Immediate release

This statement and call to action shared by the National Inter-Agency Working Group aims to amplify the voices of children and their views on the current state of the African Child in our country and region. The statement is based on the outcome of child engagement during the day of the African Child 2020 by the NIAWG.

Every year on the 16th of June, the African Union and its Member States observe the International Day of the African Child (DAC) as a commemoration of the 16th June 1976 student uprising in Soweto, South Africa, where students marching in protest of the apartheid regime were brutally murdered by police.

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) has expressed grave concern on the ongoing global outbreak of COVID-19 virus and its devastating impacts on the rights and welfare of children in Africa. Whilst there is recognition of the various measures that Member States of the African Union are taking in scaling up testing, screening, surveillance and treatment, to limit the spread and mitigate the impact of COVID-19; there are unintended consequences which expose vulnerable children to even greater risk of starvation, neglect, abuse, exploitation and gender based violence.

In commemorating the International Day of the African Child 2020, the National Inter-Agency Woking Group (NIAWG) engaged children in pursuit to amplifying the voices of African children and their views. Children across the Southern Africa region shared their views through drawings (see actual drawings attached & link at the end).

“I miss going to school”

Many children expressed their concerns of missing out on education and not being able to go to school during the pandemic and related lockdowns with several saying ”I miss going to school”. Children also raised the issue of access to education and the quality of education received commenting “as African children we are denied entry into school because of documentation”, “as African Children we need education too” and “Away with gutter education”.

“Stop harassing girls sexually”

Children pleaded for stronger protection from sexual abuse. This must be urgently heeded particularly as children are most vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse. They lack appropriate access to health services, psychosocial support and child-friendly criminal justice systems.

“As an African child it’s not my choice, to eat from a bin”

The extent to which children have not been able to access food during the pandemic and related lockdowns is stark - with one child from Limpopo describing resorting to eating rubbish from bins for survival.”.

“Our rights must be respected”

The NIAWG continues to call upon all duty bearers and right's holders – individuals, communities, government and non-government actors to uphold the international and national obligations to protect all children. Children’s rights are human rights. Children continue to plead that their rights be respected.

Members of the National Inter-Agency Working Group on Care and Protection of USMC:

- Save the Children South Africa/ Lawyers for Human Rights/ Consortium for Migrants and Refugees/ Terre des hommes/ IOM/ UNICEF/ UNHCR & silent partners
"I miss my family"

Measures must be taken to preserve family unity and avoid unnecessary separation of children from their families. Detention of parents should be avoided to ensure children are cared for in families rather than in institutions.

'I miss playing outside'

Psychosocial needs of children need to be prioritised in both government and partner programming in response to COVID-19 to ensure their right to play, learn and socialise all of which are critical for their development and well-being.

We call on all stakeholders, duty bearers, private sector, civil society and the government to urgently and sustainably direct resources to circumvent the grave impact COVID-19 is having on children. Especially vulnerable children include: unaccompanied and separated migrant, refugee and asylum seeker children; stateless children; children living with disabilities and chronic or debilitating illness; and those who may or may not be documented.

UNICEF reports that an up to 66 million children could fall into extreme poverty as a result of the crisis; exacerbating the learning crisis; threatening child survival, health and wellbeing. The situation of vulnerable children is further exacerbated by their inability to access services such as healthcare and educational support due to a lack of access to documentation during the lockdown.

The theme for this year’s commemoration is to promote “an effective child-friendly national legislative policy and institutional framework”. This is in line with Africa’s 2040 agenda for children. An area of focus within this effort is for States to establish child friendly information and communication procedures to ensure the child’s right to such information on matters concerning them through formats and methods, tailored to their age and maturity. This is particularly critical in the context of the current pandemic when Member States provide information to the public regarding COVID-19.

We call for all stakeholders, including governments, to give due consideration to the following areas in response to COVID-19 and the consequences thereof:

- Ensure that social service practitioners are well resourced to identify vulnerable and at risk children and ensure their protection and well-being.
- Ensure access to documentation for unaccompanied and separated migrant, refugee, asylum seeker and stateless children, and any child who may be undocumented.
- Ensure the proper placement of children facing harm to places of safety, particularly undocumented children as they face increased risks of trafficking, exploitation and abuse.
- Ensure improved resourcing of classrooms for children who have returned to school and academic support for children who are learning from home.

Children are the future. We must all take steps to protect and promote the rights of children now in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and always.

Kindly forward any enquiries by email or call to: Nyika Machenjedze (0717652472 / NMachenjedze@savethechildren.org.za) or

Members of the National Inter-Agency Working Group on Care and Protection of USMC:

- Save the Children South Africa/ Lawyers for Human Rights/ Consortium for Migrants and Refugees/ Terre des hommes/ IOM/ UNICEF/ UNHCR & silent partners
Members of the National Inter-Agency Working Group on Care and Protection of USMC:

- Save the Children South Africa/
- Lawyers for Human Rights/
- Consortium for Migrants and Refugees/
- Terre des hommes/
- IOM/
- UNICEF/
- UNHCR & silent partners

Abigail Dawson (0748515683 / communications@cormsa.org.za)

Link to the actual drawings by children