



As the World Bank responds to COVID-19, how can we protect children?

While the world responds to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank and borrowing countries face a novel set of challenges on an unprecedented scale. The World Bank and implementing agencies must make child protection, and specifically preventing child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA), a priority in all COVID-19 emergency response and recovery projects or risk exacerbating precarious situations.

The Challenge

Children are disproportionately impacted by global crises. The unique impacts of [COVID-19 make the situation even more grave](#), as there are several factors that increase the risk of child SEA during the current pandemic and the related lockdowns and economic recession. Since [75% of the instances of child SEA happen by caregivers at home](#), the fact that [1.5 billion students are out of school due to the pandemic](#) vastly increases the potential for child SEA. [Unemployment and underemployment are also risk factors in child SEA](#), raising the risk of child SEA in communities and online even more. Early evidence indicates that [gender-based violence \(GBV\) and violence against children \(VAC\) have increased](#) as a result of the economic insecurity, movement restrictions, and isolation that have come along with COVID-19 pandemic response. Services and resources available to child survivors as well as [reporting mechanisms for child SEA have been greatly diminished](#) due to restrictions on movement amidst the COVID-19 response. The situation

for children is going from grave to worse at an alarming rate.

Currently, many World Bank infrastructure projects are still ongoing and workers' camps for large infrastructure projects remain active. Without sufficient in-person monitoring of project sites and activities, these sites pose SEA risks for children in nearby communities. Children are increasingly vulnerable amidst COVID-19 response and recovery projects - World Bank projects are no exception. With more children out of school and families in dire economic situations, new or ongoing World Bank projects pose a real risk for child labor, exposing children to additional types of exploitation and abuse.

Children are especially vulnerable not only to abuse but also to malnutrition and loss of educational opportunities due to the conditions arising from quarantine. These deprivations have a lasting impact on the health, wellbeing, and economic prospects for children.

The Response

The World Bank has responded quickly to the global pandemic with [plans to spend \\$160 billion into 2021 in addition to the \\$14 billion](#) it has already set aside for COVID-19 response. One of the main pillars of the World Bank response is focused on protecting ["the poorest and most vulnerable households"](#), which presumably includes children

of these households as among the most marginalized.

Given the heightened risk of child SEA amidst both the pandemic and accompanying response and recovery efforts, child protection should be front-and-center of World Bank priorities as they design, approve, and implement projects.

Recommendations

The World Bank can take the following concrete steps to mitigate the risks and ongoing impacts of child SEA in its COVID-19 response and recovery efforts:

1. BUILD CHILD PROTECTION INTO PROJECT DESIGN AND STAFFING

All new projects by the World Bank should assess the disaggregated impacts and risks of projects on children, including child SEA. This includes Development Policy Loans (DPLs) and other rapid funding mechanisms to help mitigate the risk of child SEA. Understandably, funding is going out very quickly to COVID-19 response and recovery, and time is of the essence. Nevertheless, the World Bank should verify that Bank staff and implementing agencies are taking the following steps to prevent child SEA and promote child protection in project design.

- Flag COVID-19 projects as high-risk for child SEA given the elevated risks during the pandemic, in line with the [recommendations for identifying high-risk projects by the Task Force on Ending Violence against Women and Children](#). Continue using the GBV risk assessment tool so that the unique risks for children are considered in project design.
- Where risks are identified, confirm that appropriate prevention and mitigation efforts are in place. Include child-specific protection measures for the prevention of SEA in new World Bank projects. COVID-19 special protection mechanisms that are put in place to help “vulnerable and marginalized groups” access economic recovery efforts and basic essential services should prioritize child protection issues in line with the [Environmental and Social Framework](#) (ESF) and accompanying guidance.
- Consult and engage with child-focused civil society organizations (CSOs) working directly with impact communities in project design to implement effective child protection mechanisms.
- Develop disaggregated data for “disadvantaged and vulnerable groups”, including children, that is included in early project design phases. Waiting until implementation greatly decreases

the chances of this data being included at all.

- Reinforce the World Bank’s commitment to not employ children under the minimum working age in line with the [Environmental and Social Standards](#) (ESSs). Increasing unemployment for families and the sheer numbers of out-of-school children are tremendous risks for child labor in World Bank projects.
- At the project level, hiring practices and professional development on child SEA issues are vital in helping to prevent child SEA. Implementing teams should conduct background checks for new Bank hires as well as Contractors’ employees working on high-risk projects. All staff should be trained on child protection measures including how to recognize signs of abuse and report disclosed or suspected cases of child SEA.

2. MAINTAIN ACCESS TO SURVIVOR SERVICES AND KEEP REPORTING MECHANISMS ACTIVE

To-date, a number of existing World Bank infrastructure projects that are high-risk for child SEA are still moving forward. As projects continue amidst COVID-19 lockdowns and movement restrictions, the concern is that insufficient attention will be given to the monitoring, reporting, and redress mechanisms that make projects safe for children. Similar concerns exist for rapid COVID-19 response projects, as well as ongoing projects that are delayed and are likely to resume with accelerated timelines. The World Bank should confirm that communities have access to services and reporting mechanisms for child SEA amidst project implementation.

- Projects providing services directly to communities should include programs to support child survivors of SEA and ensure that child SEA survivors are not cut off from the services they need.
- In COVID-19 health response projects, the World Bank has the opportunity to take a comprehensive health approach by including psychosocial support for children who are survivors of SEA to secure their access to vital services.
- The [Grievance Redress Service](#) (GRS) should remain open and available in a child-friendly manner that protects confidentiality, so communities and children are able to report instances of child SEA and child labor directly to the World Bank.
- Continue to monitor complaints and act expediently to address suspected or confirmed cases of child SEA, even amidst pandemic response. Measures and strategies for mitigation, reporting, and remediation for child SEA should be included

in COVID-19 response project documents such as the ESF reporting documents or otherwise.

3. ADJUST MONITORING AND TRAIN REGIONAL AND COUNTRY-LEVEL STAFF ON CHILD PROTECTION

In the ongoing pandemic, with movement restrictions in most of the world, project monitoring on the impacts on vulnerable and marginalized groups is limited if not non-existent. To continue to monitor wherever possible, [remote monitoring options](#) should be explored and implemented.

- To help offload some of the monitoring burden on Headquarters-based World Bank staff in Washington, D.C., the World Bank should train staff at regional and country levels on child protection issues, including how to recognize, monitor, and report cases of child SEA. It is likely that national-level travel will open up before international travel, so it will be critical for staff at the capital level to be ready and able to assist in the monitoring of project implementation once they are permitted to do so. Conducting training as soon as possible will allow the World Bank to monitor child SEA immediately once movement restrictions are lifted.

4. WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH CHILD-FOCUSED AGENCIES AND COMMUNITIES

Beyond supporting effective project design that focuses on prevention, qualified child rights organizations who work directly with communities can help borrowing countries continue to provide services for survivors of child SEA. These organizations are also well-equipped to help monitor projects for child protection and connect children with resources as new SEA cases are found, reported on, and redressed amidst pandemic response and recovery efforts.

There is a possibility, where projects are continuing to move forward, that cases of child SEA perpetrated by project workers will go unnoticed, unreported, or suppressed. Civil Society Organizations (CSO) can help children and communities navigate remote forms of reporting via internet, phone, or mail put in place around COVID-19 response as children may not have access to these services.

The World Bank should work collaboratively with such [community interlocutors](#) to help monitor impacts of projects on children, respond accordingly, and help reduce the long-term impacts of child SEA should it occur.

- Bridge the gap of direct service delivery that will almost certainly rise as the crisis continues by working closely with CSOs who are responding to COVID-19 and can ensure that borrowing

countries are able to bridge the service gap.

- Lean on CSOs for local intel and assistance on decisions where resources can be allocated most effectively, and which members of the community are likely to be most impacted by and excluded from project benefits.
- Find new ways of tracking safeguards implementation without endangering the World Bank staff amidst the pandemic. In areas with new and ongoing projects, the World Bank can contract local child rights CSOs to conduct outreach to community members in a safe and responsible manner.

5. PUT A SPECIAL FOCUS ON CHILD PROTECTION IN SOCIAL PROTECTION PROJECTS

In COVID-19 response measures, social protection systems are critical. To-date, the social protection projects that have been approved to address COVID-19 do not adequately address child protection risks or mitigation measures. The World Bank has the opportunity to help prevent child SEA by putting some of the focus towards child protection within social protection for borrowing countries.

COVID-19 social protection projects should be utilized to improve the status for children within a country through the creation of or strengthened child protection systems or mechanisms, enhanced child protection services and training, and awareness raising. Only then can we move beyond prevention in projects themselves to real systemic and long lasting positive change for children and their communities.

Although it is not yet possible to know the total impact COVID-19 will have on the world, the systems that keep children learning, healthy, and safe are already coming under increasing strain and putting children further at risk of SEA. The World Bank can play an essential role in prioritizing child protection throughout response and recovery to this global crisis.