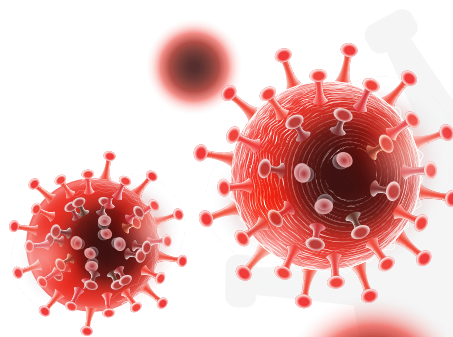


Building Back Better



Stories of Hope & Resilience



Giving every child the best start in life calls for whole-of-society action.

Civil society, governments and parents must work together to protect and nurture young children, from the start of life.

Every day, and especially during times of crisis, young children depend on adults to love, protect and care for them. As parents, teachers, ECD practitioners, and activists, our work with children is an essential service. Speaking up for children, finding ways to make sure they are supported and nurtured, is critical to their wellbeing today and to their future learning, productivity and happiness.

In this blog, we share 3 stories from South Africa. Each sheds light on actions that we can take to keep children on track and ensure none are left behind.

Are young children less likely to be affected by COVID-19?

Much has been written about children not being at significant risk of the severe effects of COVID-19. Evidence (so far) tells us that they can be infected, mostly developing much milder symptoms and significantly less likely to die than adults and older people. All of this is good news for parents and young children. However, what these data don't tell is about the indirect costs associated with COVID-19 which may pose an even greater threat to children's early development, health and emotional wellbeing than the virus itself.

Children's safety and wellbeing is threatened by the impact of the pandemic on their home environment.

740 million women or 70% of the employed workforce, work in the informal economy, these jobs are the first to disappear in times of economic crisis leaving many already vulnerable families facing serious hardships. According to a survey conducted by Partnership for Evidence Based Response to COVID-19 (PERC), over 66% of adults in Twenty African countries surveyed, said they were afraid of going hungry and running out of money if they had to

quarantine for 2 weeks, while the lowest-income households said they would last no more than 1 week. A Lancet modelling study predicts significant increases in maternal and under-5 deaths as food insecurity grows and health systems are disrupted. Threats to child safety have also increased under lockdown as GBV spikes around the world.

Children's early learning and development is affected negatively by the suspension of early childhood care and education programmes.

Along with the closure of schools in 191 countries, interrupting the learning of 1.5 billion children, most ECD centers, have also shut their doors. Young children depend on the adults in their world to keep them safe and ensure their development needs are met. For many of our children, these centers are a safe place where they receive care, stimulation and at least one nutritious meal a day. As advocates, parents, teachers and ECD practitioners, our voices matter. By speaking up for children and ensuring they are supported, nurtured and still learning, is critical. As always, this requires attention not just to what happens on the ground but also to the system as a whole.

Here are three examples of civil society action at a global, national and local level.

1. Around the world the message that childcare is an essential service has landed. With this has come the recognition that the sector in many countries is woefully underfunded and at risk of not recovering from the impact of the pandemic. Those who have long advocated for the prioritisation of ECCE services as a win-win for all of society, employers included, can leverage the momentum of the moment. Advocating at regional and country level for childcare to be recognised as essential can be a step to accelerating funding and service expansion.

2. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic civil society organisations came together to take collective action in a sector characterised by fragmentation. A hard lockdown was implemented in South Africa in March. This meant the closure of 20 000 – 30 000 ECD centres employing approximately 175 000 women. Activated by this threat to the sector, civil society organisations took collective action. A sector survey to better understand the impact of COVID-19 was undertaken. Based on the evidence gathered, a 'national call for relief' advocating for: urgent government action, increased funding and improved cross-sector collaboration, was issued. Since then, Government has continued to provide registered ECD centres with their state-supported subsidies and put in place a cross-sector consultation process to explore ways of sustaining and reopening programmes.

3. The development needs of children don't go into lockdown. Creative Skills Factory (CSF) based in the village of Stanford was able to adapt their existing programme to keep children nourished and learning in spite of the COVID-19 lockdown. Their swift response demonstrated how:

- o *To be flexible and adaptive: CSF is a small organization with a relatively small budget. They were able to adjust their strategy and respond rapidly to the needs of children and families.*
- o *To graft new ways of working into an existing programme: CSF could leverage off what was in place already and pivot their programme to seamlessly continue providing for the development needs of children.*

While the key elements and focus of the programme remained intact, it was the approach that had to be adjusted.

This included:

I. Getting to grips with the compliance regulations and engaging with local authorities to gain support and trust so that they could keep their programmes running.

II. Facilitating a preparation training programme for CSF staff and teachers to prepare them and the children for what was coming.

III. Maintaining nutrition support by sending food home and setting up a community feeding programme to boost children's health and immunity.

IV. Continuing stimulation and learning with materials adapted for home-based learning prepared and sent home so learning. This included specific school-readiness materials for Grade R children.

V. Communicating with parents via WhatsApp to share ideas, stories, activities and games to support their role as facilitator of their children's learning.

Three things the team said they have learnt:

I. Relationships always matter. "We kept activities simple, we distributed parcels to families, but it wasn't about this only, these parcels created the opportunity for much needed human connection." It was evident that children found the lockdown difficult to deal with. The distribution of resources by people they knew kept them connected, it was a source of comfort.

II. "The parcels were exciting for children who do not have access to play and learning materials at home." The home environment is an important space for child development, without resources it's hard for parents to engage in simple learn at home activities.

III. "Parents responded with interest – the parcels and engagement on WhatsApp unlocked enthusiasm and participation at family level." Parents want to help their children. Giving them tools and activities led to increased investment on their part. "I see there is so much willingness. Children want to learn. Parents want to help their children."

