

Submission to the International Development Committee inquiry into Humanitarian crises monitoring: impact of coronavirus

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Summary

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues in most countries of the world, street children and homeless youth continue to be among the groups who are most affected. As highlighted in Consortium for Street Children's (CSC) previous submission, they are both directly at risk of contracting the virus and indirectly at risk due to the effects of the pandemic and responsive measures on their livelihoods and the services that support them.

This submission brings out some of the longer term implications of these risks, and highlights the challenges and opportunities for organisations who work directly with street children and homeless youth. It identifies lessons to be learned, drawing from the innovative ways in which CSC network members have responded as well as the challenges. Finally, it turns to the UK development sector specifically, considering the challenges faced by small UK charities working with street children and homeless youth overseas, and provides recommendations for DFID to ensure these charities can continue playing their unique and invaluable role in responding to this pandemic and in realising the leave no one behind agenda.

Introduction

The Consortium for Street Children (CSC) is the global network of organisations working to change the world for street children and homeless youth. We do this by working together on advocacy, research and innovative projects to support these children and improve their lives. We have 140+ members working in 130 countries around the world, including many with ongoing humanitarian crises and/or dependencies on development aid. Many street children and homeless youth also fall into categories like children with disabilities, refugees, internally displaced persons and children on the move, pushed from their communities of origin by diverse factors including abuse or violence at home, or loss of family livelihood.

Building upon our earlier submission which documented the immediate risks or threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to street children and homeless youths and to the work of the organisations who support them, this submission seeks to draw attention to longer term implications of and lessons to be learned from the pandemic. The information has been collected from organisations in the CSC network working with street children and homeless youth around the world via an online survey as well as discussions with individual members.

Longer term issues and implications

1. Continued direct risks to street children

As our last submission demonstrated, street children and homeless youth are likely to be more susceptible to the direct effects of the virus due to the circumstances of their lives, as demonstrated by the prevalence of conditions such as pneumonia and asthma. This risk to street children's health continues, with experts acknowledging the strong possibility that COVID-19 may join several other existing coronaviruses and become endemic, meaning it continues to be regularly found amongst certain populations or in certain areas.^{1,2} This is particularly a concern in urban areas in less economically developed countries, where factors such as high population density and weak public health infrastructure have meant that the measures needed to eradicate the virus have not been viable.³ Furthermore, while the WHO's development of a Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework following the H1N1 pandemic sought to improve the organisation of vaccine production and procurement, there are still serious concerns about how poor and marginalised people in many countries will be able to access vaccines.⁴

As such, many of the current issues faced by street-connected children during the pandemic, including their health vulnerability, may continue to demand attention in the months and years ahead. The prevalence of respiratory illness and poor nutrition amongst street-connected children, alongside their exposure to unsanitary conditions and inability to carry out basic health protective precautions, means that street-connected children are more susceptible to contracting the virus than other children, and more likely to develop a serious illness if they do contract it. Endemic COVID-19 will mean that NGOs and governments have to build on existing systems and infrastructure and continue to contend with a new and serious health risk to street children and homeless youth.

2. Continued risks to livelihoods and food security

Whether or not COVID-19 does become endemic, its devastating social and economic impact to date will have long lasting repercussions for street children and homeless youth. COVID-19 is pushing us to the brink of a global food crisis, and such a crisis would most seriously affect the poorest and most disadvantaged, including street children and homeless youth.^{5 6} As documented

¹Hunter, Philip. 2020. "The Spread Of The COVID - 19 Coronavirus". *EMBO Reports* 21 (4). doi:10.15252/embr.202050334.

² Farrar, Jeremy. 2020. "Why The World Needs \$8 Billion Now To Get Us To COVID-Zero | News | Wellcome". *Wellcome.Ac.Uk*. [<https://wellcome.ac.uk/news/why-world-needs-8-billion-now-get-us-covid-zero-coronavirus>]

³ Loayza, Norman. 2020. "Smart Containment And Mitigation Measures To Confront The COVID-19 Pandemic: Tailoring The Pandemic Response To The Realities Of Developing Countries". *World Bank Blogs*. [<https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/smart-containment-and-mitigation-measures-confront-covid-19-pandemic-tailoring>]

⁴ Eccleston-Turner, Mark. 2017. "The Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework: A Viable Procurement Option For Developing States?". *Medical Law International* 17 (4): 227-248. doi:10.1177/0968533217723683.

⁵ Rogers, Paul. 2020. "The Global Crisis Of Our Time: The Long-Term Impacts Of COVID-19". *Oxford Research Group*. <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/the-global-crisis-of-our-time-the-long-term-impacts-of-covid-19>.

⁶ "COVID-19 Will Double Number Of People Facing Food Crises Unless Swift Action Is Taken | World Food Programme". 2020. *Wfp.Org*. <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>.

in our previous submission to the Committee, CSC network members are already reporting that hunger, rather than COVID-19, is the most immediate threat for many street children and homeless youth. Several weeks into lockdowns and curfews in many countries, this situation continues. For example, CSC Network Members in Bangladesh, Grambangla Unnayan Committee (GUC) and Dhaka Ahsania Mission, have described how many street-connected children are unable to afford to eat due to a loss of livelihood and the closure of support services. One child who normally survives by collecting and selling waste in Dhaka told GUC “I never experienced hunger before. I did not know how painful the hunger might be. I feel like committing suicide if I have to continue my life with this type of hunger.” The mother of another waste picking child described how the current situation on the streets is reminiscent of scenes from the famine she had come to Dhaka to flee in 1974. A widespread food crisis could push many more children and families into severe food insecurity, placing further demands on NGOs which are already struggling to respond.

Where governments have attempted to support those in need of food as a result of the crisis, their efforts are often proving inadequate. In Recife, Brazil, for example, CSC Network Member Happy Child International and their local partners report that although the council is providing 1,500 meals a day to street-connected and homeless individuals (including children and youth), and the state government is supplying 240 food kits twice a day, this is not sufficient to the demand in reality. This highlights the need for accurate data, as the council has based its provisions on the 1,600 street-connected people in its official estimates, which conflict with other data that give far higher estimations: 4,000 street connected people throughout the 18 municipalities in Recife and a total of 13,000 in the 110 municipalities throughout the state of Pernambuco.

In addition to the urgent and immediate need to support children dependent on the streets for their income to access food, a serious and prolonged economic slump has been predicted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments should be aware that more children may end up on the streets as a result of rising poverty, and put in place sustainable, rights-respecting policies and strategies to support street-connected and homeless populations in the long term.

3. Challenges to organisations providing services, and opportunities for partnership

CSC network members have consistently outlined how lockdowns, curfews, social distancing and other containment measures have had serious effects on their normal operations. As previously documented, outreach activities have been restricted in many countries and some drop-in centres providing shelter for street children and homeless youth have had to close their doors. The continued presence of COVID-19 means that some services may have to be adapted over the course of months if not years.

In the current context, most drop-in and accommodation centres are seeing a large increase in demand while others are being forced to close or introduce restrictions that may become necessary in the longer term should the pandemic continue. For instance, drop-in centres run by a CSC Network Member in Mwanza, Tanzania had to put in place social distancing measures that reduced the number of children they can support in their drop-in centres despite an increase

in demand, leaving more children vulnerable on the streets. To mitigate this, they are exploring using a larger outside area near the drop-in centre to provide services to more children. In Cameroon, too, a partner of CSC Network Member Apprentis d'Auteuil said their centre is full to capacity: *"We're still looking for what to do with these children who come knocking on our door every day. We don't even have any more beds available."* Another Apprentis d'Auteuil partner in Mali, Caritas Ségou, reported that because there are fewer shelters operating in Ségou, some children have run away to Bamako in search of shelter there - a distance of about 230 kilometres. Other shelters are operating their own lockdown policies, with no one able to come in or out, in order to ensure the safety of the children and staff already inside. Those who have had to close drop-in centres and other temporary accommodation are concerned how to re-open shelters safely in the near future. One Network Member in Nigeria expressed concern that when the full lockdown is lifted, the coronavirus will likely not yet be defeated, so they will have to put comprehensive measures in place to protect children and staff from contagion and transmission. They do not have PPE to keep staff safe and securing social distancing among children in drop-in centres with overwhelming demand has been proven extremely challenging.

Some members are encouraging family reunification for children in street situations with relatives to ease the pressure on shelter and ensure children have a safe place to live. For instance, the Samaritan Trust in Malawi have promptly mobilized resources to reunite children in street situations with their families right after the government proclaimed a state of emergency. However, many organisations are struggling to continue family reunification processes, as family visits are often not safe or allowed, and virtual meetings with families often not possible in the contexts these organisations work. As a result, there is a risk that children return to unsafe environments if they choose to reunite with their families while the necessary support is not in place. This is of particular concern with domestic violence cases increasing around the world during this pandemic.

In addition, some NGOs have lost contact with children they usually support which may have lasting repercussions. A partner of CSC Network Member Apprentis d'Auteuil in Cameroon, for example, reports that children feel 'abandoned' despite the organisation's best attempts to maintain contact while outreach activities are suspended. The organisation worries that it will not be possible to reconnect with these children when activities are able to be resumed. These concerns are shared by Yayasan Kampus Diakoneia Modern (KDM), a CSC Network Member in Indonesia, who are struggling to keep in touch with some children who normally attend the sports-based activities which have been put on pause.

Despite these challenges, positive developments and areas for opportunity have also been identified. Some organisations have been able to secure permits to continue their work despite lockdowns and restrictions on movement. UK-based CSC Network Member StreetInvest has provided advocacy support to assist their partners, MFCS in Ghana and Glad's House in Kenya, to secure permits to allow street-based social workers to continue to reach children on the street and distribute vital supplies. Without these permits, street-based responses would be non-existent and many hundreds of street children in Mombasa and Kumasi would be without specialist support at this time.

These two organisations, MFCS and Glad's House, also provide good examples of the need for specialised emergency COVID-19 responses. In Mombasa, Kenya, Glad's House undertook a headcount over two days at the start of the crisis to assess the demographics of the children and their families who would need support because of coronavirus. This headcount was possible because Glad's House have local knowledge and are trusted in the communities where they work. As a result, Glad's House have demonstrated to the local government the importance of keeping street workers on the streets during lockdown to ensure street children have access to vital services (water, food, healthcare) and are working in partnership with government to deliver these services based on the data they collected. The aim is that this can be utilised as good practice and replicated across Kenya. Without the support of small charities in the UK, Glad's House would likely not have been able to react to the crisis as quickly and comprehensively as they have now.

In Kumasi, Ghana, MFCS and a network of organisations working with street children have played a crucial role in distributing food relief provided by the National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO) to street children who are hidden from or wary of government presence on the street. The volume of food available fluctuates and rarely reaches street children who need it most. As a result of their expertise and relationships with street communities in the city, MFCS and the network are sourcing and distributing additional meals and uncooked food items to the street children and families not reached by government responses. MFCS have been able to mobilise a rapid, targeted and informed response to the lockdown's impact on street children in Kumasi, including the installation of handwashing points and sanitation supplies in the hidden parts of the city where street children are now spending their time, since being cleared from main streets and markets by authorities.

Elsewhere, some members have found innovative ways to repurpose funds to continue family support. For instance, partners in Mwanza, Tanzania have repurposed funds normally spent on transportation for family visits to purchase affordable mobile phones to distribute to families to stay in contact with them. If successful, this model will be rolled out across several cities in Tanzania.

These organisations, like many others, are demonstrating the value and necessity of work specialised to the needs of street children and homeless youth. In the future, programmes will need to be established to address: mental health challenges related to facing severe hunger, poverty, abuse and violence, as well as loss of family members due to COVID-19 itself, but also the impact of the response; nutrition and primary health care; debt; homelessness; education, training and employment.

Lessons to be learned from this pandemic

1. *Relief provided to support vulnerable populations during crises should not be limited to those who can produce official identity documents, or the most marginalised will not be reached.*

CSC Network Members in several countries have reported that although their governments have taken positive steps attempting to support vulnerable populations during this pandemic, including street children and homeless youth, these efforts are not reaching those who are the most marginalised. In India, for example, food ration cards allowing cardholders to access food in shops are limited to those with Aadhaar (national identity) numbers and bank accounts, according to CSC Network Members. Such policies tend to exclude street children and homeless youth, as well as internally displaced individuals and other unregistered groups. Further evidence from Bangladesh suggests that families that are not registered to vote are also being excluded. CSC Network Member GUC in Bangladesh reported that the government's attempts to distribute food among rural and urban poor people are being hijacked by some elected representatives who are using this food assistance for political gain, 'persuading' people to vote for them. This has resulted in families being refused food assistance because they, like most of the informal sector workers working in the cities and living in illegal settlements or unregistered households in the slums of Dhaka, are not voters. Even if they have a National ID card, it may be for their original rural hometown, excluding them from voting and therefore from accessing food aid. Likewise, in countries where support is provided to workers who have found themselves out of work, this has been limited to those employed in the formal economy, leaving out those whose livelihoods were already precarious and who are among the most affected.

If lockdowns continue or need to be reinstated, governments should take action to ensure that their support mechanisms do not exclude those who are the most at risk and who need assistance most urgently. We therefore recommend that DFID insist in all its direct budget support assistance to governments and other contracts and grant agreements that emergency support is not reliant on identity documents or any other registration requirements, and that those furthest behind are reached first.

2. *Street work and staff of organisations providing direct services to street children and homeless youth should be recognised as essential workers, and the small, specialised organisations that have this expertise should be funded accordingly.*

As shown above, the context of lockdowns as a response to the pandemic has proven that it is generally smaller, community-based organisations that are able to reach the most marginalised children, providing essential services. Experience has shown that street children and homeless youth are distrustful of adult intervention in their lives, having been let down time and again by those in authority who are meant to protect them. Small, frontline organisations who have established relationships of trust with street children, their families and communities are therefore best placed to ensure that children who will not be reached by mainstream relief distribution are not abandoned during this time of crisis.

Government agencies and large international organisations often do not have the same access, trusted relationships and connections as smaller organisations. For example, one CSC Network Member in Delhi reported that food relief delivered to slums by government officials did not reach children living in the interior of the slum.

Though smaller, local agencies are better equipped and trusted in communities to identify the most vulnerable individual and ensure that food and assistance reaches them, they do not have sufficient resources to respond to the increased demand and cannot attract sufficient funding because the numbers they reach are often considered too small.

Thankfully, in some places governments are beginning to listen and trusted street workers are being recognised as essential workers with permits to ensure vital services reach street children and their communities. But only takes place at a local scale – and is not yet happening at national scale.

We recommend to DFID that a greater proportion of DFID’s budget be allocated for contracts with smaller charities that have direct impact and connections on the ground. We recommend that in larger consortium contracts, DFID require from the consortium lead to devote a percentage to small organisations who have the trust and skills to have the impact required at the street level. In our view, the potential higher transaction costs of contracting smaller charities are offset by the higher impact and long term benefits working at the local level has, and the lack of profit margins that smaller organizations require.

3. Many NGOs are able to adapt services to adhere to safety measures and meet changing needs, but doing so requires additional funding and support.

CSC Network members around the world have rapidly adapted to the demands of containment measures, such as social distancing or adhering to intensified hygiene requirements. This can involve significant challenges in engaging with the same number of children or providing the same services as before the pandemic. Furthermore, from the responses received from network members it appears that the core needs of many children are changing. This includes an increasing demand for the provision of food and essentials following many losing their livelihoods. We have seen many organisations demonstrating their capacity to adapt, however this often requires support to develop and enact new policies. CSC Network members have strongly expressed that additional funding is one of their most pressing needs at this time. Funding can ensure they continue working at the same level, meeting the needs of the same numbers of children and providing the same standards of services, despite the rapidly changing circumstances.

We recommend that DFID reserve a proportion of emergency funds specifically to equip smaller organisations working directly with street children to ensure that they can continue adapting to safety measures and changing needs.

4. Systematic data collection about the impact of the pandemic on marginalised groups such as street children and homeless youth is required.

Taken collectively, the anecdotal evidence provided by CSC Network Members points to the myriad ways in which street children and homeless youths around the world are among the most affected during this pandemic, yet these groups are routinely left out of national data collection efforts based on household surveys and other methods that exclude those living outside of the

standard definition of a household. Efforts on the part of organisations working with these children to collect data about them and their lives have been further hindered by the context of the pandemic. Lockdown measures have prevented organisations and outreach workers to gather information on the numbers and locations of children and youth on the streets.

We recommend that DFID prioritise investing in more inclusive data collection methods that is not limited to traditional households to both collect data and to evaluate the success of its programmes.

Challenges faced by small UK-based organisations who prioritise the most vulnerable – street children and homeless youth

Despite the challenges and increased demand for services highlighted above, CSC's UK network members report that they are experiencing severe shortfalls in income to continue operating. UK expert charities are well placed to scale up the coronavirus response through their networks of local partners in a way that larger international agencies cannot because their partnerships are generally short-term and managed from the UK. These small charities with strong local ties therefore add unique value to the pandemic response, without which street-connected children and homeless youth around the world are at risk of being left behind, which will ultimately impact on the number of street children who survive this pandemic

Some of the challenges faced by small UK charities include:

- Charities can furlough staff, but are seeing an immense increase in need, and hence are struggling to deliver more with less human resource. Staff cannot be furloughed in-part, which is a large constraint for smaller organisations wishing to manage their human resources sensibly during the crisis.
- In general, charities do not pay rates, so do not get any business rate relief. Relief grants are linked to those who already get rate relief, so charities are excluded here too.
- Small charities – those with an income of less than £1 million per annum and that make up the vast majority of a sector that employs over 800,000 – have been excluded in the organisational support that has been offered to SMEs.

As such, we recommend that DFID works with the Treasury to include small UK Charities working overseas in areas which align with DFID priorities. DFID stands to lose significant unique expertise in addressing the needs of street children and homeless youth in their programmes of poverty alleviation and working with children with disabilities if the UK charities working with street children and community-based organisations overseas are allowed to fold. This will ultimately affect DFID's ability to deliver the leave no one behind agenda.