

**Better  
Care  
Network**

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for every child

# It's time for care

Prioritizing quality care for children  
during the COVID-19 pandemic

*Challenges, opportunities and an agenda  
for action*

December 2020

# A Discussion Paper

Parents, family members and communities are on the front line when it comes to ensuring children's well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has upended systems of support, including schools and childcare shining a spotlight on the importance of quality care for children and those who provide it – the invisible backbone holding up strong and resilient families, communities, and economies. It is essential work, critical to upholding child rights, which has been overlooked and undervalued for far too long. If children are to be at the heart of the COVID-19 response and recovery plans, care and caregivers must be prioritized as a matter of urgency.

Though devastating, the current crisis offers an important opportunity to reimagine and transform the essential work of caring for children. Supporting and understanding parents, family members and other caregivers is crucial in order to mitigate the immediate, medium-, and long-term impacts of the pandemic and ensure holistic response and recovery. Quality care for children must, therefore, be the highest priority for strategic investments, policies and programmes.

This paper<sup>1</sup> outlines the extraordinary challenges facing children and families across the globe, and the steps that can be taken to ensure their inclusion in COVID-19 recovery plans. The five-point agenda for care offers an important roadmap to guide the immediate response to ensure quality care for children as well as the long-term investments required to build back better by making children, families and communities more resilient today and tomorrow.

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*<sup>1</sup> This paper was written by Gillian Huebner on behalf of the Better Care Network (BCN) and UNICEF. Florence Martin of BCN, and Aniruddha Kulkarni and Kirsten Di Martino from Child Protection Section, UNICEF Programme Division provided technical guidance and inputs. The paper also benefited from valuable comments from colleagues in UNICEF Headquarters, Regional, and Country Offices, notably from Child Protection, Social Policy, Disability Inclusion, Early Childhood Development, and Data and Analytics. BCN and UNICEF are also grateful for comments received from Dr Najat Maalla M'jid, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Bill Bell, Head of Child Protection & Child Rights Governance, Save the Children, and Philip Goldman, Founder and President, Maestral International.*

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# The impact of COVID-19 on children

COVID-19 is having unprecedented impacts on children and families across the globe; however, these are not being evenly experienced. While the challenges of caregiving are increasing for most families, the effects are particularly acute for those already engaged in low-wage or in-kind work, often in the informal economy where there are few safeguards. Caregivers are stretched, and there is a lack of quality, affordable childcare, with limited access to social protection, services and support to address the multiple and cumulative risks associated with the pandemic, as well as persistent poverty, systemic inequality and discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

With the poorest and most vulnerable in society being at greatest risk, the impact of COVID-19 has the potential to be devastating, with profound and life-long repercussions for children, families, communities and societies.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the pandemic, millions of families were barely hovering above the poverty line without access to social protection and other forms of support that would enable them to meet basic needs and withstand additional shocks. The COVID-19 crisis is pushing these families into extreme poverty, and has revealed the deep fragility and limitations of the health, education, justice, social protection, psychosocial support and social welfare systems. It has been estimated that an additional 100 million people will experience extreme poverty this year as a result of the pandemic,<sup>3</sup> increasing the number of children living in poor households by 15 per cent, and bringing the total number of children living in poor households globally to more than 725 million.<sup>4</sup>

Children already facing extreme and prolonged hardship are especially vulnerable, particularly those living in fragile or precarious environments. For example, children confined to abusive homes may experience domestic and gender-based violence, with reduced access to child protection services or community support. Refugee, internally displaced, migrant and stateless children, and those living in conflict and humanitarian crisis settings are also at heightened risk.

Families in which a child, caregiver, or elderly person has health issues or disabilities (many of whom are immunocompromised) face greater threats and have less support. Pre-existing inequalities in mental health access have been exacerbated, as many caregivers experience added stress and a deterioration in their own physical and mental well-being. This can significantly impact the quality of care that those caregivers are able to give to children.<sup>5</sup> Single-parent families, especially those in which the parent is female and/or younger, are reckoning with even greater

challenges in terms of balancing work and caregiving responsibilities.

Millions of children without family care are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 infection. This includes those who live in residential care centres and detention facilities,<sup>6</sup> or in street situations, or those who have been separated from their families due to conflict, labour, disaster or migration. These children lack support and monitoring to ensure their health, safety, protection, and well-being.<sup>7</sup> Some children will temporarily or permanently lose a parent or caregiver due to illness or death, creating further strain for communities and alternative care and social support systems (e.g., kinship care, foster care, *kafalah* or adoption)<sup>8</sup>.

# Parents, families and other caregivers on the front line

The closure of schools and formal and informal childcare settings, and the lack of access to services during the pandemic means that parents and caregivers have less support whilst taking on increased responsibilities. Empowering those who provide essential care for children should therefore be a global priority to safeguard children's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.<sup>9</sup>

Children thrive when they feel safe and protected, their rights are respected, their basic needs are being met, and family and community connections are stable and nurturing.<sup>10</sup> Research has shown that the single most important factor in the development of resilience in children is the existence of at least one stable and committed

relationship, with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult. Children who do well in the face of hardship typically have strong relationships with significant adults in their family and community.<sup>11</sup> These relationships can serve as powerful buffers to counterbalance the effects of acute and chronic stress. Efforts to support parents, families and other caregivers to meet children's health and developmental needs in the midst of poverty or serious threat must include bolstering children's and caregivers' protective factors and capacity for resilience. This involves supporting their ability to respond appropriately to children facing deprivation or distress.<sup>12</sup> Policies, services and community supports need to be in place to provide caregivers with the time and resources needed to provide nurturing care.

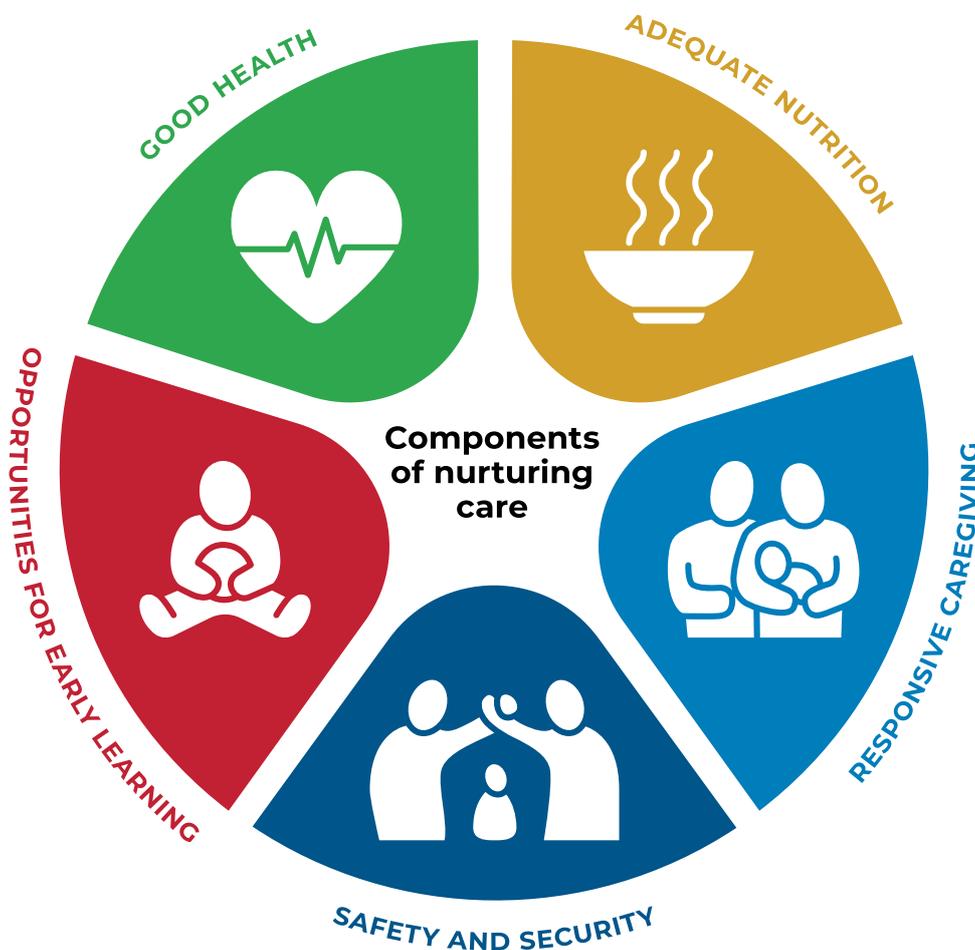


Figure 1

WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group, *Nurturing care for early childhood development*, 2018.

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**“To reach their full potential, children need the five inter-related and indivisible components of nurturing care: good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for learning.**

**Nurturing care refers to conditions created by public policies, programs and services. These conditions enable communities and caregivers to ensure children’s good health and nutrition and protect them from threats. Nurturing care also means giving children opportunities for learning through interactions that are responsive and emotionally supportive.”<sup>13</sup>**

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Despite the role that parents, family members, and other caregivers play in children’s care, they have often been undervalued in national and global policies and programmes. If children are to be at the heart of the COVID-19 response and recovery plans, care and caregivers must be prioritized as a matter of urgency. Services that are delivered to children – such as primary health and nutrition, early childhood care and development, education, mental health and psychosocial support, or protection – do not work in a vacuum. They are most effective when they consider the vital roles of caregivers, who also need support to take care of their own physical and mental health, so they can provide appropriate care for their children.<sup>14</sup> Supporting caregivers triggers a triple dividend: positively impacting children, women (who carry the bulk of the care burden) and communities as a whole.

Quality care for children has a financial cost. The vast majority of caregivers are women and girls, and globally, up to a third

of all families are headed by single mothers.<sup>15 16</sup> Their unpaid work is valued at up to US\$10 trillion per year, or 13 per cent of global gross domestic product.<sup>17</sup> Care responsibilities often compromise women’s paid economic participation. For example, in 2018 global female labour force participation stood at 48 per cent, compared with 75 per cent for males.<sup>18</sup> Further, women in their prime reproductive years are 22 per cent more likely than men in this age group to live in extreme poverty. The COVID-19 crisis has compounded these disparities, as more women have been forced out of work and education, and more deeply into poverty. This is due to their having to take on additional childcare responsibilities as a result of school and childcare centre closures. Many women also have to care for other family members who have become ill. The impact of this economic marginalization and wage disparity is likely to be long-term, unless clear measures are taken to address the care needs of children and the fair participation of women in the workforce.<sup>19</sup>

Another significant concern is the number of young children who are being left without adult care while their parents work. Prior to the pandemic, more than 17 per cent of children under the age of five were left at home alone or in the care of another child under the age of 10.<sup>20</sup> With school and childcare centres closing, or grandparents and older relatives no longer being able to step in to provide childcare, this is likely to increase, negatively affecting the health, development and safety of these children, with potential long-term repercussions. The COVID-19 crisis has also exacerbated the fragility of the informal care system, creating deeper vulnerabilities for low-income parents and families, and women and children in particular.

Employment policies that either facilitate or hinder working adults’ ability to balance work and caregiving responsibilities have a particularly large impact on women and children.<sup>21</sup> Family-friendly policies such as paid parental and sick leave, breastfeeding support, accessible, affordable, and quality childcare, and child benefits<sup>22</sup> are a critical first step. Finding affordable and quality childcare that meets the needs of children and working parents remains difficult worldwide, particularly in low-income countries, and especially in the midst of a public health crisis. Huge gaps in access persist, quality is often substandard, and laws and policies to regulate care are often non-existent or unenforced.<sup>23</sup> More than 40 million children worldwide have missed out on early childhood care and education in their critical pre-school year, as COVID-19 has disrupted childcare and education services.<sup>24</sup>

# The ultimate breakdown: children without family care

When vulnerable parents and families do not have the resources to meet their basic needs, the risk of neglect and separation of children from their families increases. Extreme poverty, inadequate access to social services, conflict, disaster, disability, forced labour and discrimination have led to millions of children living in fragile care environments. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the difficulties faced by these children and families. Decades of research have showed that children's well-being is seriously impacted by lack of family care. Family separation, combined with the inappropriate use of alternative care, particularly in institutional care setting, can lead to immediate and long-term physical, social, psychological and emotional harm.<sup>25</sup>

The potential for children to be infected by COVID-19 in congregate care settings, including residential care facilities or crowded detention centres, is high given that physical distancing and other basic sanitation practices are often not fully observed. In some cases, residential facilities have closed, and children have been returned to their families without proper preparation and support being put in place. In other contexts, facilities have restricted access and contact with the outside world as part of containment measures, resulting in loss of connection between children and families and even more limited oversight, which has the potential to contribute to increased risk of neglect and violence. For children in street situations, access to already limited help and support services has been significantly disrupted and made even more challenging. The closure of courts and administrative bodies with oversight of care and justice decisions for children and the suspension of proceedings and gatekeeping processes could result in the continued detention and separation of children who might otherwise be released or placed in better care environments.<sup>26</sup>

Most countries still lack accurate and reliable figures on the number and characteristics of children under 18 living without family care. Weak regulatory systems have led to inadequate monitoring and services of alternative care placements, further compounding the precarious situations of some children. The number of children at risk of separation and in need of alternative care is likely to increase, both during the pandemic, when illness or containment measures may lead to separation of children from families, and as a result of the long-term socioeconomic impact on families' ability to provide care.<sup>27</sup>

Globally, the vast majority of children without parental care live in kinship care, that is, with grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other relatives.<sup>28</sup> Extended family care plays a fundamental role in enabling families to care for their children when, for example, they need to work for long periods away from home, or to migrate to other countries in search of livelihoods. Kinship care is also critical for children who experience family-based violence, abuse, and neglect, discrimination, and social exclusion. Given that the health risks of COVID-19 are particularly high for people over the age of 60 and those who are immunocompromised,<sup>29</sup> temporary alternative care may be needed for children whose older kinship caregivers have heightened health risks, may have fallen ill and need time to recover. Others may require permanent care solutions, putting pressure on already stretched formal alternative care services.

Inadequate investment in, and support for, kinship care and the development of strong and competent foster care systems for temporary and urgent alternative care is likely to result in children being left without appropriate care. More children are at risk of neglect, homelessness, or placement in inappropriate residential care facilities. Efforts to pre-emptively and permanently scale up the capacity of family-based care and social protection systems are critical to enhancing family resilience and preventing unnecessary separation and recourse to residential care.<sup>30</sup>

# Focusing on protective factors

When caregivers face challenges in caring for their children, broader systems of support become critical. As the COVID-19 pandemic affects communities in waves, potentially over an extended period of time, more families are likely to become vulnerable. Traditionally, social service systems have focused on mitigating risks for the most vulnerable members of society. Services often do not become available until a child or family is on the brink of, or already in, crisis. However, research shows that child, family and community resilience is the result of a combination of protective factors. These can be enhanced through strategic investments, including building the capabilities of caregivers and strengthening communities to promote children's life-long learning, health and well-being.<sup>31</sup> Children, parents, families and communities know what they need to get through crises. Engaging them in developing solutions is key to identifying and building upon their strengths, for the benefit of their children.

Protective factors are the conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities and society that help them to navigate risk and promote the healthy development and well-being of children, youth and families, including community support, parenting competencies and economic opportunities. Shifting from a focus on eliminating risk factors towards strengths-based solutions engages children, families and communities in identifying what they are doing well and offering support to build upon a positive foundation before the cracks appear and begin to widen. Focusing on protective factors can also help actors build capacity and collaborative partnerships with other service providers, including early-childhood and youth-service systems, which are likely to enhance cross-system collaboration to support children and families and promote their resilience and well-being.<sup>32</sup>

At the community level, programmes that seek to address poverty and risks to children by strengthening families' protective factors can help those facing hardship to avoid falling into crisis. These programmes meet individuals' immediate needs through housing assistance, childcare, access to food and safe, hygienic environments. Some also aim to reduce social isolation by building a network of support and strengthening parents' capacity to handle stress.<sup>33</sup> Family resource or support centres, anchored in the communities they serve, can play a key role in holding together the fabric of family and community relationships that are essential for children's development and protection.<sup>34</sup>

Effective and well-functioning social service, child welfare and child protection systems are vital to a nation's ability to shore up its most vulnerable families. Social service providers weave protective webs of support by

- Connecting families with essential services
- Preventing separation of children from families
- Supporting quality family-based alternative care
- Reuniting families
- Providing critical mental health and psychosocial support
- Linking vulnerable families and parents with social protection schemes and economic strengthening activities.<sup>35</sup>

With proper investment and training, the social service workforce can help to provide effective prevention and support services for the most vulnerable populations.

In many countries, however, social service and child welfare systems are often understaffed and under-resourced. The pandemic is stretching these systems even further, potentially creating long-term negative repercussions for children and their families. Frontline social service workers have been directly affected by the pandemic, personally as well as professionally. Some services have been cut due to containment measures or funding cuts. Work practices have changed from direct, person-to-person contact, to remote, often web-based solutions. Home and site-based visitations have become more challenging and riskier. Oversight mechanisms that are meant to ensure the appropriateness and quality of services – which were already limited or weak in many contexts prior to COVID-19 – have been further undermined, leaving children facing adversity in even more precarious situations.

The only way to effectively address the current crisis and avert potential long-term damage for the world's most vulnerable children and families is to urgently strengthen child welfare systems and services. Resources must be increased and redirected to child- and family-centred services that strengthen protective factors and the capacity to provide quality care for children. The goal must be to strengthen supports for families, so they are able to withstand shocks.

# Investing in inclusive, child-sensitive and shock-responsive social protection systems

More frequent and severe natural disasters caused by climate change, ongoing political upheaval and increased inequalities, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, have caused the number of children and families living in communities vulnerable to shocks and facing emergency situations to increase. When crisis hits, effective social

protection support is often a crucial factor in determining whether families can quickly and safely adapt to new circumstances, or their life paths will be permanently altered. Social protection systems can also be a key part of government and non-governmental actors' toolkits to address the multiple dimensions of poverty. All too often,

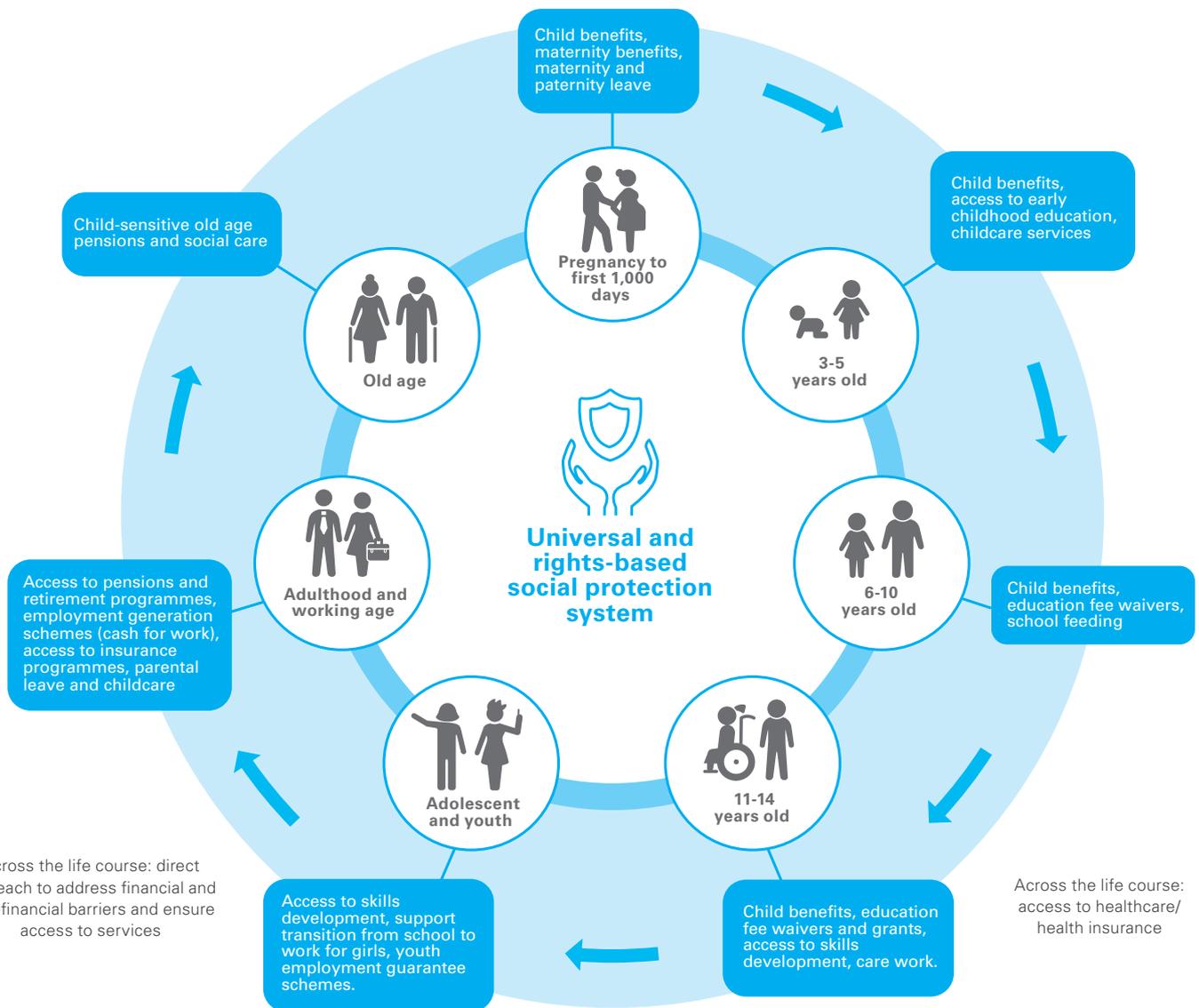


Figure 2  
UNICEF Global Social Protection Framework, 2019.

however, national systems have poor coverage and are either too weak to respond, or are not designed to have the flexibility to adjust to covariate shocks, for example, through rapidly expanding their reach to those that need support or temporarily increasing the size of cash transfers while families and communities recover. When shocks are recurrent, protracted, or severe, they destabilize household economies, making a return to normal life very challenging. This progressive deterioration forces many parents and caregivers to make choices that are in direct conflict with children's rights, creating long-term negative repercussions for children's well-being.<sup>36</sup>

The current coronavirus crisis requires an emergency response, but also underlines the necessity of building sustainable long-term and inclusive shock-responsive social protection systems.<sup>37</sup> Social protection serves as a pillar of counter-cyclical economic policy by delivering rapid financial support to those who need it when crisis hits, providing resources that directly protect individuals and families and support the economy. With economies currently under the greatest threat since the 2008 financial crisis, the importance of counter-cyclical economic policy cannot be overstated.<sup>38</sup>

At a national level, social protection coverage, while still insufficient, has grown exponentially in lower- and middle-income countries in the last decade, with the potential to be an important aspect of the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. Even with this progress, 4 billion people still have no access to any form of social protection and two out of every three children globally do not receive child or family benefits.<sup>39</sup> In addition, women are overrepresented in jobs in the informal sector, which are particularly vulnerable during times of economic upheaval, being poorly covered by social protection systems. It is therefore imperative that the COVID-19 response emphasizes inclusive, child-sensitive, gender-responsive and equity-driven social protection systems.<sup>40</sup>

Globally, researchers, policymakers, and programme implementers have increasingly recognized that strengthening the poorest families is key to ensuring child well-being. Economic assistance is a core aspect of a family-strengthening approach. Household economic-strengthening interventions can target the family, parent,

caregiver or the child (as the intended beneficiary). They can also include interventions that focus on increasing access to education or health services, household savings, credit, income generation and employment opportunities, and other areas.<sup>41</sup>

Cash-transfer programmes that bolster family capital are widely understood to have positive socioeconomic impacts, ranging from poverty alleviation to improved living conditions and psychosocial well-being. However, cash alone is not always sufficient to reduce the economic risks, vulnerabilities and barriers to services that parents often face. 'Cash plus' interventions combine cash transfers with other types of assistance, including psychosocial and parenting support, and linkages to services.<sup>42</sup> Research has identified a combination of interventions that effectively lift vulnerable households out of poverty and improve caregiving environments, resulting in positive and measurable outcomes for children in multiple areas, including health, education and protection.<sup>43</sup>

The pandemic underscores the need to work with governments to develop and improve sustainable, comprehensive and inclusive social protection systems, building on and strengthening critical community-based responses. It is crucial that these systems are built to be child- and gender-sensitive and shock-responsive; with policies, operational mechanisms, and the people overseeing them able to respond to both short-term and prolonged crises.<sup>44</sup>

# A global roadmap for resilient families and better care

International law recognizes the central role of parents and families in providing essential care for children. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) makes clear that the family unit is fundamental to the growth and well-being of all its members, and has primary responsibility for nurturing and protecting children. Together with other international human rights treaties, the UNCRC requires states to promote family care and establish comprehensive measures to support parents, families and other caregivers in their child-rearing responsibilities and prevent unnecessary separation and loss of family life and connections.<sup>45</sup>

Important groundwork has been laid to support families and ensure quality care for all children. For example, in 2009, the United Nations General Assembly welcomed the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. The guidelines highlighted the range of measures states must put in place to support families, address the drivers of child-family separation or abandonment, and direct resources and services towards providing family-based alternative care and preventing child institutionalization.<sup>46</sup> Since then, a growing number of countries across all regions have developed and adopted national standards and policies for the provision of alternative care for children.

Recognizing that all children need nurturing care to reach their full potential, the World Health Organization, World Bank Group, and the United Nations Children's Fund launched The Nurturing Care Framework in 2018. The framework outlines the conditions that enable communities and caregivers to ensure children's health, development and protection. This includes the public policies, programmes, and services that support parents and families in their caregiving role.<sup>47</sup>

In December 2019, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a Resolution on the Rights of the Child, urging states to take effective action to provide support to families, prevent unnecessary separation of children from their parents, and provide a range of alternative care options to protect all children who do not have family care.<sup>48</sup> The Resolution creates an unprecedented opportunity to advance the care agenda globally.

This body of work offers an important roadmap to guide the immediate response to ensure the care and protection

of children, as well as the long-term investments required to build resilient families and communities. COVID-19 has underscored the critical role such measures play in enabling families to care for their children, especially in times of crisis.

As daunting as the COVID-19 pandemic is, with long-term and far-reaching implications for children and families across the world, the crisis presents an opportunity to reconsider how resilient and productive societies are built and sustained. It has underlined the real value of the most important work in the world: caring for children and those who are vulnerable. Without addressing the essential role of care in the response to risks and shocks, there will be no recovery for individuals, families, communities or economic systems. Children's care is the bedrock of a sustainable, equitable and peaceful future. National governments, the private sector, non-governmental partners and other stakeholders must effectively work together to achieve these five overarching goals.

# An Agenda for Care

## 1. Ensure a child- and family-centred response

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, governments must develop and implement policies and programmes primarily aiming to reach vulnerable families and provide child-centred support services. These services should

- Reduce or eliminate risks factors
- Promote safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments
- Provide concrete support in times of need
- Foster parental and child resilience through increased access to social support and strengths-based coping strategies

Responses to the pandemic should prioritize family empowerment and family-centred policies and provide full protection of children's rights. It must acknowledge the diversity of families and family lives and accept that needs and solutions will vary in light of individual characteristics, as well as across time and contexts. Supports should be broad; that is, available to all families, but also targeted; reaching and responding to the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized children, parents and families affected by COVID-19. This includes low-income families, young and single parents, and those who face barriers to access services due to discrimination of any kind, including on the basis of disability. All services delivered to children must recognize and support the critical role that parents, families and other caregivers play in children's lives during the pandemic response.

### Responses to the pandemic should

- Ensure that all children and families are able to access high-quality essential primary healthcare, food and nutrition services, childcare, early childhood development and pre-school, and safe, inclusive and equitable educational opportunities and environments, including distance learning, as part of the COVID-19 response.
- Support parents and families at local levels through child and family resource centres and services that build upon strengths and enhance protective factors within individual families and communities.

- Increase access to mental health and psychosocial support services to prevent social exclusion and violence against children.
- Target specific services to vulnerable families with children, including low-income caregivers, single parents, grandparent headed families, families with children or caregivers with disabilities, informal sector workers, and those without stable living situations.

## 2. Create an economy that values care

Parents and other caregivers should not face economic insecurity during COVID-19 as a result of providing essential care for children. Efforts to scale-up equitable workforce participation as a part of the response will be more successful if support is provided for caregiving responsibilities. Attention must also be paid to the childcare workforce – that is, those who work in paid and unpaid roles and provide essential services to young children. Despite their important work, many childcare workers – most of whom are women – are poorly compensated and face challenging and risky work conditions. Effective child-centred, gender-sensitive, inclusive and shock-responsive social protection systems also play a crucial role in addressing poverty and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Supporting families, parents and other caregivers including grandparents with appropriate policies, social protection benefits, and services can help them withstand shocks, stay together and escape poverty. Social protection programmes should support innovative solutions that are founded in a systems perspective and build on community-based resources and responses.

- Scale-up workforce and education participation and labour policies under the COVID-19 response to support caregiving responsibilities, recognizing that the essential work of caring for children is undertaken primarily by women and girls. Measures should prioritize parental and sick leave, flexible schedules, minimum wage and efforts to support the work-family balance, engage fathers, and promote the equitable sharing of family responsibilities between men and women.
- Recognize childcare workers as essential front-line emergency responders and ensure that they have salary continuity, job protections, benefits, and access to protective equipment and health care so they can continue to safely provide essential care for children.

- Scale-up child-sensitive, gender-responsive and inclusive social protection programmes linked to community-based services, including child benefits, tax allowances, cash transfers, fee waivers/reductions for public services, housing and food assistance, and economic support for vulnerable families with children as part of the COVID-19 response.

### 3. Build caring systems and an effective workforce

The widescale impact of the pandemic has made investments in comprehensive social service, child welfare and protection systems ever more urgent. Identifying and securing qualified social service workforce, including temporary replacement staff have been identified as essential to strengthening social services during and post this pandemic.<sup>49</sup> These traditionally underfunded systems and services must be scaled up to meet growing needs, ensure rapid response capacity and support national and local efforts to reduce child poverty, risk and adversity, while complementing and leveraging the work of the health, mental health and psychosocial support, education, and justice sectors. Existing services should be flexible and responsive to new conditions and changing service-seeking patterns. Delivery service models may include mobile outreach units, telephone and text hotlines, in addition to home visits that include public health protocols when children are at risk.

- Invest in robust social service and child welfare and protection systems to ensure that all children and families can access appropriate services promptly during the pandemic.
- Provide adequate funding for a professional and supported workforce to directly serve children and families and designate specific social service and child welfare and protection workers as essential staff throughout the COVID-19 response.
- Strengthen community-based networks, schools, peer support groups and safe spaces to provide care and protection to children, adolescents and caregivers, in ways that are age-, gender-, and disability-inclusive, and allow for safe and meaningful participation of all children and families during the pandemic.

### 4. Enhance resources for family-based care in the community

As more and more families become vulnerable and the risk of separation of children from their families increases due to the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries should review and, where necessary, develop or reform national laws, policies and services to prioritize the care of children in a safe, nurturing and permanent family environment. For children at risk of separation, or already separated from their families, it is important to recognize that diverse and complex needs are best met through a comprehensive range of high-quality services accessible at the community level. Placements in family-based alternative care (kinship care, foster care or *kafalah*) should always be prioritized over residential care, with the clear purpose of offering children a stable, protective and nurturing environment. Where the separation of parents or other primary caregivers and child is long-term, the alternative care arrangement should give the child a sense of security, continuity, stability and belonging, by providing certainty on where the child will live for the remainder of his or her childhood, and who the child's parents or legal guardians will be. It is important to recognize the significant additional risks related to the placement of children in residential care during the pandemic. Group care arrangements are more prone to cluster infections and children at an increased risk of abuse, neglect, and exploitation.<sup>50</sup> Residential facilities should only ever be used to provide short-term temporary care, with full public health protocols in place.

- Develop and implement policies, regulations and programmes to end the institutionalization and detention of children and prioritize family-based care alternatives and community-based services as part of the COVID-19 response.
- Increase resources for care-strengthening and reform and redirect public and private resources towards a range of suitable high-quality care options and the safe transition from institutional to family-based care in the community during the pandemic.
- Establish and strengthen effective case management as a key aspect of the COVID-19 response, including registration, oversight and accountability mechanisms and licensing systems for all formal alternative

# Moving forward towards better care

care options. Assess the quality of care and status of children in all facilities and formal placements and ensure that effective gatekeeping and referral mechanisms are in place during the pandemic.

## 5. Collect data on children's care

The availability of high-quality data on children's care – including those living without family care – remains a major constraint. Children who live outside of family care are often not captured in household surveys. Dedicated data collection efforts are needed to gather information on their well-being, but such undertakings are rare. Additionally, most countries lack good administrative records and therefore do not have accurate data on children in alternative care, or the services they receive. With more children and families at risk of separation and placement in alternative care due to COVID-19, it is ever more important to have reliable figures and close existing data gaps. As an increasing number of countries are engaging in care reform efforts, investment in quality, accessible, timely and disaggregated data are essential to monitor the availability of services to prevent separation of children from their families, and to assess progress related to providing alternative care.

- Invest in ethically and methodologically sound data collection, including better use of census and socio-demographic data, to assess the situation of children living without family care as part of the COVID-19 response, including information on where and with whom children are living, the type and conditions of care arrangements, the quality of care they are receiving, and their well-being outcomes.<sup>51</sup>
- Ensure privacy protections and appropriate data-sharing firewalls while also making data publicly accessible.
- Establish effective monitoring and evaluation of services for vulnerable families and children without family care and promote use of data to guide coherent policy-making and well-informed public discourse.

The 2019 United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Rights of the Child calls on governments and their partners to support families and to prioritize care. The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized just how critical this focus is. Economic and social recovery will be impossible if concentrated efforts are not made to shore up vulnerable families and invest in their resilience and ability to provide nurturing care for their children.

International agencies and global partners will need to work with national governments towards translating the above action areas into comprehensive plans and results frameworks with appropriate funding and technical support. This will require

- Engagement with international finance institutions to design and support implementation of rights-based, child-centred, inclusive and shock-responsive social protection;
- The development and strengthening of global policies, coordination mechanisms, and information-sharing platforms
- Inter-agency technical teams with competencies in building family strengthening and care reform systems
- Funding for technical support.

The process will include the identification of strategies to streamline and align ongoing programmes and resources with the five action areas listed above, and the establishment of robust mechanisms to measure results for children and families.

While global and national efforts are needed, responding effectively to COVID-19 in the immediate moment and over the long term also involves mobilizing coordinated local-level action with communities all over the world, supported by well-organized and equipped public health and social services and working hand-in-hand with public and private stakeholders. In order to reach individual families – which are the heart of local communities and the backbone supporting healthy societies and economies – innovative, decentralized and locally designed responses will be required.

# Endnotes

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