Consortium for Street Children note to the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Rights of children in street situations during the covid-19 pandemic

21 April 2020

Introduction

The Consortium for Street Children (CSC) is the global network of organisations working to change the world for children in street situations. We do this by working together on advocacy, research and innovative projects to support children in street situations and improve their lives. We have 140+ members working in 130 countries around the world.

The work of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has always been of particular importance and relevance to CSC, as many children in street situations around the world are living in extreme poverty. Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak there have been many signs that children in street situations are at risk of being further pushed into extreme poverty.

This note sets out the vulnerability of children in street situations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and asks both the current Special Rapporteur, Philip Alston, and the incoming Special Rapporteur, Olivier de Schutter, to support our call for action. The information in this note is based on evidence from our Network Members working directly with children in street situations, as well as research and media reports.

Vulnerabilities and risk to human rights abuses faces by children in street situations during the covid-19 pandemic

Every child has a right to life and to the highest attainable standard of health. States must ensure the survival and development of the child to the maximum extent. However, extreme poverty puts the lives of children in street situations at risk. Many are homeless, which is a prima facie human rights violation, or living in informal settlements. Lack of adequate nutrition, lack of access to water and sanitation, limited access to healthcare due to their lack of identification and barriers such as discrimination and fees, and social exclusion due to their street connections, are all ‘ordinary’ rights violation faced by children in street situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified these existing vulnerabilities for children in street situations. They are among the most exposed to the risk of contagion due to their living conditions, including the difficulty to respect distancing and self-isolation measures and the absence of handwashing facilities available to them, but also the lack of

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accessible information made available to them on the existence of the virus, how to protect themselves and what to do if they develop symptoms.

Health

Infectious diseases, including respiratory infections such as pneumonia, have been shown to be more prevalent among children who live on the street than among their peers who live at home. Asthma, a known pre-condition increasing the likelihood of developing more severe COVID-19 if infected is also common among children in street situations. For instance, a study in New York found that homeless youth were hospitalised with asthma at a rate 31 times higher than other youth. Poor nutrition, a problem faced by many children in street situations, weakens the body’s immune response and increase health vulnerabilities, and this issue has been exacerbated by the disruption or suspension of many nutrition programmes that otherwise cater for undernourished children. These pre-existing health conditions mean that children in street situations are more susceptible and vulnerable than most children to contracting and becoming severely ill with COVID-19.

The right to health also includes access to preventative measures and appropriate information. Children in street situations are at increased risk due to the inadequacy of information made available to them on the existence of the virus, how to protect themselves and what to do if they start to have symptoms. Where governments are sharing such information publicly, it may remain inaccessible to children in street situations due to lack of access to the necessary technology, or a lack of understanding of the official language.

Children’s mental health may also be suffering as a result of the pandemic. 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 they work with feel mentally tortured and are living in fear. 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

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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.

Water and sanitation

Despite children’s vulnerability to ill-health, many children in street situations are unable to carry out the basic precautions that everyone has been urged to take to protect themselves from the virus. Washing hands with soap and water is the first line of defence against COVID-19, yet this essential practice remains out of reach for many children in street situations who do not have regular access to basic water and hygiene facilities. Several CSC Network Members have reported that access to water and sanitation has actually deteriorated for children in street situations since the start of the pandemic. For instance, CPCS, a CSC network member in Nepal, reports that children in street situations are finding it increasingly hard to find water because all shops are closed. In India, the Concerned for Working Children reports that children in street situations and their families in Karnataka are at a breaking point because they are losing access to drinking water. A network member in Tanzania reports that in Mwanza children on the street are being denied access to hygiene facilities placed by the government at markets and bus stands. They are told that they do not need to wash their hands because they are ‘used to dirtiness’.

Livelihood and access to food

Restrictive measures to contain the spread of the virus adopted by States in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, such as lockdown, have enormous impact on people all over the world and have the potential to push many more into extreme poverty. The street is the only source of income for many children in street situations around the world, as they are often working or begging on the street, practices which require contact with other people. The role of labour in the lives of children in street situations is complex, and children often experience multiple forms of work while on the streets. While many of these forms of labour may be hazardous or exploitative, the effect of the pandemic and responses to it has been to abruptly cut off the means by which many children in street situations afford their daily necessities. Others live with their families who are dependent on daily wages or informal work. With the populations of most of the world’s cities confined indoors and those on daily wages unable to work, these children and their families have lost their livelihoods.

CSC Network Members in several countries (including Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan) report that children are struggling to find food to eat as a result. For example, Safe Society in India report that not only are the food

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stocks of families who are dependent on daily wages running out, food prices are also rising rapidly pushing food even further out of reach for those in poverty. In Kenya, a boy speaking to CSC Network Member Glad’s House described what the curfew means for him: “Now that we are being told no one will be allowed to roam around the streets from 7pm, does it mean we are going to die of hunger instead of corona?”

In Bangladesh, as a result of the nationwide lockdown, children in street situations working as waste collectors and street vendors cannot earn money anymore because no one is allowed outside on the streets. Children who beg on public transport vehicles, at water terminals or stations, now do not have this opportunity - passengers would often donate food or money to these children, but as public transport has been suspended, these opportunities to access food and livelihood have ceased.

The closure of schools also further limits the access to food for many children in street situations who were enrolled in school. CSC partners in Tanzania, for example, warn that as schools are shut, children and families in street situations lose one of the main free means to access food. This may push them back onto the streets to find sources of income and food, but as highlighted above, these opportunities have become very limited in most countries.

It also remains to be seen what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be on the livelihood of children in street situations, particularly with a global economic crisis looming. Action must be taken to prevent these vulnerable children from being pushed further into poverty and/or ending up in more exploitative situations.

**Legal identity**

Some States are taking measures to mitigate the negative effects of responses to the pandemic for those in poverty by financially supporting companies and vulnerable households, but children in street situations are at risk of being left behind because of a lack of legal identity documents. For example, CSC Network Member Cities for Children, in Pakistan, reports that the government social protection programme, Ehsaas, is distributing and tracking relief based on information related to national identity cards. This excludes children in street situations who do not have these documents – as many are unregistered or do not have their own documents - as well as unregistered refugees and stateless communities. As well as being routinely denied access to services including health care and education, during the pandemic this means that some children in street situations are not able to access support being provided for their government simply because they cannot prove their legal identity.

**Shelter**

In different countries, the poverty faced by children in street situations can lead them to being criminalised simply for being on the streets, although they often have nowhere else to go. The imposition of curfews, lockdowns, quarantines and isolation comes at a higher cost to children in street situations, who have a particular relationship with public spaces, often based on necessity. States should provide children in street situations with equal
access to shelters or other adequate, alternative housing.

On the contrary, some CSC members have reported states removing access to informal shelters and sleeping spots during lockdowns. In Islamabad, Pakistan, CSC Network Member Cities for Children reports that despite being in lockdown, 75 homes in a slum community were razed by municipal authorities. Residents were only provided with temporary shelter and compensation after outcry on social media. The District Commissioner responded saying there would be an inquiry into the forced eviction at this time of crisis, but that “they say it was a den of professional beggars.”9 According to a CSC partner in Tanzania, children are being denied access to their usual sleeping spots due to fear in the community that the children may be infected.

CSC is also particularly concerned that children in street situations are more vulnerable than ever to police abuses, including torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. For instance, children violating the curfews rules in the Philippines are subject to inhuman or degrading treatment, including reports of children being locked in a coffin or confined in dog cages,10 or being forced to sit in the midday sun. The life of these children is at risk as President Duterte issued a shoot to kill policy for anyone protesting or causing ‘trouble’.11

Support systems from governmental and non-governmental actors

As this note highlights, the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting children in street situations, exacerbating existing inequalities and plunging the poorest people deeper into poverty. While the actions taken by governments are designed to protect their populations from the disease, very rarely have policies taken into account those who are unable to self-isolate or whose livelihoods are destroyed overnight when a lockdown is put in place. Instead, children in street situations are being punished for not being able to adhere to restrictive policies and are not being given the means nor the information necessary to keep themselves safe.

CSC network members are working tirelessly to ensure that the children in street situations they are working with have access to basic needs during these difficult times. For instance, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the Grambangla Unnayan Committee is encouraging donations that would enable the organisation to provide children with those services for free. The Dhaka Ahsiana Mission is cooperating with the local government to deliver free food and medicines to children in street situations, as well as allowing them access to the government facilities. In Indonesia, a CSC partner organisation has been collecting donations of food to provide to a thousand vulnerable families in greater Jakarta. In Uganda, a CSC partner organisation works closely with local partners to provide children with food, and asked the government to revise a recently introduced law that bans donations to children in street situations in light of the emergency.

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9 For news coverage of the incident, see https://www.dawn.com/news/1549770
Many organisations have been developing information resources for children and practitioners. For instance, our network member StreetInvest published guidance for street workers and developed a template letter that several organisations have successfully used to collaborate with local authorities. Many organisations have developed child-friendly materials to advise children on good hygiene practices to prevent catching and transmitting the virus, such as Ek Ronga Ek Ghuri in Bangladesh (view here) and the Samaritan Trust in Malawi (view here).

Children are also actively participating in interventions set up by organisations, and even leading their own interventions. StreetInvest 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 reported that in a centre run by one of their local partners in Madagascar, initiatives led by children included a presentation by children on COVID-19 and a discussion during which children shared their understanding of a government briefing with their peers.

At the same time, many non-governmental services are being forced to shut their doors or reduce their hours to comply with restrictions and protect their staff and users. Two network members in Malawi and Zimbabwe have been forced to restrict outreach activities, while one network member in Nigeria, the Education for Purpose Initiative, reports being unable to find children in their usual settings and meeting places. Members in Vietnam, Indonesia and Zimbabwe have said that some drop-in and accommodation centres are seeing a large increase in demand while others are being forced to close or introduce restrictions. The COVID-19 pandemic is making the work of these organisations more difficult or, in some cases, impossible, leaving many street-connected children at increased risk.

Around the world, there have been calls for governments to support these services with funding and supplies including protective equipment for staff members. It is our view that street workers should be seen as ‘essential workers’ and be protected and assisted to continue working with children in street situations.

Call for action

Our main asks to governments, that we would like the Special Rapporteur to support, are for them to provide to all children in street situations:

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1. **Safe spaces for self-isolation**: Street-connected children and homeless youth lack safe places to go during lockdowns and curfews. Governments must make sure they can access somewhere to safely self-isolate, in collaboration with NGOs already offering shelter. Governments must also ensure that lockdown measures do not punish or discriminate children and youth who have nowhere else to go.

2. **Access to essential services**: Street-connected children and homeless youth will be increasingly vulnerable during the pandemic. Many will be unable to access food, water, healthcare and sanitation. Governments and donor institutions must include them in schemes and emergency funding, including specific provisions such as hand washing stations, food outreach programmes and allowing social workers to continue street outreach work during lockdowns.

3. **Access to information**: Street-connected children and homeless youth often lack access to accurate and appropriate information on how to stay safe and what to do or where to go when they need care and support. Governments must provide information and advice that is easy to understand for street-connected children and homeless youth, including those with limited or no ability to read.

We would like to ask the Special Rapporteur to join our action to ensure children in street situations are not being pushed further into poverty and at even greater risk of having their rights violated in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Further information

- For the latest news and resources on children in street situations during the covid-19 pandemic visit our dedicated webpage on this topic at: https://www.streetchildren.org/how-covid19-affects-street-children/
- On 24th March, we shared with our network members a first explanatory note on public spaces and orders to self-isolate or quarantine at home.14
- On 3 April, we published a second explanatory note on the right to access to information.15
- We are currently working on our next notes, which will focus on health, water and sanitation, and housing, which will be published in the next weeks.

Contact lizet@streetchildren.org for any questions on this note or further information on the rights of children in street situations during this pandemic.

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