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JOINING FORCES
For All Children

Strengthening family environments to realize children's rights

ChildFund Alliance | PLAN INTERNATIONAL | Save the Children | SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL | Terre des Hommes International Federation | World Vision

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EXCECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The observance, protection and promotion of children's rights are unattainable without quality and adequate care. This starts and mainly happens within family environments into which children are born. Governments have a responsibility to support parents and caregivers in securing a safe and protective space for children to survive, learn and thrive, as well as protecting children when their rights are violated both within or outside their families.

- Although it is difficult to assess the magnitude of the challenge due to a lack of data, many children around the world are still growing up alone in fragile family environments where they are exposed to high risks of violence, abuse or neglect; or in poor alternative care settings that are harmful to their overall wellbeing and development.

- The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and measures to contain it exposed the limited services to support families, which have increased the stress and pressure felt by caregivers and children and potentially further affecting their family environments.

- These risks are even greater for girls, as well as for other marginalized groups such as children with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, in street situation, on the move or in conflict zones, children with no birth registration, and LGBTQI children, who require specialised and targeted attention.

- Addressing the key drivers of family-child separation through robust and well financed social protection measures and integrated child welfare and protection systems can minimize risks of child abandonment, abuse or neglect within family environments, as well as ensure quality care when a child temporarily or permanently loses parental care.

- Governments and civil society organizations, including faith communities, must work together to address these challenges, provide the most relevant and useful support and in doing so, ensure that children are actively engaged and participate in all decisions that directly affect their lives.

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Critical data and problem analysis

The observance, protection and promotion of children's rights are unattainable without quality and adequate care, which starts within family settings[1]. Families are the primary environment where children can grow, develop and establish their first relationships and will have implications and consequences on their development and on their engagement with their community as they grow into adulthood.

COVID-19 has exposed the fragility of that family environment when undergoing extraordinary pressure due to the unintended consequences of the pandemic and the limited support children and their families receive.

Ensuring quality data on the situation of children living in fragile family environments or without parental care is a worldwide challenge. SOS Children's Villages has estimated that one in ten children worldwide may have lost or is at risk of losing parental care[2]. Estimates also suggest that about 140 million children have lost one or both parents[3]. Tens of millions of children were estimated to be living in the street[4].

In spite of protection of children's rights and the need for quality care being enshrined in international law and regulations, many children

> ...the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding
>
> (Preamble, Convention on the Rights of the Child)

around the world are still growing up alone, in fragile family environments where they are exposed to high risks of violence, abuse or neglect; or in poor quality alternative care settings that are harmful to their overall wellbeing and development. These risks are even greater for girls, as well as for other marginalized groups such as children with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, in street situation, on the move, with no birth registration and LGBTIQ children.

The impact of family environments in the development of a child

➜ A child's development is best realized in a family environment where their physical, psychological, emotional and social needs are met. Research shows that one of the most important factors in a child's development is having a stable and responsive relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult.[5]

➜ Support networks within a community can greatly contribute to stabilizing vulnerable families and are sometimes critical for a family to live in dignity and for caregivers to have the time and resources to devote to the full and optimal development of their children as self-reliant, self-confident members of society. This is particularly important for families that require specialized support for children or caregivers with additional needs.

➜ Social and gender norms in a family environment are instrumental in shaping the lives of children and their understanding of society. Traditional practices and stereotypical gender roles can perpetuate harmful behaviours that could lead to the use of violence and coercion that maintain gender inequalities[6] and violate children's rights.

➜ In cases where a child may lack a family environment, or may need to be separated for his or her own protection the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) emphasises that a child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the state.[7]

➜ The United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children[8] and the 2019 UN Resolution on the Rights of the Child[9] offer guidance on how to respond to the needs of children deprived of their family environment; they offer frameworks to prevent unnecessary separation and call for a range of quality alternative care options to determine the most suitable placement for each child[11].

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Children without adequate care are undercounted

One of the key challenges in developing effective policies and raising awareness of the magnitude of the problem is the lack of precise data on children living in fragile family environments where they could be exposed to risks, or on children without parental care. Data needs to also be disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, disability and other groups that are traditionally excluded and for whom specialized policies are required.

Additionally, discrepancies in legal categories could hinder the collection of reliable, accurate, timely and comparable data, and complicate the efforts to understand children's experience while on the move[12], in poverty or living in a variety of informal alternative care placements. For example, while UNICEF had estimated that 2.7 million children worldwide were living in institutions in 2017[13], others estimate the number to be 5.4 million[14].

Whilst investment in data collection and analysis has stepped up, they remain skewed because they tend only to cover people in stable household settings through household surveys or national census sampling frames. Children in other situations, or who are not visible, are often left underrepresented in national data.[15] Among others, these include children living in formal and informal alternative care settings, children in detention, trafficked children, unaccompanied refugee/migrant children, street connected children, children in conflict zones, or those displaced or living in unregistered facilities[16].

Too many children still lack birth registration

Birth registration can facilitate children and their families' access to essential services for the realization of their rights. One in four children worldwide under the age of 5 (166 million) are not registered at birth. And even when registered, an estimated 237 million children under the age of 5 lack a birth certificate[17]. There are many reasons for this, including lack of resources and investment in accurate and comprehensive civil registration systems, barriers in accessing birth registration services or fees attached to them. The last two decades have seen a rise in birth registration levels globally, with Plan International and UNICEF, among others, supporting national efforts. However, progress has been uneven and additional investments are needed to achieve universal birth registration.

Key drivers of separation of children from their families

Growing up outside a family is one of the most powerful predictors of child deprivation and vulnerability. These children are usually less able to exercise their rights, face serious risks to their safety, development and wellbeing when they are orphaned, abandoned, deprived of family care[18] or when they suffer long term disruptions to relationships or separation. Moreover, family separation and the loss of parental care put children at greater risk of anxiety, depression, social isolation, discrimination, inadequate care, abuse and exploitation[19].

Ultimately, there is a financial cost for society in the longer term as well. Breakdown of parental care can result in costs to government and place strain on public services creating a cycle of deprivation of care that is perpetuated in subsequent generations[20].

Children are temporarily or permanently losing parental care and entering alternative care for many reasons, many of which could be avoided with strong preventive and family support measures. Some of them include[21]:

- **Death or poor health of the parents:** Death of a parent affects around 140 million children[22], with at least 15 million of those having lost both parents. In 2014, 11 million children had lost parental care due to HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa[23]. Data from the last 5 years (2016 – 2020) shows that 25% of children under the care of SOS Children's Villages had lost one or both parents, while an additional 30% had lost parental care due to the poor health or disability of their caregiver.

- **Violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation:** In 2014, it was estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect[24]. In these cases, the majority of perpetrators of violence against children were family members or known and trusted by the child they harm, and required a child to be separated for his or her own safety. Gender dynamics add another layer of vulnerability. Gender-based violence disproportionately affects girls who suffer violence when they are subjected to child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual harassment[25]. Crimes committed in the name of so-called honor killings or trafficking[26] could also contribute to girls leaving and escaping their families.

- **Poverty:** When coupled with child protection issues and unequal access to basic services, poverty is a significant driving force behind children's placement in alternative care. In 2018, UNDP estimated that half of the world's poor were children[27], many of whom lack social protection support to overcome this situation causing families to experience distress and increasing risks of child labour or other forms of abuse or abandonment.

- **Lack of access to education:** In 2017, 263 million (or 1 in 5) children, adolescents and youth were still out of school[28]. Most of them live in low-income countries where access to quality education remains a great challenge[29] and in many cases require the payment of fees. This disproportionately affects the access of girls to schooling. Hence, parents may choose to request governments or service providers for placement of their children in care facilities where education is offered.

- **Teenage pregnancy:** Becoming pregnant while young or having a child out of wedlock could lead to girls being abandoned and neglected by their families due to stigmatization and discrimination, or to the girls being forced into marriage[30]. UNICEF estimates that by 2030 about 750 million women will have been married as children[31].

- **Migration:** Today, 52% of all refugees and 12% of all migrants worldwide are children. Nearly 13 million refugees who have been forced from their homes were under the age of 18, according to UNHCR[32]. About 37% of those who arrived in Europe between January and June 2020 were unaccompanied and separated from their families[33]. Children affected by conflict, insecurity, forced displacement, migration and climate change are all facing increased risk of losing, being separated from or being deprived of parental care due to policies and measures that often neglect children's rights and their best interest. In other cases, parental migration leads to temporary and often permanent separation from the children they leave behind.

- **Disabilities:** Globally, there are up to 150 million children living with disabilities[34]. Girls and boys with disabilities are often the most vulnerable and excluded in their communities, and subjected to profound levels of poverty, discrimination, and violence. Children with disabilities, especially those living in poverty and with far less access to basic services and protection[35], may be placed in alternative care to receive treatment that could otherwise be received at home with appropriate governmental support. Worldwide, children with disabilities are up to 17 times more likely to live in institutions than other children, according to UNICEF[36].

- **Discrimination:** Children from ethnic minorities and indigenous communities are noted to be significantly over-represented in institutions. In some countries, Romani children are much more likely to be taken from their parents than non-Romani children and be placed in institutions[37]. In 2016, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) revealed that indigenous children and children of African descent were over-represented in the child welfare system[38], showing that racial disparities existed when addressing their need for out of home care. Moreover, children, adolescents and young people identifying as LGBTIQ+ are more vulnerable to violence by family members, and often forced out of the family home, and unwelcomed in their communities.

Other reasons that lead to child-family separation include parental separation and re-marriage, parental imprisonment, family dysfunction, and runaways (to escape abuse, stigma-based on LGBTIQ identity or child marriage, for example). Additionally, active recruitment of children by care providers into facilities increases the risk of unnecessary placement in care settings. This is especially true in countries where inspections and monitoring mechanisms for care facilities are lax, "self-referrals" are enabled, or when facilities operate without due registration.

Protecting relationships with siblings and other extended family members can decrease the trauma and help the recovery of the child who has been deprived of family care[39]. Siblings should not be separated from each other in care placements unless it is deemed in their best interest by the appropriate authorities.

> The likelihood of children being separated from their families can be reduced by strongly supporting and investing in families. A comprehensive and integral approach to child welfare, protection and family support that addresses the above mentioned drivers for separation would significantly reduce unnecessary family-child separation.

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Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it have created additional stress and burden on families, exposing the fragility or even lack of support systems, and exacerbated the drivers of child-family separation.

A worldwide survey conducted last year by Save the Children with children and caregivers from their programmes corroborated many of these challenges and laid bare the effects of the pandemic on children and their families[40]. Among other findings:

- Three-quarters of households surveyed, reported losing income because of COVID-19 and 96% reported having trouble paying for essential items or services.

- Four in five struggled to pay for food and two in five households found it difficult to provide their families with a nutritious diet.

- Most parents and caregivers (89%) reported that their access to healthcare, medicine or medical supplies had been affected.

- The data showed a significant impact on the psycho-social wellbeing of children and their caregivers, as well as an increase in violence in a third of households.

- The poorest households, households with disabilities, female headed-households and girls, were the hardest hit.

During the pandemic, care arrangements, work-family balance, gender equality and other key aspects of family life have been disrupted. The UN Secretary General also stressed[41] that these situations have led to increased risks of stress, abuse, family breakdown and potential need for temporary or long-term alternative care placement.

Family life may have dramatically changed due to the challenges faced by parents. This is especially true among the poorest families caring for their children at home, as care services and schools are closed, yet parents are unable to take leave or risk losing their jobs – as many of these parents are in essential industries. Moreover, increased prevalence of unpaid care work at home has reinforced existing gender inequality and negatively affected women, who are leaving the labour force to care for their families. Significant disruption of alternative care arrangements also took place, with children being sent back to their families of origin rapidly from childcare facilities or foster families without appropriate reintegration procedures. Children in care had limited or no access to professionals and family members that used to visit the care facilities prior to the pandemic.

This is compounded with increased vulnerabilities that may exacerbate the risks of family-child separation due to the drivers described above such as:

- 117 million more children could fall into poverty by 2021 - bringing the number of children living in poverty to over 700 million[42];

- Maternal and under-5 child deaths resulting from the disruption of health systems and decreased access to food could also increase[43].

- An additional 13 million child marriages could take place that otherwise would not have occurred between 2020 and 2030[44].

- Increased calls to domestic violence helplines in many countries since the outbreak of COVID-19[45] while access to child protection services were reduced.

Children's participation in decisions that affect them

Children have the right to freely express their views and those views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity[46]. Their capacity to participate and be heard should be nurtured and fostered within their family environments. Additionally, decisions related to their situation within their families, or to potential need for placement in alternative care must be undertaken with their active and meaningful participation. For example, the General Comment No.12 of the CRC provides for specific obligations for the child to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings including divorce and separation; separation from parents and alternative care; and adoption and kafalah of Islamic law[47].

> **It's very important that all children learn that they have rights which have to be respected and that they should participate in decisions affecting their day-to-day lives**
>
> Alexandra, young advocate with care experience, Spain

Additionally, in order to be able to participate meaningfully and genuinely, children should be provided with an enabling environment. This includes providing all relevant information through child friendly materials, adequate support for self-advocacy appropriate to their age and circumstances[48], feedback on the weight given to their views, as well as access to complaints, remedies and redress, should their right be disregarded or violated.

SOS Children's Villages asked children in its family support and alternative care placement programmes across nine countries about being involved in decision-making. They overwhelmingly asserted that they want more inclusion in decisions being made about them and their lives, as well as decisions that affect their families. This revealed the importance of children being consulted and informed about their situation[49].

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What works: Strengthening care and social protection systems to support families and children

In order to support and strengthen family environments to realize children's rights and prevent abandonment or separation of a child from their family, the state has the obligation to develop and deliver social policies and programmes that address the key drivers of separation. This includes, among others, access to income, employment, healthcare, education, security, parental support childcare or other community based services. Civil society partners, faith communities and the private sector bodies, including all the organizations of the Joining Forces Alliance, must also increase their efforts to enable states to fulfil their responsibilities.

Joining Forces partners have continued working to support and strengthen families to advance and protect children's rights. World Vision's model of celebrating families enhances knowledge and skills to create a safe and nurturing environment, decrease harmful attitudes and improve family relationships. SOS Children's Villages supports vulnerable families by offering a range of supportive services that are provided according to the individual situation of each family, including direct provision of food, cash transfers, as well as mental health and psychosocial support or parenting and family support programmes[50]. Plan International has been investing in strengths-based interventions that build the skills of parents and caregivers in positive parenting approaches[51]. Save the Children has been piloting targeted cash and voucher assistance to vulnerable families as well as connecting vulnerable families to social protection schemes where they exist. They are now working on training for case workers to support families. In addition, Save the Children has launched Parenting without Violence, a global positive parenting programme focused on improving the relationships between parents and children to reduce violence within the home[52].

Many countries are engaging in reforming or expanding their child welfare and child protection systems, to improve the quality of services for children in vulnerable situations. The main components of a strong child protection system include a legal, policy and regulatory framework that supports children and their families, reduces unnecessary child-family separation and provides quality care to all children when the appropriate authorities deem necessary to place them in alternative care settings. It also requires meaningful coordination across government sectors and adequate resources.

The Report of the UN Secretary General on the implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow up process[53] identified governmental family-oriented responses to COVID-19 undertaken by different countries which are proving to be effective and which would need to continue beyond the pandemic. These include additional parental or sick leaves for affected working parents in many European countries (including Austria, Cyprus, France, Italy, Norway and Romania), care services for the children of essential workers remaining open in some countries (including Australia, Canada and the Netherlands), additional financial support through child grants and other measures being offered (such as in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, the Republic of Korea and South Africa), and having provided subsidies for water and electricity bills (such as in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali).

Measures with gender perspectives that can support families in caring for their children have also been adopted. According to the UNDP gender tracker, which includes over 2,500 measures across 206 countries and territories and a focus on the areas of violence against women and girls, support for unpaid care and the strengthening of women's economic security can be observed. However, responses vary across regions and countries, with Europe leading the response on addressing violence and unpaid care[54].

Supporting family environments to advance children's rights, whilst protecting those that lose it

To ensure that every child grows up in a safe nurturing family environment and those that are not able to do so are duly protected:

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↳ States must improve data collection, as well as their monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure that all children and their families are counted. Efforts should be redoubled to ensure the birth registration and identity documentation of all children so that they can access all government provided services.

↳ National statistical offices should disaggregate data regarding care status, gender, age and other exclusion factors such as ethnicity and disability, ensuring that children without parental care and children living outside of family households are identified and counted.

↳ States should enable a robust, well financed and integrated child welfare and child protection system where children and families in vulnerable conditions are

assessed early, supported, and provided with comprehensive services for all (education, health, mental health and psychosocial support, parenting support, among others), as well as other direct support services such as cash transfers, universal child benefit or other income support measures. Development partners must support countries in these efforts, and not promote austerity policies which often lead to a reduction in social spending.

↳ Targeted policies and programmes must be developed to address the needs of families traditionally marginalized or in vulnerable conditions and to avoid their separation. This includes, among others, single-parent families as well as families from ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, in street situation, with disabilities or on the move.

↳ Governments must continue working and strengthening support to families during the pandemic and beyond through expanded child and family benefits, paid family leave and sick leave, improved flexibility of working arrangements and gender-responsive services to reduce the burden of care on women. Commitments should be made to support work-family balance, engage fathers, and promote the equitable sharing of family responsibilities between men and women.

↳ Governments must designate child welfare and protection services and workers as essential so that they can be appropriately resourced and supported as long as the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures persist, including access to vaccinations.

↳ In line with the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, states must ensure that removing a child from a family environment is a last resort measure, and secure a range of suitable quality alternative care placement options that respond to the individual care needs of each child. Mechanisms should also be put in place for an orderly, planned and prompt reintegration to his or her family when in his or her best interest.

↳ All child rights-focused civil society organizations, government officials, faith communities and specialized professionals working with children, must commit to enhancing children's participation in decisions that directly affect their lives, such as judicial and administrative proceedings. This includes the development of child-friendly materials that enable them to engage in a meaningful way.

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Notes

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