

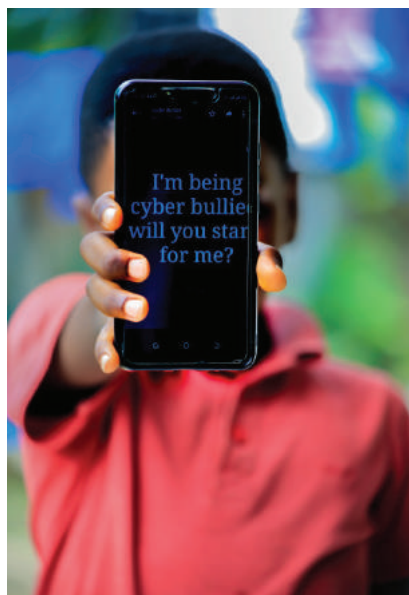


CHILD NEGLECT AND COVID-19

Introduction

June 16 marks the International Day of the African Child. Celebrated every year since it was established in 1991 by the Organization of African Unity, this day was instituted in remembrance of the 16 June 1976 student uprising in Soweto, South Africa. In the African Union Commission's 2020 publication in recognition of the day, themed "Access to Child-friendly Justice in Africa," the Commission calls on member states to adopt the measures necessary for the firm enforcement of children's rights. The publication highlights the responsibility of states to account for the vulnerabilities, needs, and best interests of children, particularly those in the justice system, as well as their "right to life, survival, and development."¹

In recognition of this day, we have developed this advocacy brief to address a relevant issue in the broader theme of children's rights: child



neglect. Child neglect, which occurs when a carer does not provide the conditions necessary for the healthy physical and emotional development of a child, directly conflicts with a child's right to a life of dignity and development. The experiences of neglected children may lead to adverse effects on brain development, low self-image, poor academic performance, and could be associated with negative impacts on their physical and social development, among other detrimental effects.²

¹African Union, "Day of the African Child 2020: 'Access to Child-friendly Justice in Africa,'" p. 3, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. 22 January 2020, <https://www.acerwc.africa/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NV-for-DA-C-2020-English.pdf>

²"Child Neglect," Findlaw, January 24, 2019, <https://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-charges/child-neglect.html>



SARS-CoV-2, also referred to as COVID-19, has heightened the need for extra attention on the welfare of children in Cameroon as the pandemic continues to have an especially damaging impact on the lives of society's most vulnerable members.

Thus, this advocacy brief will begin by describing the various forms of child neglect, followed by a brief overview of child neglect in Cameroon. The brief will explain why neglect is a concerning phenomenon and situate the problem of neglect in the context of COVID-19, later paying particular attention to the needs and safety of Cameroonian schoolchildren amid a global pandemic. We urge policymakers to take the topic of child neglect in Cameroon into careful consideration and encourage the adoption of policies that are recommended at the end of this document, some of which include:

- * Increased minimum wage requirements for working adults. Currently, the minimum wage requirements do not meet the cost of living in Cameroon. Children are often sent to hawk in the streets to pay for school fees and basic needs. A salary increase would mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and lessen their exposure to external dangers such as child trafficking, abuse, and bodily harm. Also, provide direct monies to populations in high-risk areas and/or that work in the informal sector.
- * Coordinate efforts between government and NGOs to create awareness of child neglect to the public. Outline forms and definitions of child neglect. Campaigns in English and French are essential to be inclusive of both populations.
- * Promote hygienic and sanitary efforts in schools. Campaigns should be in age-specific languages. Provide masks, soap, and clean water in school



facilities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

* Testing and tracing efforts should be implemented to protect children in schools.

* Create centres to provide resources and a safe environment for children who need them. This would be in conjunction with NGOs who are already established in urban areas where children are living on the street. Emphasis should be on those who are more susceptible to dangers, especially young girls.

* During this pandemic, parents are less likely to send their children to school. Implement programs that can provide children with access to technology and other resources needed for remote learning. This can help prevent the spread of the virus while ensuring that their learning would not be disrupted on a long-term basis.

** Please refer to the end of this document for other strategies and policy suggestions.*

What is child neglect?

Child neglect is a form of child abuse where a carer (which can be a child's parents or a legal guardian) does not provide the conditions necessary for the healthy physical and emotional development of a child. Other characteristics of neglect include exposure to drugs and the failure to protect children from various environmental dangers. The World Health Organization has also identified insufficient supervision, poor hygiene, abandonment, and the deprivation of education as manifestations of child neglect.³ We likewise emphasize the need for the following conditions to be met for the positive development of a child:

* Nutritious food

³World Health Organization, "Chapter 3: Child abuse and neglect by parents and other caregivers," in *World Report on Violence and Health*, p. 61, 2002, https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap3.pdf



- * Stable living conditions
- * A clean, secure home
- * Access to healthcare and medical treatment
- * Good personal hygiene
- * Adequate adult supervision
- * Positive, nurturing engagement and mental stimulation

Child neglect exists in various forms and with differing levels of severity (from mild/moderate to severe).⁴ Types of child neglect include, but are not limited to:

Inadequate Supervision: Children, especially younger children who need the full attention of responsible adults, may be at risk of exposure to safety hazards such as poisonous materials, drugs, and unattended/improperly stored firearms. Inadequate supervision also refers to caregivers who are unable to responsibly look after the child, such as another child, an adult who is too distracted to look after the child properly, or a caregiver who enables risky, illegal, or otherwise dangerous behaviours (such as exposing the child to drugs or alcohol).

Physical Neglect: Neglected children may experience abandonment. They may also experience "shuttling," which occurs when a child's carer frequently leaves the child with others for significant periods. The child's carers may also outright refuse to care for the child and send them away from their home without properly seeking out alternative care for the child. Nutritional neglect can occur when a child experiences hunger or malnourishment for extended periods. Also, neglected children might not have clothing that is appropriate for the weather.

⁴Diane DePanfilis, *Child Neglect: A Guide for Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention*, p. 13. 2006, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/neglect.pdf>



Emotional Neglect: Emotional neglect can occur when a child is deprived of adequate affection, nurturing, or emotional support. This form of neglect may also occur if a child is exposed to repeated or severe forms of domestic abuse. The neglected child may be denied the ability to socialize with other children or adults. Emotional neglect can sometimes be challenging to identify in children, but it typically exists alongside other types of neglect.

Educational Neglect: Children may be allowed to miss school regularly to the point of interfering with their educational development. If a carer fails to send their children to school (or arrange for alternatives such as homeschooling), this can also cause problems. Neglect also occurs if a child has unique education needs related to developmental delays or learning difficulties, and the carer refuses to take the necessary actions to address those needs.

Medical Neglect: Failure to get the necessary treatment or care for a child experiencing health problems. Delaying a child's access to necessary medical attention (or even preventative care) can also be recognized as neglect as the child's health may be further worsened as a result.





Child Neglect in Cameroon: A brief overview

Child neglect is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in Cameroon. According to a 2019 report that was conducted over three years, over 50 per cent of children in Cameroon have experienced various forms of abuse.⁵ Among these are physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect. The types of physical abuse commonly practised include physically punishing the child as a form of discipline, rubbing pepper on the skin, and over-working the child, among others.

Economic hardships can account for some of the types of neglect experienced by children in the country. As noted in the study mentioned above, poverty led to the failure of some caregivers to ensure that their children have access to basic needs, such as food, healthcare, and educational opportunities. At the same time, religious beliefs, alcoholism, a lack of understanding of children's rights, and cultural and social norms were also cited as contributing factors to the neglect of many Cameroonian children. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Also, children with disabilities are especially vulnerable to neglect. For instance, children who may want to go to the hospital to access treatment for their disabilities may find that those in their church community actively discourage it in favour of turning to prayer for healing. This is in direct contradiction with children's right to access adequate healthcare. Children with disabilities are disproportionately more prone to neglect and may face forms of emotional neglect, such as being deprived of affection and praise or being treated as lesser because of their disability.

⁵"New Report Shows over Half of Children in Cameroon Face Abuse," *Crux*, October 2, 2019, <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/09/new-report-shows-over-half-of-children-in-cameroon-face-abuse/>



This topic is also addressed in Cameroon's *Initial Report on the Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* put forth by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Access to adequate healthcare for disabled children is established as a right for Cameroonian children, and the need for adequate facilities to meet the needs of these children is noted.⁶ This report also recognizes child abandonment as a growing cause for concern in the country. This form of neglect is explained to be exacerbated by parental neglect, poverty, "uncontrolled sex among adolescents," and HIV/AIDS. In fact, at the time of writing, the report estimated that 300,000 children were at risk of being left without a family or support system as a result of the stigmatizing impact of HIV/AIDS.

Even though the situation of street children has long been a cause of concern, not nearly enough measures have been taken to address the issue. Urban areas, such as Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, have significant numbers of these children. Article 4 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was signed by Cameroon, mandates that:

*"States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment... while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s), or any other person who has the care of the child."*⁷

⁶African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, *Initial Report on the Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, p. 37. 29 November 2003, https://acerwc.africa/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Cameroon_Initial_Report.pdf

⁷World Organization Against Torture, *Rights of the Child in the Republic of Cameroon*, p. 15. 2001, https://www.omct.org/files/2001/08/2129/cameroun_web_gb.pdf



Thus, it is the responsibility of the government to adequately address the issue of street children while also exploring how best to support them and what actions to take to ensure that these children are not vulnerable to the dangers of the streets (such as drugs and sexual harassment).

Concerning impacts of neglect: Why is it dangerous?

Child neglect can leave lasting impacts that lead to lifelong problems. As one might expect, children who do not have access to nutritious foods may experience malnourishment. This can lead to physical problems such as stunted physical development as well as a range of mental and cognitive problems such as developmental delays and depression. Older children may engage in behaviours such as self-harming as well.

Neglected children may also find that they struggle academically and do not get along well with other students. Children who have lived in unstable or dysfunctional environments for a long time might exhibit especially disruptive behaviours. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that children who are emotionally neglected are often struggling with low self-confidence and self-esteem, further disadvantaging these children socially.

As they reach adulthood, neglected children may struggle with substance abuse, mental illness, developing and maintaining good relationships, and other disadvantages as a result of their upbringing. They may also become involved in risky or criminal behaviour. What is particularly concerning is the possibility of these adults to treat their children the way that they were treated as children, continuing the cycle of neglect.



COVID-19 and neglect in Cameroon

Cameroon has been significantly affected by COVID-19. Many news outlets and international organizations refer to Cameroon as the current epicentre of the virus in central Africa, with 8,312 cases and 212 deaths.⁸ Due to a lack of testing capabilities and hard-to-reach rural and conflict areas, the numbers are likely much higher. The population is also at risk for higher deaths due to the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3.6% of the population is known to be HIV positive.⁹ People with underlying conditions face higher mortality rates if infected with COVID-19.

Child neglect comes in many forms. Children are not just neglected by parents and family members, but also by governments. Currently, the population of street children has grown in large cities. Most of these children have different reasons for running away, including the death of a parent, poverty, and abuse. In a study published by the African Journal of Primary Health Care & Family Medicine, 16.8% of children left home due to the death of a parent.¹⁰ These rates will rise if COVID-19 death rates increase. The country's healthcare system lacks the infrastructure necessary to handle the high volume of sick patients and raising fatalities. Also, the youth, particularly girls, are vulnerable to sexual abuse, not only out on the streets but also in their own homes. According to a study presented by Dr. Teke Johnson Takwa, "A Qualitative Study of Domestic Maltreatment of Children in Cameroon," 25% of abuse cases occur in the home.¹¹ Children being kept at home during COVID-19 may be subjected to more frequent abuse by their perpetrators.

⁸World Health Organization, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Situation Report - 141, p. 3. 9 June 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200609-covid-19-sitrep-141.pdf?sfvrsn=72fa1b16_2

⁹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Cameroon Country Profile, July 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/globalhi/ivb/where-we-work/Cameroon.pdf>

¹⁰Samuel N. Cumber and Joyce M. Tsoka-Gwegweni, "Characteristics Of Street Children In Cameroon: A Situational Analysis Of Demographic, Socio-Economic And Behavioural Profiles And Challenges," *African Journal of Primary Health Care & Family Medicine* vol. 8, no. 1 e1-e9, 18 Nov. 2016, doi:10.4102/phcfm.v8i1.1076



Due to the closures of workplaces and the city in general, workers in the informal sector are unable to earn a living for their families. Children that live on the street (or are sent by their families) turn to the streets to sell (hawk) goods. Since schools are closed and remote learning is often not a realistic option, parents have yet another incentive to send their children out to hawk. Although the government has warned the local populations to keep their children in quarantine, the absence of income is devastating for these families. In a report by UNICEF, only 2,450 N95 masks were given to the Ministry of Public Health.¹² These masks would most likely only go to hospitals. Supplies such as masks, water, soap, and hand sanitizer are challenging to obtain. Children that are out hawking without these materials are at a higher rate of contracting the virus. Although currently, the mortality rates of children are low in Cameroon, they can



¹²UNICEF, Cameroon: COVID-19 Situation Report - #11, p. 1, May 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Cameroon%20COVID-19%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2011%20-%2028%20May%202020.pdf>



still transmit the virus to the other members of their households.

Safety of Cameroonian school children amid COVID-19

COVID-19 has presented its own set of challenges for children in school. Schoolchildren may find themselves facing different obstacles or vulnerabilities, whether they remain at school amid the pandemic or stay at home. With cases still on the rise, careful steps must be taken to ensure that the well-being of children is not compromised for the sake of reopening the country.

One set of concerns arises with the recent reopening of primary and secondary schools in Cameroon. Despite the worries of observers who fear that it is still too early to send children back to school, many children are returning to classrooms after months of suspended classes. Concerns that the government's efforts to provide enough safety measures will fall short have already been echoed by some reports of schools with low or nonexistent supplies of protective items such as face masks and hand sanitizers.¹³ Additionally, despite some attempts to respect social distancing (such as assigning fewer students to each classroom), social distancing is quite challenging to enforce and sustain. Crowded hallways and classrooms are still a genuine risk for many students who are returning to school. Furthermore, many students travel to school on public transportation, which is often packed taxis and motorbikes that heighten the risk of virus transmission.

If soap and water, alcohol-based gels, masks, and other protective mea-

¹³Moki Edwin Kindzeka, "Cameroon Opens Schools Amid COVID-19 Spike," *Voice of America*, June 01, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/cameroon-opens-schools-amid-covid-19-spike>



asures are not available, children may be inadvertently bringing the virus home, increasing the risk of infection for vulnerable family members. Additionally, added pressure is placed on parents to adequately educate their children on best practices to reduce COVID-19 spread, which can be particularly difficult with very young children or in communities that are less informed about the virus.

At the same time, keeping children at home can present new troubles that may reinforce neglect or otherwise threaten the safety of schoolchildren. Neglected children who spend more time at home as a result of this may be subjected to even more physical or emotional neglect than before. Children living in unstable households or communities-especially neighbourhoods where armed conflict is rife such as in the Northwest and Southwest regions - are bound to experience added distress and fear for their safety.

Furthermore, other challenges arise when children cannot go to school because of the virus. Before schools began to reopen, many students were in a difficult situation. Some children who were no longer going to class, for instance, were sent to hawk small items in the street to generate an additional source of income for their families. This puts children at risk of being vulnerable to dangers such as sexual harassment, vehicle accidents, acute fatigue, and exposure to extreme elements.

School closures during the pandemic also reinforce the socioeconomic disparities among children that result in unequal academic outcomes.



Educational neglect can be an unintended consequence if children are not able to continue their studies while at home. Some children, for instance, have access to the technologies and other resources at home that make digital learning possible, while others do not. As of now, many parents do not feel comfortable sending their children back to newly-reopened schools. Thus, we must think about the children whose studies are significantly disrupted during this time and investigate how best to ensure that they do not fall behind.

Policy Implications

Implement strategies to protect schoolchildren in the context of COVID-19:

- * Encourage hygienic practices such as frequent hand washing, avoiding touching one's face, social distancing, coughing or sneezing into one's elbow, etc.
- * Regularly clean and disinfect school buildings and communal surfaces; if possible, encourage air ventilation by opening windows or through other methods of increasing airflow.
- * Ensure the availability of masks (especially masks that are an appropriate size for children), hand sanitizer and/or soap and water.
- * Given how much students rely on public transportation to get to school, implement the necessary measures to ensure that there are no overcrowded public transportation and school buses.
- * Maintain accurate attendance records to monitor how the virus may be spreading; also, this can help school administrators determine if learning gaps are widening as a result of children being kept from attending school.
- * Increase access to testing to assist in tracing the spread of the virus to



prevent further spread within the school setting.

* Do not ignore the gaps in technology access when instituting digital-based learning in place of in-person classes-work with students who do not have access to the necessary technologies to ensure that they do not fall behind academically.

Respond to the underlying economic drivers of child neglect:

* Policymakers should consider providing regular financial support for households with school-aged children as a means of ensuring that they can take additional measures to protect themselves from the virus and obtain the necessary resources needed for at-home learning. This will ideally help discourage families from sending their young children to go work to secure additional income as well.

* Provide financial support for those working in the informal sector. Many of these jobs involve a significant degree of social interaction in crowded areas, which poses the risk of virus transmission. Assist families who do not want to work out of safety for their health and also due to conflict, but would have no source of income otherwise. This support may take the form of reduced taxes and cash transfers to families who are working in sectors that have been the most negatively affected.

* Establish family-friendly work policies for those in public and private sectors so that parents can return home early to take care of their children.

* Continue to carry out actions to reduce children on the streets, including providing them with educational and employment opportunities.¹⁴

* Create safe spaces for children who live on the street because they are unable to return to their families due to conflict, poverty, and/or difficult

¹⁴Moki Edwin Kindzeka, "Cameroon Clears its Streets of Abandoned Kids," Voice of America, April 6, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/cameroon-clears-its-streets-abandoned-kids>



home life. Government agencies can coordinate with NGOs to achieve this.

Address attitudes surrounding child neglect more broadly through widespread campaigns:

- * Develop child-friendly campaigns in both English and French, raising awareness about the different forms of child neglect. Emphasize the physical, social, and cognitive consequences of neglect and the steps that should be taken to reduce it. This should be treated as the collective responsibility of the public and private sectors, NGOs, media houses, etc.
- * Emphasize how common actions such as hawking can be forms of child neglect; use a combination of legislative approaches and effective media campaigns to change attitudes around such practices.
- * Develop programs to assist young girls at risk with reproductive education. This population is most vulnerable to sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancy, and associated diseases.

Contact Us

Community Centre for Integrated Development
Express Union Building - Molyko, Buea
(+237) 666952306/670044614/670222514
info@comuceid.org/www.comuceid.org