

## Kigali Declaration on Child Care and Protection Reform

**Recognising** that the Commonwealth accounts for 60% of the world's youth population;

**Recalling** the *Nadi Declaration* of the 20<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers where the importance of providing all children with access to quality early childhood education was highlighted; recognising the importance of multi-sectoral coordination to support and promote early learning and development of all young children, and further highlighting the need to invest in early learning with the goal of providing universal pre-primary education to enable sustainable development;

**Recognising** that the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children will be both immediate and lifelong;

**Recognising** that COVID-19 has further increased inequalities and revealed gaps in social protection systems around the world;

**Recognising** the 240 million children with disabilities, 1 in 10 children worldwide,<sup>1</sup> who continue to be disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, who remain at higher risk of infection, serious illness, and death, and face greater barriers in accessing inclusive information and essential services;

**Emphasising** that children in most marginalised and vulnerable situations have been disproportionately affected by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including children in low-income countries, refugee children, children with psycho-social and intellectual disabilities, and children in institutions;

**Recognising** that 120 million girls are estimated to have suffered some form of forced sexual contact before the age of 20,<sup>2</sup> over 200 million girls and women are living having undergone female genital mutilation,<sup>3</sup> and more than 650 million women are married before the age of 18, of whom 250 million are under the age of 15;<sup>4</sup>

Noting that, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, an estimated 100 million more children have fallen into multidimensional poverty at the end of 2021, compared to 2019, as a result of loss of education and health services;<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, 2021. Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-with-disabilities-report-2021/>

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, 2014. Hidden in plain sight: a statistical analysis of violence against children. <https://www.unicef.org/media/66916/file/Hidden-in-plain-sight.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, 2021. Female genital mutilation (FGM). <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, 2014. Ending child marriage: progress and prospects. [https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Child-Marriage-Brochure-HR\\_164.pdf](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Child-Marriage-Brochure-HR_164.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Save the Children/ UNICEF, 2021. Impact of COVID-19 on children living in poverty: A Technical note <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>

**Emphasising** that the education gap has widened with more than 1.5 billion children severely affected by COVID-19 measures;<sup>6</sup>

**Recognising** that one-third of youth did not have access to ICT prior to the COVID-19<sup>7</sup> pandemic and will continue to be excluded from distance-learning opportunities; there is a significant gender and disability digital divide, meaning girls and children with disabilities have less access to technology both inside and outside the classroom; it is anticipated children with disabilities will be more significantly impacted, further widening inequality in educational outcomes;

**Noting** that it is difficult to predict the long-term consequences and effects on human capital development of this learning crisis on the younger generations;

**Recognising** the critical gaps in national and international data collection and capacity to monitor and report on child care and protection;

**Reminding** that rising malnutrition is expected as more than 150 million children globally, including those who normally rely on school meals, lack essential health and nutrition services.<sup>8</sup>

**Stressing** that the lockdown measures have put children at an increased risk of being witnesses and victims of abuse, domestic violence and abuse online, particularly girls with disabilities who already face a higher risk of gender-based violence;

**Recognising** that each year 1 billion children are estimated to have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence and/or neglect;<sup>9</sup>

**Noting** that almost 1 in 10 children,<sup>10</sup> including migrant and refugee children, are subject to child labour, forced labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation;

**Recognising** that the online sexual exploitation of children is a serious global child protection issue, and that COVID-19 has led to some of the greatest risks for child protection, including child trafficking for forced labour and online sexual exploitation of children;

**Recognising** that protecting our youth and unlocking their potential will create more vibrant, peaceful and prosperous societies;

**Building** on the CHOGM 2018 Commonwealth Youth Forum Declaration,<sup>11</sup> requesting us to “renew our commitment to ‘Leave No One Behind,’” recognising that millions of children and young people still live in care institutions, including many children and young people with disabilities;

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations, 2020. Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond.

[https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, 2020. COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies. [https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RemoteLearningFactsheet\\_Updated.pdf](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RemoteLearningFactsheet_Updated.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, 2021. UN backs plans to ensure regular, healthy school meals for every child in need by 2030. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105962>

<sup>9</sup> WHO, 2020. Violence against children. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>

<sup>10</sup> ILO & UNICEF, 2021. Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, trends and road forward. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-labour-2020-global-estimates-trends-and-the-road-forward>

<sup>11</sup> ,The Commonwealth, 2018. Eleventh Commonwealth Youth Forum: Declaration by the Young People of the Commonwealth. <https://www.chogm2018.org.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Commonwealth%20Youth%20Forum%20Declaration%20%26%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

**Reaffirming** our commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted on 20 November 1989;

**Welcoming** the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted on 13 December 2006, including provisions on care which should be provided based on free and informed consent informed by dignity, autonomy and the needs of the person;

**Welcoming** the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted on 13 September 2007, including provisions on the right of Indigenous peoples to retain shared responsibility for their children, consistent with the rights of the child;

**Welcoming** the adoption of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development ;

**Recognising** the potential negative effects of institutionalisation on children’s physical, emotional and psychological well-being and the collective role of care and protection reform, donors, and governments in tackling this issue through the provision of quality, integrated, community-based mental health and psycho-social support;

We, as Commonwealth Heads of Government, commit to:

**Positioning** the Commonwealth as a leading advocate on child care and protection reform by implementing the UN Resolution on Children Without Parental Care;

**Recognising** the resilience shown by children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic;

**Promoting** zero tolerance against violence, harassment, abuse online and offline, discrimination and neglect, paying particular attention to children in vulnerable circumstances;

**Recognising** the importance of providing a range of quality alternative care options, including, inter alia, family and community-based care and, where relevant, redirecting resources to family and community-based care services, with adequate training and support for caregivers and robust screening and oversight mechanisms, and progressively replacing institutionalisation accordingly, we undertake to take appropriate measures to:

1. *Strengthen* health systems for future pandemics and ensure adequate response to the needs of all children and young people;
2. *Expand* social protection coverage to reduce poverty and promote human capital for all children and young people, and strengthen social protection systems to better respond to future shocks;
3. *Tackle* the underlying causes that lead to children requiring care and protection;
4. *Tackle* the underlying causes of the separation of children from their families and communities, including by progressively replacing institutionalisation with quality alternative care across the Commonwealth;
5. *Put in place* the necessary frameworks and resources to ensure sustainable and effective child protection and safeguarding systems for care and protection of all children, including the elimination of child labour in all its forms, forced labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation;

6. *Implement* a policy of zero tolerance for violence, harassment, abuse, stigma, or discrimination, paying particular attention to the most marginalised and excluded children and those in a situation of vulnerability;
7. *Encourage* development agencies by 2025 to:
  - a. Support staff, as well as applicants and recipients of aid, development assistance and investment, to prioritise quality care arrangements at the community level, over institutionalisation, including for children with disabilities;
  - b. Support projects which take a holistic and inclusive approach to child protection systems development and family strengthening;
  - c. Provide clear information on how funding supports families and family-based systems of care.
  - d. Amplify and support the voices of children and their families, including the under-represented voices of girls, children with disabilities and other marginalised groups, and support the meaningful participation in society of children, young people, their families and their representative groups;
  - e. Support inclusive, accessible, quality community services, including all aspects of education, health and social services, that meet the diverse requirements of children and their families, and support the choice, dignity, autonomy and full participation of all children and their families in society, including the most marginalised;
8. *Recognise* the role of evidence-based research and data disaggregation in providing a clear picture of the challenges facing child protection across the Commonwealth;
9. *Recognise* that well-meaning support for institutions through international aid, donations, orphanage volunteering, mission trips or tourist visits, can in some cases lead to unnecessary family-child separation and undermine care reform efforts;
10. *Undertake* to improve data collection, information management and reporting systems related to children without parental care in all settings and situations to close existing data gaps and develop global and national baselines.

Republic of Rwanda  
25 June 2022