



# Child Protection

and COVID-19

Cambodia Case Study

# The impact of COVID-19 on children<sup>1</sup>

Early on in the pandemic, the Joining Forces<sup>2</sup> coalition and the Child Rights Coalition-Cambodia (CRC-Cambodia) conducted a number of assessments and surveys that revealed the multiple impacts that COVID-19 was having on children's mental health, safety and education.<sup>3</sup>



## Mental Health

Negative impacts on children's mental health were found to derive from the distress of worrying about their health and the health of their loved ones, not being able to see friends, and concerns and uncertainty about the future<sup>4</sup>.



## Safety

Children reported spending more time online, increasing their risk of abuse and exploitation, with many children reporting cyberbullying, being contacted by strangers and being asked to post intimate photos<sup>5</sup>.

A World Vision Cambodia survey of households also indicated that 21% of parents reported that violence had been increasing in their households. Of these, 60% said physical violence had increased and 81.3% said emotional violence had increased. Similarly, when considering means of discipline, 23% of children reported that their parents had increased their use of physical violence, whilst 27% reported that their parents had increased their use of emotional violence<sup>6</sup>.



## Education

The disruption to education has had some of the greatest impacts on children around the world. In Cambodia, schools were closed in March 2020, affecting an estimated 3.2 million students<sup>7</sup>. Children surveyed as part of a national Joint Education Needs Assessment, led by the Government, UNICEF and Save the Children, reported that school closures negatively impacted access to food and nutrition, reduced protection from abuse and violence, and increased the risk of school drop-out<sup>8</sup>.

A Joining Forces report cited students' concerns about the poor quality of their distance education and, with that, their concerns about having good employment possibilities when they are older<sup>9</sup>. In addition, the pandemic's negative effect on household incomes meant children were increasingly worried that they or their siblings would have to leave school and engage in paid work in order to help their families meet their basic needs, such as food, clothes and medicine.

**In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has had many, varied impacts on children's protection and well-being. Child protection organisations, such as World Vision Cambodia, have had to expand and adapt their programming to meet the enhanced and particular needs of children at this time.**

1. This case study was developed by Malia Robinson, International Consultant, and Vesna Chhay, Technical Program Lead for Child Protection and Participation; and Mathieu P. Andre, Technical Lead Advocacy, World Vision Cambodia. It was reviewed by Brittany Persinger, Knowledge Management Manager for Advocacy and External Engagement, World Vision International
2. Joining Forces is a coalition of six child protection organizations globally: Child Fund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Terre des Hommes and World Vision.
3. Joining Forces. (2020) Will We Listen to Them? Op-Ed, <https://plan-international.org/blog/2020/06/will-we-listen-them>; summary of Joining Forces (2020) Joint Statement, 1st June 2020: Donors and the government must put children's rights at the heart of the COVID-19 response. <https://plan-international.org/publications/joint-statement-childrens-rights-and-COVID-19-response-cambodia> Retrieved 8.30.2021. Joining Forces (2021), COVID-19 recovery and children in Cambodia: Time to give them back their childhood, Joint Op-Ed, <https://www.wvi.org/publications/cambodia/joint-oped-covid-19-recovery-and-children-cambodia-time-give-them-back-their>
4. World Vision Cambodia (2021), SURVEY ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS IN CAMBODIA. World Vision Cambodia, <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Survey%20on%20the%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Vulnerable%20Households%20in%20Cambodia.pdf>
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. UNICEF, Royal Government of Cambodia Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, and Save the Children. (2021) Cambodia COVID-19 Joint Education Needs Assessment. P. 5. <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/reports/needs-assessment-helps-understand-impact-COVID-19-education-stakeholders> Retrieved 8.30.2021.
8. Ibid. pp. 7 -8.
9. Children's rights to be heard, we are talking, are you listening, Joining forces, January, 2021.

# World Vision Cambodia's adaptation and strengthening of child protection programming

Based on the evolving nature of COVID-19, and following the World Vision Global Centre's Child Protection COVID-19 Programme Guidance, World Vision Cambodia has been continuously adapting our child protection programming, based on the community contexts in which we operate.

## Adapting Guidance and Program Models

World Vision Cambodia developed Child Protection and Adolescent Programme Implementation Guidance to ensure continued implementation of our child protection programme, in line with the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and government guidance for COVID-19 safety.

One key model that was adapted for the pandemic response was World Vision's *Celebrating Families curriculum*, which is a positive parenting curriculum. Our child protection team reviewed the existing content to see what was useful or could be adapted to create messages to address the specific stressors brought about by the impacts of the pandemic on households. These included fear of contracting COVID-19, economic difficulties and parents having increased childcare responsibilities due to school closures. Working with the communications team, the child protection team developed posters to be used in awareness raising campaigns. The messages were also developed into videos that were shared on Facebook and other social media platforms. We also partnered with a media partner to launch a radio programme focusing on positive parenting awareness which aimed to help parents cope and engage positively with their children. Parents in the *Celebrating Families* programme also took the initiative to get together, share their own strategies for using the materials and discuss how they could support each other.

A further key adaptation was World Vision's *Peace Road curriculum*, a life skills curriculum for adolescents and young people that is designed to be implemented in Adolescent Clubs and Groups. Successfully adapting this curriculum for use during the pandemic involved first understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on the target age group, before adapting the curriculum content to address these emerging needs. The curriculum, nonetheless, also retained a focus on more general needs of adolescents and young people, such as managing emotions, positive thinking, decision making and conflict resolution. In another adolescent programme, we revised our community service-learning project guidance to help adolescent clubs adapt their projects to online platforms and focus on the COVID-19 Response in their communities.



## Engagement with Communities and Partners

As part of our COVID-19 Response, World Vision Cambodia guided field teams to work closely with local community leaders and child protection actors to maintain and strengthen child protection referral and reporting mechanisms, and provide guidance on how these may need to be adapted to remote modalities.

We adapted and used different platforms to reach out to communities, including children and their families, according to COVID-19 prevention guidance. For example, scaling down or limiting the number of participants in meetings and activities (following physical distancing and hygiene protocols), and using remote platforms for meetings, trainings and workshops, such as Microsoft Teams, Telegram, Zoom or phones.

In order to address the stressful impacts of the pandemic, we partnered with Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Cambodia, a non-governmental organization that specializes in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), to extend MHPSS services to children and adults in the communities where we operate. Services included in-person and hotline counseling, and psychological first aid (PFA) training for World Vision Cambodia and partner staff to strengthen our work with distressed individuals in communities. Recognizing the psychosocial impact of the pandemic on our staff, we also engaged TPO to provide counseling for our staff and partners to support their emotional resilience.

## How World Vision Cambodia and our partners adapted and strengthened programme approaches



World Vision Cambodia's assessments have demonstrated that within the context of COVID-19, community partners and volunteers have played a greater and more important role in ensuring the successful delivery of programming. This has been particularly evident in situations where travel and meeting restrictions have prevented our staff from visiting communities. As bigger group meetings and gatherings were restricted, partners had to deliver programme activities through smaller groups and increase the number of home visits. Given community volunteers and partners are living in the communities, their continued access has been a valuable asset. However, they have also required an increase in remote support.

Capacity building of community partners has become the main focus of World Vision Cambodia's ongoing child protection project implementation. Our staff are providing coaching and capacity building opportunities to ensure that project partners and volunteers are well equipped to continue supporting project implementation under the pandemic restrictions. This capacity building also includes online trainings and information on how participants can prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect themselves, children and beneficiaries from the virus.

Community partners and volunteers adapted to remote modalities very quickly, using phones, social media platforms and conferencing applications to hold meetings and stay connected with our child protection teams. Through frequent calls for updates and support, the relationships between our child protection teams and community partners have actually strengthened.

Where child protection programming continued face-to-face, groups, such as the adolescent groups, had to be reduced in size, with more sessions needed to cover the original number of participants. In this way, community partners and volunteers took on increased work, and with remote support from the World Vision Cambodia teams, gained new skills and strengthened their capacities.



Community partners and volunteers adapted to remote modalities very quickly

## Examples of how World Vision's child protection programming adapted or changed its relationship with formal child protection systems

A priority of World Vision Cambodia has been to ensure **increased collaboration with the government**. At the national level, the organization has been working closely with the Department of Child Affairs, the Department of Social Affairs, the Cambodia National Council for Children of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Department of Local Administration of the Ministry of Interior. A lesson from the COVID-19 Response is the importance of having strong relationships with relevant government authorities prior to humanitarian emergencies in order to respond more readily and effectively.

At the local level, World Vision Cambodia is collaborating with the **Commune Committees for Women and Children**, a formal structure at the commune level whose mandate is to ensure women's and children's safety and well-being in the areas of protection, health, education and nutrition. We have worked in multiple ways to strengthen the committees' capacity in their operational areas of expertise, both prior to and during the pandemic. For example:

- World Vision Cambodia was the leading non-governmental organization to advocate with the government to develop the **Child Protection Guidebook for Commune Committees for Women and Children**. This clarified the roles of local, formal child protection actors.
- World Vision Cambodia noted that many Commune Committees lacked the capacity and resources to respond effectively to child protection issues. One important way of strengthening their capacity was to engage their members in our **Child Protection & Advocacy groups**, which consist of representatives of the community, local child protection mechanisms and the government. This has helped bridge the relationship between formal and informal child protection actors for child protection response, referral and reporting.



## Overview of the ways World Vision Cambodia has engaged faith leaders and faith communities in ensuring children are protected in the midst of COVID-19

The World Vision Cambodia's child protection programme has been working with faith leaders prior to and during the COVID-19 Response. For example:



World Vision Cambodia engages faith leaders in implementing the Celebrating Families intervention. They participate as the core trainers and community volunteers for the programme. They are responsible for providing positive parenting training, helping to run caregiver support groups and making family home visits. Some of the faith leaders have taken the implementation further, undertaking awareness among their church members on positive parenting.

Faith leaders are also engaged in Child Protection and Advocacy groups which were established with the support of World Vision Cambodia. Through participation in these groups the faith leaders contribute to the strengthening of child protection referral and reporting mechanisms.

World Vision Cambodia has partnered with community groups, including churches, to provide financial support for these groups to implement activities and child protection interventions.

## Effective Coordination and networking during the COVID-19 Response

At the national level, World Vision Cambodia's child protection team has actively engaged with different national child protection emergency platforms, networks and coordination mechanisms. With the onset of the COVID-19 Response, these coordination mechanisms have been more active than ever before.

### National Child Protection in Emergency Working Group

COVID-19 pushed the government to finalise and approve its [National Child Protection in Emergency Plan](#), which had been pending for two years. The Plan helps to clarify what support, services and activities to promote children's protection should be included in the

national and local government responses to emergencies, especially the COVID-19 Response.

World Vision Cambodia is an active member of the group that contributed to the finalization of the Plan. The Plan established national, provincial and district working groups on social protection (including child protection) which are led by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

This helps to improve engagement and collaboration, especially for the local, formal child protection service providers at the community level. The groups have become more active and closely collaborate with our staff in the field.

## Humanitarian Response Forum

The Humanitarian Response Forum was established in 2011 in response to the demand for increased coordination among development partners to address the demands of humanitarian disasters, primarily floods and drought. World Vision Cambodia is the sector co-lead for the Child Protection and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sectors. Our participation in the Forum plays a key role in supporting information sharing and coordination of sectoral responses to the pandemic across the country in these two sectors.

With the onset of the COVID-19 Response, these coordination mechanisms have been more active than ever before.

## Child Protection NGO Forum

The Child Protection NGO Forum comprises United Nations (UN) stakeholders and international and local NGOs who work in the child protection sector. It was established in early 2021 in order to better collaborate and share information with regards to NGO-led child protection programming, including programming implemented during the COVID-19 Response.

All of these national platforms have guided and strengthened collaboration among UN agencies, NGOs and government actors in order to improve child protection services and enhance the protective environment for children. The platforms have also strengthened collaboration at the local level. Elements of the coordination that were particularly effective were having strong coordination from the national to the local levels, sharing of governmental and organizational responses, objectives and operational areas to avoid duplication and identify gaps, sharing of resources and developing joint plans.

## Bridging the gap between development and humanitarian approaches in the COVID-19 Response

At the outset of the pandemic, World Vision Cambodia held consultations to understand how COVID-19 was affecting programming. We particularly focused on the experiences of child protection teams implementing programmes in the field, led by our staff and our partners. It was a reflective process to determine which activities could possibly continue and which could not.

These consultations started a process of continuous reflection and adaptation, with programming changes being made where necessary. The reflective process was really driven by the inputs of the field-level implementers, responding and innovating based on the fluid situations in their respective contexts.

The process also identified what existing, development-oriented programming could continue, understanding that on-going needs would only be increased by the pandemic. Learning from World Vision Cambodia's experience highlights the importance of two main points:

- It is critically important to understand what is already being done in child protection programme implementation, particularly what are the strength and gaps. Facilitating an ongoing deliberative, reflective process that is informed by, and supportive of, those implementing the programmes in the field is vital for impactful programming.

- Despite the limitations brought about by the emergency, data collection is still very important to inform decisions and understand key areas for response and recovery.

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COVID-19 pandemic has taught us to be more adaptive of development projects and programmes.

A fast response to the needs of those of who are affected by disaster of course is important. However, development programs are a way forward to ensure the better recovery and sustainable change in the communities. So, we need to be quick and ready in finding ways to be adaptive to the situation and be informed by evidence.

Veasna Chhay, World Vision Cambodia

## Influencing formal part of Child Protection System

WV Cambodia focused on ensuring the strengthening of CP system, especially in terms of continuity of the CP services at local level by pursuing the following actions:

- Influencing the adoption of the **CP in Emergency Contingency Plan**. This plan clarified at the beginning of the outbreak of COVID-19 how the Ministry of Social Affairs was going to organize the prevention and response to violence against children in the context of the pandemic. WV Cambodia was a key member of the technical working group CP in Emergency that supported technically the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veteran and Youth Rehabilitation to develop the plan.
- We also supported the Government to finalize the adoption of several important instruments to strengthen the local CP system. We took leadership for the development of the **CP Guidebook for the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC)**. Officially adopted in June 2021 following 2 years of work led by WVI-C, this guidebook clarifies the responsibilities of the commune Committee for Women and children in terms of CP and how they are supposed to implement these responsibilities (processes, protocols, etc.).

