COVID-19:
Action for Children Without Parental Care in Africa

Transform
Alliance
Africa

Transform Alliance Africa (TAA) is a growing collective of organisations, currently working across Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The Alliance's Vision is of an Africa free of orphanages, where all children grow-up where they belong, in safe and loving families. Our Mission is to be a catalyst to end institutional care of children in Africa, by using our collective voices, knowledge, practice, and experience to strengthen families.

Countries across the world are still experiencing enormous challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Africa has experienced relatively fewer COVID-19 infections than other regions, the pandemic has still had far-reaching socio-economic effects. In communities already coping with very weak social protection and welfare systems, vulnerable children and families at risk of separation have felt the full force of the crisis.

The livelihoods of many families have been threatened by the economic fallout. The strict containment measures to control the spread of the virus have   weakened child protection systems and put children's rights at risk.

Children in alternative care, already among the most vulnerable group of children in Africa, have been particularly badly affected.

Children already in alternative care continue to be at risk of multiple violations of their rights, including increased neglect. And the continent will be confronted with increased numbers of abandoned and separated children in need of alternative care if pre-emptive measures are not taken now.

We, Transform Alliance Africa, call on Africa's regional bodies, governments, donors and civil society organizations to reinforce their individual and collective efforts to respond to the needs of children in, or at risk of entering, alternative care.

Contextual Challenges:

As highlighted in the Technical note on the protection of children during the COVID-19 pandemic: Children and Alternative Care[1], we call attention to the following contextual issues:

- **Separation and abandonment of children:** In a context of already weak social protection systems, the loss of livelihoods and income caused by the pandemic means that families, including kinship carers, now find it harder than ever to meet the daily needs of children including nutrition, basic health care and housing. This puts children at increased risk of losing parental care and ending up on the streets or in inadequate alternative care.

- **Children in institutions are exposed to COVID-19**: Adults and children living in large-scale residential facilities such as orphanages, are highly susceptible to COVID-19. Institutionalized children and staff are at a high risk of virus transmission. Institutionalized children with disabilities and with underlying health conditions are especially vulnerable to infection. Although data across the region is scarce, children with disabilities are more likely to be confined to institutions than children without disabilities.

- **Child protection workers are not listed as essential service providers:** Many governments have not identified and listed social workers, child protection officers, and care givers as essential service providers. Generalized restrictions of movements to control the spread of the pandemic may lead to a reduction in the carer-child ratio and hence compromise quality of care in residential settings. In addition, these restrictions can lead to poor responses to children, including cases of neglect, abuse and exploitation in both alternative care and communities.

- **Poor safeguarding and monitoring of institutionalized children:** Research has shown that children in alternative care are at higher risk of violence than their peers in a family environment[2]. Inadequate in-person monitoring of institutions as a result of the quarantines and lock-down measures can lead to increased abuse, violence and neglect. Without effective monitoring, violations may stay hidden. Children may be subject to a higher risk of exploitation and abuse including forced labour, prostitution, and trafficking.

- **Moving children from institutions to families without support and preparation:** There have been reports of sudden closures of some institutions and the expedited removal of children within them in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. These closures were often taken without the necessary steps of assessment, preparation, support and monitoring. Rushing or missing these steps may result in putting children in an even more harmful situation, even if they are moving back to their birth family. They may also put children at risk of the trauma of re-institutionalisation.

- **Lack of or inadequate support to care leavers:** Young people who have left care have been identified globally as one of the most socially excluded categories[1]. In Africa, most countries lack social protection and welfare programs to support them. These young people are at heightened risk of being excluded from social networks, losing their livelihoods and being unable to meet their basic needs as a result of the pandemic. The lack of available support makes them more vulnerable to homelessness, exploitation and becoming involved with negative behaviours like theft or prostitution as coping mechanisms.

What can African Governments do?

The strength and the future of the African continent depends on flourishing families and communities. But the stability of the family structure continues to be shaken by poverty, disease, conflict and violence, among other factors. Governments have made progress in strengthening child protection systems; however, the pandemic has threatened to erode these gains. We have seen increased levels of poverty and increased violations of the rights of children and women. It is key that we protect the progress made and accelerate positive child protection measures that will have a significant impact, even beyond the pandemic period. We must design systems and interventions that are child-centred but also family-focussed, to build more resilient families and communities.

Building on the Technical Note, we call on African governments to:

- **Support and strengthen families and communities:** The pandemic has exacerbated socio-economic issues that weaken the family structure, including domestic conflict, poverty, drug use and abuse, and related issues.

  - First, supporting families means developing and expanding social protection, safety nets and welfare programs to reach vulnerable and at-risk families to shield them from future shocks.

  - Second, as part of the current COVID-19 guidelines, governments need to secure and coordinate the provision of psycho-social services, including counselling and support group networks.

  - Third, existing community structures should also be mobilized to be more vigilant about abuse, neglect and exploitation concerns, especially for women and children in the communities.

  - Lastly, governments should provide emergency economic assistance to those who have lost livelihoods as a result of the pandemic. This may include public works programs, rent payment freeze or waivers, moratorium on evictions, universal one-off cash, childcare support and increased food and other material assistance. This will minimise the risk of family separation due the socio-economic fall-out of the crisis.

- **Enhance monitoring and oversight mechanisms at community level:** The pandemic has increased vulnerabilities and risks among already vulnerable populations. Governments must invest resources and time in coordinating increased monitoring and oversight within communities, to prevent and respond to protection concerns such as child marriages, sexual abuse and exploitation, physical abuse and other child safeguarding and protection risks.

- **Protect and support children in institutions:** Anecdotally, initial indications are that the pandemic has resulted in a sharp reduction in funding from donors for children in alternative care. Many institutions have closed and others have resorted to sending children back to their families and communities, often with little or no preparation. Children who remain in institutions are at enhanced risk of violence, including serious neglect, due to staff shortages as a result of illness and travel restrictions. Governments should have a system for physical and virtual monitoring of institutions to ensure the safety and well-being of children, and that COVID-19 guidelines are fully implemented within these settings.

- **Identify child protection workers as essential staff:** Current restrictions significantly limit response to child protection concerns by child protection workers and social workers. These workers should be declared essential staff and be allowed to move freely during the pandemic, both in the communities (to assist vulnerable families) and institutions. At the same time, it is paramount to ensure that child protection professionals are given the necessary support and resources, including PPE, for their own safety and to allow for effective case management.

- **Support young people who are leaving or have left care:** Include care leavers in emergency response and outreach initiatives, as well as social protection programs and link them to other social services to ensure they have access to the basic needs and provide them with practical support, guidance and mentorship.

- **Stop sudden closures of institutions:** Ensure children are not moved from care without planning, preparation, monitoring and support systems in place. Alternative care providers should follow case management policies and procedures to ensure the best interest of the children and that their safety and well-being are protected.

- **Re-orient and re-align care and protection systems towards care reform:** Focus on family-based care, ensuring that children already returned to their families are provided with post-reintegration support and are not taken back into institutions or other types of alternative care, ensuring their needs are met within their families and communities. Prevent placements in institutional care by enhancing the response to support vulnerable families and communities.

- **Prioritize workers in child protection and children in congregate care in vaccination campaigns:** Noting the promising progress in the development of vaccines against COVID-19, we echo calls for an equitable global dissemination of vaccines. It is imperative that staff working in alternative care provision, children living in congregate care and child protection and social workers be recognised as an early priority group for receiving the vaccine, given their high risk of becoming infected or spreading the virus.

We call on the African Union and other regional bodies to:

- Explicitly recognise the harm caused by institutions and their devastating effects on the family unit, decrying the use of institutions as a solution for children in need of alternative care and promoting family-based care. This is consistent with the Preamble to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which underscores the need for every child to grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

- Urge governments to ensure that each response plan to the pandemic is driven by the *best interest of the child* and the *do not harm* principles, in line with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

- Urge governments to preserve children's rights during the COVID-19 pandemic, through guaranteeing access to quality health, education and child protection services and other rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

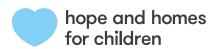## We call on civil society organisations and the donor community to:

- Increase investment in family strengthening and support services to address the underlying factors that lead to the unnecessary separation of children from their families, by focusing on nutrition, health (including mental health), education, child protection, and community-based services for children with disabilities.

- Support children returned from institutions to remain safely in their families and communities. Ensure these children receive adequate post-reintegration support and access to services, and strengthen oversight through targeted monitoring.

- Advocate for and support the development of strengthened child protection systems.

- Collaborate and coordinate with governments for appropriate COVID-19 responses targeting children in alternative care.

- In particular, recognize the devastating effects of institutions on children, families and communities and allocate support for the well-planned transitioning of children from institutions and their placement into families and alternative family-based care.

**Protecting Children, Supporting Families,
Strengthening Communities**

This call to action was developed and coordinated by Transform Alliance Africa and endorsed by its members organisations.

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Endnotes

1   Prepared by an Inter-Agency Task Force coordinated by the Better Care Network,
     the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and UNICEF.

2   Lorraine Sherr, Kathryn J. Roberts & Natasha Gandhi (2017) Child violence experiences in institutionalised/orphanage care, Psychology,
     Health & Medicine, 22:sup1, 31-57, DOI: 10.1080/13548506.2016.1271951

3   Strahl, B., van Breda, A. D. P., Mann-Feder, V., & Schröer, W. (2020). A multinational comparison of care-leaving policy and legislation.
     Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy, 1-16.