

**High Commissioner's Dialogue  
on Protection Challenges:  
Protection and Resilience during Pandemics**

UNICEF written statement

**Protection considerations**



**The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability and protection needs of refugee and other displaced children**

While children are less affected by the direct health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, children do suffer from the indirect effects of the pandemic.

Refugee children face these additional risks and vulnerabilities on top of already existing risks and vulnerabilities. Being on the move, without a social network and often separated from their families, refugee children are already more at risk of poverty, child labour, physical, psychological and sexual violence and lack of access to education, clean water and sanitation and health care services.

Measures to combat COVID-19 often have a socio-economic impact and might lead to parents losing their jobs or livelihoods and children becoming more at risk of poverty. Poverty is one of the main causes for children to drop out of school, to be subjected to child labour or child marriage. Closures of schools do not only lead to the disruption of education but also to children missing out on a protective environment, school meals, and water and sanitation facilities. Hospitals, clinics and medical services are overstretched, or inaccessible, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pregnant women, new mothers and newborns might not receive the medical care they would normally receive. Since the start of the pandemic, vaccination programs are disrupted and progress in immunization has been reversed. Mental health and psycho-social support services for victims of physical and sexual violence are often disrupted and cannot handle the increasing needs. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic is increasing the risk for children, especially girls, to experience physical, psychological or sexual violence. Parents might be more at risk to contract COVID-19 as refugee families often live in cramped conditions, without the possibility to social distance and with limited access to clean water and sanitation. Essential information on

COVID-19 is not always available in the language of the refugees. The suspension of legal or administrative services might lead to children being longer in detention centers or not being able to obtain birth registration. Finally, the xenophobia and discrimination that refugee children and their families already face is exacerbated by the misinformation on the spread of COVID-19.

UNICEF calls on Governments to include refugee children in national systems, policies and plans to ensure they receive the health, education, protection, WASH and other services they need. UNICEF also asks Governments to ensure the continuity of child protection services and take actions to end immigration detentions and provide access to asylum procedures.

### **Human rights at the core of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

All preparedness, response, and mitigation efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic should be child-sensitive, inclusive of refugee children and upholds the principle of the best interests of the child. International Human Rights Law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Convention of the Rights of the Child, should be at the center of the measures against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped wars and violence and people continue to flee from persecution and conflict. The right to seek asylum, the right for refugees not to be expelled or returned and the right for children to be reunited with their families cannot be derogated from, not even in a public health emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and their families cannot be sent back to situations where their life would be in danger. Protecting the population against COVID-19 and taking measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 is compatible with providing international protection to those fleeing wars and seeking asylum.

All children have the right to survival and development, to education, to the best health care possible, to clean water and sanitation, to healthy food, to protection from any kind of violence and a safe environment to live in. No matter where they are or where they come from, refugee children have those same rights. The COVID-19 pandemic did not suspend children's rights and we need to make sure that all children, including refugee children are able to continue to enjoy their rights, not despite of the COVID-19 pandemic but because of the COVID-19 pandemic which is having a major impact on their lives.