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ASEAN and SAARC must put children's rights at the heart of COVID-19 response

As the world grapples to address the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, there is a growing need for a collective, coherent, and multi-stakeholder response to the pandemic. We welcome that the two intergovernmental regional bodies – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) – have declared their commitments to take regional-level measures to fight the pandemic and address its impacts.

The two bodies have also committed to the realization of child rights. In the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, children are recognized as a vulnerable group whose rights are “inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” ASEAN also established the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) to uphold child rights as prescribed by international human rights instruments and regional declarations. In South Asia, SAARC adopted the Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia and recognized the South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) as a Regional Apex Body.

We call on ASEAN, SAARC, and their respective Member States to ensure the application of a child rights-based approach in their decisions and actions on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, as it has been recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Address violence against children by allocating a portion of the COVID-19 national and regional response budgets to child protection systems and services

Share experiences, expertise, and good practices on children's mental health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene to reinforce public health regional cooperation

Include experts on child rights and women's and girls' rights in regional coordinating bodies tasked with planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating regional strategies to address the COVID-19 pandemic and future public health emergencies

Ensure food security and nutrition of children when responding to the financial impact of COVID-19 and improving the stability of the regional economy

Provide inclusive access to education as part of the COVID-19 regional response and recovery plan

Ensure that public information campaigns are adopted for children and that children are genuinely consulted in the pandemic response

Strengthen regional child rights efforts by including the perspectives of civil society and children during the COVID-19 crisis

While children have been mainly spared by the virus, the COVID-19 crisis has affected children's human rights in a number of ways. The past months reveal the emerging patterns in the impacts of COVID-19 on the realization of children's rights. The pandemic and the response to it have profound effects on children's physical health, mental well-being, education, social development, protection, and participation. All children in all countries are affected, albeit in varying ways. As such, the response to the pandemic must recognize that COVID-19 has distinct impacts on children in early childhood and children in adolescence, on girls and boys and other children, or on children with and without disabilities. Children in street situations, in conflict-affected areas, in alternative care, in informal settlements, in the context of migration, and in other situations of vulnerability need special protection measures.

As a group of child rights organizations, we urge ASEAN and SAARC to:

1. Address violence against children by allocating a portion of the COVID-19 national and regional response budgets to child protection systems and services

Suspension of classes, movement restrictions, lockdowns, and other confinement measures increase the risks of children witnessing or experiencing domestic violence. This is a particular concern for children already living in violent family situations, but in other families, the added stressors of the financial or health impacts of the crisis might increase the risk of violence. Child helplines in some Asian countries have reported a spike of 33% up to 50% in the number of received calls after the implementation of confinement measures by the government.

Previous experience also proves that emergency situations increase gender-based violence, disproportionately affecting girls. With the isolation and indefinite suspension of classes due to COVID-19, children are spending more time online and may be exposed to cyberbullying, online abuse, and online sexual exploitation. The rapid closures of residential institutions lead children in alternative care to return to their families and communities without adequate preparation. The movement restrictions lead to the delay of decisions in the child justice system, and this is especially worrying in countries that allow pretrial detention of children in conflict with the law. In addition, children in street situations and children who violate imposed curfews or movement restrictions have in some countries been targeted with physical and humiliating punishment by authorities.

The suspension of classes also means that children are no longer able to rely on schools as safe havens or places of support, including to report violent incidents. Social work and child protection services, including child helplines, are in many countries suspended or scaled back due to the virus, increasing child protection concerns .

In this time of public health emergency when children's vulnerabilities to violence increase, we ask the authorities to recognize and designate child protection services and workers as essential. These services and workers should also be given adequate resources to respond to reports of violence against children. Governments should also coordinate with civil society organizations and faith-based organizations to strengthen the response to violence against children during the pandemic.

Moreover, the experience during this pandemic must be maximized to inform the regional roadmaps to end violence against children. We ask ASEAN and SAARC to work with civil society and children to revisit the efficiency and agility of the regional child protection strategies during public health emergencies.

2. Share experiences, expertise, and good practices on children’s mental health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, alternative care, and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene to reinforce public health regional cooperation

Regional intergovernmental bodies should exchange experiences and best practices to achieve the region’s common goals. We welcome that both ASEAN and SAARC have emphasized the need for the transparent exchange of information in dealing with the pandemic.

In discussing public health, we ask ASEAN and SAARC to prioritize children’s mental health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and alternative care. Mental health and psychosocial support, especially to children, should be a core component of the COVID-19 response. The sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and women must be funded and recognized as an essential health service for children’s survival and healthy development.

Evidence from past epidemics shows that the problems regarding limited access to maternal, neonatal and child health, and other basic health services are further heightened due to the diversion of resources from routine health services. Moreover, teenage pregnancy rates and maternal and child death rates may rise during pandemics because of school suspensions, limited access to sexual and reproductive health information, and increased levels of sexual violence and exploitation.

Regarding mental health, children are not spared from experiencing the psychological impact of the pandemic. Children feel the stress and anxiety over physical health risks, isolation, school closures, economic vulnerabilities, and uncertainty of the future due to the pandemic. There are children who are concerned about not being able to go back to school due to their household’s loss of income. The suspension of visits between children in alternative care and their families may weaken the children’s sense of belongingness. As there are millions of children in Asia with parents who are migrant workers, children left behind in their home countries worry about their parent’s safety abroad and when they might return due to the travel restrictions. Children with COVID-19 positive parents could face discrimination and isolation that could have severe long-term effects on their mental health and development. Children in street situations are discriminated against because their circumstances hinder them from following stay-at-home orders.

Additionally, in the time when proper handwashing and hygiene are crucial to stopping the spread of the pandemic, children in street situations face stigma because of their difficulty to maintain good hygiene. Some children in remote areas or those living in a slum are also cut-off from safe water. In this regard, we ask governments to reach vulnerable children with basic water, sanitation, and hygiene. Ensuring access to these are crucial to public health.

3. Include experts on child rights and women’s and girls’ rights in regional coordinating bodies tasked with planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating of regional strategies to address the COVID-19 pandemic and future public health emergencies

In forming or assigning working groups or similar bodies to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN and SAARC should include child rights experts in relevant positions to ensure that the children’s perspectives are taken into consideration during the processes. Following this, efforts to strengthen national and regional preparedness and response for future public health emergencies must involve experts on child rights and

women's and girls' rights, including professionals working with children, academics, civil society organizations, and children.

4. Ensure food security and nutrition of children when responding to the financial impact of COVID-19 and improving the stability of the regional economy

The past months indicate the growing economic vulnerabilities as a secondary impact of the pandemic. The loss of jobs, reduced income, and other income shocks due to the pandemic response will lead to poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. In the ASEAN region, for example, more than 36 million people already live in extreme poverty, and millions more children risk being pushed into this group as a result of the crisis. Poverty and hunger expose children to the threats of sexual exploitation, child labor, child marriage, and child trafficking. The global cost of malnutrition, in all its forms, is up to USD3.5 trillion per year according to the 2018 Global Nutrition Report.

As such, regional discussions on mitigating the short-term and long-term economic consequences of the pandemic must take into consideration the impacts on children. Human capital development is crucial to economic growth, and investing in human capital is substantially about investing in children.

We ask governments to implement financing and strengthening social protection schemes to ensure that appropriate, safe, healthy, and nutritious food is affordable and accessible to children and pregnant and lactating women. Moreover, regional discussions on economic stimulus and poverty alleviation measures should target the most vulnerable groups, including families depending on daily income, working in the informal sector, or lacking in income, so that they will not be left behind in the post-crisis economic recovery and growth. ASEAN and SAARC must urgently scale up safety nets and social protection measures for the vulnerable families with children by providing free access to basic healthcare, food, hygiene, sanitation items and cash assistance support to overcome the immediate and long-term impacts of the crisis.

5. Provide inclusive access to education as part of the COVID-19 regional response and recovery plan

All Member States of ASEAN and SAARC have implemented school closures as part of the measures to contain the virus, affecting millions of children and impacting their learning outcomes and human capital development. To children in vulnerable situations, this school interruption may trigger them to drop out of school completely.

As a solution, there are schools offering distance learning, but not all educational systems are fully prepared for it. Children's access to devices and internet connection vary between girls and boys or between children in urban areas and those living in rural parts. Distance learning can also be especially difficult for children with disabilities. Teachers, parents, and caregivers also have different levels of capacity and support to deliver distance learning.

The collective experience to uphold children's right to education during the pandemic highlights the importance of a flexible national education system. The governments must ensure that distance learning is accessible to all children in their countries. Children vulnerable to the income shocks of the pandemic must also be given enough support to encourage them to return to school. ASEAN and SAARC must conduct an assessment on the impact of the pandemic and response to children's education, and it must be used to inform the planning and development of a resilient educational system.

6. Ensure that public information campaigns are adopted for children and that children are genuinely consulted in the pandemic response

We call on ASEAN and SAARC to take proactive efforts to ensure that children receive child-friendly information about the pandemic and the response to it. Communication must be adapted for children of different ages, maturity, gender, and language. Messages must be conveyed in an inclusive and culturally-sensitive manner. Different channels of communication must be explored to ensure that children in indigenous communities and in remote areas receive the information too. Member States of ASEAN and SAARC should also consider holding press conferences designed for children.

Moreover, ASEAN and SAARC must recognize the right of children to participate in developing response to both COVID-19 and future public health emergencies. Children must be consulted and engaged through appropriate mechanisms and their right to freedom of expression must be respected, to ensure that government responses are tailored to children's specific needs. The emerging practices across the region on governments providing platforms for children to voice out their concerns and recommendations must be collated and shared to ASEAN and SAARC platforms for possible replication.

This unprecedented crisis presents an opportunity for leaders and other stakeholders to help children develop their skills and leadership in civic engagements at the local, national, regional, and global levels. Children must not be viewed and treated as passive subjects of the pandemic response. They are active citizens who want to understand the pandemic and be involved in protecting themselves, their families, and their peers.

We see groups of children from South and Southeast Asia making COVID-19 prevention videos and disseminating these to various social media platforms. We know about children providing peer-to-peer counseling through a messaging application to help other children cope with the psychological impacts of COVID-19. We are also supporting child-led groups taking the lead in conducting research on the impacts to and concerns of children related to the pandemic.

As they do these, the governments and all stakeholders, including the private sector, must recognize, now more than ever, the importance of children's access to digital tools and media in order for them to enjoy their right to be heard and be agents of change. These also bring insights on the discussions on the length of children's screen time vis-à-vis the quality of content and contacts they have online. These experiences brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic must be taken into consideration in upholding child participation and realizing children's rights in the digital environment.

7. Strengthen regional child rights efforts by including the perspectives of civil society and children during the COVID-19 crisis

A serious public health concern, the COVID-19 crisis has further implications for children's human rights. Among others, it highlights the risk of cyberbullying and other online threats to children and the need for child care reforms. It underscores the importance of using detention only as a measure of last resort, and it presents areas of improvements in the child justice system regarding delays in decisions on child custody cases and cases involving children in conflict with the law. It brings out the resourcefulness of children to continue voicing out their demands for climate action. ASEAN and SAARC must look at the correlation between the pandemic and the

environmental crisis, and ensure scaled up regional efforts for the fulfillment of their right to a healthy environment.

These experiences must be taken into consideration in on-going and future regional work that directly or indirectly affect children. They must be considered in coordinating and collaborating with the private sector and other stakeholders. More importantly, civil society and children must be involved in the processes to ensure the effectiveness, equity, inclusivity, and sustainability of regional efforts, including those done in partnership with ASEAN dialogue partners or SAARC observers.

Signed,

**Joining Forces
Child Rights Coalition Asia
Child Rights Connect
ECPAT International**

Joining Forces is an alliance of the six largest child- focused international NGOs: ChildFund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Villages International, Terre des Hommes International Federation, and World Vision International.

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www.soschildrensvillages.org | www.terredeshommes.org | www.wvi.org

Child Rights Coalition Asia (CRC Asia) is a network of child rights organizations working together to be a strong voice for child rights in the region by leading in strengthening child rights movements, promoting innovative programs, and advocating better policies for and with the children.

www.crcasia.org

Child Rights Connect is a strategic partner of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the largest global network of child rights organizations.

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ECPAT International is a global network of child rights organizations working to end the sexual exploitation of children online, through trafficking, prostitution, child marriage, and in travel and tourism.

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