



PDA Covid-19 Series Vol.1 No.2

GHANA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM & COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a great deal of impact worldwide, Ghana inclusive. From the devastating impact on the economy due to the closure of borders and restrictions on human movement and trading activities to its resulting impact on education and socioeconomic life. Ghana's response, according to the Ghana COVID-19 Emergency Preparation and Response Project (P173788) has focused on limiting transmission of the virus through enhanced contact tracing, isolation and treatment of infected persons, as well as information sharing about the virus whilst trying to minimize its socio-economic impact. Every member of every class in the society have had their fair share of the impact of this pandemic, and children are not in any way, excluded. But the question is, how formidable is Ghana's welfare system in protecting children against the egregious impact of COVID-19 pandemic?

Children remain the most [treasured possession](#) in the Ghanaian society. As custodians of the future of the nation, their welfare and protection are of importance to the development of the nation. Nevertheless, child welfare in Ghana has over the years, seen innumerable changes. Having transitioned from kinship foster care to state care, the introduction of the Care Reform Initiative (CRI) in 2006 changed not only policy but the provision of child welfare services in Ghana as well. The object of this initiative was to transition from state care to again, revive the family and [community-based care](#) - which appeared to be a more sustainable approach to child welfare. This, in turn, led to the closure of about 90% of residential care facilities for children across the country.

Owing to this, child welfare presently is being managed under the child and family welfare system. Hinged on the idea that children are an integral part of the family, this system is geared towards ensuring the safety and protection of children by strengthening the capacity of [families](#) to achieve permanency of the family system in caring for children.

Over the last two decades, both state and non-state actors have demonstrated their commitment to protecting children in Ghana. However, the disconnect between child welfare laws and practice, as well as the lack of a coordinated system, coupled with inadequate resources, capacity and quality of services continue to hamper Ghana's progress in the area of child welfare. For so long a time now, Ghana's child welfare has been built on response to child-related crises rather than prevention - which is more costly.

The increase in child neglect, child labour, [streetism](#) and child trafficking cases in Ghana points to the fact that [poverty](#) remains the major force responsible for the inability of parents and families to care for and adequately protect their children. Non-maintenance of children has over the last decade also seen a sturdy increase; data from Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) reveals. A lot of these children end up being displaced from their homes and forced to make ends meet whiles living on the streets. On the other hand, government interventions such as the Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP) programme and the Labour-Intensive Public Work (LIPW) programme, just to mention a few, meant to empower poor households financially to be able to provide for their families have had their setbacks. Challenges such as insufficient funds and the difficulty in accessing complimentary services by beneficiaries have watered down the intended [impact of these programmes](#) - rendering them almost ineffective.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 pandemic has affected every facet of life. While this pandemic has claimed many precious lives, it has also exposed the inadequacies of child welfare systems in many [jurisdictions](#) and offers an opportunity for countries to rethink and restructure their welfare systems - such that children would be optimally protected in the wake of another disease outbreak and other humanitarian emergencies.

In Ghana, even though there is currently no statistics on the positivity rate of the coronavirus pandemic among children, they are likely to be hard hit by the virus outbreak. The devastating impact of COVID-19 pandemic is more compounded for children from poor homes, street children, and children under shelters. This pandemic poses a threat to increased levels of child poverty among Ghanaian children.

[Multidimensional child poverty](#) could mean that a child may be deprived of at least three of the eight needs including nutrition, health, learning and development, child protection, water, sanitation, housing and information. As the virus continues to persist in the country, with physical distancing and lockdown measures being instituted, its compounding effect on the reduction in economic activities and lay-offs, could lead to reduced household income. This poses a potential risk of pushing the entire household into poverty, with children being the worst affected group due to their vulnerability.

Currently, about 73.4 percent of children in Ghana are multidimensionally [poor](#). This figure casts a gloomy projection on the rate of child poverty and the likelihood that there could be an upsurge due to COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, child poverty may also result in the malnourishment of a lot of children – which could potentially lead to an increase in infant mortality in Ghana

Also, the COVID-19 pandemic poses far-reaching risks on children as it may lead to a surge in child-related violence and abuse, including physical, and sexual abuse in the home. The temporary closure of schools and uncertainty characterized by the lockdown and job losses have the potential of heightening anxiety and stress - which may trigger abusive behaviours in parents and relatives alike.

These potential negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the welfare of children begs the question as to how robust is the Ghanaian child welfare system to absorb the needs of children during this period. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ghana, the government has instituted relief measures including sharing of food to vulnerable families and setting up stimulus packages for businesses. While these measures are commendable, especially in providing immediate relief to poor families including children, there is no known mechanism to track, report, and ultimately reduce the incidence of violence and abuse against children in this period of lockdown caused by COVID-19 pandemic.

In the meantime, the government of Ghana must resource the Department of Children, Municipal and District assemblies, to enable them to embark on a campaign to create awareness on COVID-19, while encouraging community members to call and report cases or suspected cases of child abuse to the appropriate law enforcement authorities. The government must also initiate measures to support poor families financially in the quest to build their capacity and enjoy a minimum living standard during and post-COVID-19. The President of Ghana in his address on March 27th, 2020 announced a possible release of a minimum GH¢1 billion to households and businesses. But the question on who gets what and how it will be equitably distributed remains unanswered. It borders then more on the plans and measures put in place to ensure that the right beneficiaries are identified and supported accordingly; whilst paying critical attention to affected households and children.

A partnership between government and players in the technology and telecommunication industries as well as content creators to develop safety guidelines to regulate contents tailored for children, as well as educate parents and children on the safe use of the internet in times like this would be very helpful. This will go a long way to protect children who may resort to virtual platforms for learning from online abuse.

In the long-run, the government of Ghana should, as a matter of urgency, engage stakeholders in the child protection ecosystem to consolidate all efforts and redevelop Ghana's child welfare systems to stand the test of time, and protect children even in the wake of a disease outbreak such as this.