

19 June 2020

## Submission to The House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology (INDU)

Save the Children Canada commends the Government of Canada for its sustained global leadership to champion the rights of children, women and girls, with a particular focus on the most marginalized, and aligned to the Feminist International Assistance Policy. We further applaud the recent Government of Canada investments through GAVI-The Vaccine Alliance and support for safe abortions and reproductive health services, despite COVID-19 restrictions, as this funding builds on other landmark commitments through the Thrive Agenda and trailblazing initiatives such as the G7 Charlevoix commitments in 2018 and the Equality Fund, launched at Women Deliver in 2019.

COVID-19 poses a significant threat to the ambition at the heart of these initiatives and to development gains made over decades<sup>i</sup>. While COVID-19 might have limited direct health impact on children, the indirect consequences are dire and long lasting. For example, the World Health Organisation predicts that “under the worst-case scenario, in which all insecticide-treated net (ITN) campaigns are suspended and a 75% reduction in access to effective antimalarial medicines, the estimated tally of malaria deaths in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 would reach 769 000. This twice the number of deaths reported in the region in 2018 - a return to malaria mortality levels last seen 20 years ago.”<sup>ii</sup>

As a global child rights organisation our ambition is to ensure that rights to survive, learn and be protected for children, in particular the most vulnerable, are at the centre of the global COVID-19 response. As a result, we launched the ‘Protect a Generation’ strategy, our global response to the crisis across 87 countries worldwide, including Canada, to act quickly to prevent, mitigate and respond to the devastating impact of the pandemic on the lives of children.

Save the Children Canada welcomes the opportunity to share a brief with you. We hope that our analysis and recommendations below, which shine a light on the hidden impacts of COVID-19 for children and youth, can contribute to the deliberations and outcomes of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology on Canada’s Response to COVID-19.

### 1. Hidden impacts of COVID-19 for children and youth

- *As COVID-19 claims more victims, vulnerable children and youth, including adolescent girls will bear the brunt of the pandemic*

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. While there are many uncertainties about the epidemiology of COVID-19, global effects are predicted to be devastating. The COVID-19 pandemic has spread at an alarming rate and is now hitting countries with some of the world’s most vulnerable children. Cases are being confirmed in some of the world’s most fragile countries where response capacity is already stretched to meet the lifesaving needs of children and communities. “It is estimated that the coverage of essential medical services could be reduced by between 15% and 45% over 6 months, resulting deaths globally (10% to 45% increase) and reversing recent progress in reducing infant mortality.”<sup>iii</sup>

Critical concerns for the most vulnerable children during the pandemic include immediate threats to health and nutrition systems, reduced access to education and learning as a result of school closures, exposure to poverty due to pressure on family income and livelihoods, and heightened exposure to protection risks. Children trapped

in conflict zones, refugee camps and living in fragile states face acute risks to their survival, development, learning and protection. For instance, adolescent girls face increased risk of early and unwanted pregnancy, being forced into early marriage and never returning to school.

- *COVID-19 pandemic comes on top of an existing global learning crisis and the danger is that the world's most vulnerable children may not make it back to school at all*

Almost 1.3 billion children – 75% of all those enrolled – are currently out of school in 182 countries<sup>iv</sup>. Children out of school in fragile contexts, living with intersectional forms of discrimination, face significant risk to their survival and development. These include children pushed into poverty because of COVID-19, who may be forced to work because their families are struggling to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. Lessons learned from the Ebola crisis in 2014-2015 have pointed to the potential impact that COVID-19 can have on girls' education. Based on several research studies, a Malala Fund report on COVID-19 and girls education suggests that “marginalised girls are more at risk than boys of dropping out of school altogether following school closures and that woman and girls are more vulnerable to the worst effects of the current pandemic”.<sup>v</sup> The report draw on the impacts of the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone in 2014-2015 and the financial crisis in 2018 and estimates that “approximately 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school after the crisis has passed, if dropouts increase by the same rate.”<sup>vi</sup>

Similarly, in Canada, Indigenous children and youth are disproportionately at risk due to historic and ongoing systemic discrimination. Access to basic human rights and key determinants of health during this pandemic, like clean water, healthcare, and housing are not a reality in many Indigenous communities. Long-term drinking water advisories remain in 61 First Nations communities across Canada, six of which are ‘do not consume advisories’, including in Wet’suwet’en and Grassy Narrows.<sup>vii</sup>

Indigenous children’s experiences with education have been severely impacted by the legacy of the Residential School System, as well as the proposal-based education policy, dating back to 1969 when the Federal government gained responsibility for on-reserve education, and which remained in place up until replaced by a new formula-based regional model in 2019. As a result of this policy and associated legislation governing on-reserve education, “First Nations children receive 20-30% less education funding than their non-Indigenous counterparts and to date Indigenous children have significantly lower graduation rates compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.”<sup>viii</sup> Indigenous Services Canada’s new education policy shows promise, but this progress could be lost due to historic inequities that will be exacerbated by COVID-19.

- *COVID-19 will deepen child poverty and increase youth unemployment and under-employment*

Not only does the pandemic pose an immediate risk to the lives of children and their learning outcomes, but it threatens to deepen poverty and existing inequalities. Save the Children’s recently launched paper [\*‘How To Protect A Generation At Risk’\*](#), which analyses the primary and secondary impacts of COVID-19 on Africa’s children suggests that ‘economic aftershocks risk pushing an additional 33 million children into poverty’. These economic consequences were echoed by the ILO’s Director-General in response to the ILO’s initial assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on the global world of work: “This is no longer only a global health crisis; it is also a major labour market and economic crisis that requires a swift and coordinated response.”<sup>ix</sup>

Based on an initial assessment, the ILO predicts the following economic impacts: i) “An increase in unemployment by 25 million. ii) An increase in ‘working poverty’ worldwide by 35 million additional people due to a decline in economic activity for the ‘working poor’, a reference to those who work and live close to or below the poverty

line.”<sup>x</sup> Youth, in particular young women aged 15-24 are among those over-represented among the ‘working poor’. Furthermore, prior to COVID-19, of the 41 million young people eligible to participate in the labour force, one-fifth are neither in education, employment or training (NEET), with young women making up the majority.”

## **2. Save the Children’s response: ‘Protecting a Generation of Children’**

Save the Children developed the ‘Protect a Generation’ strategy to guide the delivery and adaptation of integrated programming and advocacy in response to the crisis. Our COVID-19 Response Plan is based on investment in real-time analysis and learning, such as a 22 country scoping analysis in April. This approach has proven to be critical to first understand what is necessary and to ensure not just timely but effective pivots to new contextual and operational challenges associated with COVID-19.

To date we have:

- Launched a Global Response Plan seeking 649 million USD to reach 69 million children and adults, informed by country-level response planning in 87 countries and reflect our engagement in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP).
- Thus far, we have reached 2,491,842 direct beneficiaries, (including 996,053 children) with cash support, Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCC) and alternate remote education through our global efforts to keep children and their families safe from infection.
- Through our national and global advocacy efforts, we have put a spotlight on policies and financing required, including through debt relief, to ensure that in this crisis developing country governments are able to strengthen children’s access to health, nutrition, education and protection services.

Our response enablers include accountability to affected populations, coordination, partnership with local and national actors and real-time evidence and learning.

## **3. Recommendations**

While the COVID-19 pandemic certainly poses formidable challenges, it also presents an opportunity to build back better by strengthening social protection, health and education systems and ensure that these systems are more inclusive and resilient to future shocks.

**We call on the Government of Canada to engage and listen to Indigenous peoples, and take action accordingly:**

- Canada’s COVID-19 Economic Response Plan includes a significant distribution of funds to Indigenous communities, acknowledging their increased vulnerability to the negative impacts of COVID-19. However, this does not begin to address the historic and ongoing systemic inequalities for Indigenous children and their communities.
- Indigenous communities and organizations are calling for the Government of Canada to prioritize fulfilling Indigenous children’s rights to self-determined health, education, and protection in a long-term response to COVID-19 and inequality. Canada’s failure to do so has already had severe repercussions to the well-

being of Indigenous children, and the COVID-19 pandemic threatens unprecedented damage if inaction is prolonged.

#### **We call on the Government of Canada to support developing country governments to:**

- Guarantee children rights during the COVID-19 pandemic by ensuring children will have access to quality health, education and protection services, including mental health and psychosocial support.
- Address the underlying systemic issues that make the poorest children more vulnerable to the crisis. Developing country governments need to be supported to focus on systems strengthening in the social sectors. This will enable these countries to address immediate issues stemming from the crisis and to recover better afterwards, so they are more resilient long-term, including to future pandemics and other shocks.
- Recognise and integrate the specific needs of the most vulnerable children, including girls and those that face intersectional forms of discrimination, into their COVID-19 response plans.
- Ensure that dedicated funding is put in place for the mitigation, prevention and response to gender-based violence, with an emphasis on investing in women and girls rights organisations, and women- and girl-led civil society and grassroots organisations who are working on GBV, so they can scale up their work.

#### **4. Description of Save the Children Canada**

Save the Children is active across close to 120 countries worldwide. We're drawing on our 100 years of experience working in and with communities around the world in a vast range of contexts to put children's rights at the centre of our work. We've played a key role in responding to major epidemics, including Yellow Fever, cholera, measles, and Ebola. As a leader of Education and Child Protection in crises globally, we're one of the only humanitarian organisations with the ability to deliver children's programming in collaboration with a health response to infectious disease outbreaks. We are also a trusted partner for many Indigenous organizations across Canada, with whom we work on community-led emergency programs that seek to strengthen child and Indigenous rights in emergency contexts.

In 2018, we directly reached 66 million people, including 41 million children, through our lifesaving work. It is this worldwide presence, decades of on-the-ground expertise and ability to rapidly adapt to changing conditions that sets us apart from others responding to the crisis.

<sup>i</sup> UN (2020). *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children*.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/23-04-2020-who-urges-countries-to-move-quickly-to-save-lives-from-malaria-in-sub-saharan-africa>

<sup>iii</sup> 21 April 2020 John Hopkins, Early Estimates of the Indirect Effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Maternal and Child Mortality in Low and Middle-Income Countries, p.1.

<sup>iv</sup> UNESCO, COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response, accessed by Save the Children on 3 May 2020.

<sup>v</sup> Malala Fund, 2020. *COVID-19 and Girls Education. What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics*

<sup>vi</sup> Malala Fund, 2020. *What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics*

<sup>vii</sup> Government of Canada, Ending long-term drinking water advisories

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-more-indigenous-canadians-than-ever-are-graduating-from-high-school/>

<sup>ix</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_738742/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_738742/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>x</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_737648.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_737648.pdf)