Joint letter to the African Union on the impact of COVID-19 on children

15 April 2020

H.E Moussa Faki Mahamat
Chairperson, Africa Union Commission

Your Excellency:

The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought developmental and humanitarian work to almost a complete halt and is hampering Africa’s efforts to provide and engineer accelerated development for its people through Agenda 2063. At the time of writing this letter, there are over fifteen thousand confirmed COVID-19 cases in 52 countries in Africa. The crisis is overwhelming national health systems, is badly damaging economies and is putting millions of households at significant risk of harm. Not only is there the likelihood of children contracting COVID-19, they are also the most impacted. Children especially girls face increased threats of gender-based violence, discrimination, abuse and lack of essential services.

We, the African Union Liaison Offices of the following organisations: International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children’s Villages International, UNICEF and World Vision International, recognise and appreciate the efforts and leadership demonstrated by your Excellency and the African Union to coordinate and drive responses to COVID-19.

We congratulate the African Union and His Excellency President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, President of the Republic of South Africa and current Chairperson of the African Union, for calling for urgent action among AU Member States to forestall the potential catastrophic impact of COVID-19 during the meeting of the Bureau of the African Union Heads of State and Government convened ahead of the G20 Leaders’ Summit on 26 March 2020. We applaud the Bureau for agreeing to establish a continental anti-COVID-19 Fund into which member states of the Bureau immediately contributed US $12, 5 million seed funding.
We express our organisations’ commitment to support AU’s interventions to respond to COVID-19 at the continental and national levels and wish to reiterate the following:

- The COVID-19 pandemic is negatively impacting the economic situation, lives, livelihoods and environment in which women, girls and all children grow and develop, undermining their immediate protection, daily subsistence and longer-term wellbeing and resilience.
- People living in fragile, conflict and disaster-affected contexts, particularly refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and people on the move, are acutely vulnerable to the direct and secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and risk being excluded from national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans. Refugees and asylum seekers also risk having their rights disproportionately violated by measures to control the outbreak, including their right to seek asylum.
- There is a risk that humanitarian resources will shrink further, just as needs escalate. The most vulnerable, particularly girls, and women, will be hit the hardest by increasing funding gaps.
- Measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, including movement restrictions and border closures are already limiting access for humanitarian personnel and assistance, and resulting in disruption of services and supplies essential for adolescent girls’ health, safety and wellbeing.
- Closure of schools and other educational settings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will present a further barrier to learning, and deprive children, especially girls of a protective environment and source of life-saving information and psychosocial support.
- Human rights violations and abuses by law enforcement agencies, enforcing COVID-19 mitigation measures adopted by member states.

Your Excellency, in light of the foregoing, we would like to make the following recommendations to the AU Commission and Member States:

- Measures to control and respond to the spread of COVID-19 must be equitable, protective of human rights and humanitarian principles, non-discriminatory, and responsive to the different needs and risks faced by individuals and thus do no harm to pre-existing and already struggling humanitarian responses. Governments should observe all human rights protocols as articulated in international and regional human rights conventions.
- Protection must remain central to the COVID-19 response to avert increasing risks of gender-based violence and abuse from shutdown/lockdowns. It will therefore be important to assess, monitor and respond to cases of violence in all settings including, displacement camps, host communities and in quarantine situations (including use of disaggregated data on age, sex and disability, geographic location including versus urban).
- The needs of all children without parental care, those in alternative care and unaccompanied and separated children must be addressed, according to international standards, the best interest of the child and the principle of confidentiality. This includes good record keeping, referral systems from health providers, and providing unaccompanied and separated children with appropriate family-based, age, gender, and sensitive care. Children under detention are at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and should be released.
- Keep children healthy and learning, and reach vulnerable families and children with water, sanitation and hygiene.
- Expand current social protection systems to increase coverage and benefits to children in all forms of alternative care and families in heavily virus-affected communities. Quarantine measures should be child sensitive and accompanied by financial or material support to low income households and/or communities.
- Waive any potential restrictions to accessing reproductive health services that disproportionately affect women and children living in poverty, women and children with disabilities, undocumented
migrant women and children, adolescents, and women at risk of or are survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

- Ensure that planning and decision-making processes on the COVID-19 incorporate the voices of all population groups affected by the outbreak and its secondary impacts. This includes strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of girls and young women in all decision-making processes to ensure their perspectives are heard.

- Life-saving humanitarian activities should continue within the context of measures to control the outbreak. In line with recommendations from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, governments should consider granting travel exemptions for humanitarian staff to stay and deliver critical, life-saving humanitarian interventions to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

- Governments should contextually consider implementing economic stimulus packages that will revive formal and informal economic sectors, targeting highly affected population groups.

- 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.

Our organisations are working with national governments to respond to COVID-19. At the continental level, our respective organizations commit to work with the African Union in its effort to address and respond to the COVID-19 challenge.

Signatories

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ii. Samuel Norgah: Plan International
iii. Doris Mpoumou: Save the Children International
iv. Senait Gebregziabher: SOS Children's Villages International
v. Edward Addai: UNICEF
vi. Brenda Kariuki: World Vision International

Cc:

H.E. Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, AU Chair
H.E. Kwesi Quartey, Deputy Chairperson, Africa Union Commission
H.E. Prof. Sarah Anyang Agbor, Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology
H.E. Amira Mohammed Elfadil. Commissioner for Social Affairs