

NGO statement on the General Debate

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of NGOs.

Five years ago, images of three-year-old boy Alan Kurdi, who lost his life off the Turkish coast, led to expectations for new measures to protect displaced children. Today, they are too often worse off and the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated their situation.

Worldwide, children have been impacted by disruptions, like school closures and stretched health systems, by a decrease in immunisation and vaccination, lost livelihoods, and restricted access to nutritious food. Progress in reducing child mortality is under threat and acute malnutrition in children under five is rising. Because they are stuck at home, girls often face heightened protection risks such as GBV.

As they prepare to rebuild, Governments must prioritise the rights and needs of all children including displaced children and ensure they have access to appropriate services, support, and protection.

The pandemic has devastating impacts on children, leading to three crisis we wish to highlight and provide recommendations on:

First, an unprecedented Education Crisis:

For the first time in history, an entire global generation, including displaced children, had its education disrupted. We know that the longer children dropout of school, the greater the risk they never return. Over nine million children could miss out on education for good. The price they will pay is their future.

The impact of school closures also further exacerbates GBV risks and gender-based inequalities. Increased house chores and care work limits girls' time available to learn and the gender digital divide reduces their access to information.

Funds for education are also likely to suffer because of COVID-19, and vulnerable children are particularly at risk of falling behind.

Therefore, we call on the international community to:

1. Launch a ***Global COVID-19 education action plan and Safe school reopening plans*** including for displaced children. A gender and inclusion lens with steps to remove bias and discrimination should be central, so school reopening plans leave no one behind.
2. Ensure that *all* children, irrespective of status, gender, or disability, have ***access to key services while out of school and when they return***, including options for continuity of learning, healthcare, and psychosocial support.
3. Commit to increased ***funding for education for all*** to recover from this crisis.

Second, a Protection Crisis:

The pandemic has generated loss of livelihoods and income, resulting in deteriorating living standards and increased vulnerability to child labour, abuse, violence, early pregnancy or child marriage. The impact on children's mental health, with its longer-term consequences, is yet to be assessed.

Before the outbreak, 1 billion children experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence or neglect each year. Today, children report more violence at home, particularly when they are out of school or some household income has been lost. Children's separation from caregivers also increased in households displaced because of COVID-19.

As of June 2020, GBV rates related to COVID-19 had increased by 90 % in humanitarian field sites where the Global Protection Cluster is responding. This is coupled with a decrease in access to services, including sexual and reproductive health.

COVID-19-related quarantines have also removed access to social services and psychosocial support for vulnerable children. As national services and capacities are tested by the pandemic, it becomes extremely difficult for displaced populations to access services due to high costs, lack of documentation, and administrative barriers. Yet, children are frequently invisible or under-prioritized both in humanitarian needs assessments, humanitarian response plans and development and welfare programmes.

Despite desperate needs, child protection is chronically under-funded. It only receives 0.6% of ODA and about 0.5% of humanitarian funding. GBV accounts for only 0.12 % of all humanitarian funding. In the 27 operations monitored by the Global Protection Cluster, funding for protection is only 17% of the total requirement and only 12% has been secured for COVID-19 specific protection work outlined in the GHRP.

Hence, we call on governments, donors, and the international community to:

1. Prioritise and support well-resourced, accessible and gender-sensitive **child protection services and psychosocial support**, which respond all children's needs, including displaced children. The social service workforce should be designated as **essential workers** with humanitarian access to reach all children.
2. Ensure that **GBV and mental health services** are in place for all children, inclusive of **displaced children** and of **children with disabilities**. Consider implementing the Minimum Initial Service Package for reproductive health in crises situations which include GBV response services as essential.
3. Donors should immediately address **the protection funding shortfalls**.
4. Integrate child protection into **social protection and child benefit programmes**, accessible to displaced children.

Third, an asylum and resettlement crisis:

While dealing with the impacts of the global pandemic and States borders closures to limit its spread, children still urgently need international protection and access to durable solutions.

We are concerned about the dramatic decrease in access to resettlement and complementary pathways, including family reunification, the continued deterioration of asylum procedures and that children are still detained because of their migration status.

Responding to the needs of children and welcoming them is a concrete sign of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing and restores lives and families.

Therefore, we urge all States to:

1. **Ensure access** to asylum seekers, while adhering to public health protocols and establish more and better **regular immigration pathways** for children. Children should be channelled into proper asylum and protection procedures immediately upon arrival.
2. Expedite **family reunification** and increase the number of favourable decisions.
3. Work with UNHCR, NGOs, and other stakeholders to achieve the vision of the **Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways**.

4. Put in place a plan to **end immigration detention of children**.

Finally, **we would like to urge all stakeholders to involve children** through consultations and taking into account their diverse backgrounds, gender, and abilities, to ensure their specific needs and recommendations are included in response plans.

For further details, visit icvanetwork.org

Thank you.