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SOS CHILDREN'S  
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CAMBODIA

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International Federation

World Vision

Joint Op-ed

## Will we listen to them?

1<sup>st</sup> of June

**Will we listen to them? – Children and young people tell us about the massive impacts that the COVID-19 crisis has already had on their lives and what we still need to do to win the fight against the pandemic.**

As COVID-19 continues to progress around the world, Cambodia has emerged as one of the rare success stories. With no known community transmission and only two imported cases since April 12, it is clear that the first wave of contagion has been managed successfully, thanks to the swift action of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RCG) supported by Development Partners, the World Health Organization (WHO) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The recent imported cases show we should remain vigilant, but it is also important to celebrate the excellent work done and recognize the sacrifices that many have had to make to respond to the crisis.

Several rapid assessments<sup>1</sup> conducted by Joining Forces organizations over the past 3 weeks reveal that children and young people have had to make some of the biggest sacrifices thus far. A recent consultation of 239 children and young people, conducted across 15 provinces and Phnom Penh by child and youth-led networks and supported by Joining Forces and CRC-Cambodia, highlight how the secondary impacts of COVID-19 have already significantly affected the lives of children on a massive scale.

One of the first signs of impact creating massive change among children is severe emotional distress. Afraid for their health and that of their loved ones, sad because they cannot see their friends, and concerned everyday about their future, children and youth are having strong feelings and experiences that have a negative impact on their mental health. With more time in their hands, 84% of children and young people interviewed also reported spending more time online. This additional time on the internet comes with increased risks of abuse and exploitation. 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 victim of, or to have witnessed, cyberbullying since the closure of schools in Cambodia. These findings are very concerning; Joining Forces organizations are committed to invest more on child protection to respond to these challenges. We believe that now is the time to come together for children going through hard times, where we can all do something to address these concerns through solidarity, coordination and caring for the most vulnerable.

Secondly, the closure of schools has also created massive changes in the lives of children and young people. While almost 78% of them are reporting continuing some sort of learning from home, half of them are studying for less than 10 hours a week, which is only half of what they would do on a normal week at school. Even with this limited time designated to learning they face significant difficulties. Data from our rapid assessment shows that only 54% of children have access to learning materials at home, and less

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<sup>1</sup> See the list of key resources used in annex 1.



than half of them report receiving any supports while learning at home. Additional challenges involve slow internet connection, the costs of internet credits and the impossibility to reach out to teachers to ask questions. As a result, 70% of them are concerned that home learning is providing them with poor quality education and that it may even prevent them from getting a good career in the future (41%). When asking about their recommendations to help their studies, many of them want the schools to reopen as soon as it will be safe to do so. In the meantime, they are recommending several measures to improve home learning, such as the provision of study materials, especially to poor students who cannot afford to buy them, as well as support in connecting to the internet as they cannot continue to pay for it over a long period of time. Our organizations have worked to support them and their parents from the onset of school closures. The challenges reported by children are showing we need to continue and strengthen our efforts. These findings, confirmed by a recent assessment of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), also show that, despite the great efforts and investments from all stakeholders, it will be very difficult to provide children at home with an education of similar quality as the one they would receive from teachers in schools. Joining Forces organizations are looking forward to supporting the Royal Government of Cambodia in the development of an evidence-based strategy and technical guidelines for the safe reopening of all schools in the country as soon as possible.

The third major cause of disruption to the lives of children and young people comes from the dramatic economic impacts of COVID-19. More than 86% of children mentioned that their families have seen their incomes reduced or have lost it completely. This proportion even jumps up to 93% for children from the poorest families. A similar proportion of them mentioned the loss of or reduced incomes of their families as their main concern about the future. 46% of them are reporting that spending on essentials, such as food, medicines and clothes have already been reduced in their families. Almost 30% of the children and young people interviewed reported that they believe they, or some of their siblings, will have to drop out of school to work to support their families as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Data from other rapid assessments seems to suggest that, to cope with this situation, a big proportion of the respondents are using strategies that are threatening their recovery capacities, such as borrowing or selling assets. Additional data coming from various sources already shows signs of food insecurity in communities with great risks on the quality of nutrition for children. When asked about their recommendations, a majority of children and young people mentioned the urgent need to support all affected families through a nationwide social protection programme so that they can cover essential costs such as food. To address these dramatic economic impacts, the Royal Government of Cambodia is currently implementing several actions, such as the development of a social protection programme targeting the poorest and most affected families through the IDPoor programme. The findings from the children's consultation and other rapid assessments show that this is urgently needed and it should include a clear focus on children rights, especially nutrition.

Despite these challenges, children and young people are telling us that, even if they have been affected by the impacts of COVID-19, they are fighting back and are eager to play a bigger role in responding to the pandemic. Many of them said they can support the fight against COVID-19 by raising awareness on COVID-19 through social media or support their peers that are facing challenges regarding home learning. As the Royal Government of Cambodia, donors and CSOs are continuing to work in response to COVID-19, children's voices need to be heard so appropriate and timely actions are taken to respond to their needs...**Will we listen to them?**



## NOTE TO EDITOR

**What is Joining Forces?** *Joining Forces* is a global coalition of the leading independent child-focused NGOs, united to advocate for renewed commitment to achieving the rights of all children. We advocate for all governments to demonstrate their support for internationally agreed standards for children's rights, and in particular to back the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).



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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 with 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 telephone 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 Child Rights Coalition - Cambodia (CRC-C).

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

661 Community Volunteers (CVs) and Village Leaders (VLs) were interviewed by 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 by telephone in 10 provinces from 23 April to 02 May 2020.

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

220 families were interviewed by 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's 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 Co-operatives (ACs) were interviewed. These co-operatives have 9853 members and 133 producer groups, within 7 provinces of Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Speu, Battambang, Banteay Menchey, Siem Reap, Kampong Thom and Preah Vihear Provinces.

