

# COVID-19 A CHILD RIGHTS CRISIS

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lives of children and their families as the disease spread and the movement control order (MCO) to curb it force schools and businesses to shut.

COVID-19 is not just a test of health systems, it attacks the way children access education, the way their families earn an income, and how safe they feel in their homes and communities.

If economic projections hold true, we may witness an increase in global poverty for the first time in 30 years.

Experts predict that children living in poverty are less likely to go to school, more likely to be forced into child labour, more likely to be married as children, and less likely to access nutritious food and quality healthcare.

Most at risk are the children of daily wage earners, children of single parents, women-headed household, children affected by migration and children with disabilities.

The recovery phase will take years, especially in low- and middle-income countries where there is

This unprecedented global health, economic, and social crisis requires equally unprecedented global solidarity. UNICEF is leading the charge to:

- RESPOND to the immediate needs
- RECOVER from the shocks
- REIMAGINE, an opportunity to 'build back better'

limited capacity to mitigate the impact of the economic slow-down.

UNICEF is leading the charge to **Respond**, **Recover** and **Reimagine** a world fit for every child.

Already on the ground in more than 190 countries and founded in response to the post-World War II refugee crisis, UNICEF is well equipped, together with partners in government, and the private sector, with the tools and experience to fight this.

Together, we can prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from becoming a lasting crisis for children.

We must take this opportunity to invest in their futures and build back better.

## MALAYSIA IN NUMBERS



Youth unemployment expected to increase from 11% at the end of 2019.



4 million children affected by school closures due to the Movement Control Order.



500,000 school children from low-income households cannot access supplemental school meal programme.

# SITUATION IN MALAYSIA

The COVID-19 pandemic and measures to curb its spread are expected to have a negative impact on the economy; persistent issues will become more entrenched, and with time, more challenging to solve.

## Socio-Economic Impact

The Ministry of Finance and Central Bank expect Malaysia's GDP to contract by at least 2% in 2020. Unemployment and underemployment are expected to rise, and along with it, child poverty, with many previous non-poor households at risk of falling into poverty.

Food insecurity is likely to increase, exacerbating the high levels of malnutrition already found among Malaysia's children.

Increased child poverty and family income insecurity are associated with risks related to child mental health and education outcomes as well as violence and neglect.

Children with disabilities and their families are at particular risk of increased isolation, social exclusion and poverty.

The risks to children affected by migration, including refugee, asylum-seeking, undocumented, stateless and trafficked children, are compounded by their already limited access to social protection and essential public services such as health and education, and these children face heightened risks of violence, abuse, arrest and detention during this time.

As resources were redirected towards quarantine centres and distribution of food supplies, social work was disrupted resulting in constrained capacity to meet the needs of children.

## Stalled Education

The ability for children to learn via e-learning or online classes is limited, primarily due to the lack of necessary equipment. A study involving more than 670,000 parents and 900,000 students found that about one-third do not own any devices.

Currently about half a million school children from low-income households are enrolled in supplementary meal programmes in school. The closure of schools could deprive them of their optimal nutritional intake, negatively affecting their growth.

Children experience heightened levels of stress caused by boredom, lack of personal space, and cyber-bullying due to increased screen time that might leave a long-lasting impact on children's mental health.

## Gender

During the MCO, a spike in gender-based violence and mental health issues was reported. The closure of schools and childcare centres transferred an additional burden of domestic and care work to women and girls which may be difficult to relinquish even as the MCO is lifted. As a result, women and girls face higher risks of falling out of the workforce or not returning to school, which may lead to increased gender inequalities and a power imbalance for women and girls in Malaysia.

## Healthcare

The MCO and the stress on public health also have implications on access to healthcare for women, in particular maternal health care. In addition, vaccination campaigns such as the polio campaign Sabah, was put on hold during MCO and resumed only in June.

## Policy Intervention

There is a need to look at the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, and design proper policy responses to ensure that no one is left behind. In the absence of a strong social protection system, child poverty, inequality, food insecurity, chronic illness (particularly mental ill-health) and domestic violence are expected to increase significantly.

Rising inequality, hardship and an inadequate policy response risks fueling pre-existing social tensions.

# UNICEF MALAYSIA – RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC

The effects of the pandemic together with the MCO was felt by every child and their families in the country, although experienced in vastly different ways.

It was immediately clear that UNICEF Malaysia is well positioned to respond to the needs of children and their families. The team focused on four key areas to support the government, families and children in the country.

## FOCUS 1: Communicate and Engage

Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) is an essential component of health emergency preparedness and response action plan so that affected populations can make informed decisions to protect themselves and their loved ones. The main objectives are to:

- Reach 20 million children, adolescents, and their families with targeted and accurate information on how to prevent COVID-19 infection and seek assistance.
- Engage 1.3 million young people online to

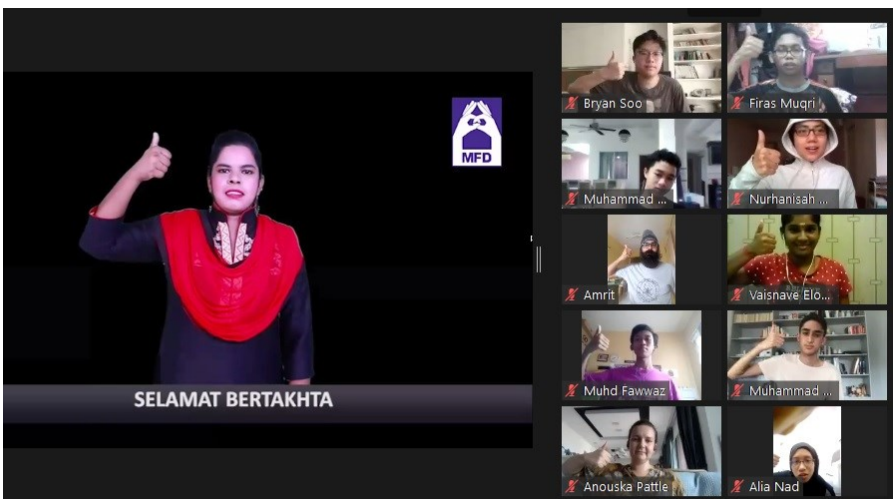
support their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, as well as to provide useful life skill development sessions.

- Establish two-way communication channel to receive feedback and concerns from 10,000 children and adolescents, especially from vulnerable groups, in partnership with other UN Agencies and local civil society organisations (CSO).
- Identify, mitigate and respond to misinformation and share information and advice.

### HIGHLIGHT: KITA CONNECT

Of the 500 young people who responded to an online survey, 65% said their biggest concern was not knowing when things would return to normal. Over half (52%) felt tired, bored and agitated, and about half (49%) felt it was difficult to find something fun to do. Another 8 in 10 wanted information on wellbeing during MCO.

A channel on Telegram called #KitaConnect was established to engage with young people to provide important information, and being a two-way communication platform, allowed youth to stay connected, receive support and inspire action.



'Sign with Serena', a fun online session to learn how to sign the national anthem, Negaraku led by Serena Lee, the 17 year old founder of Sign for Malaysia. Conducted as part of the #KitaConnect initiative, Serena volunteered to run the session as a way to stand in unity and solidarity with deaf brothers and sisters.

Zoom screenshot by Elizabeth Wong.



## FOCUS 2: Provide Hygiene Essentials

Reach the most vulnerable children and their families across Malaysia with hygiene essentials.



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Mercy Malaysia aid worker conducting handwashing education during the distribution of hygiene kits at an alternative learning centre in Sabah.

### HIGHLIGHT: HYGIENE ESSENTIALS

In partnership with Mercy Malaysia, UNICEF provided hygiene kits, which include soap, hand sanitizers and menstrual hygiene products, to 200,000 children and their families from various vulnerable groups: children living in low cost flats, studying in alternative learning centres and refugee schools, or staying at immigration detention centres across Malaysia. In addition to the kits, key hygiene practices are also demonstrated during the distribution exercise.

Across Malaysia, 60 hand washing stations will be built or refurbished to support hand washing practices in selected alternative learning centres and immigration detention centres.



## FOCUS 3: Ensure Children Learn and are Protected

UNICEF works to ensure children continue learning, parents feel supported, adolescents receive psychosocial support, and that all children are protected. UNICEF focuses particularly on the most vulnerable children, such as children affected by migration and children with disabilities, that they are included in essential child protection and social welfare services to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

### HIGHLIGHT: DIGITAL LEARNING

Led by the Ministry of Education (MOE), UNICEF together with implementing partner Arus Academy launched a training course to help teachers make the leap to online learning. The Komuniti Guru Digital Learning went live on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April following an online survey with 1,302 respondents to gather data on teachers' current needs and challenges in conducting online lessons.

The platform aims to empower teachers to become effective remote learning educators. The online modules are conducted through video tutorials, quizzes and notes, to help teachers learn how to plan, build and launch digital content for teaching and learning.

Its goal is to ensure equity, inclusion and quality of learning of online learning through building teacher capacity. The platform features a key component on "accessibility for all" to strengthen teacher capacity in lesson planning and interacting with children with disabilities by learning to utilize the Google accessibility features.

To date, around 2,400 teachers from over 1,600 schools all over the country have participated in the online teacher training.



## HIGHLIGHT: PARENTING AND SOCIAL WORKER CASE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

UNICEF, together with Maestral developed tips targeted at parents as well as social workers packaged in digestible 'bites' that can be disseminated easily online and on social media.

The parenting tips were disseminated in coordination with National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN), providing guidance, methods to promote positive discipline and avoid harmful practices, and encourage children's well-being and protection at home.

Tips for social workers focused on case management to protect children from violence including preventing and responding to violence against children and mental health care in the context of COVID-19.



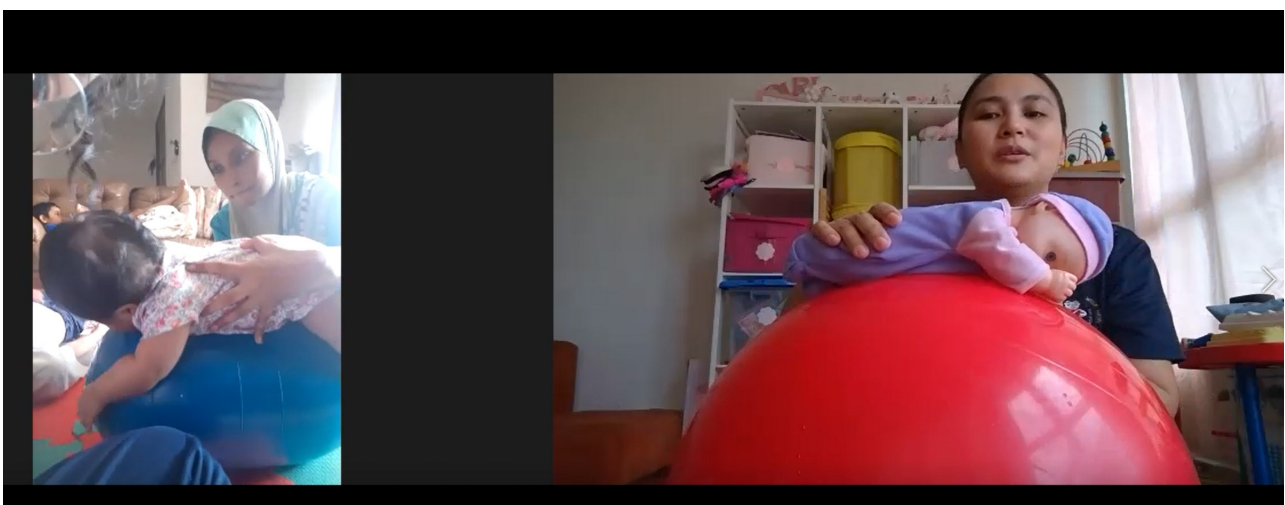
## HIGHLIGHT: TELETHERAPY

A survey conducted at the start of MCO to assess the impact that COVID-19 and MCO was having on children with disabilities and their families found that:

- 4 in 10 could not access the services they needed;
- a quarter felt lonely and isolated;
- about a quarter said they experienced loss of earnings and could not afford necessities.

In response, UNICEF partnered with the National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC) to bring the services of Early Intervention Centres online. This resulted in 806 people including children, parents and primary caregivers receiving mental health and psychological support digitally, and 878 children and adults having access to a safe and accessible channel to report sexual exploitation and abuse.

Teletherapy is now seen as a viable option for families of children with disabilities living in remote areas beyond the MCO period, and not as an option of last resort.



Nur Liana, mother to Nur Nuhaa, a 7 month old infant with Down Syndrome, is coached through online video call on the use of a therapy ball by physiotherapist Hazel Joy. Teletherapy helps Nur Liana to continue therapy during MCO to develop her daughter's reflexes and to improve head and neck control.

Screenshot provided by Nur Liana Bin Mohammed Ghouse.



## FOCUS 4: Support evidence-based policy-making

To support more effective policy-making on the response to COVID-19, research was conducted on the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effectiveness of mitigation measures.

This includes a multi-sectoral, mixed-method, and longitudinal research on the impact of COVID-19 on low income families in Malaysia which will explore impacts on employment, income, food security, education, psychosocial wellbeing and access to government programmes and services.

Surveys were also conducted through U-Report (online platform) to generate evidence informing UNICEF and partners' response to COVID-19.



A youth using the U-Report platform during U-Report's Inisiatif Anak Malaysia workshop in 2019.  
© UNICEF Malaysia/2019



## Responding to the crisis

The pandemic is a health crisis which is quickly becoming a child rights crisis. Right now, UNICEF staff is on the ground doing everything in our power to ensure that children don't feel the impact of this pandemic for decades to come.

UNICEF in Malaysia needs an additional RM10.6 million (USD2.484 million) to continue responding to the crisis so that children and families receive the support they need to recover from the shocks brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNICEF Malaysia funding needs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic	
Focus 1: Communicate and Engage	RM2.3 mil
Focus 2: Provide hygiene essentials	RM4.6 mil
Focus 3: Ensure children learn and are protected	RM2.4 mil
Focus 4: Support evidence-based policy-making	RM1.3 mil
<b>Total:</b>	<b>RM10.6 million</b>

As we scale up our efforts across the world to reduce the transmission of the virus, UNICEF is appealing for close to RM7 billion (USD1.6 billion) to provide critical health prevention supplies, public health education, as well as key healthcare, nutrition, education and child-protection support.

UNICEF never works alone. We were founded on solidarity. That's where you and every government, partner and business who shares our commitment to child rights comes in. With your support, UNICEF will do whatever it takes to ensure children and their families get the urgent support they need.

Let's #Reimagine the world we want together.

To give generously: [bit.ly/covid19unicefmy](https://bit.ly/covid19unicefmy)

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