

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Lives of Working Children and their Families

Key emerging findings of an exploratory study

The COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly and drastically changed the way we live and interact with others. Especially children are affected in various ways and so far there have been diverse efforts to document and understand the impact of COVID-19 (UN 2020). To date, very little has been documented about the impact of COVID-19 on a particular group of children that is considered as one of the most vulnerable group of children worldwide: working children. A previous participatory research with more than 1.800 working children revealed that the main reasons for children's work are to help their families, to overcome poverty and family struggles, and to continue their education (O'Kane, Barros, Meslaoui 2017). Due to their

vulnerability and economic contribution to family incomes working children may be amongst the most affected by the global socio-economic crisis and related impacts triggered by the pandemic.

To address this gap, Kindernothilfe led an exploratory research with child workers and their parents/caregivers across six countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to explore the impact of COVID-19 on working children and their families and to listen to their recommendations for effective and relevant responses to the pandemic. This document presents key emerging findings of the research.



The consultation

In collaboration with six child-focused NGO partners from Bolivia (PASOCAP), Guatemala (CEIPA), Indonesia (PKPA), Kenya (WCY), the Philippines (Kaugmaon), and Zambia (JCM) the exploratory research gathered the views, experiences and messages of 25 working boys, 21 working girls, and nine caregivers. The children aged seven to 17 years were primarily working in informal sectors, such as small-scale vendors, waste collectors, street singers, fruit loaders, tailors, and assistants (for masonry, bakery and shoemaker). Some worked in the agricultural sector. The consultations took place in May 2020 during the lockdowns and exit restrictions, using self-consultation methods. The results were made available via existing (mobile) phones or by picking up the documents.

1. Impact on livelihood and income

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant effect on working children's livelihoods. Lockdowns, health risks, and the closure of public markets and several economic sectors left many child workers and their caregivers either unemployed or resulting in significant income loss of up to 50%. Before the pandemic, children and their caregivers had more stable work and income. It was easier for children to find jobs; they earned more, and their earnings were often used to meet their basic needs, including their school costs. Some caregivers and children changed jobs in order to bring in an income, but due to reduced customers they still earned less. In efforts to find alternative work during the pandemic some girls and boys who used to do light work now spend more hours doing heavy work. Some households reported having no income at all

and relying exclusively on government subsidies and humanitarian assistance, which in many cases is not reaching the most vulnerable.

Working children's responsibilities have changed since the COVID-19 outbreak.

Before, girls and boys used to juggle education, paid work and household work. Since lockdown measures were put in place across most countries, many girls and boys were unable to earn an income and children's responsibilities mainly focused on helping with household chores and trying to continue their studies.

Some boys explained that they are spending less time taking care of their younger siblings because their parents spend more time at home. Other boys and girls continued taking care of their younger siblings and other family members while their parents were out working. For parents, the responsibilities have not significantly changed, as they tend to remain the main income source of the households, but the economic burden and uncertainty have increased due to the pandemic. For some children, one of the most difficult aspects of the crisis has been the family struggle and the frustration of feeling powerless and unable to provide economic support.

"Since COVID-19 things have not been easier for me. My work has suffered loss, the little money we had has been spent on food. Now we rely on my uncle in Lusaka who is also struggling to meet his basic needs."

(11-year-old girl, plaits hair from Zambia)

"I used to see more job opportunities. Now there is no work as we are not selling the products. We rely on the subsidy we received from the government, and my only responsibility is to help with the housework."

(15-year-old girl, small-scale vendor from Bolivia)

Story of a 33-year-old mother of one of the child workers, cook from Bolivia:

"During the pandemic, I had to find an alternative income, as I was not able to continue working. I had to do it in order to cover my daily expenses including medication and other expenses such as the rent.

It has been a sad reality not being able to work as I used to do before the pandemic, but either way, I have to thrive. I am going through difficult times."





Story of a 11-year-old boy, small-scale-vendor from Zambia:

“The most difficult part during COVID -19 was that many things came to a standstill. I stopped going to school. You just spend your time at home. I used to enjoy playing soccer with friends before the outbreak. I also used to help my family selling charcoal. After COVID-19 I could not go out to play and I no longer sell charcoal. I keep my mind busy with house chores. My plan is that after COVID-19 ends, I want to join my parents and work to earn money, as since the day we were asked to stay home my days are just spent like this.”

2. Impact on Education

Before COVID-19, many of the participating girls and boys enjoyed going to school. They appreciated learning about different subjects, playing with other children, interacting with and learning from teachers, and doing sports and school projects. Their dreams and aspirations were very much related to finishing their studies and pursuing a career, owning a house, or starting a business. Some girls and boys used to worry about passing the school year due to their limited time to study or attend school, but felt grateful for having a job that helped them paying the tuition fees and school materials.

“During my remote school, I can study freely. Before COVID-19, I could only work on my school assignments at night. Now, I have more time and I spend it wisely because time is money.”

(14-year-old girl, waste collector from Indonesia)

Prior to the pandemic, many children and their caregivers were already struggling to pay school fees. This struggle continued and intensified during the crisis drastically as some schools continued to cover school fees, even though family incomes have decreased. In Indonesia children advocated for the school fees to be cancelled, especially for months during the lockdown when children couldn't attend school.

In most contexts, children simply had to drop-out because schools (formal and/or informal schools) were closed. As some

schools continued with online education, the lack of internet access, computers or smart phones and internet costs made it difficult for girls and boys to pursue their education during the pandemic. Some children reported that they were given printed homework every two weeks; some received assignments via WhatsApp; and a few received lessons through radio and TV programs. A few children appreciated the increased flexibility for schoolwork after the pandemic.

For many girls and boys, it became harder to understand the lessons online as teachers were less able to explain things clearly and they were less able to listen to and respond to children's questions. Children do not feel they are learning as much as before and those with access to printed materials are tired of a lot of handwriting to copy the lessons and do their homework.

Despite the challenges faced many of the working children continue to give importance to their education, they prioritise efforts to study, and remain hopeful that they can return to school when it is safe.

“My work at least helped me to pay for the school fees.”

(12-year-old boy, baker assistant from Guatemala)

“During the home-schooling program, our teachers give our homework through an internet-based application. Sadly, my parents and I do not have money to purchase internet data. Therefore, I have to go to a bakery shop near my house in the morning to access free Wi-Fi from its parking lot. I always wear a mask when I go out.”

(16-year-old girl, Quran tuition from Indonesia)

3. Impact on nutrition and physical health

The research showed that nutrition of working children and their families is negatively affected by COVID-19. Most of the families reported either having less access to food, eating smaller portions, having a reduced number of meals per day, or having a less balanced diet. Before the pandemic, many of them were able to choose what to eat, had access to their favourite food, used to eat snacks between meals, and they more regularly ate meat or fish.

Since the pandemic, a minority of children are eating better than before as they spend their days at home and have even gained weight. However, most children switched to a plant-based diet with some limitations to access fruits. Some children and their parents skip their meals to give it to younger family members. Some families rely on vegetables and fruits that grow near their

households. Humanitarian assistance has been key for family survival, but the food assistance has not reached all families, and it is not sufficient to feed all their family members. Some children are experiencing malnutrition by eating only once a day or going through the day drinking only water.

Many girls and boys are resting more during the pandemic due to loss of work and home base restrictions. However, some girls and boys experience more physical exhaustion since the pandemic either because they work longer shifts, they are engaged in heavy work such as agricultural work or masonry, or because they spend more time helping with household chores or looking after family members.

“Before we did not have much to eat, we were always short of food. In my family we no longer have money and we lack food. There are days when we have nothing to eat; our situation worsens.”

(30-year-old mother of one of the child workers, small-scale vendor from Bolivia)

“I rest a little more in the afternoon after returning from the field or after helping my grandmother with the housework because in the fried chicken shop they no longer gave me work. Sometimes I play with my brother in the afternoon or go to bed later.”

(11-year-old boy, agricultural worker from Guatemala)

“If we have work then we have good food; if not, then we just eat anything that is available, or worst cases, we skipped meals.”

(16-year-old boy, waste collector from the Philippines)



Story of a 15-year-old girl, small-scale vendor from the Philippines:

“I want to have a small store where I could sell iced candy, iced popsicle, munchkins, or french fries. I wish I could gain an income from selling these things to be able to help my family especially during this COVID-19 pandemic. Now, I have a small store but because I do not have enough capital I only gain little. From these earnings, I gave half of it to my mother, and I kept the other half. These savings are still for food for the family when my parents run out of money, which happens most of the time.”



4. Impact on mental health and wellbeing

Health risks, and the lack of income and unemployment triggered by the pandemic significantly changed the worries, fears and aspirations of working children and their caregivers.

Before, their main concern was to earn enough to be able to support their families and for children to continue their education. Some of the children were also worried about their safety and combining work and school.

As a result of the pandemic, caregivers and children face ongoing, changing and increased worries and uncertainties. Children and their parents fear that they or their family members risk getting sick, and they worry about job losses, reduced income which affects their

ability to feed their family members, to cover school costs, and to pay rent and utility bills. Some families worried about increasing debts. This psychological stress led to frustration, sadness, and anger for not being able to go out and work to support their families for some children consulted. All they hear on the media is information about the pandemic, which has increased their fear and uncertainty about their future.

The movement restrictions had a significant impact on the type of activities and coping mechanisms used by children and their families to release stress during the pandemic. Most of the children have more time to rest, but many felt bored and reported life disruption as one of the main challenges of the crisis. Many girls and boys missed playing outdoors and hanging out with friends or seeing relatives who did not live in their neighbourhood. However, they have also balanced these feelings with thoughts that help them focusing on the present,

routines that give structure to their days, and leisure activities including reading, listening to music, and workouts. Some children and caregivers sought hope and comfort through their religious beliefs and practices.

Before COVID-19 children interacted with a wider group of

school friends, work peers, extended family members, and community members. The confinement reduced children's communication with their friends and teachers, while increasing their communication with their families. A significant positive impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown measures has been that many working children have increased quality time with their parents/caregivers and siblings. Before each family member was busy with work, school or other responsibilities outside of the home, and some families did not even have time to eat a meal together. For many children the communication with their parents and siblings significantly improved during the confinement, giving them opportunities to share their views and experiences, and to explore solutions together. Some caregivers described how they had more time to take care of and play with younger children, and older children also played more with their younger siblings. Despite the multiple stresses brought about by the pandemic, strengthened communication and improved relationships between children and their caregivers is an immense protective factor contributing to increased resilience of children, caregivers and families.

While the majority of children and caregivers commented on improved communication among family members, a few children said they had not experienced any positive change in their communication with their families, and for a few children there were negative changes. A few children felt like their opinions were heard less since the pandemic, as adults only had time to talk about the impact of Covid-19. Moreover, a few children and caregivers reported increased risks of violence in families, with increased quarrels between family members due to the stress of reduced earnings and increased domestic violence, especially if a family member drank alcohol.

"I am worried of contracting Corona and starving due to lack of food"

(15-year-old girl, unpaid domestic worker from Kenya)

"I am forced to keep myself busy by doing assignments which are becoming a boring routine, reading story books and watching news which is all about COVID-19."

(15-year-old boy, community worker from Kenya)

"Now we communicate more because my parents spend more time at home"

(13-year-old girl, tailor from Guatemala)

"I can hear my drunk mother and how my grandparents scold her for not stopping drinking alcohol. I can hear my older brother coming home from work exhausted."

(11-year-old boy, working in agriculture from Guatemala)

Working children's key messages and recommendations

To Governments

- Ensure fair humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable including access to basic food, and essential hygiene items.
- Increase subsidies and cash support to cover lack of income to meet family needs.
- Ensure children's right to education by providing free education, free internet access, devices, and necessary materials to continue home school.
- Provide an inclusive education that reaches children with no internet access for online learning, including education through radio and TV programmes.
- Increase COVID-19 free testing and ensure access to free health care and medication.
- Promote decent safe work and livelihood support for parents and family members.
- Provide utilities at no cost.
- Provide agricultural seeds and promote food security.

To Neighbours And Communities

- Show solidarity by supporting each other and sharing food.
- Share advice and emotional support.
- Protect each other to prevent infection spread.
- Advocate with local government to access humanitarian assistance and subsidies.

To Employers

- Avoid firing employees and provide safe and decent work so that children and their families have a source of income.
- Ensure health and safety measures for workers.
- Provide flexible working hours.

To Civil Society Organisations

- Provide humanitarian assistance including access to basic food, and essential hygiene items.
- Provide psychosocial support and capacity building of girls and boys to enhance skills and confidence.
- Support children to continue their education by providing school materials, scholarships, and financial support.
- Raise awareness on the COVID-19 pandemic by sharing accurate information about what is happening in society and how to prevent infection.
- Advocate for children's rights and the improved situation of working children by enabling their voices to be heard.

To Parents And Extended Family Members

- Protect children.
- Provide advice and guidance.
- Give children quality time, care, attention and good communication by creating a safe and favourable home environment where everybody in the family will feel a sense of belonging.
- Support children's education.
- Take care of cleanliness and hygiene.
- Provide financial help to support children's education and basic needs.

To Faith Communities

- Provide humanitarian assistance including access to basic food, and essential hygiene items.
- Advocate with local and national government for access to humanitarian aid and financial support for the most vulnerable.
- Provide counselling and spiritual support through prayer and open forums.



To The Private Sector

- Provide humanitarian including access to basic food, and essential hygiene items.
- Support livelihood and food security programmes.
- Provide scholarships.
- Telecommunication companies could provide online free internet access for home school.

To Ombudsman

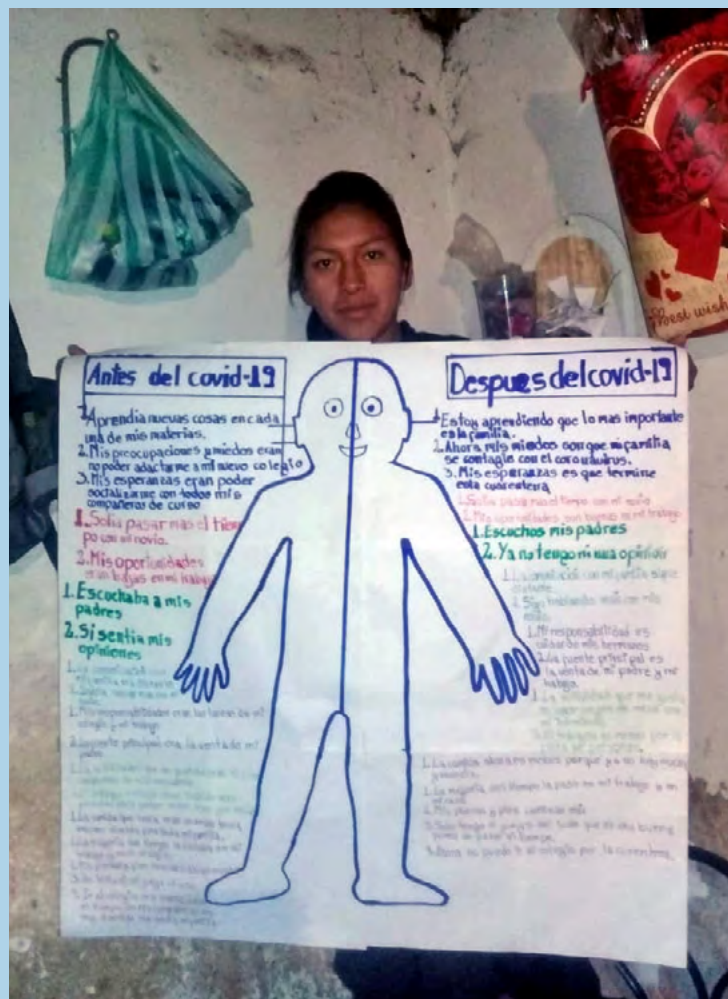
- Prevent domestic violence and provide family counselling.
- Advocate for and support families who cannot afford their house rent.

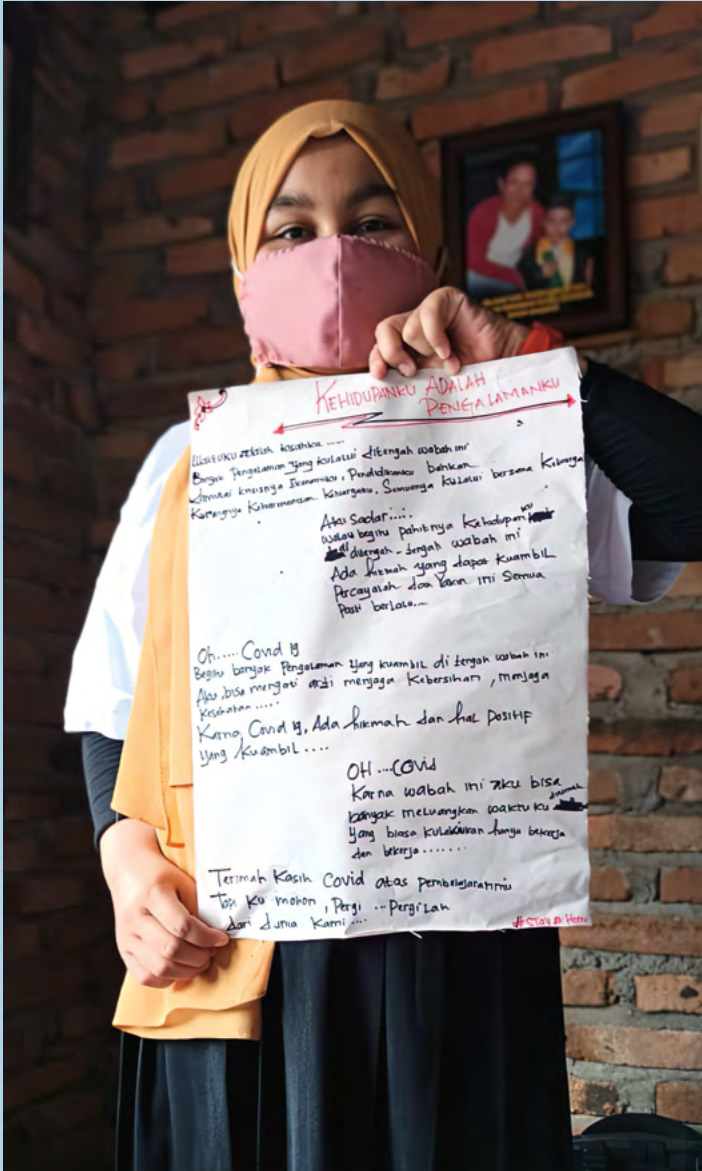
To Children

- Restrict from usual movement to prevent infection spread.
- Respect parents/caregivers and follow the prevention measures to stay healthy.
- Speak up about the negative things in the community.

To The Media

- Broadcast working children and their families' experiences of COVID-19 and its impact on their lives.
- Share accurate information about COVID-19 and ways to prevent it.





Story of a 16-year-old girl, Quran Tuition from Indonesia:

My time is My Story

*Many experiences I have been through in this pandemic
Started with my financial crisis, my education,
even the lack of harmony in my family
I went it through with my family*

Then I realised...

*Despite the bitter life of mine in this pandemic
There is a wisdom I can gain, a trust and
believe that everything shall pass*

Oh COVID-19...

*I can take so many experiences from this pandemic
I can understand what it means by taking
care of my hygiene and health
Because of COVID-19, I learned a lesson and
there are positive things I can get*

Oh COVID-19...

*Because of this pandemic, I can spend more time at home
All I can do was working and working*

Thank you COVID-19 for your lessons

But I beg you, go... go away...

From our world...

Imprint

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