed or shut down.

Sexual violence, exploitation and abuse of children in street situations, including child trafficking and child marriage, are of increasing concern as economic stresses intensify and the pandemic and its effects make it more difficult to report incidents and intervene.

What does this mean for street-connected children?

- They are **pushed into hiding and/or run away**, sometimes back home, where they can experience further abuse and violence or be forced into early marriage.

- It is **harder for organisations to find them, help them and protect them** because they don't know where children have gone.

- They **face new or further abuse from others,** for example when gathered into homes and shelters due to COVID-19 as well as in the context of self-isolating groups on the street and are unable to escape these situations due to emergency measures which restrict movement.

- They experience negative effects to their mental health and well-being, with children reporting that they **feel mentally tortured and are living in fear.**

- They are **increasingly exposed to child marriage, trafficking and sexual violence, abuse and exploitation** because incidents are going unchecked.

- Some measures used to fight COVID-19, such as heavy-handed approaches by the police to deal with the street-connected children's presence on the streets **may help establish new worrying precedents for authorities to respond forcefully to the presence of street-connected children in public spaces in the future,** despite the progress made in recent years around this problem and the right of street-connected children to assemble.

Examples

"[…] in a number of states in Nigeria including Port Harcourt and Lagos state, the government through the police force (commonly referred to as "task force") have resorted to violent means of removing street-connected children from the streets. This situation has escalated in the past weeks following the enforcement of social distancing and lockdown in response to the COVID 19 situation. Our meetings with the children have been disrupted on several occasions and our team members have witnessed first-hand how the children were brutally beaten by police officials for being on the streets." (Education for Purpose, Nigeria, 8 April 2020.)

"Childline Foundation India reported that the volume of calls to the national childline soared by 50% between 25th and 31st March 2020 and that 30% of them were related to abuse and violence." (Childline Foundation India (via Safe Society India), India, 8 April 2020.)

"There is a plan for hotels for the street population - it is very limited and people are suspicious of such policies. People fear they will be locked up." (CSC Network Member, Brazil, 7 May 2020.)

Our partner in Dodoma reported receiving reports on cases of children fighting each other. This is because the people in communities fear to help the children as before in fear of getting corona from the children. As this results in a struggle to survive, children fight each other for things like money and food.
(Vicky Ferguson, Glad's House, Kenya, 8 April 2020.)

"A boy reporting sexual abuse was refused acceptance in a foster care type placement for fear that the boy might have contracted COVID-19." (CSC Network Member, Tanzania, 8 April 2020.)

"Children were put in a coffin [by the local authorities as discipline for violating the curfew] so that they show if people don't follow the lockdown they will be in a coffin. We said it really is a violation of rights, that they are put inside a coffin, just to let them feel what it is like to be in a coffin."
(Virlanie Foundation, Philippines, 30 April 2020.)

2. Responses to the impact of COVID-19 on street-connected children

As the world continues to learn more about the virus, many organisations dealing with the combined biological and social effects of the pandemic find themselves struggling to respond to a moving target which demands continually evolving measures, practices and guidance which, in turn, need to be adapted to the range of contexts affected. In terms of street-connected children, a rapidly evolving set of responses has been launched around the world, primarily by organisations on the ground who are working hard to ensure that street-connected children are not forgotten in the response efforts.

However, what works in one place is not equally feasible in another and considerations of social difference and vulnerability are especially important to consider. Some communities where street-connected children are living have direct experience of managing epidemics and other health threats, making them potentially more resilient and more equipped to manage COVID-19 with existing community support networks, systems and processes ready to roll out. This section presents the three categories of response being launched, recognising that these are constantly evolving.

2.1 Providing practical support backed by crucial information about the street-connected children populations and their needs

What have organisations been doing?

Shifting to the provision of practical support for children in urgent need, providing emergency relief in the form of food parcel distribution, accommodation to self-isolate and during lockdowns, and access to healthcare, hygiene and sanitation facilities.

"Our activities have changed completely. We have started to give bags of deliveries to meet the immediate needs, so they can eat, or they can disinfect themselves, or for them to have more masks." (CSC Network Member, Guatemala, 6 May 2020.)

"With COVID-19 putting pressure on everyone to maintain good hygiene, and with water vendors disappearing from the streets, installing water tanks and hand washing points has become a priority, particularly in Mombasa, Kumasi and Waterloo. In Waterloo, CoDWelA have distributed veronica buckets – with taps for easy washing – on street corners and in busy spots, making hand washing easier. These handwashing points act as hubs for street workers, where they can provide education on the virus and demonstrate good handwashing. In Kumasi, with the help of street-connected young people, MFCS have installed several tanks and buckets throughout the areas where street children continue to spend their time. Glad's House have installed a 3000 litre tank in the centre of Maboxini slum." (StreetInvest, 2020b.) [9]

Generating data about street-connected children in the form of censuses and surveys for the authorities and donors, in order to justify the provision of practical support and the need for new or continued funding.

"Glad's House undertook a rapid survey of children and families living in and around Maboxini slum, providing this data to government and making direct recommendations for how to protect them." (StreetInvest, 2020b.) [9]

2.2 Developing, sharing and contributing to guidance for working with street-connected children and for street-connected children themselves.

What have organisations been doing?

Developing guidance for working with street-connected children during the COVID-19 pandemic and evolving this as more is understood about COVID-19 and its wider impact.

"CSC produced a series of child-friendly videos to help those working with street-connected children support children to understand their rights and how these might be affected in the context of COVID-19." (CSC, 2020b.)[10]

"StreetInvest developed guidance for street workers during the pandemic." (StreetInvest, 2020c.) [11]

Sharing information, advice and guidance directly with street-connected children about COVID-19, including via digital technology such as mobile phones, which has also helped organisations keep in touch with children they work with whilst restrictions are in place.

"Safe Society in India is planning to record MP3 files which can be shared on Whatsapp and social media and listened to on mobile phones. Other network members in South and South East Asia have created information posters and leaflets which can be distributed by staff. In Sierra Leone and Uganda, two network members are planning to use public address systems to get information to children in street situations." (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

> [...] the educators reassured and invited us to respect hygiene measures. Washing my hands all the time, wearing masks, using hydro-alcoholic gels or staying confined in the home was foreign to me [...] I felt like I was in prison but, in the end, I understood that today I had the greatest chance to be safe compared to other children who stayed on the street.
>
> (Child speaking to Caritas Segou, partner of Fondation Apprentis d'Auteuil, Mali, 21 April 2020.)

"CSC Network Members in different countries are also using vans with loudspeakers to make information on services and how to stay safe accessible to street children." (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

Contributing to broader guidance being developed by government response committees and other authority level responses, ensuring that the important context of street-connected children is considered in such guidance.

"[...] we have developed a good relation with the Commission of Social Welfare, where we shared guidelines on support and work with the street or youth-connected [...] The guidelines were also presented to the National Response COVID-19 Committee. We have also been able to get into the National Committee responsible for mental and psychosocial support to vulnerable population [...] We have also been able to input into the Ministry of Health guidelines to support vulnerable people, including children." (CSC Network Member, Tanzania, 23 April 2020.)

2.3 Advocating for street work in responses to street-connected children's needs

What have organisations been doing?

Directly advocating for the continued presence of important and trusted street workers and obtaining the necessary permissions to continue street work which means the delivery of basic needs, as well as checking on the physical and mental well-being of street-connected children, can continue to be channelled through trusted organisations and individuals who are best able to identify those most in need.

> […] the Mayor of Kumasi was given a tour of street communities, which resulted in the granting of permits to street workers to protect their right to be on the street supporting street children.
> (Sian Wynne, StreetInvest, 25 March 2020.)

> Permits have been given to street workers by the authorities so that police know they are allowed to be on the streets continuing their work.
> (Vicky Ferguson, Glad's House, Kenya, 2 April 2020.)

Developing advocacy materials which can be used by other organisations to call for better protection of street-connected children and support for street work during the pandemic.

"Street Invest developed advocacy messaging to be used by other organisations based on the messages "Street work is essential" and "COVID-19 responses must not cause further harm to street-connected children"." (StreetInvest, 2020c.)[11]

3. Opportunities for moving forward in our work with street-connected children

Historically, crises, such as COVID-19, have acted as junctures in policy-making and programming, catalysing new ideas and transformations and opening up new space for innovations and changes in direction which can ultimately be very productive. Likewise, COVID-19 presents new opportunities for policy-making and programming concerning street-connected children. Therefore, reflecting on the impacts and responses, it is important to understand what is consequential for street-connected children and our work with them.

Although not exhaustive this section provides some thoughts on the following questions. How is the pandemic changing the landscape for street-connected children and those who work with them? What opportunities might this present as the sector moves forward through COVID-19 and into a world which will be shaped by the pandemic and its effects for many years to come?

3.1 Forming new partnerships, collaborations and arrangements for addressing the needs of street-connected children

What is changing?

After initially making some panic-stricken decisions, **some governments are turning to organisations working with street-connected children for advice and guidance** on how to respond to COVID-19 amongst these populations. In some cases organisations have been asked to lead response efforts because they are known and trusted by street-connected children, can carefully navigate the power dynamics of street communities, know where the children are and what they need and can ensure support actually reaches them.

In some places **connections between organisations working with street-connected children and authorities and institutions have been established and strengthened,** for example between NGOs and the police. New partnerships between NGOs and private businesses have also been formed to provide support for street-connected children.

Some **organisations are benefitting from more agile relationships with donors** which have meant they can be very responsive to the needs of partners, street-connected children and communities for funding, information and other resources. This has enabled them to more quickly reach the most marginalised.

What opportunities might this present?

- It can set **new precedents for organisations who are trusted by street-connected children and their communities to inform and influence decision-making and action** around street-connected children, offering better and more expert-informed policy-making in the future.

- It can demonstrate the benefits of more flexible donor relationships, potentially opening up **avenues for more agile funding arrangements and new funding relationships**, such as private sector funding.

- It can help to provide a **mandate for street work as a positive, constructive and viable approach** for addressing the needs of street-connected children in the long-term.

- It can **encourage a whole community response** by showing how street work is an intervention with entire communities, not just the street-connected children who live within them.

Examples

"Street Workers are also acting as advisors to government, as liaison between street-connected children and community leaders and as researchers gathering vital information about how children on the street are being impacted by coronavirus. For a Street Work organisation to be effective it must inform and influence those in power who are making decisions which affect street-connected children. This is now happening with a newfound urgency, with Street Work teams simultaneously coordinating their own emergency responses - so that children can eat, find shelter, access medicine - whilst making sure that government measures to curb COVID-19 really are working in street-connected children's best interests." (StreetInvest, 2020b.) [9]

"MFCS, StreetInvest's partner in Kumasi, Ghana, have been working closely with the Municipal Officer for the Department of Social Welfare who they escorted on a visit to the streets. Now having a better understanding of where the most disadvantaged children are and how they need supporting, she is continuing to work with MFCS to push for the right responses from government teams coordinating COVID-19 programmes. MFCS have also been invited by the Ministry of Information to be a partner in a public education campaign on coronavirus." (StreetInvest, 2020b.) [9]

> Glad's House is now leading the response with street-connected children in Mombassa to prevent the government planned removal of street-connected children to prisons and closed schools and set up supported self-isolation on the street, establishing a clear mandate for important street work to continue.
> (Vicky Ferguson, Glad's House, 2 April 2020.)

"In Tanzania, partners are working with 'street champions' such as small shop owners to provide handwashing stations to children on the streets." (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

"In Democratic Republic of Congo, REEJER, a partner of CSC Network Members Foundation Apprentis d'Auteuil and FAAI, has been drawing on its experiences gained from previous political crises in Kinshasa to put into action a plan to raise awareness and protect children during the lockdown. Community leaders (including religious actors and neighbourhood leaders) were selected for 17 sites where children are located, and during the crisis these leaders have taken up responsibility for raising awareness among their community, sounding the alarm when a child is in danger and protecting children. [A total of] 270 children in street situations have been invited by these leaders to join shelters, water points or families. The community leaders are also involved in implementing a door-to-door awareness-raising campaign." (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

"As well as collaborating with government, some organisations have linked up with the private sector to provide relief: "We link with businesses to make donations of food so neighbourhoods can make food in the favelas."" (CSC Network member, Uruguay, 7 May 2020.)

3.2 Challenging dominant narratives about the pandemic and making street-connected children visible.

What is changing?

Street-connected children have been brought into "sharp focus" during the pandemic as they are "precisely in the space that everyone is supposed to be getting out of."   In this way **street-connected children, previously so easy to ignore, have been made visible in new ways.**[12]

Organisations working with street-connected children are providing a vital and different perspective of the pandemic. By documenting, reporting and sharing the experiences of the street-connected children they work with, **organisations are making the experiences of street-connected children part of the pandemic discourse.** Such accounts are important in the midst of documented experiences of others for whom the street is primarily a place used to move from one safe place to another. They are also important in the context of wider efforts within the sector to make a largely invisible population visible.

What opportunities might this present?

- It can **provide important accounts of the experiences of street-connected children during COVID-19 which organisations can use to advocate** for policies which include attention to these populations.

- It can **contribute to our wider efforts to make street-connected children a visible part of the pandemic**, not lost in the myriad of information about other people's experiences and other more dominant narratives about the pandemic.

- It can **encourage a mandate of support and service provision to street-connected children by the authorities** and help to counter dominant and worrying discourses about street-connected children as a population to remove or contain.

- It can help to **generate understanding about the needs and potential of street-connected children which can be used in advocacy efforts** to hold governments to their obligation to uphold street-connected children's rights.

Examples

"CSC submitted a report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) compiling evidence on rights violations faced by children in street situations in the context of the COVID-19 emergency, gathered from CSC network members in the first months of the pandemic " (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

> Street children are precisely in the space that everyone is supposed to be getting out of…. The usual response to these children is: 'how do we get them off the streets, and Covid-19 has brought this into sharp focus [….] If this crisis brings understanding that we need a specific response for street children, that would be a good thing. If it makes other people see these children as we do, as young people with fuller potential who are facing tough challenges, that would also be a good thing. We need to deal with the realities of their existence rather than just wish these children away.
>
> (Duncan Ross, StreetInvest, quoted in Griffin, J., 2020.) [4]

"Regarding our communication with state institutions, we got some unofficial replies from Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and from local institutions in Belgrade saying they have no plan for these children and their families. In our constant communication with beneficiaries and their families we figure out that they are on their own. Also, we are aware that this situation with street-connected children will continue after the pandemic is 'over'." (Centre for Youth Integration, Serbia, 6 May 2020.)

3.3 Encouraging child- and community-led responses to future challenges and crises.

What is changing?

As before, during other crises, **street-connected children and their communities are initiating a variety of responses to COVID-19 and its impacts.** They have found ways to participate and take a lead role in response efforts by providing support to their peers, organisations and the wider community.

Such initiatives have also been bolstered by organisations and local community members, especially where these have mobilised established response mechanisms, processes and infrastructure, and community groups which have been used before during previous emergencies such as Ebola, cholera, fires, and flooding. This has enabled them to rapidly provide information to the authorities about street-connected children populations which has supported efforts to provide practical support such as handwashing and hygiene facilities.

What opportunities might this present?

- It can help to **establish and advocate for street-connected children and community members as partners in development processes**, meaningfully contributing to support and decision-making about support.

- It can **encourage positive perceptions about street-connected children within the communities they live and work**, and improve their relationships with other community members, creating a sense of solidarity and shared purpose which can be harnessed for addressing future problems and needs.

- It can set **precedents for the inclusion and participation of street-connected children** in local decision-making processes.

Examples

"Children in street situations in Tanzania have also 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." (CSC, 2020a.) [7]

> In five wards of Kolkata [...] the 'Street Champions', trained by CINI using StreetInvest's training pack for youth advocates and researchers, are now acting as community links for Street Workers who can no longer access vulnerable street communities. As the public health crisis unfolds, they are leading a street-level response to COVID-19 and making sure that the most vulnerable are not being missed. With the support of Street Workers, the Street Champions have been on the streets of their communities informing their neighbours on good hygiene practices and what do to if they get sick. In the run up to the lockdown announced on 24th March, the Street Champions provided advice to families living on the streets to prepare them for the lockdown measures: keep identity documents safe and close in case they should be apprehended by authorities; minimise buying non-essential items to reduce social contact; and keep a stock of essentials during the lockdown period.
> (Sian Wynne, StreetInvest, 25 March 2020.)

"In Democratic Republic of Congo, REEJER, a partner of CSC Network Members Foundation Apprentis d'Auteuil and FAAI, has been drawing on its experiences gained from previous political crises in Kinshasa to put into action a plan to raise awareness and protect children during the lockdown. Community leaders (including religious actors and neighbourhood leaders) were selected for 17 sites where children are located, and during the crisis these leaders have taken up responsibility for raising awareness among their community, sounding the alarm when a child is in danger and protecting children. 270 children in street situations have been invited by these leaders to join shelters, water points or families. The community leaders are also involved in implementing a door-to-door awareness-raising campaign." (CSC, 2020a.)[7]

"Young leaders who have access to mobile phones have been working as our communication links to the communities. The exact areas where there are major issues they are communicating this, and we are communicating this to respective departments of government from where relief is provided."
(Children in Need Institute (CINI), India, 9 April 2020.)

"[A 12-year-old girl] has taken a major role in her community to inform and motivate the members of her community to wear a mask before going out, washing hands properly and avoid crowded places. At such a young age, her life experiences have made her emerge as a true leader within her community. She stated: "It can only be possible to be safe from the virus if we can inform everyone about how to do so. I feel that I have a responsibility to inform others to be safe.""
(CINI, India, 15 January 2021.)

Looking forward

The threat of COVID-19 is still largely being discussed in universal terms but the pandemic is not a leveller and, contrary to widespread observations, we are not 'all in this together'. Impacts upon the poorest and most marginalised people, including street-connected children, will be greater than for others. As Wilkinson (2020) claims, "for many people living on the margins, crisis is already the norm and change is overdue". For street-connected children, whose existence is so deeply dependent on being mobile, constraints on mobility imposed by the pandemic - which look likely to be here to stay for some time in one form or another - may present additional challenges that should be explored further.

Many questions remain about what impact the pandemic has had - and will continue to have - on street-connected children, even long after the health risks of the virus itself are diminished. Whilst we must not lose sight of the need to place street-connected children at the centre of initiatives to tackle the social, economic, political and ecological impacts of COVID-19, nor must we forget that there is still much to understand about COVID-19 and its multiple effects on street-connected children. It is now over one year since COVID-19 was first identified, in December 2019, and since the WHO declared the outbreak of COVID-19 to be a pandemic, on 11th March 2020. These milestones surely push us to step up our efforts both to better understand the realities of COVID-19 for street-connected children and to respond accordingly.

Endnotes

[1] For example, analysis of Imperial College modelling from March 2020 suggested that, without measures to address the pandemic, COVID-19 could lead to as many as 12.9 million deaths in the poorest 73 countries, whilst a UNDP study revealed that income losses in developing countries could exceed US$220 (Gavi. See Modelling suggests suppression strategy will save more lives from COVID-19 in poor countries. 1st April 2020. ; UNDP. COVID-19: Looming crisis in developing countries threatens to devastate economies and ramp up inequality. Press release, 30th March 2020.)

[2] Some organisations cited in this overview are referred to by name, where permission has been granted, while others are anonymised in accordance with the organisations' preferences. Any children's names mentioned are pseudonyms.

[3] Wilkinson, A. (2020) See The impact of COVID-19 in informal settlements: are we paying enough attention?

[4] Griffin, J. See 'Will we die of hunger?': how COVID-19 lockdowns imperil street children. The Guardian. 15th April 2020.

[5] StreetInvest. See COVID-19 on the Streets. 2020.

[6] Street work is a child-centred, rights-based approach to supporting street-connected children conducted by trained, adult professionals and taking place on the street itself. It is characterised by the development of trust between street-connected children and adult street workers which are formed around children's own values, issues, experiences and ambitions. For further information, see Street Invest (2020). See More about Street Work.

[7] CSC. See The Impact of COVID-19 on Children in Street Situations. Submission to the UNCRC. 24th June 2020.

[8] See https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-'infodemic'-misinformation-and-cybercrime-COVID-19.

[9] StreetInvest. See Street Work: Making the Street Safer during COVID-19. 2020.

[10] CSC, See COVID-19, Rights, and You: Advocacy for Children, July 2020.

[11] StreetInvest. See Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Street Workers, 30th March 2020.

[12] Duncan Ross, StreetInvest, quoted in Griffin, J., 2020.

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