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Save the Children Canada's Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (FAEE)

Study on Vulnerabilities Created and Exacerbated by the Covid-19 Pandemic

Save the Children Canada commends the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (FAAE) for its commitment to undertake a study on the vulnerabilities, created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on crisis and conflict affected situations.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a deep impact on children, families, communities, and societies the world over. The coronavirus is tearing children's lives apart – An estimated 99% of children worldwide – or more than 2.3 billion children – live in one of the 186 countries that have implemented some form of restrictions due to COVID-19ⁱ. Although children are not at a high risk of direct harm from the virus, they are disproportionately affected by its secondary impacts.

In order to learn about the effects of the pandemic, Save the Children conducted the largest survey among children and their caregivers of its kind since the outbreak of the pandemic, taking in over 25,000 respondents (including 8,000 children) across 37 countries.

Key findings of the survey included:ⁱⁱ

- 90% of the households that lost over half of their income due to the pandemic have struggled to access healthcare and medicine. And two-thirds have had issues accessing nutritious food.
- Over 1.5 billion children have been affected by school closures, with 80% of children saying that they learnt little or nothing at all during the pandemic. As a result of being stuck at home, two-thirds of girls are doing more chores around the house and over half reported spending more time caring for siblings.
- Being out of school can also be a driver of increased violence against children. Violence in the household was reported by children at over double the rate when schools were closed (17%) compared with when schools were open and the child was attending in person (8%).
- Almost one in five children (19%) reported violence occurring in homes with an income loss due to COVID-19 compared to 1 in 5 (5%) with no income loss.
- The study overall found that the poorest households, households with disabilities, female headed-households and girls, are the hardest hit.

The impact of COVID-19 on child rights and child protection will be even greater in humanitarian contexts, including those where there is armed conflict. Based on Save the Children's 2019 estimates, there were roughly 420 million children living in conflict zones in - the second-highest total on record - 160 million of them were living in "high-intensity conflicts"ⁱⁱⁱ. For children living in conflict zones, the pandemic is now one more thing to fear as the horrors of war continues. Containment measures are harder to enforce across porous borders, and in areas where governments lack legitimacy and control. The impact of border closures on the delivery of essential, external humanitarian aid will weaken already fragile health systems, which will become overwhelmed by the scale of need. Aid workers are sounding the alarm on falling immunization rates in particular. More than 60 crisis affected countries suspended immunization programmes due to the pandemic and it is estimated that 2/3 of children living in conflict zones are missing out on life-saving immunizations^{iv}.

Despite calls from the UN Secretary-General and UN Security Council, armed conflict has not stopped because of the pandemic, and public health measures can affect peoples ability to move, find safety, and access essential

services. In the short term, a global ceasefire would put an end to such conflict, and would allow critical, life-saving aid to reach the most vulnerable communities and support them in their response to the pandemic. The illness and death of family members and caregivers, and the collapse of livelihoods and subsequent impoverishment will force families and children to more extreme forms of survival including early marriage, sexual exploitation, and greater vulnerability to recruitment by armed forces and armed groups. This is supported by the Global Protection Cluster, which reported on violence against children in 23 of their operations, and child marriage in 15 operations.^v

Children from refugee and internally displaced populations are particularly vulnerable to negative coping strategies. With the impact that COVID-19 has had on the economy, refugee families will be pushed even further into poverty, and child labour will increase amongst these communities. In Jordan, 72% of refugee households are food insecure or vulnerable to food insecurity and child labour rates amongst Syrian refugees in the country are high, with children engaging in the worst forms of child labour, including street work.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought on a child rights crisis and **we call on Canada to place the needs of children, and particularly those who are most marginalized including girls, children with disabilities; and children affected or displaced by humanitarian crisis at the centre of its global Covid-19 response.**

Further recommendations are outlined below.

Recommendation 1: Canada's humanitarian response should be scaled up, timely and targeted to where it's needed most

The Covid-19 pandemic has come at a time when the vulnerability of populations has arguably never been higher. Climate crises are having more intense and severe impacts and the time between disasters has shortened, meaning less time for recovery. As the coronavirus pandemic has eroded people's ability to access food, famine has become an imminent risk in countries already experiencing crises including in Yemen, Burkina Faso, South Sudan and Nigeria.^{vi}

Amidst increasing needs there is a worrying trend of donor fatigue in humanitarian funding. In 2019, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that 168 million people in 58 countries would need humanitarian assistance in 2020^{vii}. COVID-19 spread across the world within months of the new year, and in July 2020 the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan highlighted that there was new humanitarian need of 250 million people in 63 countries.^{viii} The Plan is currently less than 50% funded and some of the worst humanitarian crises in the world are experiencing major funding shortfalls.

One example of this convergence of needs is in Yemen, where conflict has raged for more than five years with more than 12,000 civilians killed and over 3.65 million people forced to flee their homes. According to recent analysis by the FAO/WHO, 20 million people of the country's total 30 million population are considered food insecure, and rising food prices have raised the alarm on risk of famine.^{ix} Yet, a donor conference for Yemen in June 2020 saw international governments pledge only \$1.76 billion (US\$1.35 billion) of the \$4.43 billion (US\$3.38 billion) target for 2020^x. That's just half of what was raised for Yemen last year. Canada is no exception and has given just 29% of its so-called "fair-share" in contributions to the Yemen humanitarian response plan.^{xi}

In Afghanistan, 40% of the population, 14 million people, are in desperate need of lifesaving support. Children are at particular risk with nearly 1,900 having been killed or maimed in 2020 alone.^{xii} There has also been a concerning number of attacks on schools, universities, hospitals and clinics. Covid-19 has only exacerbated the suffering and the coming winter months and food shortages put many families at risk. Yet at its November 2020 pledging



conference, an estimated total of \$12bn was committed for the next four-year period (2021-2024), an alarming drop from the \$15.2bn pledged by donors four years ago. At this conference, Canada maintained its commitment of \$270 million over four years.^{xiii}

Canada should support conflict and crisis-affected country governments and host countries to focus on systems strengthening across the social sectors. This will enable these countries to address immediate issues stemming from the crisis exacerbated by COVID-19 to recover better, so they are more resilient long-term. Aligned to this, Canada should support crisis and conflict affected countries to implement social protection mechanisms such as cash transfers and policies to protect IDP and refugee children in the immediate term and in future pandemics and other shocks. Canada should also support direct provision of essential health and nutrition services in humanitarian settings for preventative care and treatment of childhood diseases and malnutrition and ensure availability of essential medicines and medical supplies.

A principled approach to delivering quality humanitarian funding is equally as important as funding amounts. Canada has not only committed itself to solutions-oriented global frameworks to tackle humanitarian financing gaps, such as the Grand Bargain (GB), but it has taken up leadership roles within GB workstreams and as a founding member of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) Principles in Practice (2003). These actions demonstrate a strong commitment to high quality funding. These same principles and practices are critical to apply to decisions related to COVID-19 financing. Canada has always understood the importance of the roles of the ecosystem of actors that contribute to a needs-based, relevant and rapid response. In the case of the COVID-19 emergency response, long-term and flexible funding will be critical so that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Local/National NGOs can respond rapidly to new hotspots. Unfortunately, almost a year into this crisis there remains a pressing need for Canada to adapt funding mechanisms and provisions to allow for more predictable, transparent and flexible funding through NGOs and Local/National NGOs.

Recommendation 2: Canada should scale-up urgently needed flexible funding for neglected response areas including child protection programming and gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response. This should include mental health and psychosocial support, sexual and reproductive health services, and information for child survivors of violence

Child protection

Children living in humanitarian crises face an increased risk of abuse. While the threats of harm are increasing, the established systems in place to protect them are breaking down. Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, vulnerable families suffer multiple hardships. Schools are closed and families have been pushed to the brink of poverty, sometimes having been denied the opportunity to protect and provide for their children.

Save the Children analysis has revealed that the pandemic has in fact put an additional 2.5 million girls around the world at risk of child marriage by 2025, undoing 25 years of progress. Furthermore, as many as one million more girls are at risk of becoming pregnant this year, with childbirth the leading cause of death among girls aged 15 to 19.^{xiv}

With the impacts of COVID-19 disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable, it is now more important than ever to ensure children's protection is central to responses. If we fail to respond, more children will be exposed to violence, exploitation, abuse, child labor, and early and forced marriages. Children will be left in distress, deprived of necessary psychosocial support, the hope of unaccompanied and separated children of being reunified with their families will dwindle rapidly, and many children will face severe risks of abuse and violence. To effectively protect all children from all forms of violence, including those who are living in



vulnerable situations, we need to act on multiple fronts, at the same time, through a child-rights, multi-stakeholder and cross sector approach.

Yet, recent analysis shows that child protection measures such as assistance for child-victims, the reunification of unaccompanied children with their parents, or the reintegration of child soldiers, are chronically underfunded.^{xv} A recent report “*Still Unprotected: Humanitarian Funding for Child Protection*” provides an in-depth analysis of 19 humanitarian response plans and refugee response plans from 2019. Only 2 per cent of the overall funding requested through humanitarian appeals was for child protection interventions. Less than half of that amount was received for humanitarian actors to give lifesaving protection assistance to children. In comparison, the overall requests across all sectors are funded at 67%.^{xvi}

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) had reached pandemic proportions long before COVID-19 began to force school closures and lockdowns, push health systems to their breakpoint, and erode protective systems. Worldwide, girls were already disproportionately impacted by this rights abuse and its lifelong and life-threatening impacts. An estimated one in three girls and women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes; 12 million girls marry before their 18th birthday each year; and at least 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone female genital mutilation, most before or during adolescence.^{xvii}

COVID-19 is exposing and exacerbating the existing inequalities that put girls, women, and non-binary and transgender children and adults at increased risk of GBV. The COVID-19 pandemic is projected to drive 31 million new cases of GBV over the next six months and cause a one-third reduction in progress toward ending GBV by 2030.^{xviii} In April, responding to what he described as “a horrifying global surge” in reports of GBV, the UN Secretary-General called for a global ceasefire on violence against girls and women in the home. Over 140 United Nations Member States and Permanent Observers have since endorsed the Secretary General’s call to action on GBV.^{xix}

Early evidence and expert projections show that COVID-19 is already and will continue to drive incidences of GBV for girls and women across the globe. Weakening of formal and informal protection mechanisms as well as disruptions to standalone gender equality programs designed to get at the root cause of GBV – gender inequality and discrimination – are predicted to contribute to increased rates of GBV.

In addition, COVID-19-related containment and response efforts also have negatively affected GBV risks and incidence rates, including through school closures and lockdowns where women and children are confined and isolated with abusers. The socio-economic impacts of such measures will also increase GBV risks, including economic insecurity and food and water shortages.

Girls also face barriers to accessing accurate, official information and public service announcements due to limited access to public spaces, group gatherings (e.g. through safe spaces), and outreach activities. For example, a recent Save the Children child and youth survey in Lebanon found that girls were twice as likely to have not left the house at all during lockdown as their male counterparts were.^{xx}

The most marginalized children face even higher risks. Before the pandemic, evidence showed how girls living in refugee and IDP camps are at a heightened risk of violence as they are more likely to be unaccompanied or separated from their families or caregivers than girls in stable settings. Rising economic insecurity and obstacles in accessing essential items and services is resulting in increased GBV in refugee and IDP camps, including exploitation and abuse. In Cox’s Bazar, it has been reported that the number of GBV cases, including child marriage, have increased during the pandemic. Yet, similar to child protection, GBV in humanitarian contexts

remains critically underfunded. Between 2010-2018 an estimated average of 0.53% of humanitarian aid went to child protection, and just 0.06% to GBV.

Canada's recent leadership on the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies has been most welcome and needed. Although Canada's leadership of the initiative ends this year, we hope to see Canada continue to raise the importance of addressing GBV in global forums in order to encourage other countries to prioritize GBV prevention and mitigation in responding to Covid-19.

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services have limited ability to cope with or adapt to the increased need for support that the pandemic is creating, particularly in fragile contexts. This was already the case prior to COVID-19, with countries such as South Sudan, for example, having more than one million children already experiencing psychosocial distress, but just three practicing psychiatrists and 29 psychologists country-wide.^{xxi} Children are in desperate need of scaled up MHPSS services.

Recommendation 3: Canada should support efforts for a global education emergency plan. This plan should ensure all children continue to learn while schools are closed through inclusive distance learning, that every child is supported to return to school when it's safe to do so and that governments and donors invest in education now so we can build better education systems for the future

The COVID-19 pandemic comes on top of an existing learning crisis for many of the most vulnerable children around the world. Progress in getting children into school has stalled in the past decade; even before the pandemic started, 258 million children and young people were out of school - around one in six of the global school age population. Girls face some of the greatest barriers to accessing education, and they are twice as likely to never step foot in a classroom as boys. Just 10% of children with disabilities were in school, and these children often face barriers to access and issues with inclusivity of education.

Even when children were in school, many were not receiving quality education. In 2018, the World Bank estimated that over half of children in low- and middle- income countries were not proficient in reading at age 10. When looking at just low-income countries, this rises to 80%.^{xxii}

The situation was even worse for many children living in unstable contexts including conflict, who face many barriers to accessing education, including attacks on schools, the destruction of school facilities and displacement.

School closures have been a key part of governments' response to control the spread of COVID-19, and have resulted in 1.6 billion learners worldwide being out of school at the peak of school closures – approximately 90% of the entire student population. Distance learning is not always accessible. Save the Children analysis found that 60% of national distance learning alternatives rely exclusively on online platforms yet as many as 465 million children and young people in these countries do not have access to the internet at home. Where available, internet access is likely to be less accessible to girls.

Save the Children predicts that almost 10 million children will not return to school following the pandemic, due to the increasing numbers of children and families that are pushed into poverty because of COVID-19, and this is likely to be an underestimate. For children that do return to school, many – particularly the poorest and most vulnerable – will experience significant setbacks in their learning, entrenching inequalities between groups of children. Save the Children identified 12 countries – Niger, Mali, Chad, Liberia, Afghanistan, Guinea, Mauritania, Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire – as being at 'extreme risk' of falling behind in their progress towards SDG4.^{xxiii} These children will need inclusive and gender-sensitive back to school campaigns, targeted interventions and expanded social protection to get them back into school. Once in school appropriate remedial education, and scale up support for teachers will be vital.



Canada should support a coordinated global education response that is well-planned, inclusive, gender responsive and adequately monitored and held accountable. Addressing the education crisis will require increased financing from donors and country governments. Concessional financing and debt cancellation measures are both needed to fill funding gaps. Education interventions must also ensure that the most marginalised children are learning while out of school and supported to come back to school when safe to do so through. For children in conflict-affected zones it is imperative that attacks on schools stop. We commend Canada for recently speaking out against the recent incidences of attacks on schools in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Cameroon.^{xxiv}

Summary of Recommendations:

Canada should place the needs of children, and particularly those who are most marginalized including girls, children with disabilities; and children affected or displaced by humanitarian crisis at the centre of its global Covid-19 response.

Recommendation 1: Canada's humanitarian response should be scaled up, timely and targeted to where it's needed most

Recommendation 2: Canada should scale-up urgently needed flexible funding for neglected response areas including child protection programming and gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response. This should include mental health and psychosocial support, sexual and reproductive health services, and information for child survivors of violence

Recommendation 3: Canada should support efforts for a global education emergency plan. This plan should ensure all children continue to learn while schools are closed through inclusive distance learning, that every child is supported to return to school when it's safe to do so and that governments and donors invest in education now so we can build better education systems for the future

Save the Children is active across 120 countries worldwide. We draw on 100 years of experience working with communities across the world in a vast range of contexts to put children's rights at the centre of our work. As a leader of education and child protection in crisis globally, we are 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 programs that seek to strengthen child and Indigenous rights in emergency contexts.

ⁱ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18218/pdf/vr59-01_protect_a_generation_report_en_0.pdf

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18486/pdf/killed_and_maimed_a_generation_of_violations_final.pdf

^{iv} <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/our-stories/vaccines-protecting-children>

^v https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18218/pdf/vr59-01_protect_a_generation_report_en_0.pdf

^{vi} <https://www.devex.com/news/4-new-areas-at-imminent-risk-of-famine-un-food-agencies-warn-98502>

^{vii} <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2020-enarfrzh>

^{viii} <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Global-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-COVID-19.pdf>

^{ix} <https://www.wfp.org/publications/fao-wfp-early-warning-analysis-acute-food-insecurity-hotspots-november-2020>

^x <https://www.unocha.org/yemen2020>

^{xi} <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bn-funding-humanitarian-response-yemen-271020-en.pdf>

^{xii} https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18486/pdf/killed_and_maimed_a_generation_of_violations_final.pdf

^{xiii} <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/11/canada-renews-its-development-assistance-commitment-to-afghanistan.html>

^{xiv} https://www.savethechildren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/global_girlhood_report_2020_africa_version_2.pdf

^{xv} <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/still-unprotected-humanitarian-funding-child-protection>

xvi **ibid.**

xvii https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17911/pdf/sc_covid19_gbv_brief_english.pdf

xviii <https://www.unfpa.org/pcm/node/24174>

xix <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

xx https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17911/pdf/sc_covid19_gbv_brief_english.pdf

xxi https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18218/pdf/vr59-01_protect_a_generation_report_en_0.pdf

xxii <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32553/142659.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y>

xxiii <https://www.savethechildren.net/save-our-education-report/>

xxiv <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/10/statement-in-response-to-pattern-of-targeted-school-attacks.html>

