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Joining Forces Statement

International Children's Day 2022

Title: The Joining Forces Alliance calls for a strong commitment to support children's rights after COVID-19

Phnom Penh/Wednesday, June 1, 2022 - For International Children's Day, the Joining Forces Alliance, a coalition of the six largest child rights international non-government organisations, asked Cambodian children and youth about their situation, experiences, and the expectations they have after the pandemic. A survey was conducted among 53 children and youth living in 13 different provinces across the country with the support of the Child Rights Coalition Cambodia (CRC-Cambodia) in May 2022. Focus group discussions were held with 24 children aged 12 to 16 in Kratie, Siem Reap, and Battambang. **Findings revealed that, even though children have gone back to a normal life, more than 70% of the children and youth surveyed reported they were feeling stressed and worried about the future.** In the interviews, children mentioned three main causes to explain these feelings: stress due to economic difficulties in their families, facing challenges to catch up with studies after two erratic years, and an increase in exposure to emotional violence and gender-based discrimination.

Despite the successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), as well as the timely introduction of the national cash transfer programme for poor households, vulnerable families are still experiencing serious economic hardship, affecting their ability to cover their basic needs. **About 80% of respondents mentioned that their parents experience economic stress, are in debt, and/or struggling with paying for basic needs such as food, transportation, and school fees.** This results in direct and indirect pressure on children and youth who feel the obligation to earn as early as possible to support their families. The "**Cambodia: National Safe Back to School Spotlight Brief**" published by Save the Children Cambodia, with the collaboration of Joining Forces members, CRC-Cambodia, the NGO Forum, and the NGO Partnership for Education (NEP) in 2021 showed that up to 10% of children were at risk of not returning to school.

Around 45% of respondents said they can partially catch up on their studies since the reopening of schools because the quality of the education they received online was lower compared to in-person learning. The learning assessment conducted by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS) in November 2021 revealed the fact that Cambodian students were much less proficient in Khmer and Mathematics as compared to the last assessment conducted in 2016.¹ Illustrating this situation and the need to fill the gaps, Rotha*², one of the survey respondents, mentioned that children need more support "*from parents, local authorities, teachers and other adults*" to express their feelings and be able to effectively manage their stress.

Lastly, children and youth report alarming levels of mental health issues. **There were 67% of respondents reported some emotional violence, such as being mocked, bullied, or yelled at either at home or in school, while another 15% reported physical violence.** Most children try to deal with these experiences on their own: "*I would rather support myself as it is not my wish to pass over the stress or concern to another person*", said Rasmey*, a student in 11th grade. "*I can take social media as a means of motivation especially through social*

¹ the percentage of students who failed to demonstrate basic proficiency increased from 34% to 45% in the Khmer language and from 49% to 74% in Mathematics

² All names have been anonymized to protect children's identity



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influencers.” Children are increasingly using social media as a coping mechanism, which exposes them to online risks such as bullying, grooming, and child sexual exploitation. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of reports on online abuse collected by the Internet Hotline Cambodia managed by the local NGO APLE has doubled.

A positive highlight from the consultation is that children and young people know their own rights and are able to identify when discrimination happens to themselves or their peers. **21% of respondents reported they had been exposed to discrimination, including toward children with diverse gender identities.** As Sokha*, a young student who just started University, rightly said: *“If you feel unsafe, you can report to anyone you trust the most. Never feel afraid of expressing your voice”.*

As we are celebrating International Children’s Day and the sharp decrease in COVID-19 cases in Cambodia over the past few months, we must listen to children and respond to their needs. As members of the Joining Forces Alliance, here are the key commitments we will work on, in collaboration with the Royal Government of Cambodia and other CSOs:

- Provide cash & voucher assistance to the most vulnerable children and families in need to avoid school dropouts;
- Implement a comprehensive strategy to compensate for the learning loss suffered because of COVID-19, including additional and remedial classes and regular assessments of student capacity;
- Prevent and respond to any incident of violence against children in schools, by completing the work started with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports to enforce strong and effective Child Protection policies in school;
- Promote the safe use of the Internet to prevent and respond to online sexual abuse and exploitation, by mobilizing all relevant Ministries, Internet and Digital Service Providers, and other private sector stakeholders;
- Disseminate further knowledge of children’s rights within communities through awareness-raising campaigns with children, youth, parents, and caregivers, to ensure children from all socio-economic backgrounds and genders can enjoy their rights and report incidents.

NOTE TO EDITOR

What is **Joining Forces**? Joining Forces is a global coalition of the leading independent child-focused NGOs: Child Fund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children’s Villages, Terre Des Hommes Federation, and World Vision, united to advocate for a 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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