



Save the Children

**Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19
pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs, defence and
trade**

**SUBMISSION TO JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN
AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE**

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Save the Children Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work. We pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Save the Children Australia acknowledges the input into this submission from our offices in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undermine decades of work advancing human development and building international and regional institutions, which protect Australia's national interest and ensure shared prosperity.

In this submission, Save the Children provides analysis which illustrates the nature of this threat, and gives recommendations on how to respond to COVID-19 in a way which strengthens our global institutions, ensures stability in our neighbourhood over the long term and avoids the worst impacts of the pandemic on individuals, especially children. This is a 'whatever it takes' moment to ensure all countries have the necessary financial resources to respond to the pandemic.

The Indo-Pacific has enjoyed decades of uninterrupted economic growth over the last 30 years (providing a degree of steadiness for otherwise fragile political environments), but this pandemic threatens that stability. We could see displacement in our region, a flare up of internal conflict and war and further waves of the pandemic. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has warned, without rapid and decisive national and international action, the pandemic will put an end to hopes to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.¹

This pandemic will pass, but what will remain are the impacts of choices we make to weather it. It is in Australia's national interest to ensure democratic norms, the rule of law and commitments to a rules-based order in our region continue. It is also in our interest that the world does not see an increase in child mortality, early marriage, child labour or any of the other bitter fruits of a population which has lost its stake in a common prosperity. These are the strategies families adopt when forced by economic circumstances – they can be prevented. If they are not, the consequences are long lasting.

Australia will need to lean on international institutions to manage instability –this will not be easy during an era of increasing insularity and popular scepticism of internationalism. Multilateralism has served Australia well, as Minister Payne highlighted in recent remarks, it was international cooperation which helped combat cholera, Ebola and the Spanish Flu.² The recently released *Partnerships for Recovery* strategy underpins the Australian Government's collective approach towards the global pandemic, including how Australia's development efforts will work alongside our national capabilities and identifies relevant priorities. We support this approach.

Save the Children is calling on Australia to demonstrate regional leadership by shoring up international cooperation and investing in our partners and allies to help prevent a breakdown in the international order. This investment necessarily transcends the immediate pandemic response: it will involve supporting economies through social protection programs, dealing with the worst impacts of climate change and stepping up our commitment to preventing armed conflict at all costs. This submission is ambitious - we urge Australia to rise to this moment by displaying leadership commensurate to the challenge before us. Australia has much to contribute to the international response: our scientific expertise, our practical knack for problem-solving and the strong relationships we have built with our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific. This pandemic has shown our world is both fragile and entirely interconnected. We succeed together or we fail together. Like all moments of crisis, this pandemic also presents an opportunity: to embrace the kind of cooperation which is only possible in the face of a collective threat.

¹ High Commissioner Michele Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Global update on human rights and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic', 30 June 2020.

² Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Speech, National Security College, Australian National University, 16 June 2020, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speech/australia-and-world-time-covid-19?mc_cid=b97f6945a9&mc_eid=f00f2ec9d4

Executive Summary and Recommendations

This submission highlights the disastrous impact of COVID-19 on children, focusing on Australia's interest in the Indo-Pacific. Our analysis reveals this pandemic will increase global poverty, child mortality and conflict, and will exacerbate pre-existing challenges such as climate change and food insecurity.

Australia is committed to the Sustainable Development Goals as a universal, global undertaking to end extreme poverty and ensure the peace and well-being of people across the world. Our interest in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is more than altruistic – it reflects the foreign policy goal of living in a stable, prosperous region with opportunities for trade and migration. COVID-19 has put this in severe jeopardy.

The recommendations below are premised on Australia adopting an ambitious agenda to match the demands of the moment. It is about matching our commitments to the region with tangible policy change, and substantial investment. The development aid paradigm is shifting, and these recommendations reflect 'aid' as a contribution, made in partnership with other countries, to protecting international order, stability, public health and prosperity.

The Pacific

Recommendation 1: Where appropriate, and in consultation with interested Pacific Island Countries (PICs), establish a "Pacific bubble" to support Pacific labour mobility into Australia to support remittance flows back to Pacific communities.

Recommendation 2: Adopt a more holistic view of infrastructure, including in the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, so that it encompasses the human and social infrastructure systems that protect the resilience of Pacific communities.

Recommendation 3: Partner with Pacific Governments and international donors to develop a 'Pacific JobKeeper' – a child-focused social safety net payment available across the region to assist the Pacific to recover from COVID-19.

Defence Policy and Security

Recommendation 4: The Australian government should strongly express its support for the Global Ceasefire, and make that support tangible by ensuring that no Australian made weapon is sold to warring parties in active conflict, that could result in International Humanitarian Law violations.

Recommendation 5: The Australian government should use its influence as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific region to encourage dialogue and good practice among states on implementing ceasefires and ensuring humanitarian access to populations in need.

Threats to the Global Rules-based Order

Recommendation 6: The Australian government should:

- support efforts to urgently reconvene the G20 to address health and economic crises and global recovery plan;
- encourage all creditors, official and commercial, to offer an immediate cancellation of all principal, interest and charges for the remainder of 2020, in particular to International Development Association countries, and call on private creditors to do the same

Recommendation 7: The Australian government should develop a standalone International Human Rights (Magnitsky Sanctions) Act targeting persons and entities responsible for gross

human rights abuses to overcome gaps in Australia's current framework for autonomous sanctions.

Recommendation 8: The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) should build firmer partnerships and institutional arrangements between Australian civil society organisations and Pacific civil society organisations through capacity-building, mentoring and professional exchange, and supporting and fostering relationships between local civil society organisations and local governments.

Recommendation 9: DFAT should increase funding of the Australian NGO Cooperation Program and Direct Aid Program to enhance the capacity of civil society organisations to access long-term, flexible assistance to support the delivery of human rights capacity building, with a particular focus on the Pacific.

Rights of Children

Recommendation 10: Australia should commit funding of \$340 million over the next four years to the Global Partnership for Education and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations and \$55 million over four years for Education Cannot Wait to ensure that education programming for out-of-school children are increased commensurate with the increase in children who drop-out or who cannot access education during the pandemic.

Recommendation 11: The Australian government should:

- i) significantly increase its ending violence against children-specific ODA allocation to \$55 million over three years in the Pacific and Timor-Leste; and
- ii) develop a policy platform for ending violence against children in the Pacific.

Recommendation 12: Australia should work with Pacific Governments to identify interruptions to routine healthcare which affect children and allocate additional funding to prevent an increase in child mortality.

Recommendation 13: The Australian government should develop a standalone strategic framework and action plan on human rights and democracy, which outlines how it will protect and promote human rights abuses abroad. The strategy should set out the Australian government's overarching approach towards the protection and promotion of human rights and provide guidance to overseas missions on developing and implementing advocacy strategies. The strategy should include a focus on accountability for child rights abuses.

Recommendation 14: To avoid a generational impact on children, the Australian aid budget should be increased by an additional \$2 billion over the coming four years.

Regional Instability and Climate Change

Recommendation 15: In line with recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and requirements under the Paris Agreement, Australia should promptly take significant measures to reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases and accelerate the transition to renewable energy, including by committing to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

Recommendation 16: The Australian government should support climate change adaptation projects which address food security in our region as part of its package of COVID-19 recovery assistance.

The Pacific

The partnership approach at the centre of the Australian Government's Pacific Step-Up is key to dealing with the consequences of COVID-19 in our neighbourhood. The challenge for Australia will be to match the expectations that have been created in the Pacific that we will deal with this crisis as a 'family', and will demonstrate our 'abiding interest in the sovereignty, stability, security and prosperity of our region' which is at the heart of the strategy. While the pandemic has been contained for much of the Pacific, the economic consequences are only now beginning to become clear. Australia has an opportunity to provide leadership in the region through novel policies like the 'Pacific Bubble', and through innovative concepts like a climate adaptive, regional social protection mechanism.

Economic Impact of COVID-19 on the Pacific

Many countries in the Pacific are dependent on tourism for revenue, and the closing of international borders will have consequences for household incomes and government revenue. Three Pacific economies – Palau, Vanuatu and Fiji – are among the world's 20 most tourism-dependent economies.³ Tourism is Fiji's primary industry, and an important source of jobs in a nation with one of the lowest rates of extreme poverty in the Pacific. In 2013, the last time data was collected, around 10 per cent of households were shown to have at least one member working in tourism, with a further 2 per cent in restaurants and 8 per cent in transportation. As more than 80 per cent of these jobs are "formal sector salaried employment," COVID-19's impact on travel is likely to result in a significant loss of good jobs, with a potentially significant negative impact on poverty. According to the ANZ Bank, Fiji may lose nearly 602,000 visitors by air this year, a 67 per cent drop translating into a GDP contraction of around 12 per cent, putting around 75,000 jobs at risk. Vanuatu, too, is expected to experience a contraction in GDP, in part due to a loss of up to 21,000 tourism jobs, and will likely experience a major recession, compounding the impact of Tropical Cyclone Harold.⁴ Early estimates indicate the number of people living in extreme poverty in the four poorest Pacific countries will increase to 30 per cent in Papua New Guinea, 27 per cent in the Solomon Islands and 17 per cent in Vanuatu.⁵ Save the Children supports the creation of a travel bubble which would allow some degree of tourism to continue. As we wrote in the Lowy Institute's *The Interpreter*: 'Including the Pacific in the bubble should be Australia's declaration of faith in the Pacific family and [will] show a commitment to the future of the children who live there.'⁶

Remittances and Labour Mobility

Remittances are an important source of household income in the Pacific – they are a greater share of Pacific economies than ODA and represent between 5 and 40 per cent of the GDP of Pacific countries.⁷ Due to COVID-19, global remittances are projected to decline by approximately 20 per cent,⁸ making this economic shock the largest decline in remittances in recorded history. This is due to the precarious employment situation of migrant workers during an economic crisis. Australia is the source of 26 per cent of remittances to the Pacific, with Pacific seasonal workers remitting approximately \$2,200 over their six-month period in Australia, and bringing an average of \$6,650 in savings to their home at the end of their work. Australia has

³ Terence Wood, 'What will COVID-19 Mean for the Pacific: A Problem in Four Parts,' DevPolicy Blog, ANU, 30 March 2020.

⁴ Kishti Sen and Tom Kenny, 'Prepare for Zero Tourists for the Next Three Months,' Pacific Insight, ANZ Research, 25 March 2020.

⁵ Chris Hoy, Dev Policy Blog, 'Poverty and the pandemic in the Pacific', 15 June 2020, <https://devpolicy.org/poverty-and-teh-pandemic-in-the-pacific-20200615-2/>

⁶ Joe Rafalowicz, 'Creating a Pacific Bubble', *The Interpreter*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/creating-pacific-bubble>

⁷ Remittances in the Pacific Region; by Christopher Browne and Aiko Mineshima; IMF Working Paper 07/35; February 1, 2007.

⁸ World Bank, Press Release, accessed 22 April 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history>

taken some measures to protect these workers and ensure remittances continue to support their Pacific Islander families by extending to 12 months those currently in labour mobility programs. New Zealand has extended seasonal worker visas until September. If some Pacific states can avoid COVID-19 infection, there may be opportunities to expand Pacific labour mobility schemes through allowing new workers to migrate to Australia and New Zealand, under strict quarantine conditions at departure and return points. This will have the twin impacts of providing essential agricultural workers in rural economies in Australia and New Zealand and increasing the flow of remittances to the Pacific.

Recommendation 1: Where appropriate, and in consultation with interested Pacific Island Countries (PICs), establish a “Pacific bubble” to support Pacific labour mobility into Australia to support remittance flows back to Pacific communities.

Social Protection Systems

To avoid the worst impacts of COVID-19 on children, Australia and its donor partners should consider financing a climate adaptive, trans-Pacific social protection program, aimed at enhancing regional states’ capacity to protect the economic resilience and human security of their communities. There is a growing evidence base that demonstrates that capable states, with effective social protection systems that reach the poorest households, are effective at managing COVID-19 and at mitigating its economic impacts, independent of political systems or ruling ideologies.¹ A large part of Australia’s domestic response to the COVID-19 crisis has been investing in social protection mechanisms like the JobSeeker social welfare payment and JobKeeper wage subsidies, a decision that has maintained reasonable demand for goods and services by protecting household incomes. In the Pacific, however, where social protection systems are comparatively narrow in their population catchment base, recent research has found that the number of people living in poverty in the PICs could increase by 1.2 million or more than 40 per cent “in the absence of government or community transfers.”¹³ Australia could do well to heed this evidence and adopt a position of support for effective social protection systems across the Pacific, placing this support at the centre of its medium- to long-term development strategy. Building this capacity, as we argue in this and other submissions we have made to the JSCFADT in recent months, is where the Pacific Step-Up should focus now. These programs should leverage Pacific regional mechanisms and be integrated with Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) efforts. They should prioritise jobs, incomes, cash transfers, alleviating poverty and inequality, and building well-functioning health and education systems.

In addition, Australia should pivot its “infrastructure” goals to include such systems. In our view, the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) has dual flaws: it is inadequate to compete reasonably with other large scale infrastructure donors in the region; and it ‘robs Peter to pay Paul’ by leveraging the same diminishing aid budget thereby reducing funding available for other critical interventions. The rules of the AIFFP should be rewritten so that it can help finance and scale pilot projects aimed at building these systems. This financing effort could see Australia combine forces with partners like Japan, the United States, India, the European Union, and Canada, playing to our comparative advantage as a donor while also responding to genuine need rather than centring our own aims and interests in our messages. This approach has also been recommended by the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, in a recent report which recommends that Australia and the United States “intensify their existing partnership on strengthening health systems resilience in the Pacific,”⁹ working with the US and

⁹ Ashley Townshend, Brendan Thomas-Noone, Matilda Steward, Claire McFarland, Jeffrey Wilson, ‘Bolstering resilience in the Indo-Pacific: policy options for AUSMIN after COVID-19’, 23 June 2020, <https://apo.org.au/node/306415>

Japan to create an agenda for this partnership. Given these considerations, Save the Children Australia recommends that the Australian Government in consultation with PICs take a more holistic view of the infrastructure that the Pacific requires, so that it encompasses the social protection systems that protect the resilience of Pacific communities.

Recommendation 2: Adopt a more holistic view of infrastructure, including in the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, so that it encompasses the human and social systems that protect the resilience of Pacific communities.

Recommendation 3: Partner with Pacific Governments and international donors to develop a 'Pacific JobKeeper' – a child-focused social safety net payment available across the region to assist the Pacific to recover from COVID-19.

Defence Policy and Security

War in the time of COVID-19: Importance of Global Ceasefire calls

While the UN Secretary General has called for a global ceasefire, most conflicts around the world are continuing unabated.¹⁰ The pandemic may be creating conditions where armed parties have an incentive to push their advantage or seize upon the chaos to renew fighting.¹¹ This is the case in Myanmar, where the military has continued to target civilians while the world's attention is otherwise occupied, thereby avoiding accountability.¹² Recent reports show that the number of children killed or maimed in the violence in Myanmar rose six-fold in the first three months of this year, compared to the previous three months.¹³ International efforts to create and implement a global ceasefire have so far faltered. The UN Security Council failed to meet for the first 100 days following the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO), and when it did meet, the Council failed to reach an agreement on a general ceasefire. Even among member states who are supportive, there is a gap between ambition and reality. United Nations Security Council members who offered support for the ceasefire in-principle continue to profit from arms sales to combatants or conduct military operations themselves.¹⁴ This is unacceptable. For the world to adequately respond to COVID-19, meaningful efforts must be made to end all conflict, and all means of doing so should be explored.

Recommendation 4: The Australian government should strongly express its support for the Global Ceasefire, and make that support tangible by ensuring that no Australian made weapon is sold to warring parties in active conflict, that could result in International Humanitarian Law violations.

Conflict is Undermining Control of COVID-19

Armed conflict leads to displacement, food insecurity and the destruction of health facilities, undermining the pandemic response and worsening its impact. In our region, fighting in Mindanao in the Philippines has displaced 23,000 people in the first quarter of 2020 alone – there has been

¹⁰Arms Control Today, 'Security Council Fails on Global Ceasefire', June 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-06/news/security-council-fails-global-ceasefire>

¹¹ UN Secretary General, 'Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council open debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict [as delivered]', 27 May 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-05-27/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-open-debate-the-protection-of-civilians-armed-conflict-delivered>

¹² UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee, 'Myanmar: "Possible war crimes and crimes against humanity ongoing in Rakhine and Chin States"', 29 April 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25838&LangID=E>

¹³ <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/media/media-releases/myanmar-conflict>

¹⁴ Oxfam, 'Conflict in the time of coronavirus', 12 May 2020, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/conflict-time-coronavirus>

no pause to the violence.¹⁵ Displaced people in Mindanao have been forced to seek shelter in evacuation centres, where 2 to 3 families share one dwelling with limited access to bathing and handwashing.¹⁶ In Myanmar, armed forces have prevented access to health facilities and impeded the delivery of humanitarian assistance – in one egregious incident a driver carrying COVID-19 test samples was killed by the military in Rakhine state.¹⁷ Pandemic response requires functional state control and a population able to practise prevention measures – conflict is the anathema of a public health response. While the fighting is localised, the consequences will be felt globally as war zones remain COVID-19 hotspots and the source of future outbreaks. The G20, G7, NATO and other regional bodies should work on de-escalating geopolitical tensions, and Australia should adopt a leadership position in the region to encourage a global ceasefire as part of responding to the pandemic.

Recommendation 5: The Australian government should use its influence in the region as a middle power to encourage dialogue and good practice among states on implementing ceasefires and ensuring humanitarian access to populations in need.

COVID-19 in Our Region: Increasing Poverty means instability

Australia's near neighbours could face a disintegration in security as COVID-19 exacerbates existing inequalities in wealth, healthcare and access to government services. This is a new challenge for countries in South East Asia, where the economic growth which buoyed internal stability for the past six decades pauses for the first time. Modelling released by the World Bank estimates that worldwide COVID-19 will push 71 million people into extreme poverty (up to 100 million in the worst-case scenario).¹⁸ This analysis also suggests that a disproportionate number will be in our region: in South Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific.¹⁹ A slowing down in GDP growth will increase state fragility and the likelihood of internal conflict, particularly where government assistance is not spread equally between ethnic groups or regions.²⁰ This may well be the case in Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar and Thailand, all countries engaged in ethnic based separatist conflicts where a discrete population feels underserved by the state and has resorted to armed struggle.²¹ The best way of preventing conflict in our region is assisting our neighbourhood to respond to the pandemic before these grievances escalate.

Investing in a Secure Region

Australia's experience with the RAMSI peacekeeping mission is evidence that international interventions are expensive (RAMSI cost Australia around \$2.6 billion)²² and can be ineffective at putting a lid on state collapse and violence. It is far better to prevent conflict before it occurs. Australia remains on track to increase our defence expenditure by 2 per cent of GDP by 20-21,²³ reaching \$175.8 billion by 22-23. In contrast, Australia's aid budget has been frozen at approximately \$4 billion since 15-16. The nature of the security threats Australia faces in a post-

¹⁵OCHA, 'Asia and the Pacific: Weekly Regional Humanitarian Snapshot', 28 April - 4 May 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/asia-and-pacific-weekly-regional-humanitarian-snapshot-28-april-4-may-2020>

¹⁶ The New Humanitarian, 'Violence or the virus? Mindanao's displaced forced to choose', 1 June 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/06/01/Philippines-Mindanao-coronavirus-violence-women-girls>

¹⁷ NPR News, 'U.N. Envoy Brings New Allegations Of War Crimes Against Myanmar', 29 April 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/29/847733031/u-n-envoy-brings-new-allegations-of-war-crimes-in-myanmar>

¹⁸ World Bank, 'Projected poverty impacts of COVID-19 (coronavirus)', 8 June 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/projected-poverty-impacts-of-covid-19>

¹⁹ World Bank, 'Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty', 8 June 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>

²⁰ The Broker, 'When do inequalities cause conflict? – Focus on citizenship and property rights', 21 November 2012, <https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/when-do-inequalities-cause-conflict/>

²¹ ASEAN Today, 'Will dynamics of conflict in West Papua, Indonesia change with COVID-19?', 19 June 2020, <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/06/will-dynamics-of-conflict-in-west-papua-indonesia-change-with-covid-19/>

²² Lowy Institute, 'AUSTRALIA'S COSTLY INVESTMENT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS: THE LESSONS OF RAMSI', 8 May 2020, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/australias-costly-investment-solomon-islands-lessons-ramsi>

²³ The Hon Christopher Pyne MP (Former Minister for Defence), 'A safer Australia - Budget 2019-20 - Defence overview', 2 April 2019, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/cpyne/media-releases/safer-australia-budget-2019-20-defence-overview>

COVID-19 world are changing. Conventional warfare is just one aspect of the threat matrix Australia faces. Aid expenditure which reduces the chances of a failed state in our region is a prudent security investment and should be increased alongside the increase in defence expenditure. Investment in human security, in helping neighbour countries rebuild their economies and social protection systems to buffer the most vulnerable, will pay dividends in terms of stability and reducing irregular migration and terrorism. The traditional narrative of aid as a benevolent or moral obligation does not apply here: investing in our neighbours during the pandemic will make us safer and reduce the likelihood of a state collapse. It is also a signal that Australia is allocating resources to a collective recovery, which reflects the remarks of Foreign Minister Payne to the National Security Council in June: 'in these partnerships, we cement our friendships, we buttress our regional security by helping to maintain stability and prosperity in our own neighbourhood, and we maintain our reputation as a good partner, and a positive contributor in the world'.²⁴

Threat to the Global Rules-Based Order

Multilateralism in response to the pandemic

Responding to a global pandemic requires a coordinated multilateral response. Australia's security, whether in respect of regional health, economic or social stability, is impacted by the effectiveness of multilateral institutions. Multilateral bodies such as the WHO, Security Council, Human Rights Council or multilateral development banks, are just some of the critical actors that Australia needs to engage with and influence in responding to COVID-19. Save the Children supports the Australian government's work to adopt an active, and as much as possible, public voice in multilateral forums. This may at times require Australia to be not just pragmatic and practical,²⁵ but also forthright and propositional.

Save the Children also acknowledges that many multilateral institutions are under increasing strain from strategic competition as to how these institutions should operate and the norms which underpin their activities. A recent resolution put before the People's Republic of China at the 43rd Session of the Human Rights Council titled "Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights" is one such example. The resolution sought to import domestic concepts and reframe international human rights system as a forum for "genuine dialogue and cooperation", "expanding common ground" and called for "non-politicisation" and "mutually beneficial cooperation" to benefit, first and foremost, the duty-bearers, that is states, rather than the rights-holders.²⁶ The resolution passed, but was opposed by Australia and several other like-minded countries, such as Germany, Republic of Korea, Spain and Austria.²⁷ Ensuring that multilateral institutions are fit-for-purpose and free from undue influence is vitally important.

At the same time, Save the Children supports an approach to multilateralism that is principled and consistent with purported values. According to the Foreign Minister, Australia will target our efforts towards the following parts of the multilateral system:

²⁴ Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Speech, National Security College, Australian National University, 16 June 2020, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speech/australia-and-world-time-covid-19?mc_cid=b97f6945a9&mc_eid=f00f2ec9d4

²⁵ Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women, 'Australia and the world in the time of COVID-19', Speech, National Security College, Australian National University, 16 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speech/australia-and-world-time-covid-19>.

²⁶ Human Rights Council, 43rd Session, 'Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights', A/HRC/43/L.31/Rev.1, 17 June 2020. Available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/L.31/Rev.1>.

²⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Human Rights Council – 43rd Session, Explanation of Vote, 'Resolution on the Promotion of Mutually Beneficial Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights', 22 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/43rd-hrc-statement-explanation-of-vote-promotion-of-mbc-field-of-hr.pdf>.

- rules that protect sovereignty, preserve peace, and curb excessive use of power, and enable international trade and investment;
- the international standards related to health and pandemics, to transport, telecommunications and other issues that underpin the global economy; and
- the norms that underpin universal human rights, gender equality and the rule of law.²⁸

Save the Children supports such an approach. However, if these principles are to guide Australia's multilateral conduct then we need to do so consistently to ensure Australia's credibility on the international stage. Our responses will only be undermined if we are unwilling to speak to support norms, standards and rules. Again, using an example from the 43rd Session of the Human Rights Council, Australia opposed a resolution regarding the right of Palestinian people to self-determination,²⁹ rights recognised Articles 1 and 55 of the United Nations Charter. Australia was one of only two countries to oppose the resolution, the other being Marshall Islands. In explaining the vote, Australia made no mention of international law, whether that was with respect to the legality of force over foreign territory or the right of self-determination. Instead, Australia opposed the resolution, noting that it was opposed "to biased and one-sided resolutions targeting Israel in multilateral forums".³⁰ Australia needs to stand up for the rules it believes in, not just with respect to the People's Republic of China, but also Israel, as well as any other state. A contrary approach risks undermining Australia's position in multilateral institutions, our leadership in promoting international norms and commitments towards a rules-based order, which has shaped our security and prosperity.

Pacific multilateral responses to COVID-19

In considering multilateral responses in the region, Australia should ensure that the primary bodies in the Pacific are front and centre. In particular, this involves the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). PIF has been one of the strongest multilateral regional bodies globally in responding to COVID-19. PIF leaders have invoked the Biketawa Declaration to respond to COVID-19. The Biketawa Declaration provides the regional framework for responding to member states' requests for assistance in times of crisis. It is the first time that it has been invoked in a situation where all PIF members have been in crisis.

Through PIF, a Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C)²⁹ has been established to enable efficient movement of medical supplies, humanitarian assistance and technical experts to PIF states. However we note with concern that this mechanism has not included humanitarian 'surge' staff from organisations like Save the Children, which has put a great deal of strain on local staff responding to disasters like Tropical Cyclone Harold.³¹ Australia has played a critical role in the PHP-C as a member of the 'Ministerial Action Group'. The first delivery of medical supplies using the PHP-C arrived in Fiji on 21 April 2020. The personal protective equipment was distributed in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia and French Polynesia by the WHO. Such collaborative measures will be critical given the likelihood that health security responses to COVID-19 will be required for many months to come. Save the Children supports Australia's

²⁸ Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women, 'Australia and the world in the time of COVID-19', Speech, National Security College, Australian National University, 16 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speech/australia-and-world-time-covid-19>.

²⁹ Human Rights Council, 43rd Session, 'Right of the Palestine people to self-determination', A/HRC/43/L.39, 3 April 2020. Available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/L.39>.

³⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Human Rights Council – 43rd Session, Explanation of Vote, 'Item 7', 22 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/43rd-hrc-statement-explanation-of-vote-item-7.pdf>. Additionally, see Professor Ben Saul, Sydney Morning Herald, 'Why Australia needs to join global condemnation of Israel's annexation plans', 25 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/middle-east/why-australia-needs-to-join-global-condemnation-of-israel-s-annexation-plans-20200624-p555pr.html>.

³¹ Save the Children, 'Submission made to Inquiry into Australia activating greater trade and investment with Pacific island countries,' Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Australian Parliament, <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=294d8c53-f580-45b0-a094-4a7f09a05369&subId=681671>

continued engagement in the PIF in responding to COVID-19 and recommends strengthening engagement, including consulting closely with other members on measures such as the “Pacific Bubble”, debt relief measures, development assistance and how the Pacific can build back better from the pandemic.

Debt relief responses to COVID-19

As the Indo-Pacific responds to COVID-19, one of the greatest challenges, particularly in the Pacific, is likely to be the erosion of progress achieved in eradicating poverty. This is due to the virus shutting down international travel and financial flows, with serious negative developments affecting disaster reconstruction projects and infrastructure construction, including the critically important tourism industry.

Some PICs will be able to finance responses to COVID-19 themselves. Several PICs have debt to GDP ratios of less than 50 per cent, or slightly more in Vanuatu’s case, at 52.9 per cent. Such ratios have allowed relevant economies, like Fiji and Vanuatu, the opportunity to stimulate their own economies by issuing their own securities in the domestic market, with some of the resulting shortfalls underwritten by their own central banks and superannuation funds.³² However, such measures are likely to be insufficient in those countries, let alone those countries who lack the financial capacity to appropriately respond, for example Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Some estimates suggest that the PICs will need an additional \$5 billion, for which their governments can approach donors and multilateral development banks for grants and budget support loans.³³ Such loans will be relevant to many PICs which are currently in debt distress, due to the scale of the crisis and the necessity of loans to protect the tourism industry.³⁴

Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, in particular, have limited fiscal capacity to respond to this crisis on their own, with greater levels of extreme poverty, and limited resources to protect rural communities. These problems are compounded by COVID-19, for example in the Solomon Islands where the government has cut rural development spending because of its fiscal shortfall.³⁵ The Government of Papua New Guinea has borrowed from its central bank, commercial banks, and foreign development partners to develop an economic stimulus package that includes support from the IMF, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank, as well as bilateral donors, including Australia. These measures are unlikely to be sufficient to protect Papua New Guinea communities from impacts like increased unemployment and running down of retirement savings.³⁶ Households that experience sharp decreases in household disposable income due to unemployment will experience more difficulty in protecting the health, education, and psychosocial needs of children, potentially leaving a generation scarred by the COVID-19 recession if not the virus itself.

Australia has a critical role to play as a G20 member to support debt relief measures for International Development Association countries, particularly in the Pacific. As the Prime Minister noted following the G20 meeting on 26 March 2020, G20 leaders must do whatever it takes to

³² Odo Tevi, ‘The Pacific’s Economic Response to COVID-19: Will it be Sustainable?’ DevPolicy Blog, ANU, 23 April 2020. See also Neelesh Gounder, ‘Fiji’s Economic Freefall, and the Government’s Response,’ DevPolicy Blog, ANU, 17 April 2020. Available at: <https://devpolicy.org/the-pacifics-economic-response-to-covid-19-will-it-be-sustainable-20200423-1/>.

³³ Kishti Sen and Tom Kenny, ‘Prepare for Zero Tourists for the Next Three Months,’ Pacific Insight, ANZ Research, 25 March 2020. See also Alexandre Dayant and Roland Rajah, ‘How Much is Too Much? COVID Loans for the Pacific,’ The Interpreter, Lowy Institute, 16 April 2020. For a discussion of PICs’ debt distress, including the source of the loans in question, see Rohan Fox and Matthew Dornan, ‘China in the Pacific: Is China Engaged in Debt-Trap Diplomacy?’ DevPolicy Blog, ANU, 8 November 2018.

³⁴ Kishti Sen and Tom Kenny, ‘Prepare for Zero Tourists for the Next Three Months,’ Pacific Insight, ANZ Research, 25 March 2020. See also Alexandre Dayant and Roland Rajah, ‘How Much is Too Much? COVID Loans for the Pacific,’ The Interpreter, Lowy Institute, 16 April 2020. For a discussion of PICs’ debt distress, including the source of the loans in question, see Rohan Fox and Matthew Dornan, ‘China in the Pacific: Is China Engaged in Debt-Trap Diplomacy?’ DevPolicy Blog, ANU, 8 November 2018.

³⁵ The World Bank, East Asia and the Pacific in the Time of COVID-19, World Bank East Asia and Pacific Economic Update April 2020, World Bank Group, 2020. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/publication/east-asia-pacific-economic-update#kf6>.

³⁶ Jotam Sinopane, ‘PNG’s Economic Stimulus: An Assessment,’ DevPolicy Blog, ANU, 23 April 2020.

save lives, overcome the pandemic and cushion the economic blow, with our Pacific family as a focus for Australia.³⁷ In early June, Save the Children joined 225 past and present world leaders in a joint plea for the G20 to meet and agree a \$2.5 trillion coronavirus global health and economic recovery plan.³⁸ The G20 is not due to meet until late November, but Save the Children urges Australia to support efforts to arrange a G20 meeting earlier.

Failure to act will leave children bearing the brunt of the crisis. More children are falling into extreme poverty the longer the COVID-19 pandemic continues. Joint efforts by the G20 could help to substantially minimise the impact, especially stronger action on debt relief. This requires the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and regional development banks to raise their lending and grant ceilings. Without further increasing the resources available to the international financial institutions and allowing them to be more ambitious in deploying their capital, their ability to respond to the crisis will be constrained. Loans could be accompanied by a suite of pro-poor reforms aimed at increasing progress against the Sustainable Development Goals via establishing social protection schemes and making the associated structural reforms that free up financing for such schemes.

Recommendation 6: The Australian government should:

- support efforts to urgently reconvene the G20 to address health and economic crises and global recovery plan;
- encourage all creditors, official and commercial, to offer an immediate cancellation of all principal, interest and charges for the remainder of 2020, in particular to International Development Association countries, and call on private creditors to do the same;
- using the G20, support moves by any country to stop making payments on debt to private external lenders; and
- pass legislation to prevent any Australian lender suing a government for stopping debt payments in 2020.

Health responses to COVID-19

The global economic and social emergency cannot end until we can bring the global health emergency to an end. And we cannot bring the health emergency to an end in any country until COVID-19 ends in all countries. Save the Children has welcomed Australia's recent commitment of \$300 million to Gavi, the global vaccine alliance at the forefront of efforts to protect the world against epidemics.³⁹ Investing in global health is critical at this moment, and Australia's contribution has gone a long way towards ensuring Gavi is fully replenished.

When a COVID-19 vaccine is developed, adequate and secure distribution will be essential, particularly for low-income countries. The global community has a responsibility to ensure this, and Gavi is well-positioned to play a key role, including supporting a stockpile to ensure a rapid response to COVID-19 outbreaks. Australia can assist and facilitate, by working collaboratively with multilateral bodies, such as the WHO, especially in the Pacific. The WHO has been

³⁷ The Hon Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister, Media Statement, 'Extraordinary G20 Leaders' Summit', 27 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/extraordinary-g20-leaders-summit>.

³⁸ Save the Children, '225 Past and Present Leaders Demand G20 Summit is Convened Urgently to Address Health and Economic Crises and Global Recovery Plan', 2 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/225-past-and-present-leaders-demand-g20-summit-convened-urgently-address-health-and-economic>. The list includes former Presidents and Prime Ministers from every continent and include a former United Nations Secretary General and heads of UN agencies, World Bank Presidents and vice presidents and Nobel Prize winners.

³⁹ Save the Children, 'Save the Children welcomes Australia's \$300m commitment to fund life-saving vaccines', 5 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/media/media-releases/save-the-children-welcomes-australias-commitment>.

extremely valuable, coordinating humanitarian and development partners in the region. This has included addressing critical supply needs, providing necessary technical advice and training on infection prevention and control, among other measures since February.⁴⁰ Such work has been made possible due to contributions from the Australian and New Zealand governments. For example, such funding has allowed the WHO and Pacific Community to purchase a testing machine and 6,000 testing kits for Tonga.⁴¹

Save the Children acknowledges and welcomes scrutiny towards the WHO's response by the Australian government. Playing an active public role, using capacity in alignment with our values, while being consistent, clear and transparent about our objectives, is a valuable role that Australia can play.⁴² It is important that in doing so, Australia works within existing mechanisms, including seeking any necessary reforms, well before taking stronger measures.

Human Rights responses to COVID-19

As noted in the introduction to this section, adopting a principled approach towards a rules-based order is critical in ensuring that Australia can fully protect and promote human rights in the Indo-Pacific, this extends to Australia's response through multilateral institutions. In response to COVID-19, Save the Children encourages the Australian government to advocate for an approach centred on human rights and international humanitarian law.

Save the Children has been troubled to observe that some countries, including in the Indo-Pacific, are using the pandemic to undermine liberal democracy, clamp down on human rights defenders and promote authoritarian models. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has warned against the use of emergency powers as a weapon governments "...can wield to quash dissent, control the population, and even perpetuate their time in power. They should be used to cope effectively with the pandemic – nothing more, nothing less."⁴³ Certain rights, including the right to life, the prohibition against torture and other ill-treatment, and the right not to be arbitrarily detained continue to apply in all circumstances. The Prime Minister said in March, "[t]here are some who believe liberal democracies and free societies cannot cope with these sorts of challenges. We will prove them wrong here in Australia."⁴⁴ It is important that Australia not only proves them wrong domestically, but also takes such an approach in our international engagement. Translating a largely successful domestic pandemic response characterised by state capacity, social trust, and leadership, to the international stage,⁴⁵ while demonstrating a commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights, will greatly enhance our credibility and influence.

One of the most important mechanisms through which Australia translate that influence is the United Nations Human Rights Council. Australia is soon coming to the end of a three-year term on the Human Rights Council, which makes the current 44th session and upcoming 45th session even more important. Save the Children encourages Australia to use these last two sessions to

⁴⁰ World Health Organisation, 'Pacific steps up preparedness against COVID-19', 21 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/about/how-we-work/pacific-support/news/detail/21-02-2020-pacific-steps-up-preparedness-against-covid-19>.

⁴¹ Matangi Tonga Online, 'Third CoViD-19 testing machine arrives in Tonga', 8 May 2020. Available at: <https://matangitonga.to/2020/05/08/third-covid-19-testing-machine-arrives-tonga>.

⁴² Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Speech, National Security College, Australian National University, 16 June 2020, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speech/australia-and-world-time-covid-19?mc_cid=b97f6945a9&mc_eid=f00f2ec9d4

⁴³ High Commissioner Michele Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'High Commissioner Michele Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Global update on human rights and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic', 30 June 2020, 27 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25828&LangID=E>.

⁴⁴ The Hon Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister, Transcript, 'Ministerial Statement – Australian Parliament House, ACT', 23 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/ministerial-statement-australian-parliament-house-act>.

⁴⁵ Francis Fukuyama, 'The Pandemic and Political Order: It Takes a State', July/August 2020. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-09/pandemic-and-political-order>.

step up its engagement on the promotion of human and child rights abroad. It is through multilateral bodies such as the Human Rights Council that countries can collectively respond to human rights abuses and ensure perpetrators are held to account. Save the Children has made a submission to DFAT ahead of the 44th session and will continue to engage closely to ensure that children's rights are promoted.

Further to engagement at the Human Rights Council, much can be done domestically to enhance Australia's current response to combatting gross human rights abuses overseas, including child rights abuses. Save the Children has been active in this Committee's Inquiry into whether Australia should examine the use of targeted sanctions to address human rights abuses.⁴⁶ Save the Children is calling for the development of a standalone International Human Rights (Magnitsky Sanctions) Act targeting persons and entities responsible for gross violations of international human rights law, serious violations of international humanitarian law and acts of significant corruption. Save the Children is of the view that the current risks to children's rights by virtue of the COVID-19 pandemic, make the urgency of such laws progressing even more important. For example, such laws would provide an effective deterrent against individuals who breach the global ceasefire agreement and are involved in grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict, such as in Myanmar.

Recommendation 7: The Australian government should develop a standalone International Human Rights (Magnitsky Sanctions) Act targeting persons and entities responsible for gross human rights abuses to overcome gaps in Australia's current framework for autonomous sanctions.

Recommendation 8: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) should build firmer partnerships and institutional arrangements between Australian civil society organisations and Pacific civil society organisations through capacity-building, mentoring and professional exchange, and supporting and fostering relationships between local civil society organisations and local governments.

Recommendation 9: DFAT should increase funding of the Australian NGO Cooperation Program and Direct Aid Program to enhance the capacity of civil society organisations to access long-term, flexible assistance to support the delivery of human rights capacity building, with a particular focus on the Pacific.

Rights of Children

Save the Children is concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the rights of children, and the implications of backsliding on those rights for Australia and the region. The policy responses that governments around the world are implementing to control the pandemic are impacting rights protected in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including the right to an education, right

⁴⁶ Save the Children has made two submissions to the inquiry and appeared before a hearing. Save the Children, Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 'Inquiry into whether Australia should enact legislation comparable to the United States Magnitsky Act 2012', 21 February 2020. Available at: [https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/ed6c9486-1242-4061-937b-604b2f99ff54/save-the-children-magnitsky-act-submission-\(february-2020\).pdf.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/ed6c9486-1242-4061-937b-604b2f99ff54/save-the-children-magnitsky-act-submission-(february-2020).pdf.aspx). Save the Children, Supplementary Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 'Inquiry into whether Australia should enact legislation comparable to the United States Magnitsky Act 2012', 8 May 2020. Available at: [Save the Children, Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 'Inquiry into whether Australia should enact legislation comparable to the United States Magnitsky Act 2012', 21 February 2020. Available at: https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/68eb904a-99c0-4cda-a7f2-96137deeb216/47-1-sub-not-pub-supplementary-save-the-children.pdf.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/68eb904a-99c0-4cda-a7f2-96137deeb216/47-1-sub-not-pub-supplementary-save-the-children.pdf.aspx)

to life and right to health. This is particularly the case for children who were already at the margins – poor children, displaced children, girls who are at risk of early marriage. These are the groups that are feeling the effects of the pandemic most dramatically. If these rights go unprotected, there is a real risk of a generation which has a lower quality of life than their parents, undoing decades of economic growth and development assistance. This goes to the heart of building a prosperous and stable Asia-Pacific. Save the Children also recalls the recent concluding observations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which called on Australia to:

“...adopt a child rights-based approach in respect of its trade agreements and development aid policy and programmes, with the rights of children and their engagement included in programme design, delivery and evaluation.”⁴⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic only intensifies the need to ensure that a child rights-based approach is developed, given the impact it will have on a generation of children.

Education

Prior the pandemic, millions of children around the world were out of school. This is the case in the Pacific, where in the Solomon Islands 30 per cent of children do not complete lower secondary school,⁴⁸ or in Papua New Guinea where as many as 40 per cent of children do not complete high school.⁴⁹ There is a real risk for this cohort and those precariously committed to education that closing schools for a brief period will result in thousands of children disengaging from education entirely.

Even for those who intend to complete their schooling, a period of absence from school will have a severe impact on their educational attainment. New analysis on ‘learning loss’ shows that children face losing approximately 20 per cent to 35 per cent in educational competence for every month that they are out of school.⁵⁰ This means children who have lost access to education for just three months could lose more than an entire year's learning. The Pacific has fortunately avoided prolonged school closures to date, but this is entirely dependent on the virus continuing to be contained. Globally, the situation is dire. UNDP has estimated that when accounting for those children who lack an internet connection or other means of distance learning, the ‘effective out of school rate’ means around 60 per cent of all children are not receiving an education – levels not seen since the 1960s.⁵¹

Displaced children are the second group whose education is at risk due to COVID-19. There are currently 7.1 million refugee children of school age, and of that group, 37 per cent are not enrolled in primary school and 76 per cent not enrolled in high school.⁵² These figures do not include the internally displaced, of whom there are millions more. COVID-19 has disrupted the ability of humanitarian organisations like Save the Children to deliver education services for displaced children. It is difficult to access and safely deliver education under pandemic response conditions.

⁴⁷ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘Concluding Observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia’, CRC/C/AUS/CO/5-6, 1 November 2019. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fAUS%2fCO%2f5-6&Lang=en.

⁴⁸ World Bank, ‘Lower secondary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group), Solomon Islands’, accessed 20 May 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.ZS>

⁴⁹ World Bank, ‘Lower secondary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group), Papua New Guinea’, accessed 20 May 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.ZS>

⁵⁰ Sabates, R., Carter, E., Stern, J. (2020) Using educational transitions to estimate learning loss due to Covid-19 school closures: the case of Complementary Basic Education in Ghana. REAL Centre, University of Cambridge. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3888219.

⁵¹ UNDP, ‘COVID-19: Human development on course to decline this year for the first time since 1990’, 20 May 2020, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/eng_pr_human_development_on_course_to_decline_for_the_first_time_since_1990_.pdf

⁵² UNHCR, ‘Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis’, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/steppingup/>

Recommendation 10: Australia should commit funding of \$340 million over the next four years to the Global Partnership for Education and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations and \$55 million over four years for Education Cannot Wait to ensure that education programming for out-of-school children are increased commensurate with the increase in children who drop-out or who cannot access education during the pandemic.

School Closures lead to Negative Impacts on Children

When schools are closed the risk to children of child labour, marriage, teenage pregnancy and exploitation increases. The Ebola crisis saw a 65 per cent increase in teenage pregnancy in some communities while schools were closed,⁵³ and early estimates predict that worldwide 10 million more girls will be out of school than before the pandemic once all schools reopen.⁵⁴ In some countries like the Philippines, risks may be exacerbated as schools are likely to remain closed until a vaccine has been found.⁵⁵

A compounding factor is parents who are out of work, which will put pressure on children to move into the labour force or to marry, with the attendant risk of childhood pregnancy. A recent UN study found that a 1 per cent rise in poverty leads to a 0.7 per cent increase in child labour as households put pressure on children to contribute to basic needs.⁵⁶ In Indonesia, 14.5 per cent of children live in extreme poverty and 48.7 per cent in moderate poverty.⁵⁷ The shock of COVID-19 on family incomes will create enormous pressure for those children to stop their education to help with household finances.

Child Protection

COVID-19 has increased the household conditions known to be linked to child abuse, such as poverty, overcrowding, social isolation, intimate partner violence, and parental substance abuse.⁵⁸ In our region, child abuse is already a significant problem - as much as 70 per cent or 4 million children across eight countries in the Pacific experience violent discipline at home, including a staggering 2.8 million (75 per cent of the child population) in Papua New Guinea.⁵⁹ If lockdown policies are introduced to control a COVID-19 outbreak, millions of children will be at risk. Early evidence from the Philippines indicates lockdowns are increasing cases of the abuse of children, and the enforcement of lockdown policies themselves carry the risk of violent encounters with the police.⁶⁰ Save the Children has called for increased, dedicated funding for child protection programming in the past – this crisis highlights the ongoing need for dedicated resources.

The COVID-19 response is also an opportunity to integrate child protection messaging into the broader pandemic control measures. This will require integrating messaging on children's unique risks and vulnerabilities related to the outbreak into government communication strategies. It is an opportunity to create wide-spread understanding of positive parenting strategies, using the crisis as an entry point to discuss how to better care for children. In 2011, Save the Children

⁵³ UNDP, Irish Aid, 'Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone', 26 October 2015, https://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/assessing-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-during-the-ebola-crisis.html

⁵⁴ Malala Fund, 'Girls' education and COVID-19: What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics', 6 April 2020, <https://malala.org/newsroom/archive/malala-fund-releases-report-girls-education-covid-19>

⁵⁵ CTV News, 'No students in school without coronavirus vaccine, Philippines says', 8 June 2020,

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/no-students-in-school-without-coronavirus-vaccine-philippines-says-1.4974042>

⁵⁶ UNICEF, ILO, 'COVID-19 and Child Labour: A time of crisis, a time to act', June 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-and-child-labour-a-time-of-crisis-a-time-to-act/>

⁵⁷ UNICEF, 'Children in Indonesia', accessed 20 May 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/indonesia/children-indonesia>

⁵⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/combatting-covid-19-s-effect-on-children-2e1f3b2f/#back-endnote0z2>

⁵⁹ Unseen, unsafe: the underinvestment in ending violence against children in the Pacific and Timor-Leste, Kavitha Suthanthiraraj, Save the Children Australia, Plan International, World Vision Australia, ChildFund Australia.

⁶⁰ UPR DOC

implemented an intensive program of capacity building, training and support to deliver child protection policies in Vanuatu for more than 2000 students in 9 schools, improving attendance and wellbeing.⁶¹ These same kinds of interventions can be adapted to remote schooling or other public health challenges.

Recommendation 11: The Australian government should:

- i) significantly increase its ending violence against children-specific ODA allocation to \$55 million over three years in the Pacific and Timor-Leste; and
- ii) develop a policy platform for ending violence against children in the Pacific.

Child Mortality

Every child has the right to healthcare and the right to life, but COVID-19 responses pull resources from the parts of the health system children depend on, such as maternal and child healthcare. Infant mortality is already a significant concern in our region: there are 43 deaths per 1000 live births in the Pacific, making our region the second worst in the world after Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶² Most deaths among under-fives are attributable to infectious diseases (such as pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malaria) and neonatal complications (preterm birth and intrapartum-related complications, sepsis). The measures taken to control diseases like malaria, polio and tuberculosis are all being interrupted by the pandemic response.⁶³ We can expect to see a rapid rise in the already high rates of infant mortality if the pandemic takes hold and resources are diverted from controlling other diseases and ensuring safe child birth.

Recommendation 12: Australia should work with Pacific Governments to identify interruptions to routine healthcare which affects children and allocate additional funding to prevent an increase in child mortality.

Coordinating human rights responses

Save the Children recommends the Australian Government develop a separate standalone strategic framework and action plan on human rights and democracy, to stand alongside existing strategic documents, including the Foreign Policy White Paper.⁶⁴ Preparing such an action plan would be timely in considering the human rights implications, especially to child rights, arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Save the Children is particularly concerned that some states may use the pandemic as a means to further undermine human rights, especially as countries prioritise domestic matters over the international sphere.

The proposed action plan should outline how human rights will be protected and promoted abroad. The strategy should set out the Australian Government's overarching approach towards the protection and promotion of human rights and provide guidance to overseas missions on developing and implementing advocacy strategies. Save the Children has raised this proposal in a submission to the current Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into whether Australia should examine the use of targeted sanctions to address human

⁶¹ The Footprints Network, 'Protecting children in Vanuatu', accessed 20 May 2020, <https://www.footprintsnetwork.org/project/66/Protecting-children-in-Vanuatu.aspx>

⁶² UNICEF, 'Levels & Trends in Child Mortality Report 2019', 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/UN-IGME-child-mortality-report-2019.pdf>

⁶³ Ishani Kaluthotage, Dev Policy Blog, 'The health challenge in PNG is far greater than Covid-19 alone,' <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/health-challenge-png-far-greater-covid-19-alone>

⁶⁴ Australian Government, 'Foreign Policy White Paper', 2017. Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>

rights abuses,⁶⁵ and a submission to a DFAT Consultation Paper: International Strategy on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery.⁶⁶ Save the Children also notes the value of the European Union's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019.⁶⁷

Recommendation 13: The Australian government should develop a standalone strategic framework and action plan on human rights and democracy, which outlines how it will protect and promote human rights abroad. The strategy should set out the Australian government's overarching approach towards the protection and promotion of human rights and provide guidance to overseas missions on developing and implementing advocacy strategies. The strategy should include a focus on accountability for child rights abuses.

Recommendation 14: To avoid a generational impact on children, the Australian aid budget should be increased by an additional \$2 billion over the coming four years.

⁶⁵ Save the Children, Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 'Inquiry into whether Australia should enact legislation comparable to the United States Magnitsky Act 2012', 21 February 2020. Available at: [https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/ed6c9486-1242-4061-937b-604b2f99ff54/save-the-children-magnitsky-act-submission-\(february-2020\).pdf.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/ed6c9486-1242-4061-937b-604b2f99ff54/save-the-children-magnitsky-act-submission-(february-2020).pdf.aspx).

⁶⁶ Save the Children, Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Consultation Paper: International Strategy on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery', 1 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/b7b6bb8b-f036-4137-a4bc-bc2cb45e2598/2020-05-01-submission-to-dfat-consultation-on-trafficking-strategy.pdf.aspx>.

⁶⁷ Council of the European Union, 'EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy', 2015. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30003/web_en__actionplanhumanrights.pdf.

Regional instability and climate change

Australia and our partners in the region are facing some of the extreme and early effects of climate change. Early evidence shows these climate impacts are already undermining the pandemic response. The Pacific was hit by a category 5 tropical cyclone just as COVID-19 was starting to gather momentum. Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Tonga were forced to respond to the cyclone during a state of emergency. Vanuatu, the worst affected, closed its borders just as humanitarian assistance was most needed.⁶⁸ Research in other parts of the world show that climate impacts impede the pandemic response – for example flooding undermined efforts to introduce social distancing in urban slum areas of South Africa.⁶⁹

Often the poorest people, located on low lying or marginal land and living in overcrowded conditions, suffer the consequences of changing weather patterns (including increased spread of infections and diseases) and have the least resources to take preventative measures, such as hand washing or social distancing. Increased air pollution is also linked to vulnerability to respiratory diseases like COVID-19.⁷⁰ Climate change is a threat multiplier when it comes to pandemics like COVID-19. As outbreaks continue before (or if) a vaccine is developed, governments will be tasked with responding to both the pandemic and climate-related disasters. Climate impacts will exacerbate the effects of the pandemic and the pandemic will make it significantly more difficult to respond to the impacts of climate extremes.

Compounding effects of the pandemic and climate change

Australia's foreign policy and defence interests in the region will continue to be challenged by the pandemic and climate change working in tandem. The Rohingya refugee camps are a case in point. The camps in Cox's Bazar, South Bangladesh are home to more than 1 million people living in tight quarters, with 103,600 people per square mile. Cox's Bazar is a region prone to tropical cyclones – researchers have seen a 36 per cent increase in the frequency of tropical cyclones in the pre-monsoon season and 48 per cent increase in post-monsoon season since 1961, likely due to climate change.⁷¹ Researchers have also shown that as sea level temperatures increase in the Bay of Bengal, the intensity of cyclones will also increase. If a tropical cyclone were to hit Cox's Bazar during the pandemic period, both the humanitarian response to the cyclone and the efforts to contain COVID-19 would be jeopardised. One million people living in refugee camps which are subject to extreme weather and a pandemic is not just a humanitarian crisis – it has the potential to destabilise the region and lead to increased people trafficking as people seek to escape the disaster zone.⁷² Australia would not be insulated from this kind of breakdown in international order.

Reducing Emissions Following COVID-19 is a Child's Rights Issues

In its concluding observations on the combined 5th and 6th periodic reports of Australia, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern that Australia 'has made insufficient progress on the goals and targets set out in the Paris Agreement', and emphasised the negative impact on the rights of children that climate change creates.⁷³ COVID-19 is an opportunity to move to a lower carbon trajectory: it is estimated that lockdown style policies have created a drop of around 8 per cent in greenhouse gas emissions, higher in absolute terms than in any year

⁶⁸ Al Jazeera News, 'Coronavirus lockdown hobbles Vanuatu cyclone recovery effort', 13 May 2020,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/coronavirus-lockdown-hobbles-vanuatu-cyclone-recovery-effort-200430062145722.html>

⁶⁹ Gibson, Lesley & Rush, David. (2020). Novel Coronavirus in Cape Town Informal Settlements: Feasibility of Using Informal Dwelling Outlines to Identify High Risk Areas for COVID-19 Transmission From A Social Distancing Perspective. JMIR Public Health and Surveillance. 6. 9. 10.2196/18844.

⁷⁰ Roberto Romizi, EURACTIV, 'Climate action is key to fighting pandemics', 18 June 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/opinion/climate-action-is-key-to-fighting-pandemics/>

⁷¹ The Financial Express, 'Tropical cyclones in Bangladesh in changing climate', 10 May 2018, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/tropical-cyclones-in-bangladesh-in-changing-climate-1525879475>

⁷² Michael B. Gerrard, *Climate Change and Human Trafficking After the Paris Agreement*, 72 U. Miami L. Rev. 345 (2018)

⁷³ UN. Committee on the Rights of the Child (82nd sess. : 2019 : Geneva), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3863406>

on record.⁷⁴ The UNEPA estimates that global emissions must drop by around 7 per cent every year to avoid 1.5 degrees of warming – which means that in the years following the pandemic steps must be taken to avoid returning to ‘business as usual’ emissions. Now is the chance to lock-in lower levels. This will not happen on its own – it is entirely possible that the drop in energy demand (and drop in oil prices) leads to a rebound which *increases* global emissions. As discussed above, locking-in climate change will lead to an enormous destabilisation of the international order and has implications for pandemic preparedness, displacement and food security. It is beyond the scope of this submission to consider the design of economic recovery packages for Australia – it is enough to note that climate change and this pandemic are linked and must be addressed together.

Recommendation 15: In line with recommendations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child and requirements under the Paris Agreement, Australia should promptly take significant measures to reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases and accelerate the transition to renewable energy, including by committing to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

Addressing climate impacts in our region

One of the immediate effects of the pandemic has been a challenge to global food security. The loss of employment, household income and rising food costs is reducing access to food around the world. On the supply side, border restrictions and lockdowns are interrupting the ability of suppliers to get food to market – this is the case in the Pacific where up to half of all food consumed is imported, with much of it held up at international borders. Large processing facilities have been the subject of outbreaks and have stopped production – this particularly affects the dairy and meat sectors. The latest data shows that 135 million people in the world are categorised as at food security ‘crisis level’ or worse – the World Food Program estimates that COVID-19 will lead to a doubling of that number.⁷⁵

Once again, the pandemic has acted as an amplifier for an issue already linked to climate change – extreme weather events, increasing temperatures, more volatile rainfall, land degradation and desertification, water scarcity and rising sea levels are all responsible for deteriorating global food security.⁷⁶ Now the pandemic has resulted in a further reduction of access and availability. The current food system is contributing to both climate change and the risk of pandemics, as land is cleared bringing humans into closer contact with disease carrying animals and speeding up climate change through the removal of carbon sinks.⁷⁷

Stunting is one of the insidious effects of poor diet in the first 1000 days of life and leads to cognitive impairments as an adult with corresponding loss in lifetime income. There are 144 million children under 5 stunted worldwide. In Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), 38 per cent of children are stunted,⁷⁸ while in Indonesia 35 per cent of children under 5 are undernourished or stunted.⁷⁹ In Papua New Guinea that figure is around 50 per cent – one of the

⁷⁴ International Energy Agency, ‘The impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on global energy demand and CO2 emissions’, April 2020, <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2020>

⁷⁵ UN World Food Program, ‘COVID-19 will double number of people facing food crises unless swift action is taken’, 21 April 2020, <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>

⁷⁶ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2019. ‘The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019’. Safeguarding against economic slowdowns and downturns. Rome, FAO.

⁷⁷ World Economic Forum, ‘The pandemic is just another sign of our broken food system’, 29 April 2020 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/how-to-feed-the-world-in-2050/>

⁷⁸ Global Nutrition Report, ‘Oceania Nutrition Profile’, accessed 20 May 2020 <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/oceania/>

⁷⁹ Jakarta Post, ‘Child growth stunting holds back Indonesia’s future’, 18 February 2020 <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/02/18/child-growth-stunting-holds-back-indonesias-future.html>

highest in the world.⁸⁰ As the incomes of poor families fall due to the pandemic, people shift away from proteins and nutritious food— this has already occurred in Indonesia, where families in lockdown are unable to afford fish leading to dumping of stock and a reliance on rice instead.⁸¹ The economic impacts of COVID-19 (covered elsewhere in this submission) will likely lead to a drop in GDP in our region - for every 1 per cent drop in global GDP the UN estimates an additional 700,000 children become stunted.⁸² Climate change and the pandemic are having material impacts on children today through reducing access to nutritious food and increasing stunting, which will create consequences in the future.

While much of the policy change will necessarily occur at the national level, international cooperation is key to success – especially in our region. As minister for International Development and the Pacific Alex Hawke remarked in August 2019, "The Pacific is Australia's home and we share the region's responsibilities and challenges – particularly the impact of climate change."⁸³ The recovery from COVID-19 involves mobilising public investment – that investment should be driving the move to a greener economy in Australia and elsewhere to help fulfil our global climate commitments. Where ODA is being used with our development partners, every effort should be made to ensure our investments help our neighbours adapt to the impacts of climate change by building the resilience of local industries – for example climate sensitive agriculture which increases food security.⁸⁴ Providing funding for climate change adaptation in the context of the COVID-19 response would help mend Australia's reputation for addressing climate change in our region – a move supported by the Australian public in opinion polling.⁸⁵

Recommendation 16: The Australian government should support climate change adaptation projects which address food security in our region as part of its package of COVID-19 recovery assistance.

⁸⁰ Global Nutrition Report, 'Papua New Guinea Nutrition Profile', accessed 20 May 2020,

<https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/oceania/melanesia/papua-new-guinea/>

⁸¹ John Mccarthy, Asia and the Pacific Policy Society, 'Food security after COVID-19: Staying afloat in Indonesia', 5 June 2020,

<https://www.policyforum.net/food-security-after-covid-19-staying-afloat-in-indonesia/>

⁸² https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_food_security.pdf

⁸³ The Hon Alex Hawke MP, Minister for International Development and the Pacific, 'Stepping up Climate Resilience in the Pacific, 13 August 2019, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/stepping-climate-resilience-pacific>

⁸⁴ Lisa Cornish, Devex, 'How COVID-19 and climate are encouraging islands to invest in food security', 26 May 2020,

https://www.devex.com/news/how-covid-19-and-climate-are-encouraging-islands-to-invest-in-food-security-97295?utm_medium=share&utm_source=lp&utm_campaign=cs_turningthetide

⁸⁵ Lowy Institute, 'Poll 2020', accessed 1 July 2020, <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/charts/australias-climate-policies-and-reputation/>

Conclusion

This submission analyses the terrible toll COVID-19 will have on children, particularly our Pacific neighbours. From the evidence we have gathered so far, and using previous pandemics as a guide, it is clear that COVID-19 will set back gains the world has made in education, child mortality and conflict prevention. The recession which has resulted from the closing of borders and lockdown style policies will dramatically increase poverty – and that increase in poverty will be the cause of many of these setbacks.

The optimistic view is that these shocks are temporary – they will continue only as long as COVID-19 requires the closing of borders and reduced demand for exports. However, the consequences for the 86 million children who will slide into poverty due to this pandemic will last considerably longer.⁸⁶ An increase in poverty of this magnitude will lead to children dropping out of school and entering the workforce, missing immunisations for preventable diseases and stunting from malnutrition – these are generational impacts which will be felt for decades to come.

Australia is at a crossroad in its engagement with the region. We can withdraw to our borders, providing some degree of development assistance and emergency aid in a business as usual manner. Or we can recognise that our prosperity, health, peace and stability is tied to that of our neighbours. Australia can truly live the mantra of the Pacific being “our family”.

Save the Children is calling for the introduction of a ‘Pacific JobKeeper’, a social safety net payment for children in the Pacific, to be funded by donors and Pacific Governments working together. We believe this transfer will help children and families weather the storm of COVID-19 and prevent the long-term negative impacts which would otherwise undermine economic growth, human development and political stability in the region for the coming decades. We are also calling for policies which show our Pacific neighbours we are prepared to ‘step-up’ by introducing policies like the ‘Pacific Bubble’ and migrant worker schemes which will help the region recover.

Australia’s aid program is already at historically low levels, while defence spending continues to increase year on year – eclipsing 2 per cent of GDP and on track to increase further. While it is natural to bolster our own defences at a time of uncertainty, we argue that aid spending can reduce the very risks that a strong defence force guards against, and for a relatively minor investment, we can help reduce conflict, displacement and civil unrest. This is in Australia’s national interest, especially under an expanded concept of security in the region, which our neighbours, especially in the Pacific, are supportive of.

During the COVID-19 emergency, democratic norms and international institutions are vulnerable. We encourage the Australian Government to continue to support the multilateral efforts which are necessary to contain the pandemic and recover from its effects, adopting a more proactive and public approach towards the protection and promotion of human rights. It may feel counter intuitive to respond to a devastating pandemic by looking outwards to other countries, and yet that is exactly what this moment demands. It is also time to progress domestic measures which enable us to better support human rights internationally, including a standalone International Human Rights (Magnitsky Sanctions) Act and an action plan on human rights and democracy.

Finally, climate change is emerging as the number one threat to the future of children and we are

⁸⁶ Save the Children, ‘COVID-19: Number of Children Living in Household Poverty to Soar by Up to 86 Million by End of Year’ 27 May 2020, <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/media/media-releases/household-poverty-during-covid>

already seeing evidence in our region of the compounding effects of changing weather on food security, displacement and pandemic response. As the world mobilises public finance to recover from the pandemic, we encourage Australia to 'build back better' through investing in the 'green economy', cutting our own emissions and supporting our neighbours to adapt to the new normal.

COVID-19 has interrupted the sense that things will continue to get better for the world's children, with minor setbacks along the way. That can no longer be assumed. If we allow this pandemic to rob millions of children of the chance to learn and grow up safely with their health intact, we will have locked-in a generation that is poorer than its parents. The implication of that for Australia is a world and region which lurches from instability to crisis for many years to come.