# Inter-Agency Working Group on **Violence against Children**

## Agenda for Action

**We strongly support the appeal by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on protecting the rights of children and safeguarding their well-being during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of those children already at risk as growing economic vulnerability will increase the threat of child labour, child marriage, child trafficking, sexual exploitation and recruitment into criminal groups, and armed groups and forces.

In addition, movement restrictions, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding and high levels of stress and anxiety have added a new group of invisible at-risk children who are at increased risk of experiencing and observing physical, psychological and sexual violence and neglect at home.

There is emerging evidence that violence against children is increasing in all different forms, from domestic violence and abuse at home to excessive use of force by law enforcement while enforcing lockdown decisions against street children. In the words of the UN Secretary General: What began as a health crisis risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis.

The UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children calls on governments, the international community, civil society, human rights institutions, the private sector, workers' organizations and leaders in every sector to ensure a child rights and multi-sectoral response to COVID-19 on three fronts:

## ① MORE INFORMATION

Ensure that age and gender disaggregated data about increases or reductions in prevalence of different types of violence against children is measured and used to inform decision-making.

This should also include medium and longer term health and social consequences related to lockdown policies such as comprehensive collection, analysis and use of age and gender disaggregated risk and resilience data related to COVID-19 and what would constitute a measured, effective response that would take into account other risks created by such response.

Inform children in a child-friendly manner and with age-appropriate language, on the effects and responses to COVID-19. Listen and learn from children about their experience of the current response to COVID-19. Cooperate with and support civil society organizations who have already conducted surveys with children and are currently planning more consultations with children over the world.

## ② MORE SOLIDARITY

Use the protection of the world's children as common cause that can stoke a greater sense of unity among people. Maintain or increase support to developing countries with a particular focus on social and child protection systems with special attention to the most vulnerable children. Support the powerful role that children and adolescents can play in engendering this spirit as many are already demonstrating throughout the world— whether through volunteering their help within communities, or combating stigma, xenophobia and discrimination online.

## ③ MORE CHILD-RIGHTS AND MULTISECTORAL ACTION

The following points are inter-linked parts of a child rights and multisectoral framework for action for children. All decisions and activities that concern children should be guided by the principle of the best interest of the child in the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as States' international human rights obligations and recommendations from international and regional human rights mechanisms.

### ≫ IMMEDIATE

- **Violence against children**

Ensure that essential child protection services are recognized as life-saving and continue to be provided and accessible to all children even during lockdowns, quarantines and other types of restrictions. Expand financial support and resources for national child helplines and gender based violence services to increase their ability to respond to survivors and/or witnesses of violence who may be caught in situations of lockdown with their abusers. Expand public education and awareness campaigns on violence against children, including prevention, such as parenting tips to prevent child maltreatment, ways to identify warning signs of potential violence at home, how to access services, and how a neighbour or friend can assist someone experiencing abuse.

- **Child participation**

Provide opportunities for children's views to be heard and taken into account in decision-making processes on the pandemic, through consultation and dialogue. Children use digital technology to support each other, exchange views and identify gaps in government responses. Children and young people will face a new different reality after the crisis and their future seems uncertain, therefore they will have to be part of the solution.

- **Access to computer and internet**

Increasing the accessibility and affordability of internet access to children, especially in places under lockdown in order to provide education, work, and public information on COVID-19 is a substantial part of the response to maintain children's learning, support and play. Possible measures include financial packages to improve connectivity, data packages and telecommunications subsidies, lending devices and providing technical support hotlines.

- **Online protection**

Messaging on safe and responsible behaviour online and supporting children to develop digital skills and resilience. This should complement concrete action including reviewing of user-generated content and take-down as well as reporting of harmful content, hate speech and illegal behaviour. Provide adequate responses to online violence, including guidance and tools for parents and carers on how to better protect children online and offline, including how to respond to and, if needed, report harmful contacts, conduct and content. Update current safeguarding policies of educational institutions to reflect online risks and potential harms facilitated through online schooling. Private sector stakeholders should take appropriate technical measures – such as parental control tools, age verification, safety-by-design, age-differentiated experiences, with password-protected content, block/allow lists, purchase/time controls, opt-out functions, filtering and moderating – to prevent underage access and exposure to inappropriate content or services.

- **Mental health**

Provide practical support to parents and caregivers, including how to talk about the pandemic with children, how to manage their own mental health and the mental health of their children, and tools to help support their children's learning. Strengthen trainings for health, education and social service workers on the impacts that COVID-19 may have on child well-being, including skills development support in talking to children about anxiety and insecurity.

- **Alternative care**

Ensure that essential child protection services such as alternative care continue to be provided and accessible to all children even during lockdowns, quarantines and other types of restrictions. Provide targeted support to interim care centres and families, including child-headed households and foster families, to emotionally support children and engage in appropriate self-care. avoid institutionalizing children without caregivers, giving priority to family-based care, including extended family (kinship) care.

- **Case management**

Establish mechanisms to ensure that communities facing restrictions on movement have continued access to child-friendly, holistic care for children experiencing violence, including case management. Provide training and support to case workers and existing child helplines on COVID-19, including basic facts and myths, impact of child protection and supported services. Identify risk mitigation measures for caseworkers and alternative methods for follow-up if home visits become impossible.

- **Children in detention**

Release children in all forms of detention whenever possible and reduce the number of children deprived of their liberty during the COVID-19 emergency to reduce vulnerabilities to infection due to crowding, confinement and limited access to health and hygiene. Prevent arrest or detention of children for violating directives relating to COVID-19, end immigration detention for children and their families, and ensure that any child who was arrested or detained is immediately returned to his or her family.

- **Child Labour / Trafficking**

Provide targeted economic assistance, including cash transfers, to low-income communities to help poor and other vulnerable families meet their basic needs without resorting to child labour or child marriage. Strengthen interministerial coordination, as well as within relevant SDGs multi-stakeholder partnerships, such as Alliance 8.7, and redouble efforts to prevent, identify, mitigate and remediate child labour, paying particular attention to increased risk of child trafficking.

- **Children in humanitarian settings**

Provide access to appropriate emotional, financial, and material resources for caregivers and /or child-headed households that are particularly vulnerable and/or have been directly affected by the disease. Train health actors and educators on child protection risks and identify alternative psychosocial support mechanisms and educational activities.

Elicit input and support from community members (including traditional and religious leaders) on the design and implementation of effective, child-friendly messaging and communication strategies to promote child protection, risk prevention, and overall awareness of appropriate referral procedures. Establish safe options for unaccompanied children and alternative arrangements for children with families who are hosted in overcrowded reception facilities.

- **Children and armed conflict**

Adhere to the UN Secretary General's call for global ceasefire. Facilitate open access for humanitarian personnel so that we can reach children and families with essential services, including food, healthcare, protection, water and sanitation and refrain from impeding the delivery of relief supplies, or prevent people in need from obtaining services.

- **Social cohesion**

Take action against racism and xenophobia that may raise against certain groups who are perceived to be linked to the COVID-19. For example, this could include evidence-based information sharing on the nature of the virus and its spread or the monitoring of hate speech and related activities.

## »» Mid and longterm

- **Transitions**

Prioritize the restoration of child services as lockdown measures wind down. Prioritize continuity of child-centred services, like schooling, nutrition programmes, maternal and newborn care, immunization services, sexual and reproductive health services, HIV treatment, mental health and psychosocial and core protection services.

Conduct outreach and re-enrollment drives to ensure that no child is left without education and protection. Ensure social dialogue with governments and employers' and workers' representatives results in strong, consensus-driven policy responses that serve those who most need them.

Identify the most vulnerable children and support their families with targeted economic assistance, including cash transfers, support to food and nutrition, and access to jobs/income-generating activities.

- **Fiscal policies and budgets**

Reformulate social priorities and develop a strategic plan for the future of public services, in particular social and child protection services. Reduce inequalities in order to re-establish sustainability in the public finances and sustainability and to establish a resilience in readiness for any further national or global crisis.

## CALL TO ACTION

A global crisis calls for a global response. Solidarity, multi-stakeholder cooperation and multilateralism are needed now more than ever.

This calls for strong mobilization of governments, bilateral/multilateral donors, civil society and private sector to:

- safeguard social protection, health, education and protection of children services;
- ensure children are duly protected and have the possibility to thrive and reach their full potential, when this crisis will be over;
- achieve the Goals and Targets of the Sustainable Development Agenda.

We, all together, must ensure children are included in all COVID-19 response and recovery decisions, so that no child is left behind.