



Child Protection

and COVID-19

El Salvador Case Study

The impact of COVID-19 on children¹

El Salvador's fragility is founded in its inability to recover as a nation from its violent past. Though it has not been formally at war since the 1990s, rates of murder and violent control over citizens, including children, and the Government's inability to provide security and protection in the face of gang-related factionalism, are akin to that of a war zone.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, El Salvador was one of the most dangerous countries for a child to live in. Violence is perpetuated through negative peer influence, especially for adolescents, and through cultures of machismo and harsh discipline that see significant levels of violence in the home. In this context, children face significant protection concerns, including a 33% school drop-out rate, family separation and fracture due to violence, and pressure to join gangs that begins at an early age². **El Salvador has the highest proportion of internally displaced people in Latin America, 96% of whom are displaced due to gang violence.** The pandemic has already exacerbated the poor economic conditions of most families.

It was initially a challenge to gauge the protection-related impacts that COVID-19 was having on children in El Salvador. This was due to the national protection system not recording nor reporting cases of child abuse or violence against children for months.

World Vision El Salvador therefore conducted a rapid protection assessment at the outset of the pandemic, which did find cases of child abuse and violence at the household level. Based on this information, we re-evaluated our child protection programming to see how activities could be adapted in light of the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, thus ensuring children's rights continued to be protected. These adaptations are outlined below.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has had many, varied impacts on children's protection and well-being. Child protection organizations, such as World Vision El Salvador, have had to adapt their programming to meet the enhanced and particular needs of children at this time.

The objectives of our humanitarian response are:

- Prevent infection
- Strengthen health systems
- Contribute to preventing secondary impacts on children
- Advocate for child protection.

Aside from child protection, the other sectors in our country office programme are health, food security, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and livelihoods.

El Salvador is one of the most dangerous countries for a child to live in



1. This case study was developed by Malia Robinson, International Consultant; Silvia Payes, Technical Advisor for Child Protection, World Vision El Salvador, and Miguel Gutierrez, National Coordinator for Child Protection, World Vision El Salvador. It was reviewed by Brikena Zogaj, External Engagement Sr Advisor, Global Child Protection and Participation, World Vision International.

2. https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/centroamerica_desplazamientos-forzados-una-constante-en-elsalvador/6075171.html

World Vision El Salvador's adaptation and strengthening of child protection programming



OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIFE PROJECT MODEL

World Vision El Salvador conducted a review of the main child protection issues being addressed in our operational area to see if these were still relevant in the context of the pandemic. A **rapid assessment** was conducted to see if the existing programming was still pertinent, and if there were new child protection issues that were not currently being addressed³.

Findings showed that the child protection issues addressed through our existing programming were still relevant, though some required closer attention: for example, programming related to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), which was being offered through a World Vision project model called **Opportunities for Life**, was identified as an area which needed adaptation in light of the pandemic. Some additional topics were therefore added to the model in response to COVID-19.

These included supporting children and adolescents to cope with the loss of loved ones without the ability to carry out the rituals normally conducted following a death, handling stress at the family level, and dealing with children's and adolescents' concerns about not having the required tools to access remote education.

At the outset, it was clear that in order to adapt messages that were relevant to the specific protection concerns triggered or exacerbated by the pandemic, every group reached by World Vision El Salvador had to be considered. These included children of various ages, adolescents, parents and government institutions. We had to think beyond general messaging, instead providing tailored messaging on specific behavioural changes related to COVID-19, such as handwashing or successfully managing children's and adolescents' stress and concerns.

As programming moved from face-to-face to remote modalities, a lesson learned was that not all community and family participants had access to technology and connectivity. Printed awareness material was developed to ensure continuation of our protection activities and was distributed during other sector activities, such as food distributions.

Additionally, the aforementioned rapid assessment found that WhatsApp was the most common form of communication accessed by community members. We therefore began to use this application for trainings and child protection messaging.



3. World Vision El Salvador (2020), Internal Rapid Assessment Report, World Vision El Salvador.

Other rapid responses included:



The development of videos on basic child protection topics, including child rights, positive parenting, child safeguarding, and reporting and referring through government institutions when one sees or suspects a child rights violation.

The videos were used to support virtual trainings on child protection for community members and members of the local child protection systems, and to promote basic protection topics during trainings related to other sectors, such as WASH.



The development of a campaign to promote different mechanisms at the community level that could be used to report incidents of child protection violations; the campaign included digital and printed content.



The development of printed materials for different sectors, such as WASH, which integrated child protection information so that all our activities and materials being sent to families reinforced child protection messages. This expanded the scale of our information dissemination on child protection mechanisms and strengthened our cross-sectoral work.



The use of local radio to implement programmes, such as World Vision's Opportunities for Life model.

The challenges of remote technology led us to strengthen our work with community leaders to support them to be a link between and to emphasize child protection in their communities, beyond some protection-focused activities. We also worked with educators on strengthening their skills to prepare for post-emergency return to school, with a focus on educational continuity, mental health and child protection.

The challenges of remote interventions led us to strengthen our work with community leaders, supporting them to become promoters of child protection in their communities, moving beyond some protection-focused activities that they support or get involved and switching to becoming an active advocate for child protection. We also worked with educators on strengthening their skills to prepare for post-emergency return to school, with a focus on educational continuity, mental health and child protection.

Though our teams have since been able to return to the field, to some extent, to conduct face-to-face trainings, the country office strategy is still to have community structures and community leaders take the lead on our child protection work, which they did successfully during the lockdown.

Our technical team is also identifying other community structures which may have been set up for a different purpose during the lockdown, such as for WASH activities, and supporting them to focus on child protection.

So, the challenges presented by the pandemic have also opened opportunities for strengthening community structures to lead on child protection.

JOINING FORCES - INITIATIVE



Prevention work with institutions and organizations, including governmental bodies, expanded beyond COVID-19 protection and covered child protection concerns related to the pandemic, especially violence at home. Initiatives, like **Joining Forces**⁴, brought child protection actors together to advocate for enhanced child protection and adaptations to current work, given the impacts of the pandemic. These advocacy activities targeted local authorities and the National Protection System.



One of the efforts that Joining Forces had begun was a **campaign to fund activities that focused on increasing children's participation**. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, the project needed to be redesigned as opportunities for child participation were greatly reduced.

The closure of schools for over one year had one of the greatest impacts, as children reported that school was where they felt their opinions, thoughts and ideas were listened to and taken into consideration. The redesign had to consider the challenges of shifting to remote modalities and potential barriers impeding participation, such as lack of access to technology or connectivity.

World Vision El Salvador created remote safe spaces for children and adults to share their feelings and experiences about the lockdown and other impacts of the pandemic. This approach faced some challenges due to lack of access to technology and connectivity, as well as economic constraints to address these challenges. However, most of the children and adults who accessed these remote safe spaces highlighted the importance of having a space to speak about how they were feeling and indicated that they would like more remote spaces, such as these.

The other initiative of Joining Forces was to **explore gaps in laws, policies and norms regarding violence against children**. Analyzing the impacts of the pandemic, two concerns were prioritized:

- adolescent pregnancy and
- harsh discipline in the home.

There was an increase in adolescent pregnancy during the period of the pandemic that needed attention and action⁵. This increase was subsequently considered when designing new programme activities, including the promotion of activities that aimed to prevent adolescent pregnancy.

Physical punishment was chosen as a second priority area since physical violence was believed to have increased during lockdowns. In our role as a **member of the Committee of Eradication of Physical Punishment and Humiliating Treatment**⁶, World Vision El Salvador engaged in advocacy around an article in national law that can be interpreted as allowing parents to use physical punishment.

An assessment of the COVID-19 Response and adaptations in programming led to an adjustment in World Vision El Salvador's programming focus, which now reinforces the following components:



Mental Health and Psychosocial Support



Livelihoods



Food security



Protection (with a focus on CP)



Increased WASH interventions

4. Joining Forces is a coalition comprised of Child Fund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Villages International, Terre des Hommes International Federation and World Vision El Salvador. Coalition members aim "to use their collective power to accelerate change to secure children their rights and end violence against them." <https://joining-forces.org/about-joining-forces>
5. Statistic from National Hospital El Salvador, 2020 <https://arpas.org.sv/2020/08/embarazos-en-ninas-de-10-a-14-anos-aumentan-79-16-en-tres-meses-segun-minsal/> and Plan International update on Covid-19 <https://plan-international.org/es/latin-america/embarazos-covid-19>
6. This is a committee led by Save the Children which also includes the First Lady's Office, World Vision, Plan, Aldeas and SOS.

World Vision El Salvador's partners' adaptation and strengthening of their programme approaches and World Vision El Salvador's role in supporting this process

World Vision El Salvador works with partners at the local level from both the formal and non-formal sectors. Our approach recognizes the importance of working with both sectors in order to be successful. For example, some of the local formal partners, such as health system partners and faith leaders, were working with us to identify where child protection violations were happening during the period that the government was not reporting. The National Council for Children is the government body responsible for reporting protection violations against children that are documented and stored in an information management system. From March through to December 2020, there was no collection of data due to their staff members' inability to go to the field. However, our partners and field staff were internally reporting incidents of violence, and a rapid assessment conducted by our team showed increases in different forms of violence due to the impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions⁷.

World Vision El Salvador worked with adolescents and community leaders to train them on how to report cases of child rights violations to the government. Videos were also created that local partners could use in sessions, covering a range of child protection topics including the importance of talking about child protection and warning signs of abuse. 200 local partners participated remotely, although the number of local partners reduced when there was a switch to virtual learning since some did not have adequate connectivity.



Our partners helped to amplify the messages that constitute our basic child protection package, which covers the following three themes:

- Children's rights
- Appropriate conduct with children (including what is expected of World Vision El Salvador staff and other humanitarian actors in their interactions with children)
- Information about the official mechanisms for reporting child rights violations.

Consistent messages were sent to community members from different channels in order to reinforce the messaging. Positively, we did see an increase in community acknowledgement of receiving the information. The project evaluation also found that over the course of the project, there was a 10.3% increase nationally in the proportion of children and youth who were aware of services and mechanisms to respond to cases of abuse, neglect, exploitation or violence against children and youth. This rose from 48.3% of respondents in the baseline evaluation to 58.6% in the end-line evaluation.

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7. World Vision El Salvador (2020), Internal Rapid Assessment Report, World Vision El Salvador.

Examples of how World Vision El Salvador's child protection programming adapted or changed its relationship with formal child protection systems



In light of restrictions relating to social gatherings, which limited face-to-face sessions and community meetings, World Vision El Salvador had to look for ways to continue working effectively with the formal and non-formal structures of the child protection systems at the municipal level. Face-to-face meetings with municipality staff and families or community members involved in our programming were consequently moved to Google Classroom.

At the policy level, we focused on supporting the national government to strengthen its child protection actions. One example was developing protocols for child protection for use in the quarantine detention centres. Anyone testing positive for COVID-19, or coming back to El Salvador from another country, had to spend 25 days in quarantine; this included children, many of whom were deported. We therefore worked with the government and staff of these official centres on strengthening the protective environment for children.

Our technical child protection teams also started working with the local protection structures in the municipalities where we work to see if the protection systems were functioning, to identify community needs that had arisen from the pandemic, to understand how these were being addressed, and to identify any potential gaps. Where gaps were evident, our teams explored ways in which we could support the structures to function more effectively. This resulted in additional trainings to address areas of weakness and the adoption of tool and methodologies for assessing the child protection environment, such as CP ADAPT.

Finally, we worked closely with the Ministry of Education, helping to set up the virtual training modalities of study programmes. We also contributed to strengthening technical teams in schools and the Ministry, with a particular focus on enhancing the technical capacity of teachers to address children's mental health issues as this topic was becoming more of a focus at the national level. Other work with the Ministry of Education included surveying school infrastructure to identify schools in need of repair so that they could re-open earlier and have appropriate WASH facilities.



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Overview of the ways World Vision El Salvador has engaged faith leaders and faith communities in ensuring children are protected in the midst of COVID-19

With regards to faith leaders, World Vision El Salvador has historically worked with different representations of churches at the local level; they are perhaps our strongest partners at the territorial and local level.

We undertake trainings with faith leaders and communities on child protection; this has led to the development of child protection policies in churches and faith community-led programmes for adolescents and youth, as well as responses to the pandemic (focusing on child protection and WASH responses).

We have also been doing trainings with church leaders on measures that can be taken to prevent the spread

of COVID-19 so they can model healthy behaviours and practices for their congregations, influencing social normative change.

During the pandemic, our work with faith leaders contributed to a much wider dissemination of basic child protection topics. This approach allowed us to reach more people with key messages on child protection that were replicated by faith leaders.

Demonstrating the positive impact of working with faith leaders, we saw a noticeable change in community members' knowledge and attitudes about child protection, as well as some increases in child protection reporting.

12. For more information: <https://www.wvi.org/church-and-interfaith-engagement/channels-hope-child-protection>; <https://www.wvi.org/church-and-interfaith-engagement/channels-hope-gender>; <https://www.wvi.org/church-and-interfaith-engagement/channels-hope-maternal-newborn-and-child-health>.

Impacts of COVID-19 on child marriage

Child marriage is not legal in El Salvador, although a law was passed that allowed girls under 18 years marry in the case of pregnancy. Child pregnancy is big concern and World Vision El Salvador believes that pregnancies are sometimes due to girls being sexually abused or exploited.

Though “child marriage” is not referred to commonly, many girls are in informal “unions,” which are still considered marriage under the global definition⁸. Pregnancy rates have increased during the pandemic, with many adolescents pregnancies rate increased. It is suspected that perpetrators likely come from the girls’ households or close social networks.

The government has little response to the issue, making it difficult to address outside of work with other partners.

However, we are working with the Ministry of Health and the Office of the First Lady to strengthen prevention of, and response to, sexual violence. We have also been working to discuss this issue more openly, as well as working with adolescents to talk about sexual violence.

In 2017, WV El Salvador, together with other protection organizations, advocated before the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador to eradicate the second paragraph of article 14 of the Family Code, which enabled the unions of minors in case of pregnancy (without investigating the origin, which could be the product of abuse or rape). This meant a violation of the girls’ rights since it enabled parents and/or guardians to decide whether the girl under 18 could marry an adult even in her condition as a girl, being an enabling incentive and promoter of early unions.

Adolescent pregnancy rates have increased during the pandemic



8. ‘The union (or marriage) at an early age is defined as the union or marriage of two people, in which one or two of the members of the couple is under 18 years of age.’ “Marrying too young. End Child Marriage,” UNFPA, 2012

Effective coordination and networking during the COVID-19 Response

The following are examples of what contributed to the effectiveness of World Vision El Salvador's COVID-19 humanitarian response:

- Coordination with central and local governments so that aid could reach World Vision El Salvador's beneficiaries when our staff could not leave their homes
- Coordination with community leaders, contributing to the protection of children in all communities not only against COVID-19 but against all forms of violence, even when our staff could not be present
- Coordination with faith leaders for greater impact to reach more children, adolescents, youth and families, and to contribute to their protection against COVID-19.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) declared World Vision El Salvador the lead non-governmental organization (NGO) in the COVID-19 Response. We have been able to leverage this to expand some COVID-19 prevention WASH programming and receive a much larger grant to address other effects of the pandemic that have a particular impact on children, such as fragile livelihoods and food insecurity.

What could have contributed to even more effective coordination?

All relevant actors, including government, NGOs, faith leaders and other actors, could have collaborated more to implement a common national plan for the different areas of the COVID-19 Response and combined their efforts. This would have contributed to relevant child protection actors being even more effective in holistically responding to child protection needs throughout the country. As it was, we had to implement our own strategy since there was no common national plan.



Bridging the gap between development and humanitarian approaches in the COVID-19 Response

World Vision El Salvador did respond to the humanitarian crisis, but without overlooking our development work. We continued to work with government institutions to keep child protection systems working, especially reporting and referral mechanisms, and to find innovative ways of enabling children to continue their education during the pandemic. We also undertook advocacy work so that children with different illnesses could continue with their treatments. After the quarantine period, we worked closely with families so that those who had lost jobs could start economic activities on their own; this was critical, since the impact of loss of household income and food insecurity greatly affected children's protection and well-being. These are some examples of bridging the humanitarian and development NEXUS.