2021 Economic and Social Committee
Humanitarian Affairs Segment
Side-event report

Impacts of COVID-19 on the Protection of Displaced Children

Sponsors & Organizers:
The European Union and the
Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations Office and specialized institutions in Geneva,
UNICEF and World Vision International

Date & Time: Tuesday, 22nd June, 8:30 - 10:00 (Geneva time)

Objective:
The event explored how the pandemic has disproportionately affected the protection needs of children in conflict and displacement settings, their unique vulnerabilities, and why they are among the most at-risk populations from the impacts of COVID-19. It called for increased investment in child protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and highlighted the importance of ensuring equitable distribution and access of forcibly displaced populations to COVID-19 vaccines, prevention and response services.

Panel Members:

Remarks
- H.E. Mr. Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations Office and specialized institutions in Geneva
- Mr. Andreas Papaconstantinou, Director for Neighborhood & Middle East, Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, European Commission.

Moderator
- Greta Zeender, Head of Research & Outcomes, UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement

Panel Composition
- Fatima, young Syrian living in Jordan
- Job, young South Sudanese Journalist living in Uganda
- Amanda Bissex, Child Protection Regional Advisor for South Asia, UNICEF
- Amanda Rives, Sr. Director for External Engagement, Disaster Management, World Vision International
- Rikke Fredberg, Policy Officer for Gender & Age, Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, European Commission.

Main points:
In his opening remarks, H.E. Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve stressed that child protection is a priority for Belgium both internally and in its external action, including at the UN. It is important to look at the issue of displaced children and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on them. At the beginning of the pandemic, the UN Secretary General (SG) had asked for a global ceasefire in all ongoing armed conflicts to make it possible to access people, realizing the importance of accessing everyone with tests, drugs and eventually vaccines. Unfortunately that appeal was largely ignored, and conflicts have continued while a few have resumed. Armed violence is on the rise, and the number of displaced children continued to grow in 2020 and 2021.
Humanitarian actors have kept repeating that conflicts and humanitarian crises are becoming increasingly protracted, with refugees displaced - on average – for at least ten years. That means that many young people spend their whole youth in displacement, which has a big impact on their education and future. Due to the pandemic, the number of returnees and resettlements have decreased significantly and therefore young people are – more than ever – missing out on opportunities to start a new life.

Regarding education, when schools close and actors move to distance learning to continue to provide education to displaced children and youth, unfortunately most distance learning is internet-based and most vulnerable households are not connected. In a recent survey by Save The Children in 37 countries, it was found that only 1% of displaced households had access to the internet. Therefore, there are many children with no access to education right now. Moreover, poor households and those in the informal sector have suffered major income losses during the pandemic, which also impacted displaced people that typically have no safety net.

From previous experiences of sudden and important income decline it is known that income loss makes children particularly vulnerable, with negative impacts ranging from increased malnutrition, school drop-out, child labor, early marriage and increased domestic violence.

Based on the Global Protection Cluster website, only 2% of the total appeals of response plans monitored by the Cluster focus on child protection. Mr. De Buytswerve expressed hope that this side event would contribute to increasing that number.

In his opening remarks, Andreas Papaconstantinou highlighted that globally, 800 million children and young people live in fragile and conflict-affected areas, and an estimated 35 million children are forcibly displaced. Growing up in emergencies exposes children to unspeakable physical and psychological suffering. The current pandemic has provided severe evidence of this. Thousands of children – especially girls – have been deprived of access to remote learning and dropped out of school, and many are at risk of never going back to school.

There are increased levels of violence against children, including gender-based violence (GBV), and community structures breaking down depriving children of protection. The EU is committed to child protection, as demonstrated by its policies, strategies, and funding streams. For instance, the EU recently adopted a new Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-2024. In its humanitarian component the EU commits to keep allocating 10% of humanitarian aid funding to education in emergencies and promoting the endorsement of the safe school declaration. This is crucial in a time of global education crisis and increased levels of attacks on education facilities and students.

The EU will also intensify its efforts to prevent and put an end to grave violations against children affected by armed conflict, including through advocacy and promoting compliance with international humanitarian law. At a broader level, the EU will continue to emphasize the importance of child protection. Strategies must be supported by actions, and in 2020 the EU provided €93 million to child protection in humanitarian settings to ensure uninterrupted service delivery during COVID-19 and – thanks to the EU’s partners – adapting existing projects to factor in actions against COVID-19. This allowed for the provision of psychosocial support to vulnerable children and projects mitigating and responding to violence against children, which became a shadow pandemic. The EU supported unaccompanied and separated children, and children associated with armed forces and groups. Many of these projects supported refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Besides targeted funding, the EU supports integrated programming so that child protection needs are taken care of across sectors. The EU encourages partners to implement EU funded projects with a focus on participation, including child participation.

Now it is time to take stock of the lessons learnt during the pandemic and to look forward with a focus on: 1) The shift to remote services for the provision of child protection activities and the integration of lessons learnt into future programming and policies; 2) Keeping an eye on the worsening socio-economic situation resulting from the pandemic, and supporting children and families to prevent negative coping mechanisms such as child
labor and child, early and forced marriages; and 3) The humanitarian community needs to enhance coordination and collaboration amongst and across sectors to ensure a comprehensive response.

Greta Zeender stressed the importance of this side-event for the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement. The Panel is tasked with finding recommendations for the UN SG on how to better address internal displacement from prevention to solutions.

Protracted displacement is a reality for many children, and the focus of the work of the Panel and its recommendations. The Panel found difficulties for IDPs in the immediate aftermath of their displacement and in the long term, including psychosocial impact and the dire economic situation of their families, which has been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 restrictions in many cases. In the first year of the Panel activities there were some 40 million people newly displaced due to disaster or conflict. Despite the SG call for a ceasefire mentioned earlier, this has not become a reality.

The Panel has heard from IDPs as well, including IDP youth, who said that education is very important for them, but many don’t have access to it. They expressed concerns about risks of trafficking, recruitment, and forced labor. The focus of the Panel is to generate the political will, particularly of national governments, to help IDPs regain self-sufficiency, reintegrate into society and reclaim their full rights as citizens and residents. For children, this means living in a family with secure housing and access to jobs and education, entering the national education system and benefiting from social protection systems. As such, the Panel considers primarily the responsibility of national governments, but also the contribution of humanitarian, development and peace actors, to better address internal displacement.

Amanda Rives presented a newly released report on the impacts of COVID-19 on forcibly displaced children and their families across eight countries. Children affected by humanitarian crisis are among the most vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and violence, and the most in need of protection. COVID-19 has only increased risks for children in humanitarian crisis, and the systems in place to protect them are overstretched.

The World Vision and War Child Holland report titled “The silent pandemic” highlights a significant deterioration of mental health and well-being of children living in conflict-affected countries as they cope with the socioeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. World Vision and War Child Holland spoke to children, young people, parents and caregivers in refugee camps, shelters, and host communities in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory and South Sudan from August to December 2020. Children and young people (38%) say they are feeling sad and fearful, with 12% on the extreme end of continuously feeling sad and fearful and at potential risk of developing mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety. Children’s feelings stem from complex daily worries. More than half (57%) of children living in fragile and conflict affected countries expressed a need for mental health and psychosocial support as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This rises to 70% for refugee and displaced children. COVID-19 containment measures have also hampered community-based child protection, prevention and monitoring activities, putting children even more at risk.

Another recent study conducted by World Vision titled “HIGH RISK-LOW PRIORITY: Why unlocking COVID-19 vaccine access for refugees and internally displaced communities is critical for children” describes how this population is coming in last in the vaccine race. The report highlights that most refugees and IDPs (68%) haven’t even heard of plans for vaccinations in their communities. Parents have lost jobs, income has decreased, 4 out of 10 people say children are less safe now. The top three concerns faced by children are shelter, food, and psychosocial support. A fifth of all refugees and IDPs (20%) reported that they have been treated more negatively since the outbreak of COVID-19, and in most countries refugees and IDPs said they experienced xenophobia, hate speech, violence and blame for the virus. Many were experiencing delays in their claims for refugee status, and resettlement processes. 33% reported schools still being closed, and 48% reported that they were unlikely to return to school even if they were to re-open again.

Civil society must be involved in developing and implementing national vaccine plans, and this includes refugee and IDPs, women, children and youth, and faith leaders, who are often trusted sources of information.
in hard to reach places. Donor governments and host countries must adopt additional policies and funds for COVID-19 response and recovery plans that address the disproportionate impacts on children in fragile and humanitarian contexts.

In a video message, Fatima – a 16-year-old Syrian girl living in a refugee camp in Jordan – highlighted that COVID-19 has negatively impacted the situation of children in her community by reducing their access to education and increasing the risks of child marriage, especially for girls, and child labour. She recommended to the government to raise awareness amongst children and adults on these issues, and stressed the importance of re-gaining access to face-to-face education for children.

Amanda Bissex highlighted the response to the impact of COVID-19 on displaced children in South Asia, with a focus on Afghanistan and Bangladesh. She emphasized the growing severity of violence against children and the impact of the pandemic on the mental health, economic well-being, and social supports of families and caregivers. She highlighted the further stress placed on services and family-based resources by the second and third waves of COVID-19.

Returns to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan increased by 84% between January and mid-March 2021, with key protection concerns for displaced children in Afghanistan including: 1) Restrictions on movement; 2) Increase in discrimination and stigmatization; 3) Disruption of the provision of continuum of care for children; 4) Disruption of essential services; and 5) Shift in policy priorities.

In Bangladesh, the key protection concerns affecting Rohingya are: 1) Increased security concerns and communal tension; 2) Reduced humanitarian presence; 3) Limited access to justice; and 4) Increase in child protection issues and MHPSS concerns.

The response focused on adapting services, increasing emphasis on COVID-19 sensitization and community engagement, strengthening coordination and capacity development for service providers, and scaling up social protection including CASH PLUS programs.

Job, a 15-year-old mobile journalist from South Sudan and living in Uganda who has been disseminating COVID-19 awareness and prevention messages, talked about the main challenges facing children in his community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He expressed concerns about school closure, and explained that students lack access to the technology required to attend classes remotely, and can no longer access recreational activities in child friendly spaces, which children miss. Teenage pregnancy in the refugee camps has increased during the pandemic and the lockdowns, and lack of access to education resulted in an increased number of cases of child marriage. He called on Donors to continue supporting refugees, and shared that recently food rations in the camp where he lives have nearly halved. He proposed child protection awareness raising targeting parents, and called for accountability for violence against children.

Rikke Fredberg talked about ECHO policy and funding, and the challenges the humanitarian community and Donors face in responding to the needs of all children in times of COVID-19.

COVID-19 had severe consequences on children living in conflict and displacement situations. The EU ensured child protection in its response and there are a number of policies and tools in this regard. ECHO takes an integrated approach to ensure that child protection is taken into consideration regardless of the sector.

During COVID-19, the priority on the ground was to keep providing services to children in camps and camp-like setting, through an integrated approach to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable.

The EU also transferred development to humanitarian funding and – together with partners – supported the adaptation of existing projects to factor in COVID-19. By working with partners, the EU could reach the most vulnerable children.
As a Donor, the EU also faces many challenges. Looking back, it was important to shift to remote services, and looking forward it will be important to address the socio-economic effects of the pandemic and mitigate coping strategies that may harm children. ECHO would welcome integrated programs that would reach across the nexus and increase social protection systems.

**Key messages of the side event:**

- Child protection is a life-saving service for displaced children, and access to services should be ensured with predictable funding across the humanitarian-development spectrum.
- It will be important to address the socio-economic effects of the pandemic, mitigate coping strategies that may harm children, and strengthen social protection systems.
- Child participation should be integrated in response planning from the very beginning, including in national response plans.
- Donor governments and host countries must adopt additional policies and funds for COVID-19 response and recovery plans that address the disproportionate impacts on children in fragile and humanitarian contexts.
- Increase investment commensurate with the impact of humanitarian crises including COVID-19 on children and their protection concerns in situations of conflict and displacement.
- Increase investment in child protection and MHPSS, and ensure equitable distribution and access of forcibly displaced populations, including children and regardless of their legal and residence status, to COVID-19 vaccines, prevention and response services.

**Additional points raised during the discussion:**

**Daniela Reale (Save the Children)** stated that many things came to a halt in 2020, except the causes of displacement. In 2020 the number of people forced to leave their homes rose dramatically, and around 42% of them are younger than 18 (almost 35 million children). Many of them lived terrifying experiences during the journey, and many of them will spend a substantial part of their childhood in displacement. The impact of COVID-19 went well beyond the impact on the health system and it exacerbated a crisis that refugee children were already experiencing. Save The Children observed a child protection crisis, with children falling into deeper poverty, which meant increased vulnerability of women and children and limited access to mental health and psychosocial support services. The capacity of national services was also tested by the pandemic, and this in the context of limited funding.

Recent research by Save The Children and The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action showed how child protection is not only underfunded, but funding is inconsistent across responses and over time. Gaps in education affecting girls as a result of the pandemic risks becoming insurmountable and may impact generations. All children, including displaced ones, should be included in COVID-19 response plans. Child protection is a life-saving service for displaced children, and access to services should be ensured, with predictable funding across the humanitarian-development spectrum. The humanitarian community should respond to the education crisis to avoid a lost generation. It is important to act swiftly.

**Enzo Tabet Cruz (Plan International)** stated that COVID-19 exposed pre-existing inequality based on gender, age, and diversity, including disability, and showed the fragility of some response systems. There are lessons learnt, such as that in responses gender, age, and disability are secondary in needs assessments, funding, and overall in response plans. Some child protection systems are not equipped to respond to the needs of girls, and in many countries affected by humanitarian crisis there are still policies and laws that discriminate against women and girls.

COVID-19 responses have been increasingly mainstreaming the needs of girls and children and adapted child protection services. An important lesson learnt is the participation of young people and children in the response to COVID-19 at community level. Disaggregated data should inform implementation measures to help consider how actions impact women, girls, men, and boys. Governments and the international community must step up efforts to ensure that policy interventions are equitable and inclusive, and safeguard all children, in particular...
girls from SGBV in displaced settings. Children should be at the center of the design of responses, and promoting the safe involvement of children in decision making.

**Fatima** was asked to share additional details on the challenges facing children in her community in the areas of protection and education, and possible solutions to these problems. Fatima stated that she witnessed an increase in the number of cases of child marriage and child labour in her immediate surroundings, resulting from parents’ decisions guided by the combined result of the impact of the pandemic on families’ livelihoods and school closure. She added that the resumption of schooling would certainly have a positive impact on child protection as well.

**Job** was asked to share his views on the importance and modalities of child participation in global-level discussions. He stated that in child friendly spaces in his community children can access different clubs, including “peace clubs” where participants can discuss opportunities for mobilization and support to vulnerable people in the community. He also participates in activities of mobile journalism (“mojo”) by documenting stories through his mobile phone. The focus of such stories are typically problems facing people in the community, including teenage pregnancy. Additional programs relate to entertainment, games and sports. For example, in child friendly spaces children used to be able to play football, which is no longer possible because those playing football can now be arrested for violating standard operating procedures, and children are too scared to play. An attendee asked for additional information regarding Job’s work as a journalist. He stated that during the pandemic he contributed to the production of videos for example on the effects of COVID-19, the hunger crisis, and teenage pregnancy.

**Amanda Rives** stressed the immediate need for action in the areas of child protection, education, and mental health. The pandemic is still a very present concern for those who don’t have access to the vaccines. In 2020 there was an ECOSOC HAS child protection event focused on adapting child protection programming to the pandemic circumstances. Programming can and needs to continue as this crisis continues. On Job’s concerns regarding ration cuts, there are now 41 million people at risk of famine, and if displaced people are having ration cuts this will increase poverty and vulnerability.

**Amanda Bissex** stated that while there is agreement about the consequences of the pandemic on the protection of children, and obviously in many countries the pandemic is still being felt very strongly, the long-term social and economic impact of COVID-19 will be felt for years to come and impact children long term in the areas of education and child protection. Mitigating long-term consequences should be an area of focus. There are many solutions and examples and it is time to focus on those, encouraging our partners to invest in child protection.

**Rikke Fredberg** reiterated the importance of cooperation across all stakeholders, including Donors, partners, NGOs, and local population. ECHO encourages mainstreaming protection and participation.

**Outcomes of the side event:**

- Most stakeholders observed and documented the severe short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on children and their families, with the child participants highlighting concerns for increased child marriage and lack of access to education.
- During the crisis many organizations, communities and families adapted, innovated, and did things remotely. It is important to learn from what has been done.
- Increase investment commensurate with the impact of humanitarian crises including COVID-19 on children and their protection concerns in situations of conflict and displacement. Increase investment in child protection and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and ensure equitable distribution and access of forcibly displaced populations to COVID-19 vaccines, prevention and response services.
- Solid disaggregated data should inform programming to address the needs for increased support to mental health and psychosocial support.
COVID-19 has not only worsened refugees’ pre-existing challenges, but created new barriers and risks. All forcibly displaced people, including children and regardless of their legal and residence status, should be part of COVID-19 response plans.

- Child participation should be integrated in response planning from the very beginning, including in national response plans.
- It will be important to address the socio-economic effects of the pandemic, mitigate coping strategies that may harm children, and integrated programs that would reach across the nexus and strengthen social protection systems.
- Child protection is a life-saving service for displaced children, and access to services should be ensured, with predictable funding across the humanitarian-development spectrum. The humanitarian community should respond to the education.
- Donor governments and host countries must adopt additional policies and funds for COVID-19 response and recovery plans that address the disproportionate impacts on children in fragile and humanitarian contexts.

Link to the recording: GMT20210622-063141_Recording_1920x1034>Edit.mp4