

Policy Brief: **The Impact of COVID-19 on children**

15 APRIL 2020

Executive Summary

Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims. While they have thankfully been largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19 - at least to date – the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing. All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good. This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong.

Moreover, the harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.

There are three main channels through which children are affected by this crisis: infection with the virus itself; the immediate socioeconomic impacts of measures to stop transmission of the virus and end the pandemic; and the potential longer-term effects of delayed implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

All of this is affecting children in multiple ways:

- > Falling into poverty:** An estimated 42-66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis this year, adding to the estimated 386 million children already in extreme poverty in 2019.
- > Exacerbating the learning crisis:** 188 countries have imposed countrywide school closures, affecting more than 1.5 billion children and youth. The potential losses that may accrue in learning for today's young generation, and for the development of their human capital, are hard to fathom. More than two-thirds of countries have introduced a national distance learning platform, but among low-income countries the share is only 30 percent. Before this crisis, almost one third of the world's young people were already digitally excluded.
- > Threats to child survival and health:** Economic hardship experienced by families as a result of the global economic downturn could result in hundreds of thousands of additional child deaths in 2020, reversing the last 2 to 3 years of progress in reducing infant mortality within a single year. And this alarming figure does not even take into account services disrupted due to the crisis – it only reflects the current relationship between economies and mortality, so is likely an under-estimate of the impact. Rising

malnutrition is expected as 368.5 million children across 143 countries who normally rely on school meals for a reliable source of daily nutrition must now look to other sources. The risks to child mental health and well being are also considerable. Refugee and internally displaced children as well as those living in detention and situations of active conflict are especially vulnerable.

- **Risks for child safety:** Lockdowns and shelter in place measures come with heightened risk of children witnessing or suffering violence and abuse. Children in conflict settings, as well as those living in unsanitary and crowded conditions such as refugee and IDP settlements, are also at considerable risk. Children's reliance on online platforms for distance learning has also increased their risk of exposure to inappropriate content and online predators

This policy brief provides a deeper analysis of these effects. It identifies also a series of immediate and sustained actions for the attention of governments and policymakers, including in relation to the following three priorities:

- **Rebalance the combination of interventions to minimize the impact of standard physical distancing and lockdown strategies on children in low-income countries and communities and expand social protection programmes to reach the most vulnerable children.**

- **Prioritize the continuity of child-centred services, with a particular focus on equity of access – particularly in relation to schooling, nutrition programmes, immunization and other maternal and newborn care, and community-based child protection programmes.**
- **Provide practical support to parents and caregivers, including how to talk about the pandemic with children, how to manage their own mental health and the mental health of their children, and tools to help support their children's learning.**

For each of the above, specific protections must be put in place for vulnerable children including refugees, the displaced, homeless, migrants, minorities, slum-dwellers, children living with disabilities, street children, living in refugee settlements, and children in institutions.

Now is the time to step up international solidarity for children and humanity— and to lay the foundations for a deeper transformation of the way we nurture and invest in our world's youngest generation.

The United Nations system – our agencies, funds, programmes and the Secretariat entities – are working across all settings and stand ready to support all governments and societies.

1. The channels through which COVID-19 affects children

The COVID-19 pandemic presents the greatest test the world has faced since the Second World War and the formation of the United Nations.

To understand impact on the world's children, it is helpful to distinguish three channels through which their lives are being affected.

The first channel is through infection with the virus.

Thankfully, children have been largely spared from the severe symptomatic reactions more common among older people—at least to date. Numerous cases of hospitalizations and deaths of children who have succumbed to the virus have been recorded, but these are exceptions and are likely related to prior conditions. Much more common has been for children to tragically lose a parent, family member, or caregiver to COVID-19. The psychosocial impacts of such loss on children should not be overlooked.

The second channel is through the socioeconomic effects of the virus and related measures to suppress transmission and control the pandemic.

As health services become overwhelmed in caring for large numbers of infected patients requiring treatment, children and pregnant women are less able to access standard care.¹ Children of frontline workers have also had to adapt to

alternative childcare arrangements. Children living in areas of armed conflict, who already struggle extensively to access health services may be further excluded from attention and access to the severely stretched health systems. Physical distancing and lockdown measures, restrictions of movement and border closures, and surveillance strategies are all affecting children in myriad ways. Face-to-face child services – schooling, nutrition programmes, maternal and newborn care, immunization services, sexual and reproductive health services, HIV treatment, alternative care facilities, community-based child protection programmes, and case management for children requiring supplementary personalized care, including those living with disabilities, and abuse victims – have often been partially or completely suspended. The impact of the pandemic extends far beyond the sphere of physical health. The pandemic is having profound effects on children's mental well-being, their social development, their safety, their privacy, their economic security, and beyond, as we explore in the following section. Children living in refugee settlements and those living in refugee settlements or other crowded conditions are especially vulnerable. **While children are not the face of this pandemic, its broader impacts on children risk being catastrophic and amongst the most lasting consequences for societies as a whole.**

¹ See: UN Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Women

The third channel is the risk that the virus and its response poses to the longer-term efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and ensure the realization of the rights of all children.

Before this crisis, we lived in a world that failed to care adequately for children; where a child under age 15 dies every five seconds; where one in every five children is malnourished (stunted); over half (53%) of 10-year old children in low- and middle-income countries (as high as four in five children in poor countries) can't read and understand simple stories; and one child in four under the age of 5 does not have their birth registered. The longer the current crisis, the more dramatic

the impacts on these children, as economies struggle and government spending is restricted; and the more likely the increase in their numbers. In active conflict situations, the pandemic or pandemic response may increase the push and pull factors for child recruitment, as well as sexual exploitation and abduction. **What started as a public health emergency has snowballed into a formidable test for global development and for the prospects of today's young generation.**

The overall impact of the pandemic on children reflects the combined effects from these three channels, which is the focus of the following section.

2. The impacts of COVID-19: dimensions and scale

Just as there are multiple channels through which the pandemic is affecting children, so there are multiple dimensions to its impact on the young. The effects could be grouped into four parts: 1) falling into poverty; 2) learning; 3) survival and health; and 4) safety.

While it is too soon to quantify the ultimate size of these effects—and decisions by policy-makers will play a critical role in determining their scale—it is possible to present some initial estimates and reference points.

1. Falling into poverty

The physical distancing and lockdown measures needed to save lives and suppress the transmission of the virus have resulted in a significant reduction of economic activity across all major economies and the resultant global recession. The severity of the recession remains to be seen but the socio-economic impacts were laid out in detail in the [title policy brief on the socioeconomic impact]². Estimates by the IMF³ anticipate global income contracting by 3 percent in 2020, under the assumption that the pandemic recedes in the second half of this year. An already grave situation could easily become much worse if capital outflows from

emerging and developing economies trigger a cascade of disorderly sovereign defaults.

At a household level, the collapse in income threatens the livelihoods of millions of households with children around the world. Inputting the forecasts from the IMF optimistic scenario into an IFPRI poverty model⁴ indicates an **increase in extreme poverty (PPP\$1.90 a day) this year of 84 to 132 million people, approximately half of whom are children**, compared to a pre-pandemic counterfactual scenario.

These initial estimates capture only the effects of a global downturn on poor households, ignoring the localized effects of household breadwinners being forced to shelter in place, or migrate back to their rural homes, abandoning their normal livelihoods. Financial diaries from 60 low-income households in the Hrishipara neighbourhood in central Bangladesh capture the sudden collapse of daily incomes when lockdown measures are introduced (see Figure 1).⁵ Historically, the burden of such shocks on households have disproportionately been borne by girls.

Such income shocks at the household level, even if only temporary, can have devastating effects on children, particularly those living in poor households with limited assets.

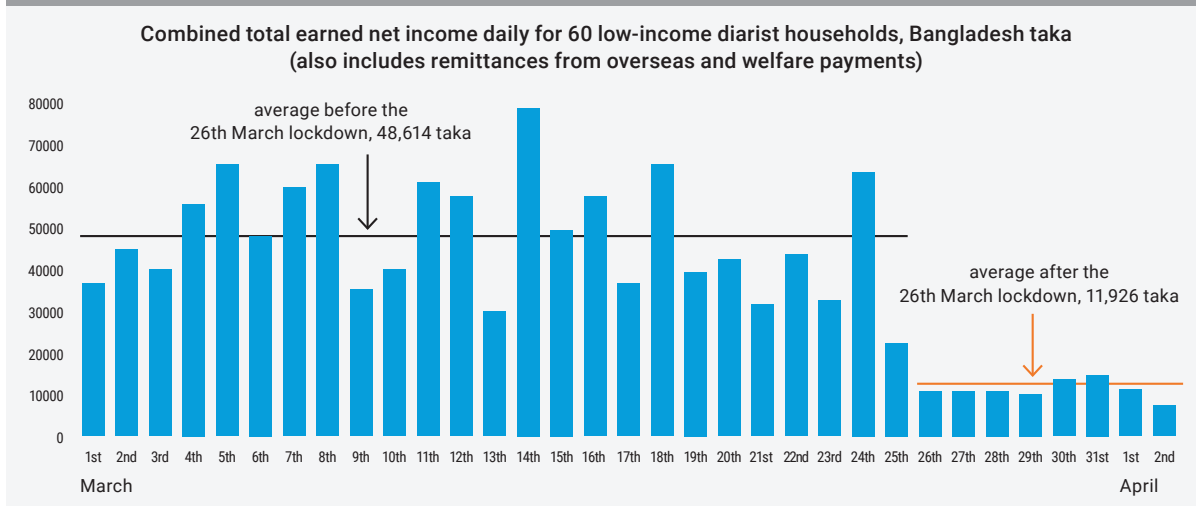
2 Shared responsibility, global solidarity: UN Report on responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19

3 World Economic Outlook 2020

4 IFPRI, 2020

5 Hrishipara Daily Diaries, 2020

FIGURE 1: HRISHIPARA DAILY DIARIES



In many countries, we have seen rapid expansions of social assistance programmes to compensate households for lost income. As of 10 April 2020, **126 countries had introduced or adapted social protection measures, of which 83 provide explicit support for children and their families.**⁶ However, the coverage of affected families, and of forgone income, is far from complete. The duration of today's lockdowns remains unclear, as is the likelihood of lockdowns being reintroduced in response to future outbreaks of COVID-19.

2. Learning

The worldwide closure of schools has no historical precedent. **188 countries have imposed countrywide closures, affecting more than 1.5 billion children and youth** (see Figure 2).⁷ In contrast to previous disease outbreaks, school closures have been imposed pre-emptively: in 27 countries closures were introduced before cases of the virus were recorded.⁸ With schools

in many countries planning for extended lockdowns, at least 58 countries and territories have postponed or rescheduled exams, while 11 countries have cancelled exams altogether.⁹

The potential losses that may accrue in learning for today's young generation, and for the development of their human capital, are hard to fathom. To minimize these losses, many schools are offering distance learning to their pupils. However, this option is only available to some. While more than two-thirds of countries have introduced a national distance learning platform, only 30 percent of low-income countries have done so.¹⁰ Girls have less access to digital technology than boys, which may reduce their access to and participation in on-line learning¹¹. Children living in informal settlements, camps with limited infrastructure and no access to internet are particularly impacted. Confinement and movement restrictions may be incentives for parties to conflict to occupy, loot or destroy schools facilities and hospitals; while empty schools may be targeted for military use. Children with

⁶ Gentilini et al., 2020

⁷ UNESCO, 2020

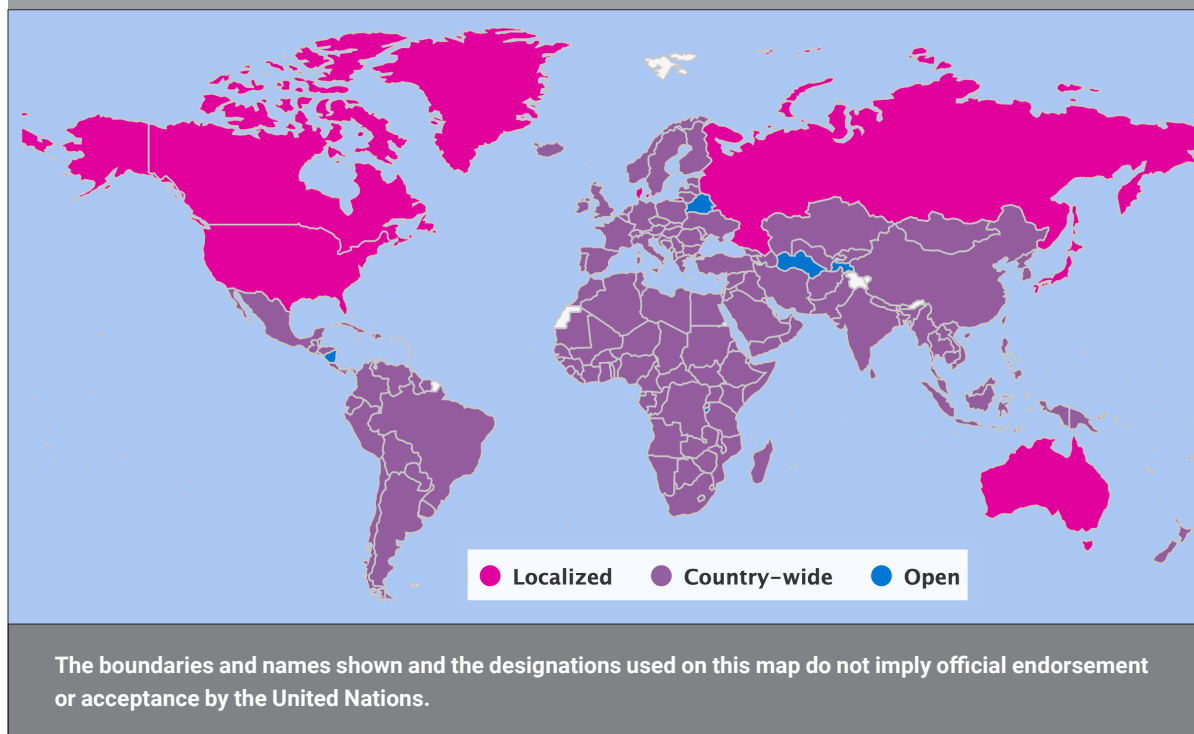
⁸ CGD, 2020

⁹ UNESCO, 2020

¹⁰ UNESCO, 2020

¹¹ <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>

FIGURE 2: SCHOOL CLOSURES (SOURCE: UNESCO)



disabilities and special needs are especially hard to serve through distance programmes. The quality and accessibility of distance learning can be expected to vary greatly both across and within countries. Only 15 countries are offering distance instruction in more than one language.¹²

Those losses will be greatest for children who, triggered by the pandemic, drop out of school altogether. That possibility becomes greater the longer schools are closed and the deeper

3. Survival and health

The direct impact of COVID-19 infection on children has, to date, been far milder than for other age groups. Preliminary data from observed cases in China and the US suggest that hospitalization rates for symptomatic children are between 10 and 20 times lower than for the middle aged, and 25 and 100 times lower than for the elderly.¹⁴ Of hospitalized patients, children are the least likely to require

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