



# Children's voices in the time of COVID-19

Continued child activism  
in the face of personal challenges

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We would like to thank the generous contributions of children and young people who shared their time and thoughts in interviews. We are grateful to colleagues and staff members from field offices: Mays Alnawayseh, Ana Alvear, Marlene Arroyo, Roberto Casquero, Vilma Cobani, Nela Hukic, Rashid Kanneh, Suzanne Kodio, Carla Lewis, Simona Mihai, Bernardin Bahati Ntaumenya, Welinton Pereira, Edgleison Rodrigues, Reginaldo Silva, and Shabira Sultana. We are thankful for the assistance and support given by Kate Shaw, World Vision Public Engagement Communications Officer, who provided useful insights as we produced this report.

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## CHILD AND ADULT SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS

World Vision ensured safe and ethical participation of children when they shared their stories, adhering to World Vision's safeguarding protocols. Names of children have been anonymised and changed to ensure confidentiality. All photos were taken and used with informed consent.

COVER PHOTO © World Vision. Children and young people participating from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mongolia, Peru and Romania taking part in online consultations on COVID-19. Interior photos © World Vision / Jon Warren, Kate Shaw and R. Bormom.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Children from Bangladesh use drawings to express their views on COVID-19 outbreak.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was conducted in March and April 2020 to explore children and young people's reflections and perceptions on the COVID-19 outbreak. Children and young people have already started mobilising themselves, using online platforms to share their experiences and support others with information and emotional support. This research on young voices was organised in response to the young people's continued child activism in the face of personal challenges. We hope that the results will prove useful to other child rights focused organisations as we seek to better understand what children and young people want to do in this time of crisis and how they can be supported, equipped, and encouraged.

***We should inform ourselves with the latest news and share it with others because knowledge is power. We can arm ourselves with answers. We, as children, can share awareness messages with everyone; this way the hygiene advices could be more effective.***

*(Suelv, age 15, Albania)*

Listening to children in the context of COVID-19 is part of how WorldVision is meeting our commitment to place children and young people at the centre of our work, focus on their empowerment, and amplify their voices from local to global levels. World Vision will continually seek children and young people's perspectives to understand their realities and inform decision-making processes based on their input.

***There are many people who are completely unaware and do not take any precautions. So, we can shoot short videos to promote more awareness. We can use an online platform to upload videos with hashtags and help by doing with something productive.***

*(Jose, age 15, Peru)*

The consultation project included 101 children and young people (58 girls and 43 boys) between the ages of 8 and 18 from 13 countries: Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Sierra Leone and Syrian refugee children living in refugee camps near the Turkish-Syrian border. The project embraced an intergenerational collaboration between two adult researchers and 12 young leaders, ages 13 to 18, who engaged as peer researchers.

Three essential themes that emerged from the data included, (1) changing lives on a massive scale, (2) keeping safe but mobilising against the expansion of the COVID-19, and (3) exploring what to do next. Across all 13 countries, the respondents highlighted three important factors that directly changed their lives on a massive scale: (a) school disruption, (b) emotional distress due to social distancing, and (c) increasing poverty. During interviews, 71 per cent of the children and young people said that they felt isolated and lonely due to school closures. Moreover, they pointed out that this had a negative impact on

their learning and daily routines and increased their sense of isolation and despair. Similarly, 91 per cent of respondents acknowledged that they were facing emotional distress and troubling feelings, including anxiety, anger, and worry due to the uncertainty of how long this crisis will last and dealing with isolation.

Despite these challenging feelings, children and young people expressed that they wanted to contribute to the fight against the spread of COVID-19 in their respective communities. They stated that it was very important for them to get involved in raising awareness about protecting people from the spread of the virus, informing their peers about the risks associated with COVID-19, and helping the most vulnerable, including the homeless, elderly, and children and young people, amongst others. Due to the nature of this crisis, the children were not able to plan activities in-person, and their awareness-raising activities have shifted online and to other remote collaboration systems instead. Research suggest that virtual platforms can provide a safe and conducive environment for children and young people to engage with their peers and other community members, model positive behaviours and increasing the use of social media for social change. <sup>1</sup>

The children and young people spoke about a great sense of social justice, serving others, and a desire to use their voices to support the vulnerable and marginalised. Children and young people asserted that they could play a pivotal role in raising awareness on COVID-19 and providing information to people because, in many cases, they had a better education and more access to technology and information than their parents and other community members.

Respondents provided a number of recommendations for child-focussed agencies, decision makers, adult professionals, and children and young people to integrate into their engagements and strategies so that children and young people are supported to take actions on issues that matter to them.

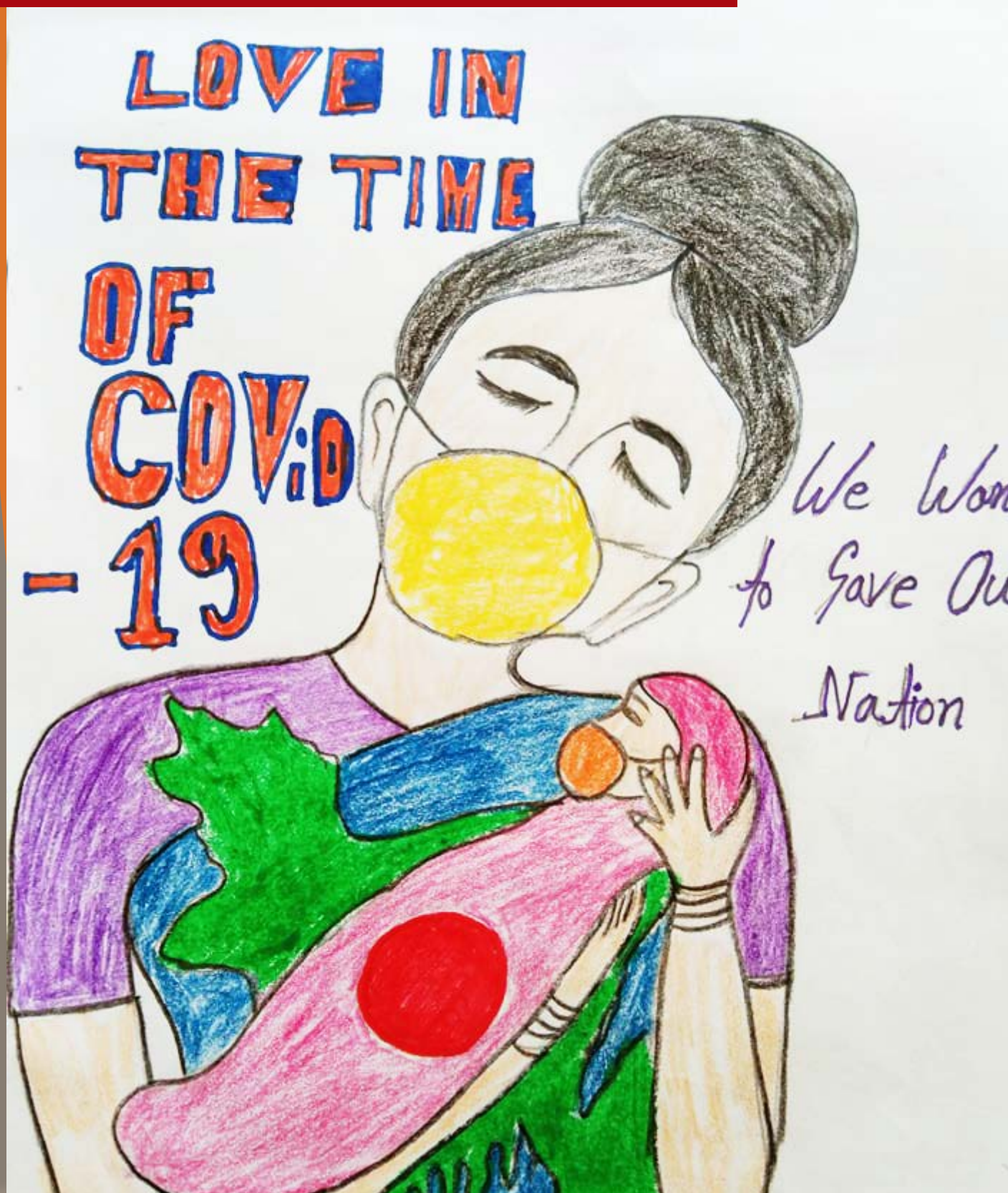


In this spirit, World Vision seeks to honour children and young people's contributions by sharing their recommendations, and would like to thank all of the children and young people who participated in this project for their commitment, bravery and openness. This research would not be possible without the support and enthusiasm of the 101 children and young people who were willing to speak not only about how coronavirus has affected them personally, but also share their thoughts and plans on how to help their friends, families, and communities through this crisis.

**Dana Buzducea**  
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# 2 / INTRODUCTION



Children from Bangladesh use drawings to express their views on COVID-19 outbreak.

# 2 / INTRODUCTION

Everything about the coronavirus made me confused when it first started. As you know, stories, panic, opinions, and the virus itself, all spread quickly. I feel like it was just yesterday that I was reading about this virus appearing in China. I never thought it would come to my country and my town, but suddenly my life has been totally changed. School has stopped, cafes are closed, and socialising is forbidden. I really miss my friends, nature, school, workshops, and everything else that I cannot do right now, but I think – and am hopeful – that this will end soon.

Sometimes I feel like some kind of prisoner. I believe that children and young people are struggling the most with this virus crisis. Children are mentally suffering, but not only this is affecting us. We are badly in need of physical activities too. Children are used to moving, running, and socialising every day, and now we are confined to our rooms and houses. Like everyone else, we want this to end as soon as possible.

Thankfully, we are aware of the situation and are taking it seriously. It's important for children to follow the main rule of stopping the virus' spread – to stay home. My mom explained how to stop the coronavirus to me in a really interesting way. She said that the virus is like a match flame and people are the matches; if we light six matches next to each other but we take the sixth one out, five will burn and the sixth one will stop the fire (the virus) from spreading. That means if we isolate ourselves, we will definitely stop extending the virus' reach. Staying home is our responsibility right now.

We should also be patient and think positively, because this is the only way to beat this disease. We need to stick together and isolate ourselves. We can contribute to fighting against the expansion of COVID-19 by talking with our friends about the coronavirus, sharing our opinions, and understanding the consequences.

As children, we can support our friends and families in these difficult times of crisis thanks to our access to information and technology. We can stay in contact with each other and disseminate positive and educational messages.



We need to avoid people who are making up stories that are not true as this is creating unnecessary mass panic. We should convince our peers, parents, and elders that this panic is not needed, but, at the same time, encourage them to stay home, be patient, and follow the rules.

We are all in this together, and if we really want to stop this virus, we have to work together as a community. We, as children and young people, will continue doing public awareness raising using photos and videos to let everyone know that we can do this together, we can beat this virus together, and we are stronger when we are unified by a common goal.

**Ajlin**  
Young leader, age 14, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
April 2020



# 3 / BACKGROUND



Salimata, age 15, from Mali, shot a video to raise awareness on hygiene practices during COVID-19 times.

# 3 / BACKGROUND

In just a few short months, the COVID-19 pandemic became a global phenomenon, affecting over 200 countries and territories. <sup>2</sup> Despite various efforts by governments and individuals around the world to 'flatten the curve' and stem the COVID-19 spread, at the time of writing, COVID-19 continues to sicken and kill people around the world, collapse national health systems, and affect the most vulnerable populations. <sup>3</sup>

**“ 91 per cent of the children and young people reported feeling emotional distress or facing troubling experiences. ”**

Children and young people <sup>4</sup> are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 with school closures and loss of access to their social safety net. As lockdowns spread, hundreds of millions of students are not receiving school meals, and many parents are unable to provide food after losing their jobs and livelihoods. <sup>5</sup> Impeded movement and disrupted communications have prevented children and young people from contacting friends and relatives, wreaking confusion, anxiety, and despair. Already, reports suggest that isolation and confinement put children at increased risk of domestic violence and other forms of abuse, including child trafficking, child labour, and online child abuse. <sup>6</sup>

## **Articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) associated with children's right to participate**

**Article 12:** The right to be listened to and taken seriously

**Article 13:** The right to freedom of expression

**Article 14:** The right to freedom of conscience, thought and religion

**Article 15:** The right to freedom of association

**Article 16:** The right to privacy

**Article 17:** The right to information

**Article 29:** The right to education that promotes respect for human rights and democracy

**Article 42:** The right to know their rights

World Vision does not see children and young people as helpless, hidden victims of this pandemic. They are not only recipients and beneficiaries of aid; they are also active social actors capable of interacting with others and shaping their environments. A growing body of evidence has shown that children and young people are eminently able to advocate for social change and actively embrace the opportunity to work towards the promotion and protection of their rights. <sup>7</sup> Creating spaces for child activism has a transformative impact on the children and young people involved and also changes society for the better as social structures and institutions become more inclusive and responsive to children's rights. <sup>8</sup>

**75 per cent of the children and young people acknowledged that it is emotionally challenging to deal with physical and social distancing restrictions.**

”

A young leader from who is member of the Bangladeshi Child Forum is taking online action to reduce the spread of the virus.

Furthermore, experiences from the field reveal that when children and young people have the space and opportunity to participate and engage in collective actions, they feel motivated to work with their peers to transform their communities and make a change in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Recognising children and young people as active, competent social actors is a paradigm shift in which they are acknowledged as capable, knowledgeable individuals who can make decisions and influence their environments.<sup>10</sup> Research from developing and middle-income countries reveal that when children and young people become active citizens, they learn from others and their confidence increases as they become aware of their respective abilities to contribute to change.<sup>11</sup>

When children and young people are involved in participatory activities with their peers, they are better able to cope with hardships and improve their self-confidence and sense of personal efficacy.<sup>12</sup> In alignment with this position, World Vision spoke with approximately 100 children and young people from 13 countries in March and April 2020 to explore their understanding and experiences during the COVID-19 crisis and how they would like to contribute to stopping the spread of COVID-19. This report provides a summary of their responses with inspirational examples of young participants already taking action with their friends and communities, as well as areas that they have identified as needing greater support.

# 4 / METHODOLOGY



Children and young people from Bangladesh teach community members proper handwashing to prevent the spread of COVID-19

# 4 / METHODOLOGY

This report draws on research undertaken in March and April 2020 to give children and young people the opportunity to express their perspectives in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because this consultation focusses on ways in which to support children and young people's empowerment and opportunities to partake in child-led actions in response to the health crisis, questions did not include specific queries regarding child protection issues as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

## AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research was to explore children and young people's views and experiences related to the outbreak of COVID-19, their ideas on how to engage in online community-based activities to support their peers and communities, and their thoughts on how to raise awareness on protective measures against COVID-19. Research questions included:

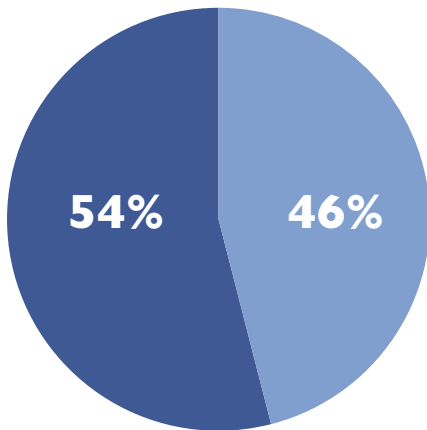
- How is COVID-19 affecting your life or the lives of children and young people in your country?
- How are children and young people contributing, or can they contribute, to the fight against the spread of COVID-19?
- Do you have any ideas for actions or a message to other children and young people about how they can raise awareness about COVID-19 using social media or other means?

## SAMPLE

In March and April 2020, more than 100 children and young people participated in a series of interviews and focus group discussions, conducted remotely via social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, and Skype. Many were members of World Vision's Young Leaders advocacy programme,<sup>13</sup> while others were active in child parliaments and clubs in World Vision programme areas. Altogether, the consultation included 101 children and young people (58 girls and 43 boys) between the ages of 8 and 18 from 13 countries (Albania, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Mongolia, Nicaragua, Peru, Philippines, Romania, and Sierra Leone, and Syrian refugee children living in refugee camps near the Turkish-Syrian border). Selection criteria considered gender, age, ability, religion, geographic region, context (i.e. fragile context representation), location (i.e. rural versus urban areas), and ethnicity to ensure diverse perspectives.

**GRAPH 1.**

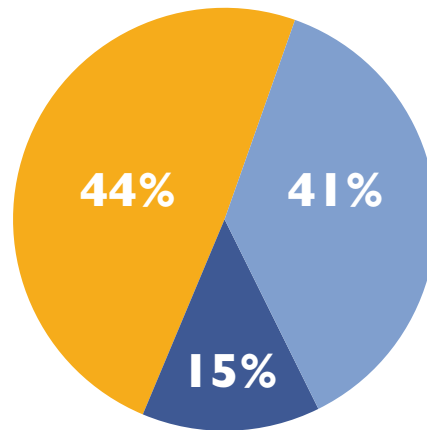
Research participants' self-reported gender



■ BOYS  
■ GIRLS

**GRAPH 2.**

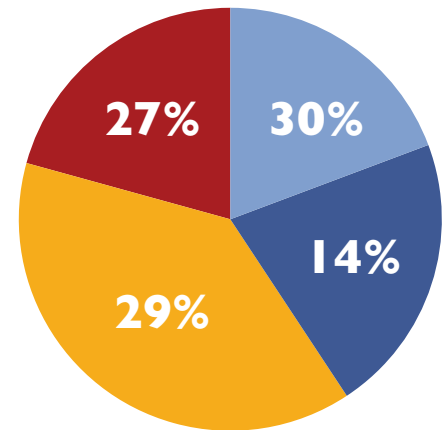
Research participants' age



■ AGE 8-13  
■ AGE 14-15  
■ AGE 16-18

**GRAPH 3.**

Participants' geographical location



■ AFRICA  
■ MIDDLE EAST & EASTERN EUROPE  
■ ASIA  
■ LATIN AMERICA

## METHODS, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

The methodology included collaboration between adults on the consultation team and young leaders engaged as peer researchers. Using an intergenerational collaboration approach, the research team included two adult professionals and 12 young researchers (ages 12 to 18) who interviewed children and young people over social media and messaging platforms. Four of the children also served as research advisers to support the consultation team of adult professionals.

It is worth acknowledging that accessing respondents via digital means could be a limitation of the research. Children and young people in the most fragile environments or living in extreme poverty may not have access to technology and thus may not be completely represented. However, the young researchers were able to reach peers in a way that would have been almost impossible for the adult team members, due to restrictions imposed in each country to control COVID-19. The data collection and advisory tasks were made possible by prior training on research skills; the young researchers had previously conducted data collection and analyses.

*71 per cent of the child respondents said that they feel isolated and lonely since their schools closed.*



Portrait of Dulamsuren, age 12, from Mongolia.

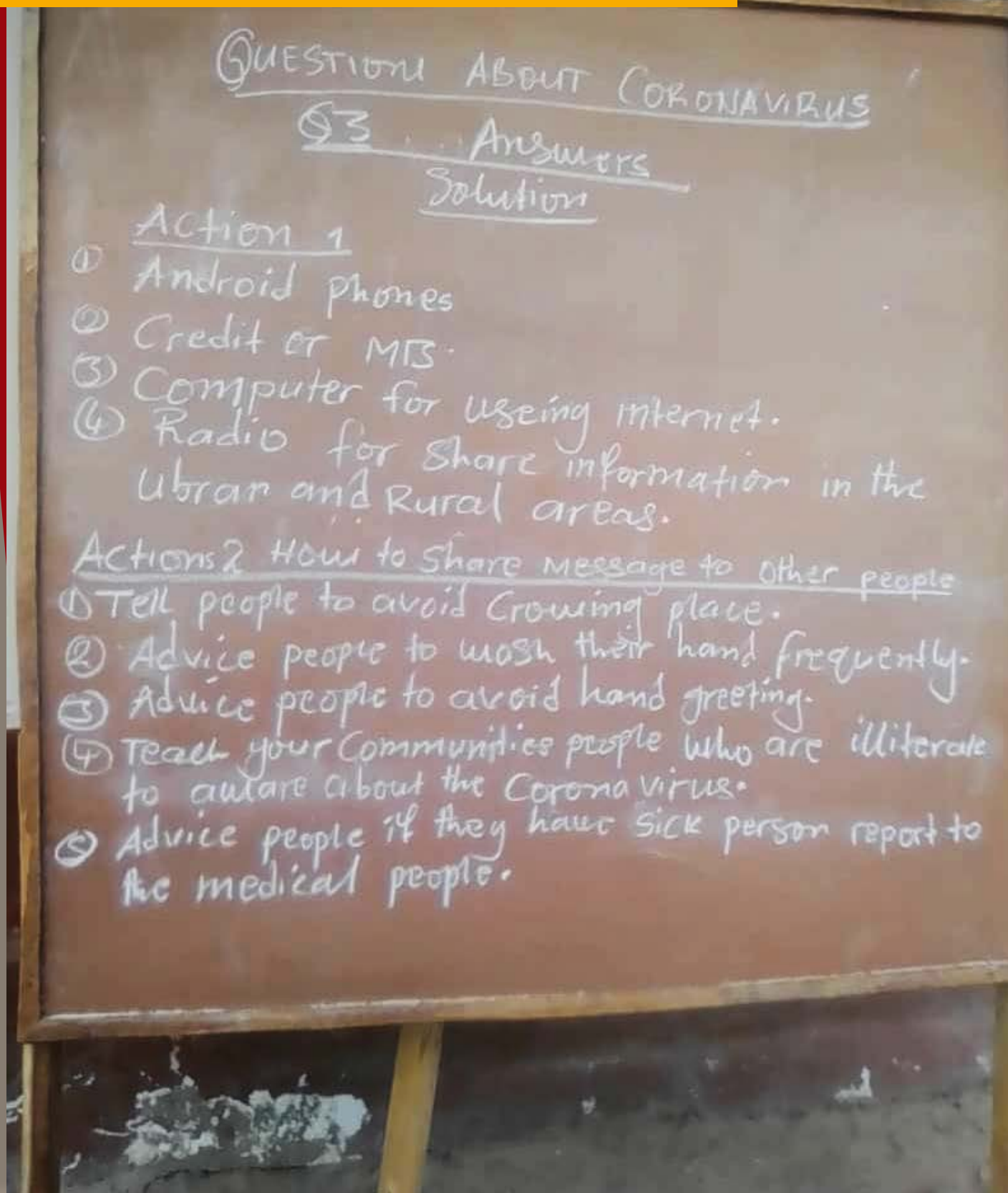
This project used a qualitative interview approach. In each country, children and young people were asked three questions (in addition to the prompt questions used to stimulate the conversation) and then given the option to either respond individually or as part of a focus group discussion, according to their preference. As a result, young participants from Brazil, Nicaragua, Peru, and Syria were interviewed in focus groups, while interviews in other countries were one-on-one.

The research team analysed interview data by identifying and categorising emerging themes or patterns within the responses, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the information.

## ETHICS

This consultation project followed the minimum standards for consulting with children and young people developed by the Inter-agency Working Group on Children's Participation. These principles include, transparency, honesty, accountability, provision of a child-friendly environment, equality of opportunity, and the safety and protection of young participants.<sup>14</sup> The project took into account the special considerations required to gain informed consent, ensure confidentiality and anonymity, acknowledge the diverse cultures of the research sites, and refrain from presenting any information that may potentially harm participants.<sup>15</sup>

# 5 / FINDINGS



Children and young people from Sierra Leona summarised their findings about COVID-19 on a blackboard.



# 5 / FINDINGS

Although the children and young people came from a wide range of backgrounds, contexts, and countries, their experiences and actions in the face of COVID-19 all fell within common themes. Participants talked about the sudden and vast changes to their lives, described ongoing activism to spread knowledge in new ways while staying safe, and the overwhelming need many of them felt to do more to respond to the crisis.

## CHANGING LIVES ON A MASSIVE SCALE

*The coronavirus affects me a lot because I cannot go out to play like before; I do not go to school or church. I miss my friends and classmates. All the boys and girls in the community and the country are affected. (Christopher, age 8, Nicaragua)*

Consultation participants were asked to share their views on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their lives, personally and in their respective countries. Across all 13 countries, the interviewees pointed out three vital dimensions that directly changed their lives on a massive scale: school disruption, emotional distress due to social distancing, and increasing poverty. In Sierra Leone, a focus group discussion led by one of the young researchers showed that the main impacts perceived by the children and young people are disrupted education, restriction of freedom of movement, increased costs of many essential supplies and limited social life, including recreational activities and public prayer.

In every country, the child respondents particularly highlighted the need to focus on the most vulnerable populations. They said that governments, civil society, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to consider them in their responses to this crisis.

*I do not feel good. Before, we were better as the schools were open and we were learning. Then suddenly, this virus came, and everything stopped. We pray Allah will keep us safe from this pandemic. (Joudy, age 13, Syrian refugee in Turkey)*

### School disruption

When participants were asked why they considered school disruption to be a critical issue in the crisis, they drew on their personal experiences to explain. 71 per cent of the child respondents said that they feel isolated and lonely since their schools were closed.

Children and young people across all participating countries agreed that the decision to temporarily close schools was an appropriate measure to contain the spread of the pandemic. However, they

highlighted the impact this had on their learning and daily routines and how it had increased their sense of isolation and despair. Because closures often took place with little notice, neither educational staff nor students were prepared for the move to distance-learning. Egshiglen, age 15 from Mongolia, noted, “We are behind in our schoolwork. Home schooling is not as efficient as learning in real life. This is something very important for us who are children and students.”

***My life and that of everyone in my country has been greatly affected since we have lost classes, and the teachers were not prepared for the online school modality. At this point they have not explained the subjects, they do not give examples, and we do not know much about the subjects we are taking online. Besides, most teachers do not share explanations about subjects and assignments on virtual platforms. (Angie, age 16, Nicaragua)***

This reflects a common frustration amongst children, some of whom had difficulties following the lessons and responding to the online tasks. Children also suggested that the schools’ online platforms were not given much attention in the past, which further aggravated the switch during the pandemic. As Drini, age 16 from Albania, explained, “Students and teachers collaborate with each other online. But online classes are not as specific... as they are in school. Almost every student learns and understands better in school with the teacher’s explanation.”

These constraints were further exacerbated in communities where schools were closed, but remote learning options were not provided, leaving many students without alternatives to continue studying during quarantine. According to children and young people, students from the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities were particularly likely to be excluded from alternative learning opportunities. Miruna, age 15, from Romania noted, “Many children did not previously have access to education, and now, as families do not benefit from essential things, such as electricity or the Internet, the children are limited in the possibility of attending online courses.” Furthermore, another Romanian participant, Teodora, age 16, argued that remote learning was a discriminatory practice since ‘children who live in rural areas do not have Internet access’ or the same opportunity to study as other more privileged children and young people.

***Coronavirus is a big complication for our daily learning because all our schools are closed. To continue learning, we can just read books and do some research on the internet. But having access to the internet is not possible for all children in Mali because many of them live in poor conditions and therefore they can’t study online. (Salimata, age 15, Mali)***

Similarly, Jason, age 15, from the DRC, pointed out that ‘the right to education is suspended’, and that schools and parents were not assisting students to cope with school closures. Online home schooling is not possible in many parts of the DRC due to the extreme poverty and families’ lack of access to technology and connectivity.

*We are 10 people living in my house. This time is hard. They ordered all the mosques, schools, and shops to close. Everything is closed. So, I spend my time studying the Quran. Every day I take a picture of the passage I am studying, and we send it to the Sheikh because we can't attend the mosque. (Muhammad, age 11, Syrian refugee in Turkey)*

## Emotional distress due to social distancing

*Everyone feels scared. We all stay home all day. We communicate with friends or other family members only by our phones. This is something we haven't done before. (Redi, age 17, Albania)*

From interviews and group discussions, it was evident that children and young people were facing different levels of emotional distress due to the COVID-19 outbreak. A total of 91 per cent of interviewees reported feeling emotional distress or facing troubling experiences. When asked more broadly about how they were coping with the changes in their lives in this context, they reported experiencing feelings of anxiety, anger, and worry due to isolation, the uncertainty of how long this crisis would last, and dealing with isolation. Ajlin, age 14, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, spoke of confusion due to a lack of information and, in many cases, fake stories and disinformation about the outbreak, which generate panic.

In Bangladesh, children and young people reported high levels of stress due to fear of COVID-19, as well as a struggle to find alternate coping mechanisms while maintaining social distancing. Rejuan, age 16, said, "Children cannot play together. It's very harmful for every child's mental and physical health." Building on this, Sharmim, a 16-year-old from Bangladesh, reflected that 'this is such a heart-breaking situation for children'.

Throughout the country consultations, children and young people consistently expressed that the enormous disruption of their lives had a negative impact on their mental health. This included a fear of their friends or relatives getting infected and a lack of confidence in their local health services. Children and young people reported a sense of feeling unmoored and shaken as everything had almost completely stopped in their communities. Natalia, a Peruvian girl, explained:

*We are in quarantine, and we can't go out. The situation is very bad. People are experiencing anguish and desperation at home. At the beginning of the quarantine, people were behaving well, but as time passes, many people are not respecting the lockdown, and these people are putting others at risk. (Natalia, age 16, Peru)*

During interviews, children and young people revealed that many of them felt a sense of worry or frustration by the restrictions put in place, and that those feelings were intensified by the lack of necessary coping skills for emotionally distressing situations. For some of them, this is the first time in their lives that they are experiencing a situation of this magnitude.

***Coronavirus is affecting us very seriously. First of all, stress. We get depressed because of staying home. It affects me, [and I am feeling] not so much joy. I feel like I can't stay in the house. Maybe some [children] who stay in the rural areas can go out in the garden, but those from an urban area can only stay in their flats. (Alexandru, age 13, Romania)***

However, for some of the young respondents, the sense of crisis and confinement was all too familiar. In the DRC, children and young people have previously faced many challenges as a result of ongoing armed conflict, social upheaval, and the Ebola outbreak. In other countries, many children and young people have been exposed to violence in their homes, schools, and communities.<sup>16</sup> One girl reflected on these deeply troubling issues and how they increased children and young people's sense of vulnerability during the current crisis:

***I do not like this situation. We wanted to announce the end of Ebola, but now coronavirus is already coming. We stay at home, we no longer study, we no longer go to church, and we are unable to participate in meetings. And, despite the fact that isolation will help protect us from the virus, this will bring starvation that can still kill us too. (Anita, age 16, DRC)***

***Coronavirus and Ebola are almost identical but not the same in the sense that coronavirus spreads faster than Ebola. Coronavirus infects the whole world while Ebola is only happening in one part of the world. (Gbenday, age 15, Sierra Leone)***

In terms of social distancing, the consultation revealed that children and young people were well aware of the rationale behind physical separation and isolation, and they were supportive of these measures to keep COVID-19 from spreading. That said, 75 per cent of the respondents acknowledged that it was emotionally challenging to deal with the physical and social distancing restrictions. However, many of them were struggling, mentally and emotionally, to deal with the consequences of the restrictions.

Particularly, they identified factors such as loneliness, reduced peer networks and relationships, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, limited internet access in their communities, and empty free time as circumstances beyond their control that made it hard to manage as the lockdowns persisted. Teodora, age 16, from Romania said, "Children feel trapped in [their] homes. We are used to playing outside and communicating with as many people as possible."

This sense of frustration was shared by respondents in many countries. Lishee, age 14 from Mongolia commented, "Because of the coronavirus, we can't work, study, and go out properly. Everything feels distant from me, like I am in a faraway land." Other children and young people added:

***Children have been locked down; that is why we cannot go outside. We also cannot play together. It's very harmful for every children's mental and physical health. (Rejuan, age 16, Bangladesh)***

***Children under 18 can't go outside at all, so the only way for us to communicate is over social media... It is kind of a disappointing rule because we cannot see each other. (Arijan, age 15, Bosnia and Herzegovina)***

Some of the participants expressed frustration and concern that not everyone respected self-isolation recommendations, and many people in their communities were still going out. Bethania, age 16, from Brazil, worried that the large numbers of homeless families in her city were unable to quarantine themselves given their lack of housing, and highlighted the need for authorities to provide shelter for them to keep them safe. She also mentioned that there were many people who were not following the quarantine due to misinformation and, in some cases, a lack of awareness and solidarity with others. Similarly, Rebeca, a Peruvian girl observed:

***We are in quarantine. Before we were able to go out to buy groceries. But the market was closed this week. I think that each one of us has to abide by the quarantine. We saw how people were fighting to buy food in the market; this should make us to reflect on that. (Rebeca, age 15, Peru)***

## Increasing poverty

Most of the children and young people we spoke with were specifically concerned about the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. They were especially worried about their parents' ability to earn a living in the face of the harsh conditions their countries had had to impose. They were also troubled about the economic impact the crisis would have on the most vulnerable and concerned for the people in their communities who do not have any savings and depend on the money they earn daily.

Nafis, a 17-year-old from Bangladesh, argued, "Every country is being locking down day by day. Every type of work is being stopped in my country. This situation is so much more difficult for those people who barely survive with basic needs." Other respondents articulated a similar rationale when describing their distresses.

***We are very worried for the people who are informal workers, those who make their income on a daily basis. These people are suffering the consequences of the quarantine, and their families will start to starve very soon. So, solidarity will be very important to support each other. (Jose, age 15, Peru)***

Children and young people were fully aware that the growing health crisis would disproportionately hit the most vulnerable populations, to which many of them belong.

***A big problem is the lack of water. For example, one of the most important recommendations is handwashing, but where we live, we don't have water. Many houses get water only once a week; so, how are these people going to have good hygiene opportunities? They can't! This will cause many infections. (Lara, age 17, Brazil)***

Interviewees also highlighted that the economic crisis associated with COVID-19 had an impact on basic government services, such as water, electricity, health services, and safety. A Brazilian girl, Bethania, age 16, explained, "The major problem is that our health system is not ready to face this crisis. Another major

problem is the economic tragedy for many families, especially those who work every day to receive a daily income.”

Respondents pointed out that the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak are devastating for their countries overall. Ahona, age 16, a girl from Bangladesh, said that the economic crisis would affect mainly children and young people, saying, “Overall, it is a very pessimistic time for everyone in the nation.”

## KEEPING SAFE BUT MOBILISING AGAINST THE EXPANSION OF COVID-19

The children and young people were fully aware of current events surrounding the pandemic and were abiding by the regulations and quarantines imposed by their governments. Laura, age 15 from Albania, asserted that ‘the only way we can protect ourselves and others is to stay at home and safe’. Rares, a Romanian boy, age 12, also noted that children and young people could help by remaining at home and respecting the rules. The young participants expressed a clear understanding of the importance of complying with the lockdown measures. However, they expressed a desire to find ways to help and support others, even though they knew they needed to find new ways to do so from their homes in order to comply with movement restrictions.

***I am volunteering in my community to battle the coronavirus pandemic and raise awareness about the risks the virus brings to the population. We want to ensure that the people are following the instructions and are using masks and gloves when needed. I feel this is an opportunity to help others. (Jomarie, age 17, Philippines)***

They were also clear that it was very important for them to get involved in raising awareness about the need to flatten the curve of COVID-19, informing their peers about the risks associated with COVID-19, and helping the most vulnerable people, including the elderly, children and young people, and the homeless, amongst others. They all expressed a strong desire to use their voices to help keep people safe and combat the outbreak.

***I think we can educate children about the pandemic – why it is so harmful and why people are freaking out so much. Many children are still not taking the issue seriously as they are witnessing a pandemic for the first time. Also, their parents are not that concerned. So, if we educate children, they can, in turn, spread the information to their families. (Ahona, age 16, Bangladesh)***

The children and young people participating in this research articulated a great sense of social justice, a desire to continue serving others, and finding ways to use their voices to support the vulnerable and marginalised. Even though all of the young respondents thought of themselves as living in poverty, they were aware that there were other people in their communities who were even more disadvantaged than them, and they wanted to help support them through the crisis.

The interviewees particularly highlighted the need to provide information to those who did not have access to information and identify and assist the most vulnerable children and young people and their families. They also recognised that the people most vulnerable to COVID-19 and its impacts might be different to those in their community who were most vulnerable during normal times.

***Children can help by raising the awareness of those around them and complying with hygiene measures, such as confinement and so on. [They can] also help through social media, which facilitates communication. (Gad, age 15, DRC)***

***We are doing videos and creating flipcharts with information on what we cannot do. We are conducting storytelling for children to keep them entertained and occupied. This helps children to stay at home and not go out to the streets. (Lara, age 17, Brazil)***

As members of their communities, the children and young people were easily able to use their social networks to detect the people who were unaware of the danger of the COVID-19 and provide information. They highlighted that, unfortunately, there was misinformation and a lack of awareness about the necessary protective measures, and this left children and young people and adults unprotected and exposed to greater risk. The young participants asserted that they could play a pivotal role in raising awareness and providing information to people because, in many cases, they were more educated and had greater access to technology and information than their parents and other community members. They said that online platforms were very helpful, but that adults, especially the elderly, did not know how to use them, and, in some cases, were sceptical of the information provided by authorities.

***Many people are confused by the misinformation or are listening to rumours. [We can] make them aware of information from the World Health Organization (WHO), IDECR,<sup>17</sup> or other trusted sources and spread hotline numbers. If necessary, we can explain how to call the hotline. All this can be done by building a network of other teenagers. However, it should be done without public meetings. Work must be done [in a way] to ensure personal safety. (Sanjidul, age 15, Bangladesh)***

When children and young people were asked if they felt it would be overwhelming or a burden to carry out these actions, they confidently answered that they considered their participation to be a rewarding experience that helped them transform the stress and fear they were suffering into something powerful and transformative, rather than demanding and upsetting.

Rebeca, age 17, from Peru, explained that children and young people had a key role to play, and they felt they had the skills and knowledge to do it. She said, “We need to motivate and speak to people so they can understand how serious this situation is. We have to be more in solidarity with each other.” The young participants’ responses echo research that has shown that when children and young people engage with each other, especially in circumstances of adversity, this engagement stimulates interpersonal communications and joint spaces where they learn from others and collaborate within their respective abilities.<sup>18</sup>

## EXPLORING WHAT TO DO NEXT

It was clear from discussions about the actions children and young people were already taking that it was important to them to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and that they were confident that they could influence their peers, families, and communities by using appropriate and safe communications. This brings to light a debate about moving children's participation into a more digital approach, as suggested by some of the young respondents. However, this move requires consideration around what this would include, its purpose(s), how to create and share information, and, finally, how to do so in a safe and protective way.

Along this line, Meghla, from Bangladesh, noted, "In this pandemic, children should take extraordinary steps for fighting against these monsters [coronavirus]. At first, we have to know properly about this virus, and then we can educate other children how to be safe from it."

However, the normal methods that children and young people use to raise awareness in their communities – child parliaments, child forums, or children's clubs – are no longer an option in quarantine contexts. As the young participants pointed out, it will be necessary for NGOs and civil society organisations supporting children and young people throughout this crisis to rethink children's participation into a more digital approach.

In contrast to in-person participation, digital communications can provide a safe and conducive environment for children and young people to engage with their peers and other members of the community during emergencies and crises. Young respondents across all 13 participating countries articulated the value of social media in engaging with others during times of isolation and quarantine.

Teodora, age 16, from Romania commented, "In this period, [the Internet] is the most used means of communicating. Therefore, we should take advantage of this and spread as many motivational messages as possible." Other children and young people confirmed this assumption.

### **SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES**

World Vision promotes a participatory approach that includes policies and procedures to ensure the safe and comfortable participation of children and young people. Based on this approach, all World Vision offices engaging children and young people are required to conduct a 'child protection risk assessment' for child participation activities. This assessment is intended to help staff consider, prepare, and protect children and young people from any potential physical, social, or emotional harm that may arise due to a World Vision participation activity or project.

The key principles in ensuring children and young people's safe participation during these activities include:

- assessing risk in relation to context, with special attention given to fragile contexts and relevant risk mitigation strategies applied.
- balancing the principle of participation with the right to life, survival, and development.



***We can use social networks, WhatsApp groups, blogs, or other tools to help disseminate the message and teach [others] how to stop the spread of the virus and how to act if we get infected, so we are not infecting others. (Anahi, age 15, Nicaragua)***

Similarly, respondents pointed out that children and young people need emotional support to combat the feelings of isolation provoked by the crisis, and that this can also be provided virtually. Francisco, age 15 from Peru suggested, “If we upload a video to Facebook, other children will feel more supported and [understood] by us. Facebook is the most accessible platform that can be used to support people during the quarantine.” Other interviewees noted:

***Social media is a powerful tool for spreading awareness. Tech[nological] developments allow us as children to discuss ideas and information. We can create different materials like animated videos to further grab the audience’s attention. We should start a social media campaign. What’s more important is to keep spreading good, positive vibes through awareness. (Suelv, age 15, Albania)***

***[We can raise awareness] by using our social networks to send educational and informative messages to the general population and all our friends who have phones or can use social networks. In this way, children can become aware of the risks and take measures to protect themselves and their families. (Christopher, age 8, Nicaragua)***

Children and young people from Sierra Leone wanted to use their mobile phones and community-based radio stations to share critical information to prevent COVID-19’s spread, including messages on avoiding crowding places, washing their hands frequently, and helping illiterate people to receive and understand key information about COVID-19.

Despite the general sense of enthusiasm the children and young people expressed for a move to online activism, the digital shift raises a new set of questions for advocates of child participation into how this can be done in a safe, inclusive and protective way. Facilitators must be careful to explore alternatives for children and young people who do not have access to technology and connectivity, as a complete shift towards online platforms may increase inequality and exclusion.<sup>19</sup>

Syrian children and young people living in refugee camps near the Turkish-Syrian border said that they did not have access to the Internet or social media, but they would like to find ways to share information and positive messages with their peers. Samira, age 16 from Peru, also argued that although social media platforms are very helpful, they present some limitations in terms of access and coverage. She pointed out that for children and young people who live in the mountains, mobile phone service is a challenge. In order to address this constraint, some participants highlighted that local or community-based radio stations were a good alternative to communicate their messages.

***Radio is one of the most powerful media channels, like social media. Kids can talk to live programmes on the radio by connecting to the programme via mobile calls. We can also invite a specialist physician who can talk about solutions and guidance. (Sanjidul, age 15, Bangladesh)***

*We can promote sketches on radio programmes with messages for everyone. To do this, we must first be in possession of tangible evidence to make those who will be sensitised believe and act positively. (Christian, age 16, DRC)*

Foyсал, from Bangladesh, believes that the role that children and young people can play in fighting the spread of COVID-19 is vital and urgent as the children and young people in his community have a proven track record of mobilising and influencing changes around issues that are relevant to them. This was endorsed by another Bangladeshi boy, Sakib, who said, “Children are mature and well-prepared to carry out social activities; we can be effective in raising awareness about coronavirus through the child forums.”

## Ideas, messages, and action

Whilst participating in the interviews, the children and young people offered the researchers a detailed list of ideas and messages that they would like to share in future awareness campaigns around the COVID-19 crisis. Participants requested the consultation team to carefully consider their ideas and provide support and encouragement to help them make these a reality. Some of the key recommendations included:

### CONDUCTING PEER-TO-PEER AWARENESS-RAISING CAMPAIGNS ON VIRTUAL PLATFORMS

- We kids can contribute a lot, since we have a lot of free time now and a lot of platforms as well. We can become influencers to raise awareness about the virus. (Martina, age 16, Albania)
- We can create a WhatsApp group to inform our friends about the quarantine. We can upload videos, especially stories and tales from our regions, on a YouTube channel as an opportunity to honour and value our cultures. (Lucero, age 15, Peru)
- We can do drawings and launch challenges such as ‘be a hero stay at home’ or ‘you count, too’. (Rares, age 12, Romania)
- We can have virtual calls with children to give them information, but also to entertain them. Storytelling is a great way to keep them distracted and amused. (Lara, age 17, Brazil)
- The best awareness we can publicise around the world is around three things: to not go outside to stop the virus’ spread, to exercise daily, and to take care of ourselves strengthen our immune systems. (Tarik, age 14, Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- We should educate ourselves on prevention and teaching [so we can] inform other children about the virus, the forms of infections, and the symptoms. This will help to improve measures to prevent the spread of the virus. (Regina, age 16, Nicaragua)
- We can notify our friends who have not seen some important news... We can easily send some important notifications via messaging over, for example, WhatsApp, Viber, Instagram, Messenger, or text messages. (Omar, age 15, Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- We can send messages followed by hashtags like #stayhome. These are more impactful if they come from children. (Catalin, age 13, Romania)

- We can make some animated movies about the coronavirus, which could be funny but have a meaningful message to educate children on how to prevent the coronavirus. (Dola, age 14, Bangladesh)

## **REACHING ADULTS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS**

- Children are exemplary in following the preventive measures, so we can put up posters in public places and raise awareness using online media to sensitise the adults who are more resistant to following these procedures. (Elizabeth, age 16, DRC)
- We need to ask the government to take actions to protect us, otherwise this will cause more fear and frustration. (Regina, age 16, Nicaragua)
- We can upload videos to sensitise adults about the coronavirus as there is a lot of disinformation and some of them are acting irresponsibly and not following the quarantine. (Bethania, age 15, Brazil)
- We need to reach the authorities to ask them to support the most vulnerable families. People have a big need and many people live day by day, so we need to mobilise to support these poor families. (Clara, age 14, Peru)

## **ADVOCATING FOR SOCIAL ACTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE**

- Raise awareness on stopping racism and ask people not to be mad at people who have Asian features. (Lishee, age 14, Mongolia)
- We can shoot videos to help people to understand this pandemic and be protected. Many people are illiterate in Mali, so written information does not work well here. With simple videos and messages we can support them. (Salimata, age 15, Mali)
- Ask people to be conscious about the impact of food shortage. We should not buy too much food so someone in need can't buy it then. (Arijan, age 14, Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- In order to reduce fake news and misinformation, we can upload posts and messages from reliable sources, such as WHO, and share them with our friends. (Anika, age 15, Bangladesh)
- We can produce a list of the rumours about the coronavirus and combat this misinformation by spreading the truth. We can also spread the helpline information through social media. (Samia, age 15, Bangladesh)
- We can raise funds for families in difficult situations. We can also share statistics in our Instagram stories to make clear that coronavirus is not a joke; it's serious. (Etna, age 14, Albania)
- We could distribute positive thoughts and beautiful messages aimed at the people directly fighting the virus but also ask people to be responsible and stay home. (Miruna, age 15, Romania)

# 6 / CONCLUSION



A young people from Sierra Leona writes the findings about COVID-19 on a blackboard.

# 6 / CONCLUSION

Children and young people are active, competent social actors who can make decisions and influence their environments. As was clear from the participants' ongoing activities to raise awareness and find a role in the fight to stop the spread of COVID-19, children and young people are not helpless victims or passive beneficiaries, rather, they develop strategies to overcome hardships and circumstances and have much to contribute towards societal change. Well-established evidence, and data from this study, illustrate that children and young people are competent social actors who can play a pivotal role in shaping their environments, even in periods of hardship.<sup>20</sup> They are able to develop strategies to overcome difficult circumstances and have much to contribute towards societal change.

The findings of this study underline the importance of recognising children and young people's ability to understand the current crisis and the need to support meaningful spaces and partnerships with them to help them take action to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Although this consultation was conducted in 13 different countries, children and young people's experiences were similar across a diversity of contexts and backgrounds, as this pandemic has had a global impact. Likewise, their willingness to engage in collective actions to stop the spread of the COVID-19 was similar.

One of the key areas of difference between children and young people was related to connectivity and their ability to use online communications, due to physical and social distancing restrictions. Those from rural or conflict-prone areas were less likely to favour a shift to digital communications, but instead highlighted the pivotal role community-based radio stations had to play in sharing messages widely.

By participating or initiating actions to stop the spread of COVID-19, children and young people have already mobilised their peers to support processes of change and achieve a joint goal. Their daily lives have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 crisis. They were aware of the threat COVID-19 poses and supportive of measures to decrease the number of infections. However, they also felt they have a role to play and were mindful that children and young people are more willing to share openly with peers than adults, and that they could ensure better access to information. Their continued activism in the face of emergency situations and crises means we must acknowledge and support their evolving capacities and role as active members of society. Evidence shows that children's active participation in problem-solving and activism during harsh times is therapeutically useful and reduces fear and anxiety resulting from negative information received via traditional and social media.<sup>21</sup>

The findings of this study show that there is major scope for collaboration with and engagement of children and young people in raising awareness and educating their peers and community members. This research proves that children and young people are keen to engage in social change and to get involved in direct actions to support their peers and communities in coping with the COVID-19 outbreak.



Children from West Pokot in Kenya playing at a water kiosk located on the roadside near her home.

As COVID-19 spreads, more and more students are out of school and, as their families and communities are affected by the pandemic, the well-being of children and young people will be more at risk. World Vision offices and programmes are working to highlight and respond to child protection needs and ensure that children and young people's voices are heard. This includes: <sup>22</sup>

- promoting online safety
- strengthening life skills and developmental assets
- adapting life skills approaches for virtual/isolation/smaller group settings, amongst other interventions.
- emphasising self-efficacy and amplifying voice, gender equality, and community service

Lastly, based on the children's perspectives on COVID-19 outbreak, World Vision calls on governments, the United Nations, international community and civil society organisations to:

- Recognise and embrace children and young people as rights-holders and social actors with capabilities to contribute to stopping the COVID-19 spread, and consider appropriate strategies to ensure that their participation is safe, sensitive and meaningful.
- Urgently scale up global COVID-19 prevention and response measures for children and their families to strengthen health systems, maintain essential health service delivery, equip frontline health workers, engage and communicate effectively with communities including children, and provide critical child protection interventions and mental health and psychosocial support.
- Adopt policies and fund COVID-19 response plans that holistically address the secondary impacts of the pandemic on children and families, particularly with respect to child protection, gender-based violence, education, water and sanitation, food security, and livelihoods.

It is our hope that this study will provide child-focussed agencies, decision makers, adult professionals, staff members, and children and young people with ideas to consider embracing in order to support children and young people's virtual participation opportunities throughout the crisis. This will ensure that COVID-19 response strategies are child-centred, empowering, and inclusive.

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