Consortium for Street Children note to the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing

Street children’s right to access to adequate housing and COVID-19

27 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 the right to adequate housing has always been of particular importance and relevance to CSC, as many children in street situations around the world are deprived of their right to adequate housing. Based on the General Comment No. 21 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on Children in Street Situations, we use the term “children in street situations” to describe children who: a) depend on the streets to live and/or work, either on their own, or with other children or family members; and b) have a strong connection to public spaces (e.g. streets, markets, parks, bus or train stations) and for whom the street plays a vital role in their everyday lives and identities. Many of them are homeless or living in informal settlements.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, measures adopted by States in response are of particular concern to our organisation. For children in street situations, the pandemic and government measures to minimise transmission of the virus have resulted in loss of livelihood, difficulty in accessing food, fear, discrimination and increase violence and harassment. The punitive emasures put in place to enforce lockdows and curfews risk persecution of those who don’t have a home in which to self-isolate.

This note sets out the vulnerability of children in street situations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and asks the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing 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

Children in street situations are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to the fact that many are homeless or living in informal settlements. They have a particular relationship with public spaces, often forced by necessity. They have limited or no access to water and sanitation and are therefore among the most exposed to the risk of contagion.

There are widespread concerns among CSC network members around access to water during the pandemic. For example, CPCS, a CSC network member in Nepal, reports that
shop closures are making it difficult for children in street situations to find water. Similarly, in India, Concerned for Working Children reports that children in street situations and their families are at a breaking point because they are losing access to drinking water. Access to sanitation has also become increasingly limited for many children. For example, a network member in Tanzania reports that 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’.

Our network members reported their fear, as many children in street situations they are working with have underlying health conditions making them particularly vulnerable despite their young age. Research shows they are likely to have an increased risk of developing severe symptoms if infected due to a higher prevalence of respiratory infections, such as pneumonia, and of pre-existing conditions, such as asthma, that make them more vulnerable than other children. Furthermore, children in street situations often do not have adequate access to information, making it more difficult for them to know how to protect themselves and what to do if they develop symptoms. Research conducted in the wake of the H1N1 influenza pandemic demonstrates that greater access to information, including media coverage and government communications, is linked to increased uptake of health protective behaviours.

Vulnerability and punitive measures due to lack of access to housing

Children in street situations are particularly vulnerable to measures adopted by States in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19, some of which may deprive people of their livelihood, work, food or shelter. The imposition of curfews, lockdowns, quarantines and isolation comes at a high cost to them. In most States, children in street situations can be more than ever criminalised simply for being on the streets, although they often have nowhere else to go. Law enforcement practices used in the enforcement of curfews or containment measures, such as street ‘sweeps’, are criminalising and marginalising people experiencing homelessness.

Some CSC members have reported governments 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. 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. States must provide to children in street situations equal access to shelters or other adequate, alternative housing.

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, 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’.

CSC network members based in India reported to CSC that children in street situations are being persecuted and tortured by the police because of the lockdown. Children can’t access state shelters because the police are beating them. In Ghana, a network members reported to CSC that children are being beaten by military and police when they go out onto the streets to find food.

Support on the streets

The examples above indicate that children in street situations need support more than ever. At the same time, many non-governmental services are being forced to shut their doors or reduce their hours to comply with restrictions, and are further limited by a widespread lack of funding and supplies including personal protective equipment.

For instance, 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic is making the work of these organisations more difficult or, in some cases, impossible, leaving many children in street situations at increased risk.

Others are still able to conduct outreach and are trying to increase these services. In Vietnam, a CSC Network Member ramped up their street outreach work in order to find children more quickly if they do come to the city and accommodate them in their centres. In Tanzania, partners are working with ‘street champions’ such as small shop owners to provide handwashing stations to children on the streets. CSC Network Members in

---

11 See, among others, the following news articles: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/27/india-covid-19-lockdown-puts-poor-risk
  ; https://thewire.in/rights/homeless-persons-coronavirus-mumbai
different countries are also using vans with loudspeakers to make information on services and how to stay safe accessible to street children.

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

*Temporary shelter and alternative accommodation*

Most drop-in and accommodation centres are seeing a large increase in demand while others are being forced to close or introduce restrictions. For instance, 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. They are exploring using a larger outside area near the drop-in centre to provide services to more children.

Those who have had to close drop-in centres and other temporary accommodation are also concerned how to re-open shelters safely in the near future. One member in Nigeria expressed concern that when the full lockdown is lifted the coronavirus will likely not yet be defeated, so they will have to put comprehensive measures in place to protect children and staff from contagion and transmission. They don’t have PPE to keep staff safe and securing social distancing among children in drop-in centres with overwhelming demand has been proven extremely challenging.

CSC is sharing information and good practices between members on safely operating drop-in centres during the pandemic, and is looking at developing guidance that can be used across the sector.

*Family reunification*

Some members are encouraging family reunification for children in street situations with relatives to ease the pressure on shelter and ensure children have a safe place to live. For instance, the Samaritan Trust in Malawi have promptly mobilized resources to reunite children in street situations with their families right after the government proclaimed a state of emergency. However, many organisations are struggling to continue family reunification processes, as family visits are often not safe or allowed, and virtual meetings with families often not possible in the contexts these organisations work. As a result, there is a risk that children return to unsafe environments if they choose to reunite with their families, but the necessary support is not in place. Some members have found innovative ways to repurpose funds to continue family support. For instance, partners in Mwanza, Tanzania have repurposed funds normally spent on transportation for family visits to purchase affordable mobile phones to distribute to families to stay in

contact with them. If successful, this model will be rolled out across several cities in Tanzania.

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:

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 protect children in street situations from facing increased rights violations, and promote their right to adequate housing and shelter 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/](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.\(^\text{15}\)

• On 3 April, we published a second explanatory note on the right to access to information.\textsuperscript{16}

• 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.