

## ENOC-UNICEF Survey on Ombudspersons for Children's responses to COVID-19

ENOC and UNICEF conducted a short online survey on Ombudspersons and Commissioners for Children's responses to the new challenges generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. 23 ENOC members responded to the survey. The main issues raised in the survey are summarised in this document. This will help inform the online session to be held by ENOC and UNICEF on Tuesday 2nd June 2020, 14:30-16:00 (CET,) and subsequent discussions. A more comprehensive report will follow after the event.

ENOC members that have responded to the survey: **Armenia, Basque country/Spain, Bulgaria, Catalonia/Spain, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Jersey, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Northern Ireland/UK, Republika Srpska/ Bosnia & Herzegovina, Scotland/UK, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Wales.**

### ***1. Have there been any changes or limitations to the execution of your role as Ombudsperson/Commissioner for Children as a result of the restrictions due to the pandemic?***

The main changes and limitations have to do with closed offices and restricted face-to-face communication. The lockdown measures affected the offices in all countries across Europe. Fieldwork and planned studies have been postponed, casework has been suspended in some cases, direct communication with children has also stopped. Monitoring of institutions, care homes and schools has been made difficult or suspended. Addressing complaints has been slowed down.

- Closed offices and work from home, suspended reception of persons in the physical offices (in all the respondent countries except Moldova and Armenia);
- Complaints and case management via online forms, by e-mail, or by phone (most countries);
- Limited or postponed fieldwork, studies in schools and institutions and casework. Suspended inspection visits to different facilities for children (Jersey; Bulgaria; Denmark; the Basque Country and Catalonia, Spain);
- Disrupted contact and direct communication with children. Child-participation initiatives have been postponed or cancelled. For example: suspended activity of the Arateko Youth Council (the Basque Country);
- Awareness raising work has been limited (Northern Ireland);
- Some projects have been suspended. Reports have been delayed (Denmark);
- Slowdown of processing complaints (the Basque Country);
- Gradual adjustment to virtual meetings with stakeholders and team members;
- No – in Moldova the Ombudsman office was excluded from the emergency state restrictions. In Finland – the role of the Ombudsman office was strengthened, institutions and the government consulted them and took into account their position and recommendations.

**2. What are the main challenges identified? What solutions have been put in place to cope with this unprecedented situation? Please give us examples.**

In some answers there is an overlap between question 1 and question 2. In others – between question 2 and question 3.

Challenges:

- Work shifted online – complaints are received and processed online. Direct communication with children is restricted;
- Monitoring of different institutions moved online and was restricted to communication with administrative staff – custodial juvenile places like prisons and detention centres, care homes for children, shelters (Moldova, Hungary);
- Casework load and signals increased to adjust to the new legislation changes;
- Restricted access to information previously coming from teachers, healthcare professionals, educators (in Denmark notifications to the social services dropped with 50%);
- Problems with reopening schools – the sanitary protocols are too strict and difficult for children to follow, i.e. counterproductive; not all canteens have reopened, which leaves children in poverty at higher risk; health workers' children are considered high risk and in some localities have been placed in separate schools (France).

New solutions:

- Hotlines open 24 h for complaints and signals (Republika Srpska, Finland);
- Intensive online communications with services and institutions;
- Promotional activities and information campaigns on traditional media and social media networks (Montenegro, Serbia...);
- Online meetings with stakeholders, institutions, authorities;
- Team of psychologists provide phone help to children via a free hotline (Serbia);

**3. Based on your recent experience, what are the newly emerged issues in terms of child rights violations, specific groups of children more adversely affected by the pandemic, and others? Please specify any mitigating measures you have identified**

Newly emerged issues:

Work from home for families with children resulted in isolation, exhaustion, anxiety, economic difficulties, unemployment, alcohol abuse, domestic violence (e.g. 14 % raise in Finland). Children living in precarious conditions, from ethnic minorities face more difficulties with distance learning both because of digital poverty and because of difficulties in assisting them in the process of learning. Children from ethnic minorities have less or zero assistance during the learning process. They also tend to be from economically disadvantaged families where access to devices and individual space is limited. Children in detention institutions or care institutions are at higher risk of abuse, extreme isolation, limited social contacts, and psychological problems. Children with disabilities face double isolation because of restricted



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access to rehabilitation activities, one on one activities, and the inability for some to fully understand the situation. New economic difficulties for families where parents lose their jobs due to the lockdown, single-parent families, or inability to combine work with care for children at home.

- **Distant learning related** (most countries):
  - Digital poverty and digital exclusion, limited access to digital devices. Restricted right to education for children in precarious conditions (street children, ghettos, home environment with difficult material conditions) (most countries);
  - Learning difficulties, limited assistance from parents and caretakers in technical issues, learning material, difficulties following homework etc.;
  - Increased difficulties for children from ethnic communities because of language barriers (Northern Ireland, Luxemburg);
  - Children disappearing from school 'radars' (e.g. in France 5-6 %);
- **Domestic violence**, abusive environment placed children at higher risk while isolated at home (Serbia, Estonia, Hungary, Malta, Finland, Slovakia, Denmark, Catalonia, etc...);
- Increased number of children placed in welfare institutions (Finland);
- **Cyber bullying** increased due to more screen time (Malta, Serbia, Montenegro);
- **Children with disabilities** – very isolated because schools and special services closed and limited conditions for digital communication. Anxiety and lack of understanding of the situation by children with mental disabilities, anxiety caused by people wearing masks and shields (Northern Ireland, Denmark, Bulgaria, Hungary, Catalonia...);
- **Mental health issues** on the rise among children and young people due to isolation and being closed at home, sometimes in an unsafe environment (most countries);
- Limited **access to healthcare** and reluctance of parents to bring children to hospitals (Serbia, hospital visits dropped by 1/3 in Finland, Wales)
- Children in **care institutions** – limited contact with biological parents, decreased control of abuse;
- **Economic hardships** have negative impact on children for many families where income has been affected due the lockdown.
- Extreme **poverty** and precarious living conditions: children living in precarious conditions – small flats, ghettos, or on the street are at higher risk during lockdown. Lack of access to free school meals leaves children at risk (most countries);
- **Limited or no time for outside play** and interaction with other children increases the emotional and psychological strain on children;
- Communication rights between **children and divorced parents** are violated due to lockdown restrictions (Serbia, Estonia, Hungary, Cyprus);
- Children of **infected parents** who need to be hospitalized are at risk (Spain);
- Strict regulations not allowing children to access food shops – for example, some food shops banned access to a parent/families with accompanying children which created unbearable situation for single or isolated parents (France);
- **Asylum seeker and refugee children** are extremely vulnerable, placed in inappropriate conditions. Refugee children in detention centres are at higher risk (Cyprus)

Mitigating measures:

- **Digital poverty and distance learning:**
  - Providing technological devices and SIM cards – schools, local government, state level;
  - Daily TV educational programmes for pupils from different grades (France);
- **Economic measures:**
  - Special assistance for newly unemployed or parents on unpaid leave (the Basque country, but problematic to implement because it depends on the employer's arrangement);
  - Food allowances or financial aid for children who benefited from free meals in school (Catalonia, Estonia proposed free school meals for all, Wales, Scotland);
- **Psychological and Physical Health measures:**
  - Public campaigns to reassure both parents and children and suggest way to cope with the lockdown;
  - Public campaigns to reassure parents to bring children to health services (Wales);
  - Children of infected parents are temporarily placed in care homes (the Basque country);
  - Special hotlines open for protection against abuse and violence (the Basque country, Serbia);
  - Dedicated webpages created by Ombudspersons for children's offices with resources to support and help children and families cope with the situation (cf ENOC website);
  - Recommendations to employers on how to treat employees with children (Croatia);
  - Lobbying for lifting restrictions on access of birth-partners to hospitals, especially for women with disabilities (Estonia, France)
  - Proposals to maintain contact between a divorced parent and children isolated in a different locality via phone and other means (Estonia, Cyprus, Hungary, Serbia);
  - Lobbying for allowing daily walks in open air in juvenile detention centres.

**4. Has access to Ombudspersons for Children's offices (or Human Rights Institutions) & other relevant services and protection mechanisms continued in an effective way? Please specify.**

Offices have been closed for visitors in almost all countries. Remote access was ensured via digital means: phone, e-mail or online platforms. New hotlines were open in several countries. The number of complaints increased in some countries.

**5. How are you carrying on your monitoring function during this Covid 19 crisis? Please specify.**

- Online monitoring of institutions, administrative staff;
- Online discussions with inspectorate bodies, service providers, civil society and government bodies at national and local level;
- In some countries a limited number of staff continues physical monitoring and casework;
- Monitoring of new legislative measures related to the emergency state and issuing recommendations to the governing bodies to adjust certain measures in view of children's rights and wellbeing;
- Some countries reported slowed down communication with state institutions because of the increased workload for the institutions (Serbia);
- Some countries initiated surveys to monitor the situation (Wales).

**6. Any other issue related to the COVID-19 situation affecting the protection & promotion of the rights of the child in your country/region that you would be keen to share with us.**

The emergency situation made visible a systemic failure to take into account children's wellbeing in some countries. It highlighted the lack of coordination and integrated approaches to children's wellbeing. Inequalities became more visible. Children's emotional and psychological wellbeing was often not taken into account when proposing restrictions.

Children living in precarious conditions and protection from violence are the two main issues that need to be addressed further.