

PROTECT A GENERATION AT RISK

CHILDREN'S VOICES ON THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19 IN MOZAMBIQUE



FOREWORD

Children under 18 make up more than half of Mozambique's population. Although confirmed COVID-19 cases remain comparatively low in Mozambique, the pandemic is likely to significantly impact on children's lives and reverse progress made on boys' and girls' ability to survive, receive a good education, and stay safe – with the most vulnerable, most affected. How we respond now will be key for ensuring the preservation of children's rights to survive, learn, and be protected. An entire generation's future depends on it.

In addition to being adversely affected by the crisis, children and young people are also important change agents that, if well-targeted, are critical to initiate and sustain positive behaviour change to contain the spread of the virus.

Boys and girls are experiencing this crisis from their own perspective and – as greatly impacted, but also as critical change makers – their voices must be heard in the response to the pandemic.

As Save the Children Mozambique, we have been working closely with Young Members of Parliament (MPs) from the Child Parliament, who have leading child-focused advocacy at national and local levels.

Here is what we have heard:

Why focus on children?

While children are not the highest-risk group in terms of direct fatalities across the African continent, this does not tell the full story, as the secondary and long-term devastating impacts on children's rights, wellbeing and safety are likely to have a disproportionately larger impact on children from poor and vulnerable households for their entire life time. Adolescent girls, children with disabilities, children on the move, internally displaced people, and those living in areas affected by violence are particularly vulnerable.



1. Our right to survive & be healthy!



“Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several child support services have been suspended and parents are afraid to take their children to the hospital when they are sick.”

Tonelda, 17, Gaza Province

Mozambique had a strained health system even before the onset of COVID-19, and recently, has had to focus its efforts, and prioritise resources, to respond to the impact of the virus. However, we are hearing children’s concerns that COVID-19 is disrupting routine health services, both due to the need to divert resources to the response, but also because of the fear of contracting COVID-19 at health facilities.

There is a real risk that we will **see an increase in the rates of maternal, newborn and child morbidity and mortality** from the lower demand for routine preventative services, such as antenatal care and other sexual and reproductive health services; immunisation and nutrition (vitamin supplementation; growth monitoring; IYCF; and malnutrition screening); and for the 2.3 million people who live with chronic diseases such as TB and HIV, there is a concern that they are not accessing their lifesaving medications. Caregivers may not seek curative services for most common lethal childhood diseases such as malaria, diarrhea, and pneumonia if they do not feel confident in the safety of the health facilities. This is against a backdrop where, already now, 53 out of 1,000 children die before they reach their first birthdays.

Children’s mental health is also at risk. The atmosphere at home might be tense, neglectful, or even abusive if caregivers also suffer from mental health issues due to stress, and children do not have outlets to socialise and play to reduce their own stress levels. High levels of stress and isolation on young children can affect brain development, and sometimes result in irreparable long-term damage. As most COVID-19 information is targeted at adults, children may not fully understand COVID-19 and their confusion may add to their stress and anxiety.

1. Our right to survive & be healthy!

The importance of play.....

....for learning & mental health

“Children have a right to play, but some, for example those who don’t have siblings, are alone and can’t exercise that right. Children who cannot access the exercise forms in schools or the new education platforms created by the government are unable to have access to education, which is one of the fundamental rights of the child,”

- Plautila, 16, Cabo Delgado.

While the stay-at-home mandate is a commendable measure to prevent COVID-transmission, children are finding this challenging, as they are used to playing with their friends outside their home. Staying at home limits their options and possibilities to play and socialise with their peers.

Limiting children’s opportunities to play risks depriving children of one of their fundamental entitlements, namely their right to play (Article 12 of the ACRWC and Article 31 of CRC). It is critical that parents and caregivers are made aware of the importance of keeping their children safely at home during the state of emergency, while supporting children in identifying opportunities to play within their home.

Save the Children’s recommendations:

- 1) The National Health Service needs to take decisive measures to encourage people to attend health facilities and ensure they feel safe, while minimising the risk of transmission. For instance, encouraging caregivers to access routine prevention services (ANC, PNC, PPC, Healthy and Sick Child Consultations, immunisation, nutrition screening, etc), as well as bringing a child to a health facility when they are ill. The health facilities should promote the scheduling of appointments, as possible, particularly for those with chronic illnesses and for routine follow-up. Implementing a good triage system at the facility entrance and separating those with COVID-19 symptoms, as well as the requirement of masks and social distancing can help to alleviate fears of infection in the facility waiting areas.
- 2) The National Health Service should train and support community health workers to respond to COVID-19, and to continue to provide mobile health services to offer preventative and curative services close to home (iCCM) in remote communities.
- 3) Government should work with NGO partners to expand mental health and psychosocial support services for adults and children, including providing mental health services during mobile health brigades.
- 4) COVID-19 prevention information needs to be developed specifically for children in simple and inclusive language and in child-friendly formats (posters, radio and television spots).

2. Our right to learn!



“My experience of studying from home is not perfect...in fact it is not very good to study from home because there are many difficulties, and there are many people who do not have a phone to study online.”

Wilson, 17, Nampula Province

Eight million children have been affected by the closure of schools. It is expected that there will be numerous negative impacts on children’s learning outcomes, and the potential of a deterioration of educational achievement and attainment is of grave concern. Children are used to face-to-face and engaged learning, and, although distance learning through printed handouts, TV and radio lessons and online classes is being promoted as an alternative, anecdotal evidence suggests that children are finding these methods to be uninspiring and difficult to follow. As well, there is very little support available, including from those in their households who are also not accustomed to these types of learning platforms. The children from remote or poorer areas, those from vulnerable communities and households, and those children who are disabled may be particularly challenged as it is unlikely that they have the necessary technology to be able to take advantage of these alternative learning opportunities.

“As most of the children are used to face-to-face classes, distance learning is difficult for them as they don’t have direct guidance from their teachers. They were not prepared for this, and there are many distractions at home.”

Gleds, 16, Sofala Province

As well, schools are much more than places for learning – they provide children with critical spaces to engage with peers and build social capital. Children who are out of school are at greater risk of being abused and exploited, and for girls, many may be forced into marriage or exposed other forms of GBV, reducing their chances of returning to school when classes re-commence. Thousands of vulnerable children rely on receiving a daily meal at school, which is frequently their only meal of the day.

2. Our right to learn!



“What should be done at my school after COVID-19 to ensure that we are all protected? Preventative measures must be maintained. They should increase staff, ensure that the school has water, and build more rooms to reduce the number of students in the classrooms.”

Teresa, 14, Manica Province

Save the Children's recommendations:

- 1) Schools should be re-opened as soon as the necessary conditions to prevent the spread of the virus and keep children and staff safe are put in place¹. As the Government prepares to reopen schools and other learning sites, government ministries and school communities must consider a coordinated, inclusive and preventative approach to addressing children's holistic needs. The school reopening process offers a unique multi-sectoral opportunity for governments and school communities to build back better, while bringing all children back into school and ensuring that no child is left behind.
- 2) Clear guidelines on safe school reopening should be in place and strictly adhered to before and after schools open, and investments need to be made to ensure the necessary health, nutrition, WASH and other pre-conditions are in place.
- 3) Parents and caregivers should be sensitised on their important role in supporting and following up on their children's learning at home, including monitoring their children's interactions with their teachers.

¹ Following recommendations from the 'Safe Back to School: A Practitioner's Guide' (May 2020), developed by Save the Children, together with other agencies of the Global Education Cluster Strategic Advisory Group. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/safe-back-school-practitioners-guide>

3. Our right to feel safe and protected!



“I think there may be children who are suffering from violence, but as they cannot leave the house, they cannot speak. The Government must help children by raising awareness among parents to protect their children more.”

Zaira, 15, Nampula Province

As Save the Children, we are very concerned that disruption of prevention services and the economic consequences of the pandemic are exacerbating existing child protection issues, heightening the risk of violence, exploitation, neglect and the abuse of children, especially those already living in households with abusive relationships. Meanwhile avenues for redress might become increasingly more difficult to access. Data from the child helpline, Linha Fala Criança, which, since April 6 has integrated COVID-19 responses, has recorded an 20% increase in calls from April to May 2020, if compared to the same period in 2019.



“The main concerns that have been raised are physical violence, which is increasing in frequency and which is often accompanied by psychological violence. Some parents, because they are unemployed, channel all their anger towards children... I have seen many children doing heavy housework, and then instead resting, they are forced to go out and sell things on the street .”

Clementino, 16, Zambezia Province

The situation is also aggravated by children’s lack of access to social services and safe spaces to express their thoughts, concerns and feelings. Caregivers may not be able to identify and deal with their own concerns, let alone address those of their children. Instead they resort to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, neglect, and physical and psychological violence.



3. Our right to feel safe and protected!



Save the Children's recommendations:

- 1) The Government must ensure that COVID-19 prevention and response plans include an integrated approach with age-appropriate and gender-sensitive measures to protect all children from violence, neglect and abuse, including the provision and adequate resourcing of child protection services and sexual and reproductive health services.
- 2) Complaint and feedback mechanisms for child abuse, neglect, exploitation and violation at community level must be strengthened and linked with district referral systems; these mechanisms should be accessible to all children.
- 3) Parents' and caregivers' capacity to practice positive parenting should be strengthened to help children to better deal with stress and improve their overall communication with children.
- 4) Social protection services should be strengthened in order to help families and prevent caregivers from resorting to negative coping strategies such as child labour, abuse, neglect, and child marriages



4. Our right to live out of poverty!



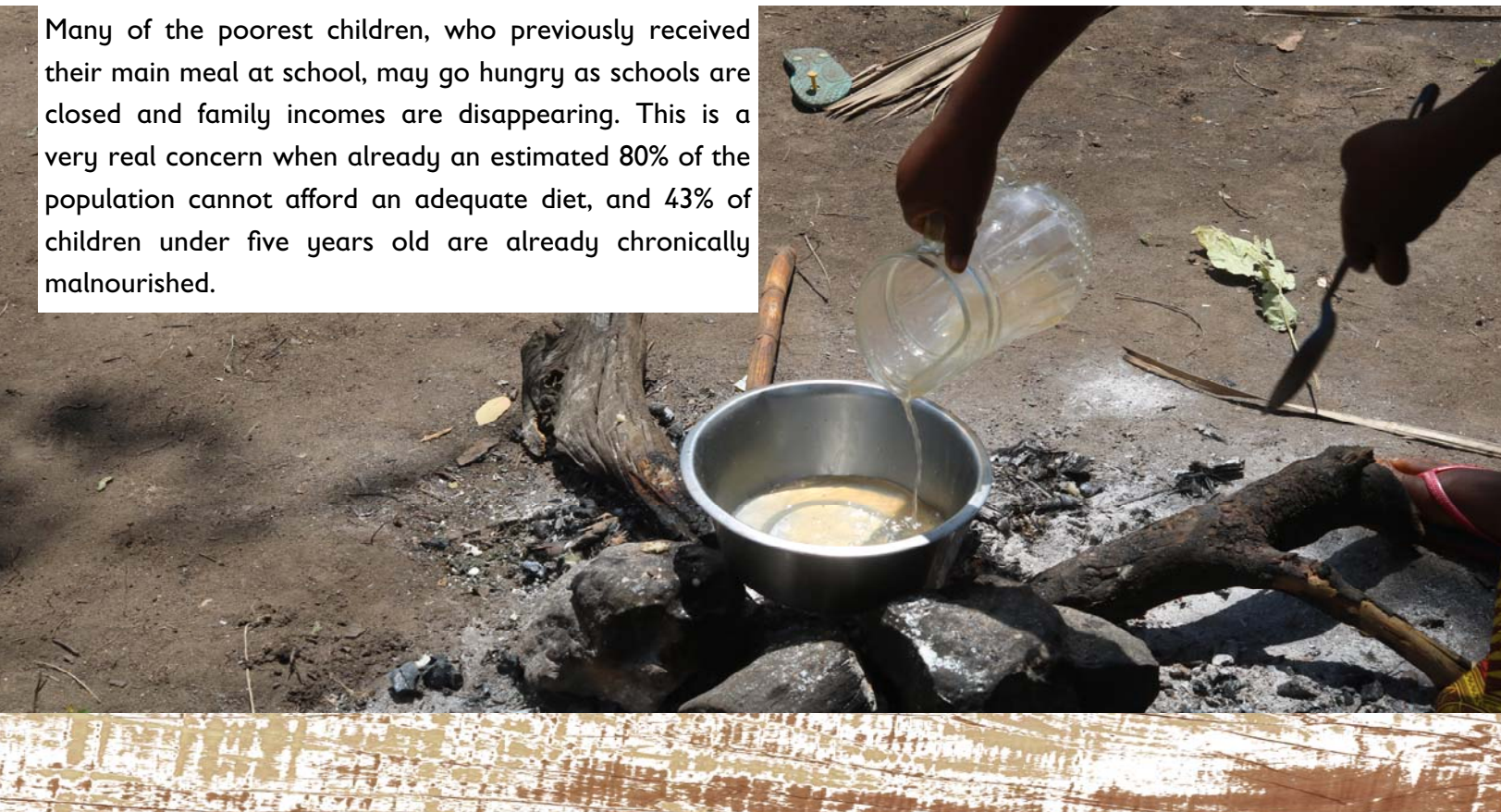
“The situation is not good. Here in my area there are children who have to sell things on the street because their parents have no jobs. People have nothing to eat and if they stay at home, they will starve to death. The Government should give support to families and assist families, here people are selling things because there is no way to support themselves”

Muamina, 17, Nampula Province

Children are seeing their caregivers and family members faced with a difficult choice: leaving home to earn a daily wage but increasing their risk of becoming infected by COVID-19, or staying at home but then not having adequate resources to feed the family.

The economic impacts of the crisis is expected to continue to become more acute, particularly for the most marginalised populations and their children. An estimated nine out of ten Mozambicans work in the informal sector, and restrictions on movement can drastically reduce or eliminate their only sources of income. The closure of borders has led to an increase in prices of essential products, which can have severe implications for food security.

Many of the poorest children, who previously received their main meal at school, may go hungry as schools are closed and family incomes are disappearing. This is a very real concern when already an estimated 80% of the population cannot afford an adequate diet, and 43% of children under five years old are already chronically malnourished.



4. Our right to live out of poverty!

“The high level of poverty faced by many parents and caregivers is one of the main problems affecting children in the COVID-19 response. Many parents and caregivers are becoming unemployed. Those who were operating their own businesses (taxi drivers, farming, selling at the market) and other activities were forced to close, compromising their incomes and livelihoods. This affects their ability to take care of children's basic needs, including buying items that are recommended for preventing infection, like soap and hand sanitiser.”

Clementino, 16, Zambezia Province

Save the Children's recommendations:

- 1) Government needs to respond to the long-term needs of children through the development and the implementation of accountable social protection mechanisms and policies to protect the most vulnerable children and families from shocks, based on transparent beneficiary selection. This includes initiatives such as cash transfers, food vouchers, and other interventions to ensure that families can survive the economic downturn.



5. Listening is not enough – let us act!

“My dream after COVID-19 is to see and embrace all my colleagues, friends, and teachers again. I will try especially hard in my studies to make up for lost time. And I would like to see that in my community, orphaned and vulnerable children receive support.”

Teresa, 14, Manica Province



“My dream after COVID-19 is, to see in my district of Macossa, a playground where all children can play and forget the drama experienced because of COVID-19.”

Frêncio Chirinda, 15, Manica Province



Urgent and focused action is necessary to protect children and youth from the potentially devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the message we have been hearing loud and clear from the children across the country. As Save the Children, we feel that it is crucial that children’s voices are amplified and help guide the political and programmatic responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

Across the world, children are suffering enormous upheaval on a scale that has never been seen before this lifetime.

As a child rights organisation, we have adapted our strategies and approaches to protect the most vulnerable children and ensure that their rights are protected. However, this requires a coordinated effort with the government and other cooperation partners. How we respond both now and going forward will be key for ensuring the preservation of children’s rights to Survive, Learn, and Be Protected.

Join us today in protecting a generation at risk!

Chance Briggs
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