

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Report from DCI Sections - April 2020

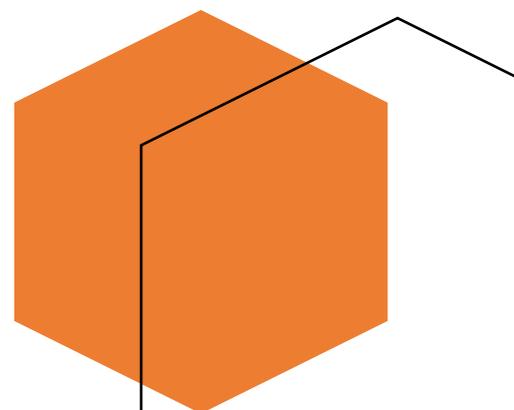
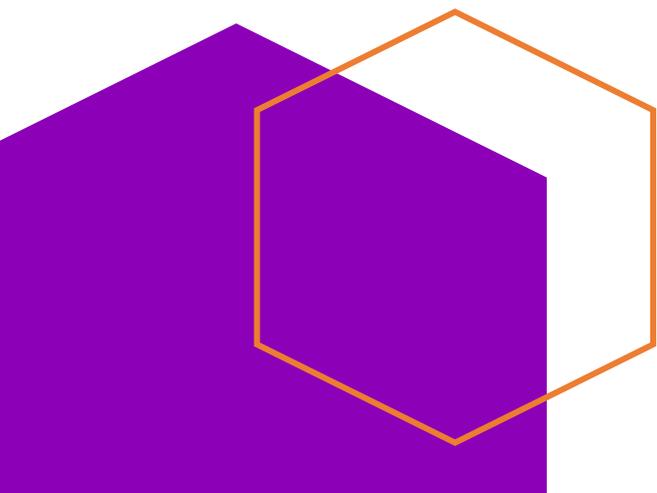


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Foreword

As COVID-19 pandemic continues, children need more support than ever. The pandemic could jeopardise progress achieved in the area of justice for children globally.

The [Committee on the Rights of the Child recently alerted](#) on the grave physical, emotional and psychological effect of the pandemic on children and urged States to “respect the rights of the child in taking measures to tackle the public health threat posed by COVID-19 pandemic”. Defence for Children International (DCI) believes that more attention should be paid to protection, wellbeing but also to the information and empowerment of children in relation to the COVID-19 threats and constraints. As a worldwide 40-year-old child rights grassroots Movement present in 38 countries, we keep ourselves alerted on mitigation measures that may do more harm than good. We will be supporting children, their families and communities, particularly in vulnerable situations. They are often unequally exposed both to the harmful effects of the virus as well as to those of the mitigation measures.

This commitment is aligned with the DCI Strategic Framework – launched in 2017 to expand children's access to justice, end violence against children, address needs of children in armed conflicts and children on the move among first strategic priorities. But cross-cutting issues also reveal to be very important in the context of COVID-19 as children deprived of liberty, girls and child participation are particularly affected.

In the context of the outbreak of the pandemic, DCI decided to conduct a survey in the countries where the Movement is present. The International Secretariat of DCI, based in Geneva, warmly thanks each National Section for their precious inputs to this survey and most of all for continuing to provide the best possible support to all children during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. On the basis of the survey, DCI will follow up with concrete action plans and urge all States not to abdicate their responsibility and commitment to uphold children's rights.



©DCI-Greece- Campaign “Can you hear me? Don't leave kids alone”



Why a survey on the impacts of COVID-19 on children's rights?

Each child is affected by COVID-19 directly or indirectly. The current health crisis is also accompanied by an economic crisis which complicates the mobilisation of the means necessary to meet growing needs. Around the world, children and young people are mobilising against the pandemic.

DCI teams around the world constantly analyse the rapidly evolving situation and threats linked to the COVID-19 as well as additional violations of children's rights related to the mitigation measures taken by governments. In many countries where DCI is present, the population will not be able to cope with the pandemic. We hope this survey will benefit to experts, practitioners, youth representatives and donors to better guide their work. We also hope it will trigger awareness of the reader to take action and be individually and collectively an agent of change during the COVID-19 period and beyond. DCI nourishes hopes and foresee long-term changes that we expect to emerge from this crisis. Everything will not be necessarily negative, but there are considerable risks, including on children's rights.



©DCI-Lebanon- Early childhood education program for refugee children.

DCI has been responsive to this global crisis. This new situation obliged DCI teams to a partial withdrawal linked to confinement measures, which was used to reorient some of our activities and their implementation modalities. Benefiting from the experience from our National Sections in Sierra Leone and Liberia who previously mobilised against Ebola, we are now able to use their best practices. The high level of uncertainty compels us to work on several scenarios at the same time. A great number of questions still remain unanswered by the international experts analysing the virus and its impact. These grey zones include in particular the link between the virus and children. Initially children being presented as less exposed to the virus, then as rapidly contributing to the virus transmission. We need to remain particularly vigilant to such early assumptions exposing children to additional discrimination and violation of their rights.

In the fight against the virus, we have one comparative advantage, i.e. the fact that the stage of the outbreak is not the same depending on the country/region. This gives an enormous opportunity to work on preparedness and good practices. In the fight against discrimination, we also have the experience of other epidemics such as Ebola, and we know how a health crisis like this can trigger additional exclusion, discrimination, violence against children, in particular those already in vulnerable situations such as children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children in street situations, children on the move, or children deprived of liberty.

Defence for Children International has to adapt its daily work to all these new challenges, and remains a watchdog on human rights of children, including their right to be informed and empowered in a meaningful way. Immediate work followed by long-term actions will be necessary to respond to the impact this crisis as well as to build resilience and protection systems for the most vulnerable.

1. COVID-19 impact on dci activities

Child Participation

During the COVID-19, the stress of promiscuity, insecurity, fear, reorganisation, the unprecedented dimension of the situation as well as tense relationships can mark everyday life. What place does the child occupy in this crisis situation? The right to child participation implies first of all hearing the child, listening to what they have to say, letting them express their questions and their anxieties, despite the difficulty from the current chaos. The next step is to help children understand what is going on around them. Finally, discuss what adults put in place to meet the child's needs, but also explain how children can get involved.

DCI knows from experience how child participation can play an important role in global crises, and how this contributes to limit structural violations of their rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires that we encourage children and young people and support their participation. This provides a guarantee that they will be able to develop as best as possible and become active members of society. The outbreak of COVID-19 is having a major impact on child participation. With the closure of schools and public spaces, children and youth participants cannot attend the trainings and meetings anymore. While the absence of schools and other leisure activities is increasing the level of stress among children, it also creates a need that should be addressed. The Committee on the Rights of the Child urged States to “provide opportunities for children’s views to be heard and taken into account in decision-making processes on the pandemic.”¹

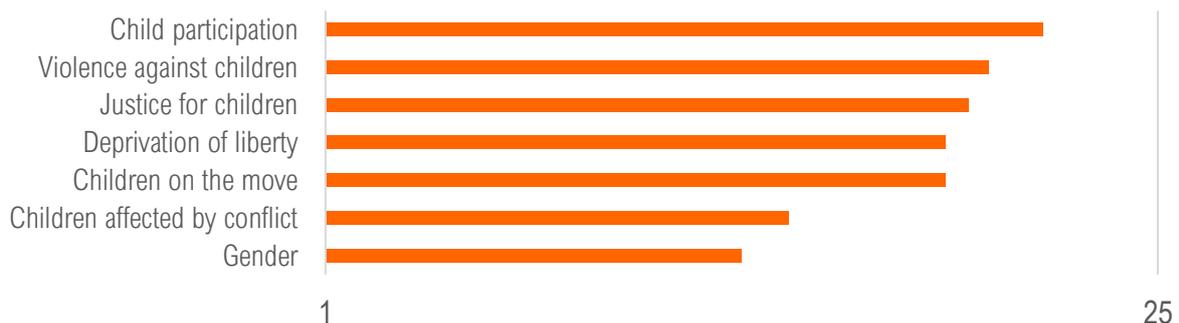


Fig. 1 Q4. Based on your grassroots /national experience and activities, which of the strategic thematic areas of DCI do you think are most affected by the coronavirus pandemic?

¹ [Committee on the Right of Child, Item 11, April 8th, 2020.](#)

DCI-Sierra Leone and DCI-Ghana observed that the limitations of movements have a negative effect on the work of human rights defenders on a daily basis, as DCI staff face new challenges to reach out to children who are confined at home. Overall, gatherings are prohibited so children try to organise themselves online but not all have access to a reliable internet connection in rural areas. The involvement of children in decision making processes on matters that concern them is insufficient as mentioned by DCI in Greece, Liberia and in Trinidad & Tobago.

Due to the pandemic, some National Sections were constrained to stop direct communication with children, like in Iraq, DCI also operates in a very tense context and under strict curfew, making difficult for the staff to communicate with children in vulnerable situation. In Jordan, after the closing of visits to children shelters and guesthouses, DCI has to follow up by organising virtual meetings between children and parents. While they need to express themselves during COVID-19, children are overwhelmed, insecure and sometimes alone in the face of their distress. Their right to participate appears to be particularly at risk in these circumstances.

The Fig.1 details the impact of the COVID-19 by each DCI strategic area of work, child participation on the top. Overall, children's rights are at high risk in key areas such as violence against children, Justice for children and children deprived of liberty.

DCI-Palestine noted that *"some of the activities will be postponed or amended, mainly those related to*

"The restriction has prevented fieldwork, field visits and made impossible monitoring visits to institutions where adolescents are deprived of their liberty". DNI - Colombia

child participation. This is due to movement restrictions and suspension of schools...". As DCI-Palestine reported "...lawyers and field workers can't collect the necessary evidence of child rights violations: monitoring visits and social services in detention centers are forbidden, whether to collect affidavits from

detained children on the forms of torture and ill treatment during their arrest, or to provide prior-interrogation consultations",

Violence against Children

Due to the current situation, parents face organisational, financial and structural challenges to meet their children's needs. Living in a confined space involves the danger of different stressful situations that must be managed within the family. Domestic violence, sexual abuse and cyber violence represent an additional danger for children in the current situation. When DCI looks at the recent past, it turns out, for example, that school closings during the Ebola epidemic in Sierra-Leone have led, among other things, to more cases of violence and sexual abuse.

DCI is concerned for the protection of children as inside their homes, children are the invisible victims of this pandemic. Children are at increased risk of exploitation, violence and abuse when schools are closed, jobs are lost and freedom of movement is restricted. Families exposed to multiple stress factors, whose children have been provisionally sent home while in care, or those who are partially deprived of support are exposed to enormous pressure.

DCI-Morocco explained the situation of online schooling is bringing additional pressure on the children and their parents who are obliged to follow, in addition to stress and unmet needs among the vulnerable population. These conditions can create an outburst of violence inside homes, while external threats through online abuse and bullying are also increasing.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, there are allegations of children being sexually and physically abused both in the urban and rural communities while governments are currently concentrating on the prevention and response measures aimed at eliminating the COVID-19. In Palestine, DCI expressed concerns about the economic deterioration affecting the ability of the families to respond to their children needs, which may cause an increase in domestic violence, especially, in marginalised areas. DCI social workers had to divert calls from the hotlines to their personal numbers as they work from home and to cope with the increase of emergency assistance requests. In Jordan, DCI needed to rent additional locations as shelters for women and girls' victims of rape in order not to put at risk the health of the current residents.

As one member from the MENA region mentioned *"studying at home and all-changed system of curfew might put more children at risk of violence with all the stress that this pandemic is putting on everyone; especially on girls... children are not allowed to move freely as they used to, especially to schools, with additional stress on girls and women as a result of social norms"*.



©UNICEF- Children living in unhealthy conditions

Justice for Children

In Egypt, DCI observed disruptions in the child justice system with discontinuation of the courts, consequently leading to the absence of consideration of cases and no follow up on investigations. DCI-Palestine has similar concerns for children in conflict with the law, as new measures have been introduced by both the Palestinian and Israeli Authorities which affect the legal aid services. Developed countries were not fulfilling their obligations to protect children, for instance in Canada, DCI said children in custody were at higher risk and in the Netherlands, the normal activities of institutions were slowed down and legal procedures only took place when urgent.

Prolonged detention under protective custody is a main concern for DCI-Greece, as well as a lack of reporting incidents of violence and abuse, making violations of children's rights occurring in total impunity. In Sierra Leone, the requirements to observe the state of emergency is having a direct impact on justice for children. It is now very complicated to support family tracing, reunification and reintegration of children in conflict with the law. This is largely because of limited movements and the need for physical distancing. The children's rights helpline and Socio-Legal Defence Centres (SLDCs) remain active and keep monitoring violations of children's rights.

Children Deprived of Liberty

In Belgium and the Netherlands, despite all efforts of DCI and partners, the public events and presentations of the UN Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty (GSCDL) had to be postponed. The GSCDL is more important than ever to understand what is at stake during the pandemic for millions of children who are deprived of their liberty in various contexts, whilst also giving valuable recommendations on the alternatives to detention which should not only be put in place for the duration of the pandemic but with a lasting view.



©DCI-Greece - Refugee child in the Greek Islands

In Liberia, DCI reported cases of children identified from neighbouring Sierra Leone on the move, but their parents could not be traced nor reunified due to the unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of the border. In addition, during the health crisis, less attention is given to children allegedly being trafficked internally and across borders due to safety measures being employed by WHO and the Government regarding COVID-19 prevention.

WHERE DO WE STAND WITH THE CONTAGION?

According to the proximity of cases, this question shows that most of the sessions have potential cases, although confirmed cases remained low. Yet Greece, Costa-Rica, Yemen and Egypt reported to have some children affected by the COVID-19 (0-5 cases) in their programs. Finally, the pandemic situation is at an early stage and may escalate quickly, especially in precarious settings such as refugee camps and overcrowded facilities. In Greece, for instance, recent measures have caused a lockdown in the registration of new asylum cases. According to DCI-Greece, unaccompanied children who arrived after 1st of March have not been identified yet and all of them are held in inappropriate living conditions.

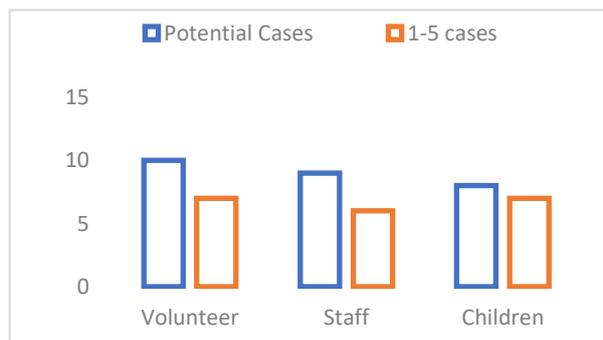


Fig.2 Positive cases in DCI

In Egypt, DCI confirmed that children on the move are more affected by the scarcity of services and the reduction of work to 80% for most of the institutions and civil society organisations. The fact that all social, sport and recreational gatherings were suspended could also lead to an increase of stress and mental health breakdown among refugee and migrant children who need these activities to boost their resilience and recover from serious trauma.

It is likely to have increasing rates of neglect, abuse, gender-based violence and child marriage as families experience further socioeconomic hardship. DCI also continues to support children and their families on the move displaced by conflict. For instance, in Bolivia, DCI provides assistance to Venezuelan families to help them cope when the government diverted humanitarian aid to prevent and respond to COVID-19. Both DCI-Bolivia and DCI-Greece observed a growing risk of stigmatisation and prejudice as the virus spreads across borders and instils fear.

Children affected by Armed Conflict

Today there are 250 million children worldwide living in conflict zones (source: UNICEF). DCI is working in the Middle East and North Africa region where there is the largest number of children in need due to conflicts.

Last week, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC), Virginia Gamba, welcomed the implementation of ceasefires by parties to conflict following the global call for peace made by the UN Secretary-General on 23 March 2020. The SRSG said that “*ceasefires present an additional opportunity to include the rights and wellbeing of children into peace dialogues and I urge all those engaged in such discussions to include child protection provisions, such as securing the release of all children associated with parties to conflict and prioritising their reintegration assistance.*”

Yet, almost a month after the Secretary-General's appeal, violent conflicts continue to rage in parts of Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine and Yemen where DCI is present. For children living with these waking nightmares, a ceasefire could mean the difference between life and death.

According to DCI-Palestine, Israeli forces continue to violate children's rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and children are paying the highest price. In Democratic Republic of the Congo, the fear of this pandemic and the powerlessness to face it in the different provinces affected by conflicts which not long ago were also affected by Ebola, is a major source of concern. The protection of several children separated from their families due to conflicts, who found shelter in DCI social centres is a serious challenge, as well as the protection of volunteers themselves, who are indispensable in the field. The catastrophic socio-economic situation does not allow for an effective preventive response and DCI is worried by a possible increase of recruitment of children who live in poverty, to join the ranks of armed groups.

Gender

The stigma associated with COVID-19 has made some children more vulnerable to violence and psychosocial distress. At the same time, controls that ignore the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls can also increase their risk of sexual exploitation, abuse, and child marriage. The *Girls Advocacy Alliance* in which DCI is working in Ghana,

Sierra Leone and Liberia has already indicated a significant increase in cases of domestic violence against women and girls, as well as cases of cyberbullying.

In the context of the pandemic, misogynist messages emerged in some countries asking women 'not to bother' their husbands and to wear makeup while working from home. DCI-Morocco said they were concerned about the situation of girls and women who do most of the work for their household, and the dissemination of hundreds of images of discriminatory language that violates the dignity of women. Discrimination on gender or race continues. In Argentina, DCI said the closing of



©DCI-Costa Rica- "Abejita" Group

schools in the popular neighbourhoods had implied a serious implication to the right to food with to the closure of school canteens, which particularly affected girls and minorities from vulnerable backgrounds.

2. Preventing the spread of COVID-19

Social distancing: what can still be done?

The outbreak of Covid-19 is having a deep impact on National Sections workplan and projects. In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, many National Sections decided to cancel any planned events, even ahead of official government decisions. Indeed, one aspect that clearly emerged in the DCI COVID-19 survey is the lack of **Community Participation due to social distance and confinement measures**.

Nevertheless, 54% of the DCI staff is working from home (in some countries the outbreak arrived at a later stage) and remains continuously in contact either with key stakeholders or partners in civil society. For example, DCI-Lebanon and DCI-Palestine interact with the parents of the children providing them with some learning activities and advice to maintain children psychosocially and physically active. DCI-Bolivia and DCI-Colombia continue their planning and virtual meetings but are also engaged in raising awareness and offer orientation to parents on how to handle potential domestic crisis or chat sessions and information through their Facebook account. Only 8% of participants to the survey claim that they were not prepared to such crisis and hence are not adopting measures to keep business continuity; while the remaining 38% affirm to be in an adaptation phase where some projects have been put "on hold" and resources are re-directed to provide children with a safe and sanitised environment but also intellectually engaged through e-learning platforms. In this case, DCI-Morocco is guaranteeing protective equipment to children and staff who work in contact with them and hygiene products to disinfect childcare facilities on a permanent basis. They have also stopped interventions from voluntary staff in those structures.

DCI work at the time of COVID-19

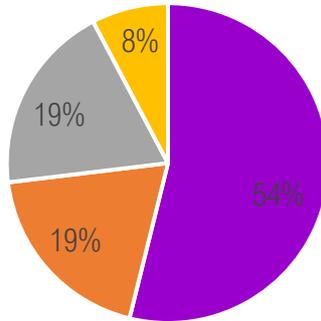


Fig.3 Main measures implemented after the COVID-outbreak

- Mainly working from home
- Adaptation of projects
- Specific measure to Protect Staff
- No measures

DCI-Sierra Leone proactively converted current activities to COVID focused action and prevention DCI Staff reported that *“Most of our activities are community-lead and people-centred, we have been challenged to get complete full attendees during our meeting... However we have been very active on advocacy and lobby with national authorities for laws, policies and regulations. While respecting safety measures and physical distancing, we managed to train youth activists to mobilise against cyber bullying in relations to sexual harassment and run advocacy campaign on child protection and safety during a pandemic.”*



Source: Advocacy campaign on COVID-19: DCI-Sierra Leone, Girls Advocacy Alliance Programme

Mobility restriction has affected the work of DCI, especially in some countries, like Tunisia, where the army and the police controls people movement. Furthermore, war affected area, like Yemen, reported fear of contagion from injuries *“Moving and going to the field has become a serious matter for fear of injuries or transmission of infection between workers and beneficiaries of the services provided by the institution, as well as the closure of many government agencies and institutions working with children for fear of infection and the spread of the epidemic”*; DCI-Yemen

Major disruption has been reported in **legal and social services**. The respondent from DCI-Netherlands

DEFENDING CHILDREN RIGHT AT THE TIME OF COVID-19

Looking at Fig.4 (pag.12), we can see that across the regions, most of the survey respondents estimate the COVID-19 situation had a mild effect on the activities reduction which stands between 20 and 50%. However, while some countries, like Sierra Leone, were barely affected by the crisis (no impact so far), in the latest bar of the spectrum, DCI Sections in Africa (Ghana and Mauritius) and MENA region (Egypt and Lebanon) seem severely affected by the ongoing health crisis which has an impact on more than 80% of the activities. Finally, the situation may change rapidly and significantly in the coming weeks, and some follow-up is needed in the coming months to assess the long-term impact of the global health crisis.

affirmed that they are still *“able to continue most of our work (Socio-Legal Defence Centres), although many of the national institutions and procedures are also on hold for example, court cases are only executed in urgent matters”*.

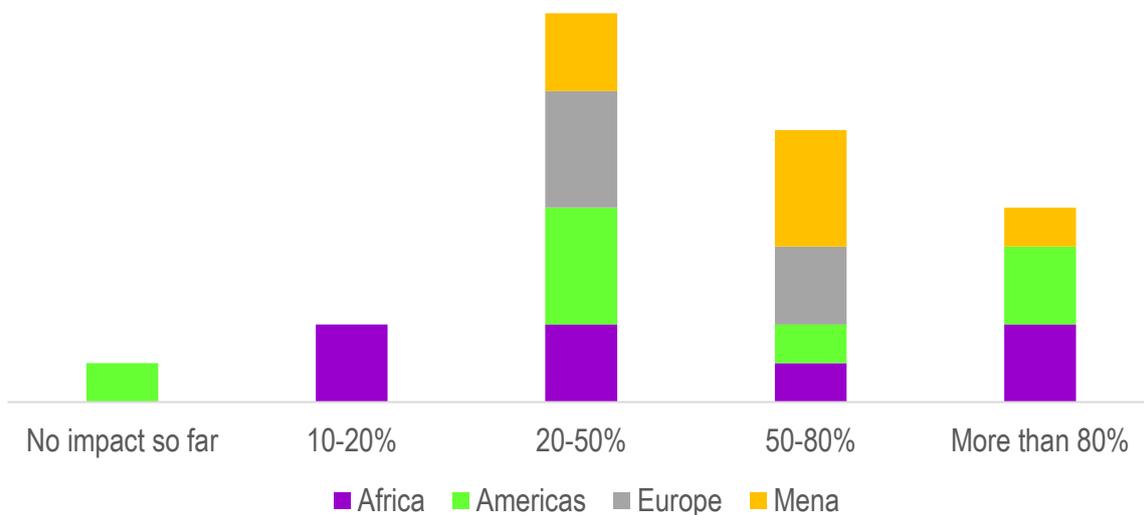


Fig.4 Impact of COVID-19 on DCI work



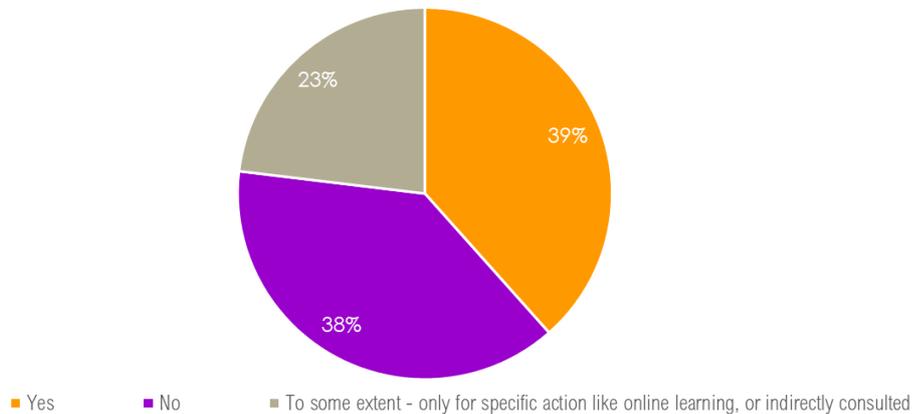
Civil society participation



©DCI-Lebanon- Early childhood education program for refugee children.

With reference to the management of the crisis, around 40 % of surveyed responded that their government is involving civil society organisations in the planning of measures to tackle COVID-19. Just to mention some examples, DCI-Palestine argued that their staff has participated in emergency committees organised at local levels to support efforts to manage and prevent the spread of the virus. Another relevant case comes from DCI-Morocco, where the government has put in place a cooperation platform with UNICEF and its partners to protect children confined in social service structures. However, 39% of respondents say that there is not such consultation process in their respective countries, and in another 24% only to minor extent (distance learning offer or indirect consultation not leading to planning and interventions). DCI has therefore an important role to play in demonstrating beneficial effects of close cooperation in the context of the pandemic between authorities and NGOs working with children on the ground and advocate for more participation of civil society.

Fig. 5 Q8. Regarding the management of the crisis or the preventive measures, is your government associating civil society organizations / child rights NGOs in the planning of measures against Covid-19?



On preventive measures, [awareness campaigns](#) have been implemented by DCI-Costa Rica on education, good hygiene practices and social distancing for children but also preventive measures for the DCI staff and volunteers. DCI – Liberia organised an awareness campaign which included the printing of Flyers and T-shirts portraying the messages in the local vernaculars. In Bolivia, DCI is working to organise humanitarian aid to Venezuelan families. DCI-Colombia has organised a campaign for the indigenous group of Wayuu, 30,000 children left without food and protection from the state.

DCI-Argentina has gathered international experts and representatives of the project #TejiendoRedesInfancia co-financed by the European Union, with the first of a series of webinars on the Protection of Children's Rights facing of the COVID-19 Pandemic (coronavirus) which was attended by more than 100 organisations and specialists in Latin America and the Caribbean.

“In our Socio-Legal Defence Centre (Children’s Rights Helpdesk) we will identify signs of child rights violations or child protection issues due to the pandemic control situation. Serious signs will be brought to the national political agenda and discussed with the relevant national government agencies”, DCI – Netherlands.

Nevertheless, we can see the resilience of many sections which have applied multiple solutions to face new challenges. DCI-Mauritius together with other national civil society organisations created a [helpline](#)² that provide counselling service, DCI-Palestine expect to be able to need to attend court session through social media. Moreover, some DCI sections, like DCI-Liberia see the COVID-19 crisis has an opportunity to streamline COVID-19 response and take the lead in defending children rights while making sure funding are maintained for their activities.

DCI-Colombia, has called for an urgent action children of the guajira province and adolescents deprived of their liberty, and in line with the

² www.helplinemauritius.org



principle of opportunity, they ask for those who have already been sanctioned and have served 70% of their sentence to be released.³

In Sierra Leone, the thematic area of Justice for Children has been particularly highlighted "... with regards to Family Tracing and Reunification and Reintegration for children who have come into contact and into conflict with the law.

This is largely because of the need to observe government regulations on limited movements and the need for social distancing." DCI - Sierra Leone. In the Netherlands, there is a [Child Help Line](#) and a specific crisis fund⁴ with an amount of Euro 100.000 has been set-up in two weeks' time to support vulnerable children.

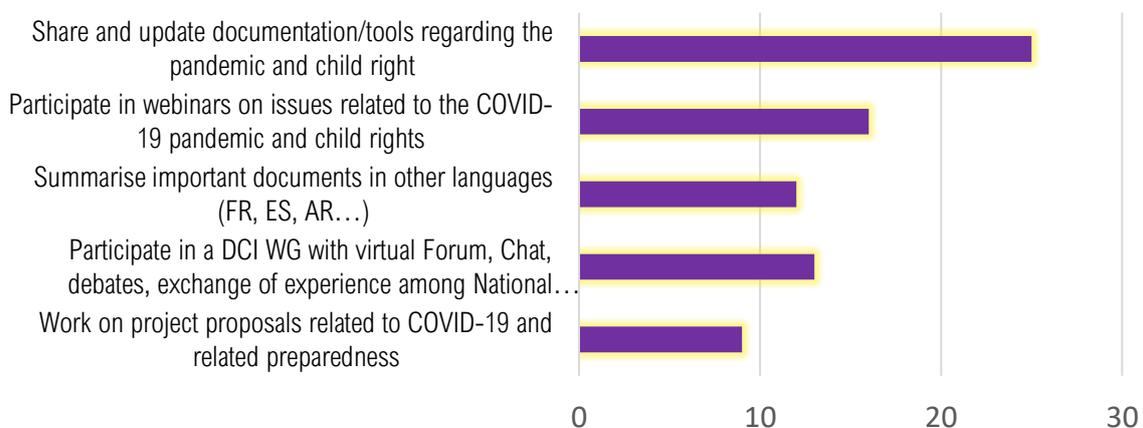
"Hotline service is working remotely to support women vulnerable to violence through diverting calls from the hotlines to the social workers personal numbers. Women's shelter is working with difficulties of movement of staff. through support from the police we can change shifts of workers on weekly basis. We needed to rent additional locations as shelters for violated women for health reasons and to not risk the health of the current shelter residents."
DCI Associate member in Jordan

3. Contingency plans & long-term adaptations

The most common tools and/or resources used are provided by UN agencies, mainly WHO and UNICEF guidelines and Facebook campaigns; the respondents also mentioned the articles in the national press on tips for [children](#) and [parents](#) in quarantine (in French), country statistics unit or information provided by the Ministry of Health.

DCI-Egypt noted *"we are currently participating in a permanent dialogue via Skype with the group of associations that have accommodations for children (alternative social care) to develop prevention and protection plans for the children in which they are housed and the supervisory staff"*

Fig. 6 Which of the following activities can be useful for your National Section



⁴ [Child Help Line](https://www.childhelplineinternational.org/) <https://www.childhelplineinternational.org/>

Lastly, participants provided a list of tools and sensitising materials they are using when working with children under the current situation. Besides the cooperation with national authorities and UN agencies (UNICEF and WHO) happening in many national sections, it is relevant to mention the Child Helpline International, catalysing specific crisis fund that in two weeks-time has organised initiatives to support vulnerable children for an amount of Eur 100.000 already collected. Most of sections are also active through Facebook accounts (Iraq, Tunisia, Mauritania, Argentina, Uruguay) or through e-mail campaigns such as in Belgium and Morocco, providing tips for children and parents in quarantine.

Some recommendations and suggestions from the surveyed are the following: the creation of a common platform to share and update documents regarding the pandemic and children rights; the participation in video-conference debates and Webinars on issues related to children rights; the translation of summaries of important documents from other sections; the participation in DCI WG virtual Forum and Q&A sessions; and the sharing of national experiences and ways forward.

Useful tools for child right defenders:

International statements on children's rights and COVID-19:

[United Nations Secretary General Statement: on the impact of the COVID-19 on children](#)
[SRSG VAC Statement on protecting violence against children and safeguard their well-being](#)
[CSRSG CAAC Statement on Ceasefires Present Opportunities to Better Protect Children in Armed Conflict](#)
[UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Statement on children rights and COVID-19](#)
[UN experts call for urgent action to mitigate heightened risks of violence against children](#)
[UN agencies issue urgent call on COVID-19](#)
[Joint Statement by UNHCR and UNICEF: As COVID-19 pandemic continues, forcibly displaced children need more support than ever](#)
[Defence for Children International Press Release](#)

Policy:

[United Nations Secretary-General Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children](#)
[European Commission Communication on COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement](#)
[European Parliament Resolution: EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences](#)

Resources for practitioners:

[UNICEF resource for practitioners on COVID-19](#)
[Child Rights Connect page on responses to COVID-19](#)
[Technical note from the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and UNICEF Platform in Spanish with useful resources for children at home during quarantine](#)
[International Association for children in museums guide](#)
[Education solutions at the time of COVID-19, in multiple languages.](#)
[Q&A COVID-19 at the workplace](#)

Research

[Study on COVID-19 impact on refugee and migrant, coordinated by University of Ghent](#)



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