

SUPPORT MEASURES FOR CHILDREN IN DIFFICULTY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Ph.D. Student, Mihail CIOBANU

The State University of Republic of Moldova,
Scientific researcher in the section "Social research and the standard of living of population" of National
Institute for Economic Research of Republic of Moldova
E-mail: ciobanu.mihail.s@gmail.com

Abstract: COVID-19 infection has spread around the world, and the restrictions put in place to curb its impact on the population have particularly affected certain groups of the population, one of whom is vulnerable children. To reduce the socio-economic impact of the consequences of the pandemic on this population group, state authorities, NGOs and international organizations have come up with a series of financial support measures, in-kind or other type of support. In this article, we aim to identify the support measures implemented or in process of being implemented in several countries of the world by such entities, including programs of such international entities as the UNICEF, EU and others.

Keywords: COVID-19, children in difficulty, financial support, in-kind support, measures.

JEL Classification: I31, J13, M14.

This paper has been elaborated and funded in the framework of the Scientific Project for the period 2020-2023, registered in the State Register of projects in the field of science and innovation of the Republic of Moldova with the code 20.80009.0807.29 Proiect Program de Stat "Perfecționarea mecanismelor de aplicare a instrumentelor inovatoare orientate spre creșterea durabilă a bunăstării populației Republicii Moldova" / Project State Program "Improving the mechanisms for applying innovative instruments aimed at sustainably increasing the welfare of the population of the Republic of Moldova".

1. Introduction

In December 2019, the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the infection with which it spread to all countries of the world. In March 2020 the WHO declared a state of pandemic. To reduce its spread, states have put in place restrictive measures that have negatively affected the population, mostly vulnerable groups, especially children.

According to World Bank estimates, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, up to 115 million people would reach extreme poverty, in addition to the closure of schools affecting hundreds of millions of children. Increasing economic uncertainty, threats of violence, the risk of child labour, of child marriage, of child trafficking, and school closures and reduced access to distance education (only about 2/3 of children globally) have led to many negative effects on children. To help reduce the negative effects of the pandemic and to ensure the health, education and safety of children and families, several international organizations have provided financial support, in kind or otherwise, to this vulnerable group of the population.

2. Support measures for children in difficulty

ChildFund, an international child development organization that specializes in children's charity, providing assistance to children in difficulty in more than 70 countries, has targeted nearly 80 million USD in 2020 to more than 5.6 million children in more than 60 countries, from these, 44 million USD dollars represent new funds, and 35 million USD - funds reoriented mainly for the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, following 4 basic directions (ChildFund, 2020):

- 1) stopping COVID-19 from infecting children and families;
- 2) obtaining the necessary food by children;

- 3) keeping children safe from violence, both physical and emotional;
- 4) supporting children to continue their studies.

To this end, ChildFund has set up community handwashing stands; educated communities of people about the symptoms of COVID-19, the necessary hygiene measures and the locations for testing and treatment. The organization also distributed such essential products as soap, gloves, masks and created child-friendly spaces with age-appropriate toys and reading materials for children who are being treated with COVID-19 or who are subject to quarantine measures. At the same time, ChildFund provided cash for food and other basic necessities to the most vulnerable families (those who lost their income due to COVID-19, households run by children or the elderly and/or households affected by disabilities or chronic illnesses) or provided directly food and household items, the possibility of paying rent and other basic needs. The organization provided virtual psychological assistance and counseling and supported temporary shelters for children living on the streets, providing hygiene materials, food and other basic items. It has also provided safe and adequate care for children who are separated from their caregivers due to treatment or preventative measures. It also supported children's learning through online or radio tutoring activities and sessions. For students in places where internet access was not available or unstable, home learning kits with materials and guidelines for their use were distributed. The urgency of this support is argued by the collateral damage of the pandemic with long-term effects on children that need at least mitigated, if not resolved.

A way of support for children and their families during COVID-19 crisis is the creation of response platforms. By the direction of support these platforms can be divided into these 12 types (Devercelli & Humphry, 2020): 1) Health platforms; 2) Nutrition platforms; 3) Childcare and psychosocial support for frontline workers; 4) Distributing books and learning and play materials to parents; 5) School re-opening and re-enrollment campaigns; 6) Cash transfer programs and social safety nets and agriculture extension programs; 7) Distance education platforms; 8) Radio and Interactive Audio Instruction; 9) Social Media; 10) Television; 11) Mobile phones; 12) National communication campaigns.

An example of health platform is the Mexico online platform for COVID-19 information sharing. It provides continuity in basic health care by prioritizing the delivery of preventive care (such as for immunization) and nutrition services for young children. Through this platform, health counseling services for pregnant women, new mothers and their families, as well as for breastfeeding, for cases of domestic violence, for care during the COVID-19 pandemic can be obtained. The platform provides information for front-line workers to identify the child with protection and mental health issues, as well as information for parents on coping and stress management strategies, on learning at home, on recognizing signs of illness, promoting hygiene and ensuring child safety.

A kind of nutrition texting platform is present in Ecuador, which aims to help children and their parents meet the challenge of food insecurity by prioritizing food security through the emergency delivery of food, including micronutrients and food supplements for pregnant women and young children, as well as through an improved prognosis of critical nutrition reserves. The Ecuadorian platform also aims to adapt school nutrition programs to deliver food directly to communities or households. Like the Mexican one, it provides parents with information about nutrition, coping and hygiene strategies, ideas for learning and play, and ways to recognize signs of illness in children.

An example of a platform for childcare support and psychosocial support for front-line workers is provided by mobile nurseries in Burkina Faso. The closure of schools and childcare centers has increased the risk of losing childcare options for front-line workers such as health professionals, food producers, sellers and traders. To this end, the burkinese platform provides medical assistance to reduce COVID-19 exposure, psychosocial support

for front-line workers to cope with stress and fatigue, the organization of emergency childcare or childcare supported by the employer and/or the provision of child support, childcare and tax credits for working parents.

A platform for early literacy of children who employ parents has been implemented in Kenya. It aims to distribute books and materials for learning and play for children to parents, also uses TV shows, radio, applications, information or specific campaigns for certain groups or individuals. The distribution of materials is also done through cash transfer programs, food distribution or other resources for the community, with accompanying materials for parents.

The humanitarian organization for children Save the Children has developed preschool guidelines for health and nutrition and initiated reopening and re-enrollment campaigns in schools, developed accelerated learning programs to promote school readiness, promoted the introduction of hygiene practices in schools .

In Madagascar, cash transfer programs for raising children, social safety nets and agricultural expansion programs have been implemented. As household incomes can alleviate the loss of livelihoods, expanding coverage and/or increasing cash transfers is a critical way to reach young children and families with vital income support and can be used as a platform for other interventions.

An example of the creation of an online education platform is provided by Costa Rica, which also includes preschool programming, the use of assistance and learning materials for parents and children delivered through video, radio, social media, applications, USB sticks in areas with reduced connectivity. The pandemic crisis offers the possibility to expand access to early education at low cost in the case of integrating the distance education platform into basic education.

Another child support measure for the COVID-19 period, which is being implemented in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is interactive radio entertainment and learning programs, which is a good alternative if internet connectivity is low.

In the United Arab Emirates, resources are provided on parenting on Social Media (Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp). The advantage of this information transmission environment is the high penetration rate in low- and middle-income states. Social media support networks for parents are created at low cost or free of charge.

Due to low Internet connectivity and a high rate of television penetration in some countries, Sesame Street and Akili and Me provided entertainment and children's education programs on TV and radio, including information in these media for parents about parenting, hygiene, education and early development and coping mechanisms.

In Colombia and Nicaragua, texting on mobile phones is used to share key messages about parenting, nutrition, health, early stimulation and strategies to reduce the rate of infection, and call centers to support parents in educating children. Free support hotlines are also used for women and children facing domestic violence.

Through national communication campaigns in Kenya, toolkits with information for children were provided to parents about WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), nutrition, health, protection and early development of the child.

In the USA in 2020 the Global Child Thrive Act was adopted, which has the aim of integrating early childhood development into USA foreign assistance that will support the growth and development of 250 million children under the age of 5 in low-income and middle-income countries who currently have the risk of not reaching their full potential because of extreme poverty and stunting (Congress, 2021). The act also aims to strengthen coordination with local governments and organizations, non-governmental organizations, including religious and other civil societies, to integrate best practices and to identify evidence-based priorities, indicators, outcomes and targets to support inclusive early

childhood, but also to develop and support pilot projects in partner countries in order to expand them to serve more children and their families.

In order to inform how the business can support children and families in difficulty during COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF has developed an action guide (UNICEF, 2020). UNICEF suggests that companies contribute financially to provide access to education, child protection and psychosocial services for basic medical and hygiene products, to contribute with personal protective equipment and transport services, with in-kind pro bono services to support health, water, sanitation and hygiene, education and child protection programs, to offer support to advocacy efforts for: keeping children healthy; promoting hand washing and reaching vulnerable children with water, sanitation and hygiene; keeping children learning; supporting families to cover their needs and care for their children; protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse; protecting refugee and migrant children and those affected by conflict.

Several EU countries have implemented support measures for children and families in 2020 to support them during the pandemic (European Commission, 2020). Austria has launched a digital educational streaming platform (Edutube), which contains 800 stores of articles and documentaries and other digital resources. It also supplemented with 30 million Euros the family hardship fund (Familienhärtefonds) for those who are unemployed or forced to work part-time, especially for single parents. Belgium has set up temporary accommodation centers for children at risk of violence or danger due to COVID-19 or lockdown. Denmark has allocated about 215 million Danish Kroner (or about 29 million Euros) to support vulnerable children. This support is aimed at children who live with people addicted to alcohol or drugs or have some illness, such as mental illness, but also in the form of grants to NGOs that aim to support vulnerable children through counseling. Estonia has introduced an allowance of up to 70% of the average parent's income for parents whose children have disabilities and need to stay home with them for education and care during the COVID-19 crisis. 10 million Euros have been allocated for the implementation of this measure. Estonia has increased support for foster families and children with rare diseases. The allowance for children with rare diseases will be as high as that for children with disabilities. Foster families will receive at least half of the national minimum wage per child fostered (at least 240 Euros per month). In Finland, a number of foundations have set up a campaign to support families with low-income with children who have suffered from school closures. The support involves food packages of about 90 Euros for a family for a week. In France, 500000 Euros have been allocated for the support of parents working remotely and improving access to hotlines and other types of online support for families, such as leisure and education activities. In order to support low-income families, the French state has offered a lump sum of 150 Euros and if the household has children under 20 years old - an additional lump sum of 100 Euros per dependent child to about 4.1 million households, including 5 million children. Greece has provided free mobile internet access to the Ministry of Education's digital educational platforms, televised educational programs. In Ireland, online resources have been provided to support parents with children for online education and digital resources for children to play at home. In Luxembourg, paid family support leave has been approved for self-employed persons in the private sector to care for elderly or disabled members. States such as Croatia, Slovakia have launched information campaigns for the prevention of domestic violence, France has increased the number of workers for hotlines and implemented alert systems in pharmacies, and Germany has allocated 225000 Euros for national hotlines for children and added to the services those provided by the digital advisory service Sofahopper, which provides support to children which are at risk of homelessness and online advice from social workers and more opportunities for young people to get online

and telephone advice. The UK has come up with support of over 12 million British pounds (about 13.6 million Euros) in support projects for children and families at risk of violence or domestic exploitation, who are in care or need mental health support. The Eurochild network of organizations has launched a project with a child-centered approach offering materials to combat discrimination against Roma children in schools.

3. Conclusions

COVID-19 pandemic had negatively affected vulnerable people and especially children around the world. To solve or at least attenuate the pandemic consequences and subsequent restrictive measures on such groups of population not only in the short term, but especially in the long term, various countries, NGOs, international organizations and other entities have put in place measures of support for vulnerable children and their families. The majority of the measures concern nutrition, health care, education, information and other basic goods or services. Lower-income countries adopted information campaigns about protection measures against COVID-19, opportunities of education and development of children, about how to get basic necessities and services. Radio, TV, internet (where connectivity is better) were used for this purpose. Higher-income countries, in addition to information campaigns, also provided various forms of financial support for vulnerable children and families, sometimes increasing the amounts of existing forms of financial support, creating hotlines for counseling and information on pandemics, domestic violence and other problems of this vulnerable group. There is a growing role of the mass media, especially those in digital format, to contribute to the creation of platforms to reach the vulnerable children, aiming at education, health care and, in general, information about various opportunities. Measures that would reduce the digital divide in the population will foster a better inclusion of such children in society and will not only help integrate them into the developing digital world, but also help with opportunities to get the basic needs met and for further development. However, these measures must be taken in parallel with measures to eliminate inadequate nutrition, to foster health care and other measures, such as social protection measures or other types of measures.

References:

1. ChildFund, 2020. *ChildFund's COVID 19 Response Plan*, April 2020. [online] Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ChildFund%20COVID-19%20Response%20Plan__Alliance%20Secretariat__.pdf> [Accessed 14 April 2021].
2. Congress.gov, 2021. *H.R.4864 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Global Child Thrive Act of 2020*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4864>> [Accessed 14 April 2021].
3. Devercelli, A. E. and Humphry, E. V., 2020. *15 Ways to Support Young Children and their Families in the COVID-19 Response* (No. 147663, pp. 1-3). The World Bank. [online] Available at: <<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/963051586986115651/pdf/15-Ways-to-Support-Young-Children-and-their-Families-in-the-COVID-19-Response.pdf>> [Accessed 14 April 2021].
4. European Commission, 2020. *April 2020 developments in child and family policy in EU member states, 06/05/2020*. [online] Available at: <<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=9670&langId=en>> [Accessed 14 April 2021].

5. UNICEF, 2020. *How business can help reduce the impact of COVID-19 on children and families.* [online] Available at: <<https://www.unicef.org/media/68021/file/Business-Engagement-Guide-7April2020.pdf>> [Accessed 14 April 2021].