

# ACT NOW:

Experiences and recommendations of girls and boys  
in West Africa during COVID-19



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### **CHILD AND ADULT SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS**

WorldVision ensured safe and ethical participation of children when they shared their stories, adhering to WorldVision's safeguarding protocols. Names of children have been anonymised and changed to ensure confidentiality. All photos were taken and used with informed consent.

### **COVER PHOTO © WORLD VISION.**

In Sierra Leone World Vision is supporting communities to install tippy taps as part of the preparedness against COVID-19.

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*World Vision's work in Ghana supporting communities to access clean and safe water, is having positive impact in the lives of children and their families.*



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 is currently wreaking havoc on countries around the world. The devastating health consequences of the virus are only the tip of the iceberg. The pandemic's indirect impacts, such as loss of livelihoods, school closures and restrictions on travel and socialising have far-reaching effects on children and young people's health, safety, education and well-being. During this period, many children and young people are spending more time at home, with family and online. In this context, children and young people are at risk of hunger, isolation, witnessing and/or experiencing violence at home and in their communities, child labour, early marriage, and, in some cases, online risks. This consultation explores children and young people's views and experiences related to COVID-19 and its indirect impacts.

This consultation was conducted from May to June 2020 using a qualitative approach. Listening to children is at the heart of World Vision's child-centred approach and our commitment to amplifying the voices of children and young people on the world stage. The consultation included individual interviews with 160 children and young people (80 girls and 80 boys) between the ages of 9 and 18 from eight countries across West Africa: Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone. The interviews took place in-person with physical distancing and over the phone. This consultation followed the minimum standards for consulting with children and young people developed by the Inter-agency Working Group on Children's Participation.<sup>1</sup>

**76%**  
of children  
shared examples  
of violence at  
home and in their  
communities  
during COVID-19

The report is organised around the three themes emerging from the data: (1) the impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people, including if or how they faced an increased risk of violence at home, in their communities or online during this period; (2) their resilient responses to these impacts personally, in their families and communities; and (3) the support that children and young people need to be safe, healthy and help to fight the further spread of the virus.

**94%**  
of children shared  
examples of  
following at least  
one preventative  
measure to stop  
the spread of  
COVID-19.

The majority of participants, 76% (122 out of 160), shared examples of violence at home and in their communities, child labour, early marriage and online risks. However, it is clear from this consultation that children and young people are not merely victims of the current crisis. Despite the many challenges they face, children and young people shared stories of resiliency and hope, of following best practices to stop the spread of COVID-19, of navigating complex home environments, and of helping their communities. Nearly all of the children and young people interviewed, 94% (151 out of 160), shared examples of following one or more preventative measures to stop the spread of COVID-19.

While the challenges children and young people face during this time are immense, this consultation highlights countless examples of their resiliency and activism in the face of a complex crisis; however, children and young people cannot confront these alone. World Vision thus calls on governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector to take a collaborative approach to support children and young people around the world.

24-year-old Fatoumata and her children were forced to flee their home in Bankass to Soukoura IDP camp in central Mali, when armed groups attacked their village. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the many challenges that Fatoumata and her family are facing.



# INTRODUCTION

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) escalated the COVID-19 outbreak from a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” to a pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The WHO director-general explained he was “deeply concerned by both the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction”.<sup>3</sup> This pandemic has had an impact on children and young people, families and communities around the world; between January 2020 and September 2020, according to the WHO, there have been almost 30 million cases of COVID-19 and one million deaths worldwide.<sup>4</sup> In West Africa, there have been 80,574 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1,173 deaths as of 24 September 2020.<sup>5</sup>

The COVID-19 outbreak arrived in West Africa on the heels of natural disasters, including drought and floods.<sup>6</sup> The region is also currently dealing with endemic poverty, unemployment, food insecurity and protracted armed conflicts.<sup>7</sup> These combined factors have contributed to the COVID-19 pandemic’s far-reaching and devastating impacts across West Africa. World Vision is responding globally to the COVID-19 crisis in 70 countries, eight of which are in West Africa. Over the next 18 months, World Vision aims to reach at least 72 million people globally, half of them children and young people. Since the start of the pandemic, World Vision has reached 4,487,244 people in West Africa, 2,109,464 of whom are children and young people, with much needed information and material support. World Vision is focusing on countries that have significant pockets of fragility and poverty where children and young people are most at risk, including conflict-affected contexts, urban slums and refugee settings. World Vision’s response is focused on four key areas to help to limit the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its impact on vulnerable children and young people and families: (1) scaling up preventative measures to limit the spread of disease, (2) strengthening health systems and workers, (3) supporting children and young people affected by COVID-19, and (4) collaborating and advocating to ensure vulnerable children and young people are protected.

World Vision works in collaboration with local authorities, frontline health workers, academic institutions, faith leaders, communities and local NGOs. Following its commitment to place children and young people at the centre of our work, World Vision responds in times of crisis by listening to children and young people, empowering children and young people, and amplifying their voices at the local and global levels. This report is part of World Vision’s continuous effort to listen to children and young people. With these findings, World Vision hopes to contribute to improving the ongoing work of child-focused agencies, decision makers, adult professionals, and children and young people themselves.

World Vision's work in Ghana is supporting communities to access clean and safe water.





# METHODOLOGY

World Vision considers children and young people active social actors capable of interacting with others and shaping their environments, not helpless, hidden victims of this pandemic. Following this premise, for this consultation the methodology included collaboration between adults and young leaders engaged as peer researchers who also conducted interviews with other children and young people.

## AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This regional child consultation sought to explore children and young people's views and experiences related to the outbreak of COVID-19, with a specific focus on violence against children and young people and opportunities they have to contribute to stopping the spread of the virus. The report also captures key recommendations children would like governments to address.

Research questions included:

- How is COVID-19 affecting the lives of children and young people in their countries and communities?
- How are children and young people contributing, or can they contribute, to the fight against the spread of COVID-19?
- Are there children and young people in your community who are facing violence or abuse in this time of COVID-19?

## SAMPLE

This consultation included 160 children and young people (80 girls and 80 boys) between the ages of 9 and 18 from eight countries across West Africa, including CAR, Chad, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone. This report is not representative of the views of all children and young people in the region, or even within each country. What this report does do, however, is provide a useful snapshot of what children and young people are thinking and feeling about their experiences living in the time of COVID-19.

## METHOD, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This project used a qualitative interview approach which allowed the research team to capture information about participants' personal meanings and interpretations.<sup>8</sup> The research team was made up of ten children, who administered the questionnaire and analysed the data, supported by World Vision staff. In all eight countries, data were collected through individual interviews conducted over the phone or face-to-face, while maintaining physical distancing measures.

Interviews were conducted in May and June 2020. The World Vision team in each country adapted the data collection procedure to the contexts of the participants. In each country, children and young people were asked three questions (in addition to the prompt questions used to stimulate the conversation). Participants were asked about their views on the impact of COVID-19, violence and abuse against children and young people in their communities during this time, and their responses and concerns to fighting the spread of the virus. The research team transcribed audio from the interviews and analysed the transcripts to identify emerging themes and patterns mentioned by the children and young people.

## LIMITATIONS

- This research was based on three open-ended questions. Each question had a series of prompts to gain further insight and detail. Interviewers used their discretion utilising these prompts, and as such, these variations are reflected in the data.
- Given the sensitive and often hidden nature of violence, it is highly likely that children and young people sometimes chose not to answer some questions or, in some cases, their answers may not fully reflect their experiences.
- While the primary aim of the research was to highlight the voices of children and young people, some percentages are noted, based on the responses for each question to provide a clearer picture.

## ETHICS

This consultation followed the minimum standards for consulting with children and young people developed by the Inter-agency Working Group on Children's Participation.<sup>9</sup> These principles include transparency, honesty, accountability, provision of a child-friendly environment, equality of opportunity, and the safety and protection of young participants.<sup>10</sup> This project took into account the special considerations required to gain informed consent, ensure confidentiality and anonymity, acknowledge the diverse cultures of the research sites, and refrain from presenting any information that may potentially harm participants.<sup>11</sup> The facilitation team ensured safe and ethical participation of children and young people, strictly adhering to World Vision's safeguarding protocols, including a referral procedure in coordination with local partners engaged in the crisis response. In order to ensure that participation was meaningful, safe and ethical, World Vision staff members facilitated conversations with the child participants, and they were encouraged to decide on their own whether or not they would participate.

*World Vision's work in Ghana supporting communities to access clean and safe water, is having positive impact in the lives of children and their families.*



# FINDINGS

Children and young people's views are arranged in three parts. The first section outlines the impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people in West Africa, including the increased risk they face of witnessing or experiencing violence. The second section considers the ways in which children and young people are responding to changes in their daily lives, and, in some cases, taking an active role in preventing the spread of the virus and its indirect impacts on their communities. Lastly, the third section spotlights the recommendations of children and young people, highlighting their ideas for ensuring that child rights are upheld moving forward. The pandemic affects all children and young people differently; however, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights existing inequalities in rural, poor and marginalised communities who face these challenges with fewer resources and support.<sup>12</sup>

## I.

### IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN WEST AFRICA

Across all eight countries, participants pointed out nine significant ways that the pandemic has affected their lives including: (1) an increased risk of witnessing or experiencing violence, (2) violence at home, (3) sexual abuse, (4) child labour, (5) early marriage, (6) online risks, (7) violence in the community, (8) economic hardship and food insecurity, and (9) navigating a new normal at home.

#### INCREASED RISK OF WITNESSING OR EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE

*In this time of COVID-19, many children are victims of violence and abuse in the neighbourhood where I live. (Noëlla, 12, female, CAR)*

**76%**  
of children talked about some form of violence when they listed the impacts of COVID-19 on their communities.

Children and young people in West Africa were asked if and how the current global pandemic had increased the risk of children and young people experiencing or witnessing different forms of violence and abuse. In total, 76% (122 out of 160) of respondents talked about some form of violence when they listed the impacts COVID-19 had on their communities (including violence at home and in their communities, sexual abuse, child labour, early marriage and online risks). Not all of the participants shared personal experiences of violence, but some gave examples using their friends and community members.

Violence against children takes many forms, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and may involve neglect or deprivation. Violence occurs in many settings, including the home, school, community and over the Internet. Similarly, a wide range of perpetrators commit violence against children, such as family members, intimate partners, teachers, neighbours, strangers and other children. Such violence not only inflicts harm, pain and humiliation on children; it also kills. (UNICEF, 2015).<sup>13</sup>

## VIOLENCE AT HOME

*I saw with my own eyes that a child [was] hit to the point of having grazes, and it makes me sad. (Mortinez, 14, female, CAR)*

As a result of the current global pandemic, children and young people are spending more time at home. In environments of heightened stress, children and young people are at greater risk of experiencing or witnessing violence.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, domestic violence was already taking place inside the home prior to the outbreak of the virus, and the increased time spent isolated at home, due to school closures and lockdown measures, only amplifies this risk. Soumeya, a 14-year-old female from Mauritania, observed: "Measures applied to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 can put children at risk." For example, Marieme, a 15-year-old female from Mauritania, reported that children and young people are "beaten often to [make them follow the] lockdown [rules]".

The issue of corporal punishment arose in interviews when discussing violence at home.

*Yes, there are times when parents hit their kids. (Chanceline, 15, female, Chad)*

*Many of the children in my community are victims of physical violence, physical abuse [and] severe 'corrections' from their parents. (Gervil, 12, male, CAR)*

*Boys in my community are confronted with bodily harm, [as a] too severe [form of behaviour] correction from parents. (Paul, 15, male, CAR)*

## SEXUAL ABUSE

*Yes, there are people in our community who always want to hurt children and also ask to sexually abuse them. (Justin, 17, male, Chad)*

Aside from physical abuse, children and young people also spoke about the increased risk of experiencing sexual abuse during COVID-19. Amaadou, a 17-year-old male from Mauritania, said that "children are confronted with several kinds of violence, and in this time of COVID-19, rapes are [the] number one [kind of violence they face]". Lucy, a 12-year-old female from Ghana, reported: "Children are sexually harassed by adults. Some adults [consider] the junior high and senior high students who are home [from school] currently as matured for sex."

The most likely perpetrators of violence against children and young people are people that they know.<sup>15</sup> Jessica, a 16-year-old female from Sierra Leone, confirmed this: "Some of our uncles ask us for sex and give us money." Maisha, a 17-year-old female from Ghana, shared: "[I] have heard of children exposed to the danger of sexual abuse, especially children who live with other people other than their biological parents."

## CHILD LABOUR

*The ban on school is affecting my studies because I go to [the] farm every day and get tired. (Prince, 13, male, Ghana)*

Child labour is defined as "work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and mental development".<sup>16</sup> There are currently 71.2 million children and young people involved in child labour across Africa; this is the largest number of children and young people working in any region globally.<sup>17</sup> The majority work in family agriculture, and many parents are reliant on their children to help to generate income.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin, a 13-year-old male from Sierra Leone, stated: "Yes, [we are] seeing some amount of child labour. Because there is no school now and this is planting season, some children are given large portions of the farm to clear and plant." Mortinez, a 14-year-old female from CAR, said: "When the child is still in bed, the parents wake [them] up to go to the field and look for bundles to sell."

Apart from agriculture, children and young people also took part in other forms of work to contribute to their family's income. Oussama, a 14-year-old male from Niger, shared: "I do petty trading to help my parents." Cassandra, a 14-year-old female from CAR, described what was happening in her community: "I see some of my friends working to feed their families; they sell firewood and others have told me that they are going to the mining sites to work for money and to come back to help their families."

Children and young people said school closures contributed to the expectation that they could work to help their families, and it also made studying at home difficult. Maisha, a 17-year-old female from Ghana, explained: "There are some instances where parents ask children to go out to work to earn some income to support the household expenses. These incidences have become common due to the closure of schools during this period of coronavirus." Hawa, a 12-year-old female from Sierra Leone, also noted: "Children are forced to go to the farms instead of encouraging them to study."

Child labour exposes children and young people to other types of harm and violence, for example, physical, psychological and sexual abuse, as well as dangerous working conditions.<sup>19</sup>

*Yes, [children and young people] do the following: sand mining [and] working in plantations ... it exposes [them] to abuses, such as sexual exploitation and even death. (Princess, 11, female, Sierra Leone)*

*Yes, we work [at the] farm and sell, which I think is risky because we can be harm[ed]. (Mohamed, 15, male, Sierra Leone)*

*In my neighbourhood, the children are really suffering. Some parents use the children in the fields, searching for firewood and other hazardous work that harms the child's development. (Sammy, 16, male, CAR)*

## EARLY MARRIAGE

*Children are now more afraid of getting married than before. (Alie, 11, female, Sierra Leone)*

Globally, sub-Saharan Africa is home to the second largest number of child brides, with over 18% of the global burden. This is equal to 115 million individuals marrying before the age of 18.<sup>20</sup> The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that over the next decade there could be an additional 13 million early marriages taking place, that otherwise would not have occurred, because of the indirect effects of COVID-19.<sup>21</sup> Early marriage is a harmful practice, in part, because it puts children and young people at greater risk of experiencing sexual and physical violence.<sup>22</sup>

Children and young people shared examples of early marriage taking place in their communities. Some viewed COVID-19 as a factor that increased this risk.

*Yes, in my neighbourhood, an 11-year-old was given in marriage. (Mahamadou, 12, male, Niger)*

*Yes, there is a case of child marriage in my neighbourhood. (Ludivine, 12, female, CAR)*

*There are minors who get married during the COVID-19 period because it is very easy to get married . . . only because the expenses will not be expensive. (Souleye, 17, male, Senegal)*

*Some [children and young people] have decided to get married, and the number is bigger than before. (Arelle, 15, female, Chad)*

Staying in school helps to protect girls from early marriage and pregnancy.<sup>23</sup> School closures, during widespread crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, may lead to an increase in teenage pregnancy of up to 65%<sup>24</sup> because, when girls are not in school, they may spend “more time with men and boys than they would were they to be in school, leading to greater likelihood of engagement in risky sexual behaviour and increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation”,<sup>25</sup> including early marriage.

Children and young people viewed the school closures put in place to stem the spread of COVID-19 as another risk factor increasing early marriage. Abie, a 14-year-old female from Sierra Leone, shared that “there are some girls who are afraid their parents will give their hand out in marriage since there is no school right now”. Jessica, a 16-year-old female from Sierra Leone, concurred: “Some [children and young people] are getting married because [there is] no school [so] their parents may decide for them to get married.”

In some extreme cases, participants shared that early marriage was employed as a solution to poverty and hunger. Jayah, a 13-year-old male from Sierra Leone, said: “They [children and young people] are getting married because they are poor.” Joyce, a 14-year-old female from Chad, reported: “We are more in danger than before because our parents can easily be pushed by poverty and give us in marriage.” Princess, an 11-year-old female from Sierra Leone, explained: “They see marriage as an easy means of survival for [their] family, especially for wealthy suitors.”

## ONLINE RISKS

When asked about online risks, the majority of children and young people in this consultation said they did not face online risks, in large part because many children and young people in West Africa do not have access to the Internet or phones with Internet connectivity. In 2017, the World Bank estimated that Internet coverage only reached 19% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>26</sup> While this percentage has likely changed, many of the participants confirmed they did not have Internet access. Jilius, a 16-year-old male from CAR, stated that he “[didn’t] have access to the Internet”, and he was not alone; in CAR, 60% (12 out of 20) of participants said they did not have Internet access at all.

That said, children and young people with Internet access did report that they, or someone they knew, had experienced online risks. For example, at least one participant in every country, except CAR, said that they personally had seen inappropriate sexual content online, and in some countries, this number was much higher. In Mauritania, half of all participants (10 out of 20), and 65% (13 out of 20) of respondents in Sierra Leone reported that they, or someone they knew, had seen inappropriate sexual content online. Maisha, a 17-year-old female from Ghana, described: “I have heard of some friends who claim to have seen inappropriate or indecent ‘dressing’ shown on a phone.” Ngora, a 12-year-old male from Senegal, explained: “Yes, it sometimes happens [for us] to see indecent photos or videos, like pornography.”

Children and young people confirmed that they and/or others they knew were asked to send indecent pictures of themselves online. Aissata, a 17-year-old female from Mauritania, confirmed: “Yes, I get a lot of such things [requests].” Han Mint, a 13-year-old female from Mauritania, said: “We send and receive photos of naked or serious people because, for the most part, it makes people laugh.” One respondent shared a situation her friend had experienced:

*One of my friends had a friend on Facebook and asked her to [snap a] naked [picture of] herself and send [it] to him. Because she did not do [what he asked], he ended up videoing himself and sent her a nude video. Because she blocked [him] ... he ended up writing bad things about her on Facebook and photoshopped her picture on a nude form. (Jessica, 16, female, Sierra Leone)*

Instances of non-sexual cyberbullying were only mentioned by a few children and young people. Solomon, a 14-year-old male from Ghana, shared: “There are issues of cyberbullying in my community. In an attempt to access educational materials online, some children are left in the hands of online fraudsters who bully children through messages [or] threats.”

## VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

*There is no shortage of dangerous people in my neighbourhood. (Melki, 13, male, CAR)*

Children and young people faced violence of varying kinds in their communities. Aissata, a 17-year-old female from Mauritania, said there was “a lot of violence in the neighbourhoods [in her community]”. In Sierra Leone, children and young people specifically cited “cliques” or gangs, comprised of mostly young men, who made them feel unsafe. In recent years, these have grown from “a loose collection of teenage social groups”<sup>27</sup> to gangs with defined territories and identities who had grown in prominence for perpetrating theft, robbery and electoral violence.<sup>28</sup>

Mary, a 16-year-old female from Sierra Leone, explained that “the ‘clique boys’ threaten the lives of not only children but adults also”. Benjamin, a 13-year-old male from Sierra Leone, agreed: “Yes, ‘clique boys’ have ... come to our community. They are bad influences on some children.” Swahiu, a 17-year-old male from Sierra Leone, said that children and young people in his community felt unsafe because of the threat of gang rape.



Apart from gang violence, a few children and young people cited violence perpetrated by soldiers and police. Bickson, a 17-year-old female from Chad, reported that “during curfew the soldiers hit the children”. Alie, an 11-year-old female from Sierra Leone, stated: “I don’t like the way soldiers are beating up people for curfew order.” Mariem, a 12-year-old female from Mauritania, explained: “The police have become thieves and rapists.”

## ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND FOOD INSECURITY

*We are hungry. (Vatimetou, 18, female, Mauritania)*

Food insecurity and hunger are significant issues in their own right, but are also problematic because, in extreme cases, the stress caused by hunger and food insecurity puts children and young people at a greater risk of experiencing violence.<sup>29</sup> In some cases, children and young people reported that economic hardship and food insecurity contributed to instances of child neglect. Nathaniel, a 16-year-old male from Chad, said: “It is difficult to find food because of the suspension of the weekly market; children are neglected every day.” Mawutor, a 13-year-old male from Ghana, confirmed: “Children are neglected and are often left alone at home without being given food.”

COVID-19 has worsened existing economic hardships and food insecurities in West Africa.<sup>30</sup> Estimates suggest that: “The percentage of children under 5 with severe acute malnutrition could rise globally by about 15 per cent (7 million children) over the first 12 months of the pandemic. Certain areas in Africa may see up to 20 – 25 per cent increase.”<sup>31</sup> Several children and young people spoke of hunger, not having enough food and rising food prices. Beatrice, a 17-year-old female from Chad, said that “hunger almost kills us”. Chaibou, a 13-year-old male from Niger, shared: “My mother’s business no longer works. The borders are closed, the vehicles of Algeria no longer bring us food, [and] everything has become expensive.”

Children and young people said that the COVID-19 pandemic had contributed to the loss of family livelihoods and/or income, making it difficult for parents and caregivers to provide nutritious food and other necessities for their families. Princess, an 11-year-old female from Sierra Leone, stated: “Economic hardship for our parents [means] they cannot provide our basic needs, such as food, medicine and clothing.”

The closure of public places and lockdown measures, taken to stop the spread of COVID-19, have worsened pre-existing poverty and economic hardships in the region.

*Due to the COVID-19, my mum’s sales at the market have been reduced since most people are not allowed to go to the market. Hence, my mum is no longer able to provide all my basic needs, which is affecting me negatively. (Rafatu, 10, female, Ghana)*

*The three-day lockdowns makes us go without enough food. It has affected our household livelihoods greatly since my parents no longer do business like before. (Paul, 12, male, Sierra Leone)*

## NAVIGATING A NEW NORMAL

Children and young people are contending with new risks and challenges while facing increased isolation from support networks. While relationships with family are important, children and young people also shared their frustrations with being in prolonged close proximity to their families. Kholi, a 15-year-old male from Ghana, reflected: "My relationship with my parents was initially good because we stay longer together as a family. However, of late, the relationship has gone sour because they are fed up with the continuous stay in the house."

### SEEKING SUPPORT

Children and young people's support networks shrank due to school and church closures and "stay-at-home" recommendations. This isolation had repercussions on their well-being and ability to seek help, if they experienced violence. As Hamadou, a 10-year-old male from Mauritania, explained: "Changes in families, relationships with friends, daily routines and the community as a whole can negatively [have an] impact [on] the well-being, development and protection of children."

When asked whether they or their friends knew who to tell or who could help, if they felt endangered or threatened by violence, the majority of participants from all countries in the consultation said that they did know who to reach out to for support. Billor, a 10-year-old male from Sierra Leone, replied: "I will take the matter to the elders in the community or to my manager of the school. I can also tell World Vision." Alexis, a 17-year-old male from Chad, said: "In the event of violence, I [would] inform the village chief and the child protection group." However, some children and young people did not know who to tell if they felt endangered or threatened by violence. Alix, a 14-year-old male from CAR, responded that he had "no idea" who to tell. Kader, a 14-year-old male from Niger, also was unsure who to ask for support: "I know no other place but to [tell] God." Due to the increased isolation of children and young people during this time, ensuring that clear and easily accessible child protection support is available for children and young people is imperative.

### FRIENDS AND IMPORTANT ADULTS

*I can no longer play with friends; currently, we rarely see each other. (Gaoussou, 16, male, Mali)*

Children and young people said that COVID-19 had affected their ability to gather, play and socialise with friends and important adults in their lives. Participants said they missed social interactions with friends, teachers and faith leaders in their communities. This was particularly an issue in West Africa, as not all children and young people had access to the Internet or phones to stay in touch with their friends, furthering their feelings of isolation.

*The relationship between friends, teachers and religious leaders hardly exists because there is no school, church or outings. Life has changed completely. (Nathaniel, 16, male, Chad)*

*The relationship remains intact with [our] parents, but the problem arises with friends, schoolteachers and religious leaders because I no longer see them during this time of COVID-19. There is a big change at this level. (Sammy, 16, male, CAR)*

*I don't see my friends as I used to, nor my teachers, and only I spend more time with the family. (Mariem, 12, female, Mauritania)*

Some highlighted that the lack of contact with friends had already negatively affected their relationships.

*My relationship with my friends has deteriorated because we no longer have the possibility of seeing each other, [as] each of us is afraid of going out and catching COVID-19, and restrictive measures [have been] added, [so] we are forced to stay at home. (Aidatou, 14, female, Niger)*

Moreover, the fear of catching COVID-19 created a climate of mistrust in some communities. Exhauce, a 15-year-old male from Chad, explained: "The fear of being infected changed the relationships between the people of the village." Arelle, a 15-year-old female from Chad, confirmed this: "My relationship with friends has changed due to the fact that we no longer greet each other hand-to-hand, and there is a climate of mistrust between us, even with teachers or religious [leaders]."

### CORPORATE WORSHIP

*The measures that have affected my life are the measures relating to the prohibition of collective prayer and gatherings. (Habibatou, 15, female, Niger)*

Apart from individual friendships, children and young people missed attending church or mosque. The closure of places of worship further isolated children and young people from important support structures. Respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their ability to practise their religion and/or to grow spiritually. Alimata, a 13-year-old female from Mali, confirmed: "The mosque is no longer accessible for a large number of people." Silas, a 15-year-old male from Ghana, explained: "I no longer get advice from my teachers and faith leaders anymore. We have had to stay apart." Rolande, a 16-year-old female from Chad, relayed: "I can't have my baptism this year."



Children in Senegal are raising awareness on COVID-19 through radio.

## 2.

## RESILIENT RESPONSES: FACING CHALLENGES AND CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Children and young people's interview responses evidence their capacity as active and engaged citizens. They were aware that they could contribute to making a significant difference through individual and collective actions in their families and communities. This section looks at the ways in which children and young people are responding to the challenges created by the pandemic and how they are working towards bettering their own lives and the lives of those around them.

### FOLLOWING BEST PRACTICES TO STOP COVID-19

*I didn't take handwashing seriously until COVID-19. (Cynthia, 14, female, Ghana)*

**94%**  
of children shared  
examples of  
following one or  
more preventative  
measures.

When asked how children and young people were contributing or could contribute to fighting the spread of COVID-19, participants said that they were following the guidance given by their governments and trusted non-governmental organisations. Jonas, a 16-year-old male from Mali, suggested that his peers "carefully follow the instructions given by the minister of health on the prevention of COVID-19". Most respondents, 94% (151 out of 160), shared examples of following one or more preventative measures, including following guidance, practising good hygiene, social distancing, avoiding large gatherings and staying at home.

The majority of children and young people said that they could help to fight the spread of the virus through practising good hygiene, such as handwashing, wearing masks and using hand sanitiser. Denise, a 16-year-old male from Ghana, mentioned that "children have been washing their hands regularly whenever their parents send them outside or when we handle money". Khady, a 16-year-old female from Senegal, stated: "They [children and young people] must wear masks and wash their hands with soap, and they must respect the measures taken by the authorities." Aichatou, a 17-year-old female from Niger, recommended that children and young people "avoid traveling, wear masks and wash [their] hands regularly with soap and water".

Staying at home as much as possible was an important guideline children and young people mentioned. Tambadiang, a 17-year-old male from Senegal, suggested: "Let's stay home and communicate by phone." Many participants also spoke about the importance of social distancing and limiting physical contact when greeting each other. Fatoumata, a 16-year-old female from Mali, explained: "Social distancing means that we no longer shake hands and we no longer eat together."

### DIFFICULTY FOLLOWING BEST PRACTICES

While children and young people recognised the importance of following these guidelines, they also expressed that it was difficult for them. Benjamin, a 13-year-old male from Sierra Leone, said: "It is difficult to breathe when you wear [a] face mask." Social distancing measures were also difficult for them to follow because they stopped them from being able to hug, shake hands, and "bond" with family and friends. For example, Hawa, a 12-year-old female from Sierra Leone, replied: "I can no longer sit on the lap of my mother." Andra, a 15-year-old female from Ghana, shared how her family had adapted to the realities of COVID-19: "I used [to] dine in the same bowl with my parents, but during this [time], we don't practise that."

## CONTRIBUTING AT HOME WITH FAMILY

Children and young people face a variety of different opportunities and challenges at home as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Increased time at home allowed for more time with family, which, for some children and young people, is a positive, but for others it poses significant challenges, such as isolation or, in the most extreme instances, violence.

### POSITIVE OPPORTUNITIES AT HOME

Children and young people thoughtfully reflected on the current pandemic and how it had affected their own lives and those of their families and friends. Participants shared their experiences of spending more time with family as a result of “stay-at-home” guidance. Several children and young people saw it as a positive opportunity to bond with family members, though they also recognised the challenging realities of prolonged close proximity.

*My relationship with my parents has improved because [during] this time, they have time for me and my siblings. (Pamela, 13, female, Ghana)*

*With the confinement, I have the chance to come closer to my family. I have time to talk to my mother, and she gives me a lot of advice. (Fama, 16, female, Mauritania)*

*My relationship with my parents has improved these days because we stay longer together as a family. (Maisha, 17, female, Ghana)*

## HELPING THEIR COMMUNITIES

This section spotlights the varied and creative ways children and young people are helping their communities, despite the risks and challenges they face.

### AWARENESS RAISING AND TEACHING OTHERS

*The actions that children and young people can do is to educate other children. (Nandou, 16, male, Niger)*

Children and young people saw teaching their loved ones about COVID-19 as a way they could contribute to slowing the spread of the virus.

*We [can] educate our parents and our friends on the means of prevention of the disease. (Omar, 13, male, Senegal)*

*Children and youth can share [messages on how to fight] COVID-[19] with friends and families. (Han Mint, 13, female, Mauritania)*

*With my friends, we are going to educate others about handwashing and respect for social distancing. (Bravo, 12, male, Chad)*

*I want to educate people and young people about this disease. (Cassandra, 14, female, CAR)*

*[I want to] inform other friends about the danger of the disease. (Sanata, 14, female Mali)*

*Children and young people can contribute by educating [their] peers and older people alike on the causes and prevention of COVID-19. (Kholi, 15, male, Ghana)*

In some cases, children and young people shared that some people in their communities did not believe that the virus was real. Thus, they took it upon themselves to help to change people's minds. Rolande, a 16-year-old female from Chad, explained: "[Some] people do not believe in the existence of the disease, so we have to educate them to change their behaviour."

Given the difficulty some respondents had accessing phones and/or the Internet, teaching those who had less access to such technologies was highlighted as a way children and young people could help. Abdoulatif, a 13-year-old male from Niger, said: "We discussed with our friends, who did not have the chance to [see] the information relating to COVID-19, about the risks and consequences [and how they could avoid] the contagiousness of the disease by observing the preventative measures."

Wider-reaching awareness raising was mentioned by participants as a concrete action they could or were already doing to help to fight the spread of COVID-19. Rolande, a 16-year-old female from Chad, shared why these actions were necessary: "In our village, fewer people observe the protection rules. So, we are going to organise ourselves with the other children to sensitise the people of our village."

Children and young people had some creative ideas on how to spread awareness.

*Children used the mp3 ... speaker to disseminate information on COVID-19 to their peers. In my community, two of my colleagues and I used the mp3 player ... to disseminate this information. The Department of Community Development and Social Welfare Directorate forwarded jingles on COVID-19, and we play the jingles twice a week. (Sarah, 13, female, Ghana)*



*In Chad, World Vision has installed hand washing kits in public places, supporting children and their communities to protect themselves from COVID-19.*

## VOLUNTEERING

*Youth have a vital role to play in spreading messages and volunteering to help others who are victims of the pandemic. (Sileymane, 15, male, Mauritania)*

Children and young people shared the ways in which they were volunteering to help to fight the spread of COVID-19 by distributing protective and hygiene supplies. For example, Diakary, a 17-year-old male from Mali, suggested: "Young people can help to raise awareness and distribute protective materials, such as masks and handwashing kits and soap." Marie, a 12-year-old female from Senegal, reported: "Children and young people organised themselves to sweep the village. They bought bleach too."

Another way in which children and young people were volunteering was through helping to equip their communities with handwashing facilities. In the absence of running water, children and young people said that they or others could help to create "tippy taps" to aid with handwashing. The majority of children and young people in Ghana mentioned the importance of ensuring that fresh water was available for handwashing.

*Children can construct a "tippy tap", a locally made handwashing facility to aid in increased handwashing behaviour amongst people. The "tippy tap" is a simple device for handwashing with running water. A five litre container, with a small hole near the cap, is filled with water and tipped with a stick and rope tied through the hole in the cap. As only the soap is touched with the hands, the device is very hygienic. A gravel bed is used to soak away the water and prevent mosquitos. When the container is empty, the cap is unscrewed, and the container is removed from the stick. The container is then filled again at a water pump and reassembled. (Mawutor, 13, male, Ghana)*

Etienne, a 14-year-old male from Mali, also suggested that children and young people could help to ensure handwashing facilities are available for village residents: "Young people should organise themselves to place [handwashing stations] at the entrance to the village."

Mask making was another way in which children and young people said that they could volunteer. Aisatou, a 15-year-old female from Senegal, said that children and young people could help with "the manufacture of masks for all families".



*Over 1 billion children are affected by violence every year. And COVID-19 is putting a further 85 million at risk. Our "It Takes a World to end violence against children" campaign is uniting us all in action to end this injustice. Young people are at the heart the campaign - speaking out for change, working with peers, schools and communities and leading the action.*

## 3.

## WHAT'S NEXT? SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

During interviews, children and young people shared what resources they needed to continue their efforts to fight the spread of COVID-19 and provided suggestions to the leaders of their countries on how their governments could help to support and protect children and young people in the time of COVID-19. From their replies, five themes emerged: (1) protecting children and young people from violence, (2) supporting children and young people to fight the spread of COVID-19, (3) including children and young people in decision-making, (4) supporting education and (5) supporting families. Here are a few of their ideas in their own words.

### PROTECT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FROM VIOLENCE

*It is high time for the child protection system to be supported by all partners and local authorities because it can help to fight against coronavirus. (Amaadou, 17, male, Mauritania)*

Children and young people are not just victims that need to be protected but are also creative and vocal advocates with ideas on how to create safer and more supportive communities. In light of their concerns regarding their peers' heightened risk of experiencing or witnessing violence, children and young people recommended increased government support in response to efforts to stop violence in their communities. Mariem, a 12-year-old female from Mauritania, asked her government to "strengthen security as violence is on the rise".

Participants cited school reopening as a concrete step their governments could take towards protecting children and young people.

*Many times, some of my friends feel unsafe at their homes since the outbreak of this coronavirus, that is why we are calling on the president to save us from domestic violence and reopen schools ... I'm therefore pleading with the president to reopen schools to prevent our sisters from getting [married] or even [having] early teenage pregnancies. (Ambrose, 12, male, Sierra Leone)*



## SUPPORT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO FIGHT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19

When participants were asked what they would like their president or head of state to do for children and young people during this period, they had many ideas. Some said they wanted their governments to provide their communities with clean water, hygiene supplies and protective equipment to help to stem the spread of the virus. They also called on their countries' leaders to provide children and young people with accurate information and training so that they too could contribute to stopping the spread of COVID-19. Some children and young people also urged governments to ensure medical facilities were fully equipped and accessible.

### SUPPLIES

Children and young people said that they needed more hygiene supplies, such as clean water, soap, masks, and hand sanitisers in their communities to fight the spread of COVID-19.

*Make enough soap and water available to our communities. (Habibatou, 15, female, Niger)*

*I ask the president of the republic to give us masks and soap and also to provide us with water. (Sammy, 16, male, CAR)*

*We need masks and gel for [cleaning our] hands. (Fatouma, 13, female, Senegal)*

*[The] government should procure more “Veronica Buckets” and support handwashing at the community level. I can see that “Veronica Buckets” are in the cities but not the [rural] communities. (Mawutor, 13, male, Ghana)*

*The government must distribute the masks, not sell them. (Jean Claude, 13, male, Chad)*

Children and young people also said they needed additional supplies to help in their volunteering and awareness-raising efforts. For example, Joyce, a 14-year-old female from Chad, requested for a megaphone and bicycle to help with awareness raising. Seynoubou, a 12-year-old female from Senegal, and Aidatou, a 14-year-old female from Niger, both asked for materials to sew masks, including fabric and sewing machines.

### ACCURATE INFORMATION

*The president should establish information centres in all communities as a means to disseminate information to the population. (Sarah, 13, female, Ghana)*

Children and young people said that more information and advocacy work were needed to make people aware that COVID-19 is real and fight misinformation. Mariam, an 11-year-old female from Mali, entreated “local authorities to go on the radio to raise awareness so that those who do not believe can believe in the existence of the disease”. Pascal, a 13-year-old male from Mali, asked the government to “train kids on COVID-19 because many people think COVID-19 does not exist”.

## TRAINING

Children and young people wanted training, including more detailed information on how they and others could keep themselves safe and how best to use supplies when they were provided, so they could help to volunteer and raise awareness in their communities. Aissata, a 17-year-old female from Mauritania, mentioned: “If young people are provided with the knowledge and means, they can raise awareness amongst their peers and those around them.” Djimtoingar, a 13-year-old male from Chad, asked “that young people be trained in the technique of fighting against coronavirus”.

## MEDICAL SUPPORT

Children and young people urged their countries’ leaders to ensure hospitals were well-equipped with necessary medicine and staff and work towards developing a COVID-19 vaccine. Edith, a 13-year-old female from Chad, asked her country’s leaders to “have medicines in our health centres”. Aita, a 15-year-old female from Mali, requested: “Make medicines and nurses available to the population.” Mahamadou, a 12-year-old male from Niger, suggested: “I would like the government to look for a vaccine to fight against COVID-19 because it is a very serious disease.”

## INCLUDE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING

Children and young people want their views taken into account by their countries’ decision makers, to be involved in decision-making processes, and their views to be respected and taken seriously. Karminty, a 17-year-old male from Sierra Leone, said: “Children are partners in the development of today. Therefore, as a child activist, I request the support and assistance by the government and partners to collaborate with the children [and] medical practitioners to sensitise colleagues [and] children about the virus called COVID-19.”

## SUPPORT EDUCATION

*I want the authorities to open our schools, I want them to pay our teachers to reduce strikes. (Machatou, 12, female, Mali)*

Children and young people wanted schools to reopen so that they could continue their learning in a safe environment. Nfaba, a 13-year-old male from Senegal, called for “the immediate return of teachers and the commitment of the authorities to donate products to schools”. Alpha, a 14-year-old male from Mali, asked his government to “reopen schools and equip each of us with masks and each school [with] its [own] handwashing devices”.

School closures have further highlighted existing inequalities. Children and young people who did not have electricity, Internet, radio, or books at home had greater difficulty continuing their education. Augusta, a 12-year-old female from Sierra Leone, said: “The president should support us with learning materials to study at home.” Souleye, a 17-year-old male from Senegal, requested: “I would like the president of the republic to provide us with computers in the field of education so that we can do distance learning.”

Children and young people wanted their governments to restart education as soon as possible, in part, to equalise the inequalities at-home learning has illuminated.

*The government's position on e-learning is helpful to those in the cities, [but] for [those of] us who stay in [rural] communities, we do not [know] how we can benefit from this intervention because we do not have electricity, not to even talk about television. (Lucy, 12, female, Ghana)*

## SUPPORT FAMILIES

Participants in this consultation asked their governments to provide food and regulate the price of food so that children and young people do not go hungry.

*We want the president to help us with food because our parents do not work. (Gnima, 17, female, Senegal)*  
*I want the president to bring bags of millet. (Nafissa, 15, female, Niger)*

*The state must reduce the price of food. Because of the coronavirus, the work has stopped, and we do not have the means to buy this food. (Aisatou, 15, female, Senegal)*

*We have suffered too much during this period of the disease; we want food and material assistance to fight against this COVID-19 disease. (Kaltouma, 12, female, Chad)*

Aside from basic food assistance, children and young people also asked governments to support livelihoods and give families financial assistance so that parents could afford to provide for their children. Mahamadou, a 12-year-old male from Niger, asked the government to provide “support in food [and] offer employment opportunities to our parents who have lost their jobs”. Oussama, a 14-year-old male from Niger, urged the government to “provide financial assistance to our parents”. Alimata, a 13-year-old female from Mali, requested: “I want the government to open schools and allow our parents to continue doing their businesses because that is what our lives depend on.”

## SUPPORT MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

*The government should come to the aid of the poor. (Mercy, 17, female, Ghana)*

Children and young people were especially concerned about the most marginalised people in their communities, particularly those living in poverty. Ludivine, a 12-year-old female from CAR, explained: “We need . . . soap . . . to give to our friends [from] poor families, so that they can use [it] to avoid this disease.” Sileymane, a 15-year-old male from Mauritania, stated that the government should “feed the poor and small traders”. Silas, a 15-year-old male from Ghana, suggested: “The state should employ more e-learning platforms and also equip teachers to go to radio stations to [provide] short lessons so that poor families can benefit.”

*World Vision Senegal's National Director, Antoinette Habinshuti, demonstrates to children how to wash hands as a protection measure from COVID-19.*



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Children and young people are ready and willing to play their part in fighting the spread of COVID-19. In addition to highlighting how they and their peers had been affected by the crisis, children and young people are also working to respond, but they need support from their governments, UN agencies, donors, NGOs and the private sector to do so. They are not only beneficiaries but are also rights-holders. Relevant stakeholders must create an environment where child rights are protected, and children and young people are included as actors in their own rights.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM WORLD VISION

On the basis of these findings from this qualitative research, World Vision suggests the following recommendations to ensure that children and young people are active participants, protected, educated and have their basic survival and development needs fulfilled throughout this crisis.

**Children and young people must be protected from violence, equipped with practical help to fight the spread of COVID-19, supported to continue their education, and provided with livelihood opportunities for their families.**

- **Recognise and embrace children and young people as rights-holders and social actors with capabilities to contribute to stopping the spread of COVID-19.** This includes utilising appropriate strategies to ensure that their participation is safe, sensitive, and meaningful, including the provision of age-appropriate information to make them safe.
- **Governments, donors, UN agencies and the international community must prioritise child protection actions in all national COVID-19 responses.** This includes ensuring continued functioning of child-friendly reporting mechanisms, such as SOS hotlines.
- **Governments, UN agencies and civil societies must fund and implement a mental health and psychosocial (MHPSS) strategy** for reaching those directly and indirectly affected, especially the most vulnerable, taking into account gender, age and disability.
- **Governments, UN agencies, civil societies, faith-based organisations and the private sector should work together to make the Internet a safer place for children and young people.** This includes strict implementation of laws on cybercrime, such as the online sexual exploitation of children and young people and online bullying, and intensifying efforts to raise online safety awareness amongst children and young people.
- **Governments, donors, UN agencies and the international community must improve access to and availability of age-appropriate and gender-responsive distance education methods** to mitigate the disruption school closures, due to COVID-19, are having on learning.

- **Governments must ensure that education reaches the most vulnerable children and young people,** particularly where learning has already been difficult or interrupted due to fragility or exclusion.
- **Distance learning curriculums should include life skills education** to help children and young people to recognise and mitigate violence, exclusion, stigmatisation and poverty-associated risks. This is crucial to preventing increased rates of child labour and child marriage.
- Governments, donors, UN agencies and the international community must urgently take action to scale their responses to acute hunger by **investing in public health and water, sanitation, and hygiene to address root causes of child malnutrition.**
- **Governments should ensure social protection measures are in place for the most vulnerable throughout the response and recovery phases.**
- **Governments, banks and microfinance institutions should develop and fund poverty alleviation plans that incorporate economic recovery lending to help the most vulnerable families to recover more quickly after the shock.**



*In Senegal children are at the centre of the COVID-19 response.*

*Enhancing community WASH and activating infection prevention and control structures is part of the outstanding work World Vision is doing in Sierra Leone to protect the most vulnerable children and their communities.*



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