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International Children Day

COVID-19 recovery and children in Cambodia: Time to give them back their childhood

Almost a year and a half after the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Cambodia, several recent studies¹ show that the pandemic, step by step, has deprived children from their most essential rights and put their childhood on hold. Over the last 15 months, children first have been required to stay home by school closure and other restrictions, losing their daily routine and becoming isolated from their friends, teachers and relatives. Beyond the loneliness, they have had to battle growing fears and stress. Fear for their health and the health of their family as the country was going through several episodes of community transmission. Fear for their future career as schools were intermittently closed from March 2020 until today. Fear of falling behind as many have had to face multiple challenges to study remotely. Stress as they saw their parents and relatives losing their income and struggling to cover their living expenses. Several surveys also show that domestic violence has increased during the pandemic and children have had a reduced access to social services to find support.

It may be difficult for many parents and caregivers to talk to their children and to reassure them in the middle of a difficult third wave and as economic difficulties are piling up for many. However, as dark as the current days may seem to be, some signs should give us hope that the pandemic could be defeated in the near future. With around 23% of the adult population vaccinated at least once, Cambodia has the second most successful vaccination campaign in the region. Data from countries that have achieved a high level of vaccination is also very encouraging. In these countries, transmission and the number of deaths are falling, showing that vaccines work. In this context, we believe it is time to think about the other battle that lays ahead. For many children in Cambodia, “back to normal” will require more than defeating COVID-19. It will require to also defeat its potentially durable impact on learning, poverty and mental health. Our organizations have regularly conducted a series of surveys and dialogues with children to ask them about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and their hopes for the recovery of the country. From those, three priorities identified by children look critical if we want to give them back their childhood.

The first priority is to reopen schools, with the aim to provide the best education to as many children as possible, while also mitigating local Covid-19 risk levels. Despite the efforts of all relevant stakeholders, several surveys found that around one third of children are not continuing to learn during school closure. The ones that continue learning only study for a few hours a week and in very difficult conditions. "Online learning is not easy. I cannot catch up with the lesson when the teacher explains and after class no one can explain to me more" said Ravy, a 14 year old girl from Mondulkiri. The Royal Government of Cambodia is currently working on a plan for the progressive safe reopening of schools. It is critical to finalize this plan and implement it as soon as it is safe to do so, especially as more than 85% of the educational staff and teachers have been vaccinated. Beyond this, all stakeholders will need to come together by the beginning of the next

¹ For more details, see the MoEYS, UNICEF and Save the Children Joint Education Need Assessment, <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/media/4296/file/Cambodia%20COVID-19%20Joint%20Education%20Needs%20Assessment.pdf> or World Vision's Survey on the Impact on Vulnerable Households, <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/media/4296/file/Cambodia%20COVID-19%20Joint%20Education%20Needs%20Assessment.pdf>

school year to implement a strong enrolment campaign to bring back children to schools. It will require a mix of new measures, such as scholarship programs to support students at risk of dropping out, remedial classes to support students who had stopped learning during school closure, etc. This effort to contain school dropout will have to be sustained until the economy has fully recovered, as the economic hardship that many families are facing will continue to put children at risk of dropout, child labor and child marriage.

The second priority is to ensure that the most vulnerable families are supported financially. Too many people have lost their job or seen their income reduced over the last 15 months. "My family has no income, only expenses and we now owe a lot of money" said Sophal, a 17 year old boy from Mondulkiri. According to a recent survey conducted by World Vision, only 50% of the respondents reported being able to fully cover their food expenses. To cope, they have had to take on new debts or to sell their productive assets and there is a risk that this increased economic precarity will continue to generate food insecurity beyond the pandemic. To address this, it will be important to continue the social assistance programs that were started during the pandemic until the economy has fully recovered. Beyond this, it is likely that the most marginalized families would need to be targeted with additional nutrition, food security and livelihood programs to mitigate the effects of the large loss of jobs in the country.

The third priority is to address the consequences of the pandemic on the mental health state of the children. "I am worried about falling behind in my studies and that my family could be infected with COVID-19," said Kunthea, a 12 year old girl from Kampong Chhnang. Significant investment in social inclusion and broader protection services, as well as tailored programs will be needed to ensure that mental health services are available for the most vulnerable children and their families. Prolonged isolation and stress have taken their toll and could lead to long term reduced confidence, insecurity and social withdrawal, even after restrictions are lifted and the pandemic has been defeated.

Through these priorities, Cambodia can put the development and learning of children at the center of the recovery plan and should be able to defeat not only the pandemic but its potential long term impact on children.

NOTE TO EDITOR

What is Joining Forces? Joining Forces is a global coalition of the leading independent child-focused NGOs, united to advocate for renewed commitment to achieving the rights of all children. We advocate for all governments to demonstrate their support for internationally agreed standards for children's rights, and in particular to back the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).



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