



ChildFund
Alliance



Terre des Hommes
International Federation

World Vision

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Donors and the government must put children's rights at the heart of the COVID-19 response

As COVID-19 continues to progress around the world, Cambodia has emerged as one of the rare success stories. With zero known community transmission and only two imported cases in more than 6 weeks, it is clear that the first wave of contagion has been managed successfully. The recent imported cases show we should remain vigilant, but it is also important to celebrate the excellent work done so far to achieve this remarkable success against a virus that has infected millions of people across the globe. There is no doubt that the strong and quick coordinated response from the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), Development Partners and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is at the heart of success in mitigating the spread of the pandemic in the Kingdom. Various response mechanisms led and coordinated by the relevant Ministries made a significant difference, such as the nationwide closures of all entertainment venues, systematic contact tracing and the quick roll out of a nationwide prevention campaign.

However, while we celebrate victory in our first battle against COVID-19, we should not think we have won the war against the pandemic and its overarching consequences on Cambodia. A series of rapid assessments and surveys¹ conducted over the last few weeks show that COVID-19 is already having a profound effect on children's well-being. As grassroots organisations, we are especially concerned how vulnerable children and marginalised communities and groups will be able to cope with the wide-ranging educational, social and economic impacts of this crisis. We know that the Royal Government of Cambodia, development partners and other CSOs are sharing these concerns and are currently developing plans to respond to them. This document provides priorities and recommendations that we believe should help guide our coordinated action towards ensuring children's rights in Cambodia are at the heart of the COVID-19 response.

Education

To prevent any community transmission of COVID-19, the Cambodian government made the decision on 16 March to close all types of schools for all grades in Cambodia. More than 3 million students from preschool to grade 12 have been out of schools since mid-March. A recent decision from the Royal Government of Cambodia indicates that school closures may continue until November 2020.

This situation is having a significant impact on the well-being of children and the realization of their rights in Cambodia. A recent survey conducted by Joining Forces and CRC Cambodia with children aged 10-17 shows that, while 78% of children and young people interviewed are reporting continuing some sort of learning, half of them study for less than 10 hours a week at home in comparison to 20 hours on a normal week at school. According to another rapid assessment by

¹ See the list of these assessments and surveys, and information on their methodology in annex 1.



Save the Children, only about half of children have access to learning materials while staying at home (54%), where only 48% of them report receiving from anyone while learning at home. The survey by Joining Forces and CRC Cambodia also found that additional challenges involve slow internet connection, the cost of internet credits and the impossibility to reach out to teachers to ask questions. As a result, two-thirds of these children are concerned that home learning provides them with a poor quality education and more than 40% of them believe that it could even prevent them from getting a good career in the future. In a recent rapid assessment conducted by World Vision, 86% of respondents believed that the present situation will lead to an increase in the number of children dropping out of schools in future.

The situation is also concerning in terms of early childhood education (children aged 3-5). A rapid assessment conducted by Plan International indicated that almost 30% of parents do not teach their younger children at all, while 60% of parents provide very little support to these children for their learning. 74% of parents also reported that they have very little knowledge on how to teach their younger children.

School closures may have a disproportionately harmful impact on girls, particularly the most marginalised. According to the rapid assessment conducted by Plan International, since the closure of schools, girls have been asked to do more domestic responsibilities, which also cuts the time they can dedicate to home learning. Various international studies have shown that they are also at increased risk of child and forced marriage, early pregnancy, domestic and sexual violence when they are out of school. As a result, there are real concerns that COVID-19 will make girls less likely to return to school following the school closures, increasing the gender gap in access to education in Cambodia.

Recommendations to the government

- Schools should be reopened as soon as it is safe to do so. This will require a clear evidence-based strategy and technical guidelines for all schools in the country. Joining Forces members are willing to support the Royal Government of Cambodia in the development of this strategy, guidelines and their implementation.
- Significant coordinated efforts should be made to improve home learning practices, especially for children in remote and hard to reach areas with no or limited access to digital platforms. This should involve capacity building for teachers, increasing the availability of learning materials to take home, improving learning broadcasts and multiplying the channels used to broadcast them, as well as developing resources for parents and for peer-to-peer learning.
- Early Childhood Development (ECD) activities and materials should be promoted through various channels and programmes to ensure that the youngest children continue to develop and learn through play, based on the components of the Nurturing Care Framework.
- As schools may stay closed for several more months, more should also be done to ensure that home and distance learning mechanisms are accessible to children and youth with disabilities, including children and youth with visual or hearing impairments.
- The reopening of schools will have to be accompanied with a coordinated nationwide campaign to prevent school drop out, especially for vulnerable children, such as girls, children with disabilities and ethnic minority children.



Recommendations to donors

- Provide a coordinated and strengthened support to the MoEYS and all CSOs working in this area as per the recommendations above.
- Be flexible with implementing agencies to ensure a rapid and adaptive response during this unpredictable crisis.

Livelihood, food security and child nutrition

The data coming from several rapid assessments and surveys conducted over the last few weeks by different organizations shows that a large proportion of the population is already experiencing severe economic difficulties that are very likely to worsen in the coming months. According to a rapid assessment conducted by World Vision International, $\frac{3}{4}$ of families are reporting a loss of or reduced income. 86% of the children and young people interviewed are similarly reporting that their families have seen their income reduced or lost. While families have seen their income reduced, prices of staple foods have increased according to various sources². 36% of children and young people consulted reported that COVID-19 has already led to an increase of child labour in their villages, a finding that seems to be confirmed by other rapid assessments. World Vision's rapid assessment also shows that, to cope with this situation, a large proportion of the respondents are using strategies that are threatening their recovery capacities, such as borrowing or selling assets.

This widespread impact on livelihoods seems to have already a noticeable impact on food security. In a recent rapid assessment from the Food And Agriculture Organization (FAO), 14% of the farmers surveyed indicated that their households have reduced the quantity of food consumed or that they do not eat enough, a clear sign of food insecurity at the household level. According to data collected by WVI, a majority of families (71%) are reporting that they are only able to partially meet their food expenses. To cope with this situation, families are using several strategies that are non-sustainable and are impacting children's nutrition and well-being, including reducing the number of meals, switching to less nutritious food or cutting the size of food portions.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, despite strong sustained economic growth, Cambodia was registering high rates of malnutrition among children under 5 years, with 32% of children being too short for their age and 10% of children not weighing enough for their height³. If the food insecurity situation worsens over the next coming weeks, this high level of child malnutrition would likely increase, canceling the progress made over the last 10 years and threatening the physical and cognitive development of hundreds of thousands of Cambodian children.

Recommendations to the government and donors:

- To address the impact of the crisis on the economy, the RGC has implemented several actions, such as the development of a social protection programme targeting affected workers from the tourism sector and the garment industry. There is an urgent need to extend the response of the Government to all the poorest and most vulnerable families in Cambodia. The development of a national cash transfer programme through the IDPoor programme is encouraging and should be finalized as soon as possible with a clear focus on child nutrition.

² FAO and monthly report from the Ministry of Commerce

³ Source: UNICEF



- These social protection programmes should ensure community participation in the identification and registration of the poorest families, as well as other beneficiaries to ensure transparency, integrity and inclusiveness.
- Such a programme will have to be complemented by feedback mechanisms or social accountability programmes so citizens can monitor the quality of the support provided.

Recommendations to donors and CSOs:

- To address the impact on livelihoods of the most marginalized communities while preventing further child malnutrition, short-term food or cash-for-work programming will have to be implemented on a large scale with linkages to longer term livelihood programmes.

Prevention of COVID-19

All rapid assessments conducted by members of Joining Forces confirm that almost everybody in Cambodia is aware of COVID-19 while a good portion of the population has been reached by awareness raising messages on how to prevent the spread of the virus. However, the same rapid assessments suggest that some gaps in knowledge, attitudes and practices are still inadequate and would put many lives at risk in the instance of a second wave of cases.

For example, a Save the Children rapid assessment suggests that while almost all children have received information on COVID-19 and how to protect themselves, 91% of them do not practice social distancing. A rapid assessment conducted by Plan International also shows that a quarter of the respondents appeared to be still unclear about how best to practice handwashing to prevent COVID-19. A rapid assessment conducted by World Vision International suggests that, while the availability of water at the community level does not seem to be currently a major issue, a majority of the respondents are not prioritizing using water for personal hygiene.

Recommendations to the government and donors:

- Continue the nationwide awareness raising campaign to ensure that children and their caregivers across Cambodia know about the importance of handwashing with soap, respiratory hygiene, regular surface cleaning and physical distancing.
- Working with INGOs and other local CSOs, ensure that data is collected on a regular basis to measure knowledge, attitudes and practices of communities and see if they have been improved following the current awareness campaign as well as adapt the messages accordingly.
- WASH infrastructure, including child-friendly handwashing stations and water storage containers, should be set up and be ready to deploy for communities in need and to public locations, such as markets and large intersections.
- Ensure that doctors, nurses, health staff, patients and people seeking treatment have access to reliable and safe child and gender-adapted water, sanitation, and hygiene at health facilities as well as soap and child-friendly COVID-19 focused hygiene information. This will allow medical professionals to provide safer services while also protecting themselves.



- Ensure that when schools reopen they have the facilities and materials necessary to reduce virus transmission, safeguard essential services and supplies and promote healthy behavior, as well as have teachers and other staff trained in COVID-19 prevention. This includes ensuring access to adequate supplies of soap, clean water for safe handwashing, sufficient child-friendly and gender adapted toilets, procedures for when staff or students feel unwell, and protocols on social distancing and good hygiene practices.

Child Protection

As previously mentioned in this document, the data from several rapid assessments suggests that school closures and reduced access to livelihoods in communities may have led to an increase of child protection issues. More clear data is related to child labour, where 36% of the children and young people consulted reported that COVID-19 has already led to an increase of child labour in their villages. More than 30% of them also reported that they believe they, or some of their siblings, will have to drop out of school and work to support their family to cope with the economic impacts of COVID-19.

The recent children and youth consultation conducted by Joining Forces and CRC-Cambodia also raises the issue of online child safety. Data collected during this consultation suggests that, with more time in their hands, 84% of children and young people spent more time online. This additional time on the internet, largely unsupervised, comes with serious child protection challenges. In the same consultation, 15% of all children interviewed reported to have been contacted by strangers on social media while 2% reported to have been asked to share intimate pictures or videos or to perform inappropriate acts in front of their webcam. A similar proportion of them reported to have been victims of, or to have witnessed, cyberbullying since the closure of schools in Cambodia.

Recommendations to the government and donors:

- The continuity of essential child protection services must be ensured through the ongoing training of the social workforce and the dissemination of specific guidelines so that children continue to have access to safe referral mechanisms and psychosocial services during the crisis.
- All stakeholders should coordinate their efforts to regularly measure the impact of the current crisis on child labour and exploitation and implement strategies to address it.
- All stakeholders should support the development and implementation of a nationwide, coordinated campaign on online child safeguarding targeting children and their parents, at least for as long as schools remain closed.
- Integrate online child safeguarding into the home learning curriculum.



Health

All rapid assessments conducted by members of Joining Forces show that fears of infection are high in local communities. In the rapid assessment conducted by World Vision Cambodia, a significant part of the respondents are suggesting that, to avoid any risk of infection, community members are canceling or postponing visits to health centers. There is a need to investigate this potential issue as it may have some severe consequences for pregnant women and children under 5 years of age.

The same rapid assessment shows that more than 80% of children and young people are reporting various levels of emotional distress. Afraid for their health and that of their loved ones, sad because they cannot see their friends anymore and concerned everyday about their future, children and young people report having strong feelings and experiences that have a negative impact on their mental health.

A rapid assessment conducted by Plan International also suggests that COVID-19 has reduced access to sanitary pads during menstruation for girls and young women due to a reduction in income and fear of infection while visiting the local market to buy them.

Recommendations to the government and donors:

- Support the implementation of strategies to prevent a drop in pregnant women and recent mothers receiving adequate antenatal and postnatal care. This will require significant coordination among the Ministry of Health (MoH), donors and CSOs around innovative approaches.
- Increase the availability of psychosocial support for communities through a coordinated approach between MoH, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS), donors and CSOs.
- Knowledge, supplies and facilities for proper menstrual hygiene management is also critical, including for female health workers.

Child participation

In the consultation of children and young people conducted by Joining Forces and CRC-Cambodia, a high proportion of children (85%) reported wanting to be involved in the COVID-19 response in their community. Many of them said they could raise awareness on COVID-19 through social media (64%) or help their peers in home learning (39%). Others said they could support activities organized by local authorities. However, none of them reported having been consulted or even informed about the actions of local or national authorities, development partners or CSOs.

Recommendations to the government and donors:

- All stakeholders, from the Royal Government of Cambodia to donors and CSOs, should create and use processes to ensure that children and young people are consulted and involved in the development and implementation of the response to COVID-19. This includes strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of children, especially girls and young women, in decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard.



- All stakeholders should try to ensure that children receive transparent child-friendly information about the pandemic, including how they are responding to the crisis.

As child rights organisations, we are closely monitoring the impact on our operations and constantly adapting to keep working during the crisis while placing the utmost importance on the safety and well-being of the children, communities and our staff. We are ready to collaborate and support the RGC in its nationwide coordinated efforts to respond to and recover from COVID-19.



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Annex 1 - List of key resources used for this statement

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Rapid Assessment of COVID-19 Outbreak on Agriculture and Food Security in Cambodia: Policy Responses, May 2020

Information gathering activities combined desk review, telephone and virtual interviews with 41 selected key informants and local authorities and communities in 14 provinces. A total of 337 participants were interviewed by telephone by staff from the MAFF and Provincial Departments of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (PDAFF), coordinated by the Department of Planning and Statistics (DPS).

Joining Forces and Child Rights Coalition - Cambodia (CRC-C), Voices and perspectives of Children and youth on COVID-19 in Cambodia, May 2020

239 children and young people, aged 10-17 years, from 15 provinces and Phnom Penh were interviewed by telephones from the 11th to the 18th of May by the Child Advocate Network (CAN), the Adolescent and Youth Reference Group (AYRG) and Cambodia Children and Young People Movement for Child Rights (CCYMCR) with the technical support of World Vision International Cambodia and CRC-C.

Plan International Cambodia, Rapid Assessment COVID-19, May 2020

661 Community Volunteers (CVs) and Village Leaders (VLs) were interviewed through telephone in 3 provinces (Siem Reap, Stung Treng and Ratanakiri) from the 23rd April to 1st May

Save the Children International Cambodia, Rapid Assessment COVID-19, May 2020

241 children and young people, aged 10 to 17 years old, were interviewed through telephone in 10 provinces from 23 April to 02 May 2020.

World Vision International Cambodia, COVID-19 Rapid Assessment Report, May 2020

For the rapid assessment, 220 families were interviewed (household survey) from the 11th to the 14th of May in four different locations (Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Preah Vihear, and Kampong Chhnang). 42 Key Informant Interviews were also conducted over the same period with local authorities, children group leaders, community group leaders, faith leaders and CCWC leaders at the same locations. The interviews were complemented by a desk review.

World Vision International Cambodia, Rapid Assessment on Agriculture Cooperative in the context of COVID 19, May 2020

65 leaders of Agriculture Cooperatives (ACs) were interviewed. These co-operatives have 9853 members and 133 producer groups, within 7 provinces of Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Speu, Battambang, Bantey Menchey, Siem Reap, Kampong Thom and Preah Vihear Provinces.

