REPORT WEBINAR CYCLE FOR THE CARIBBEAN MEMBER STATES

Introduction

The idea to celebrate this cycle, comes from the request made by the Caribbean Member States during the 22nd Pan American Child Congress and the 94th Regular Meeting of the Directing Council held in the city of Cartagena in November 2019.

The first approach to the request, was to celebrate periodic meetings to present lessons learned and good experiences, but in March we were obliged to change the agendas and reconfigure our schedule.

In that sense, the IIN-OAS signed in early April a letter of understanding with the NGO Caribbean Development Foundation, and during May took contact with the CARICOM Secretariat and UNICEF – to coordinate actions to support the work of the Caribbean States during the sanitary emergency.

The pandemic is placed many children and adolescents in the Caribbean States in jeopardy and this webinar cycle was able to provide Member States, public servants, NGOs and care givers information and tools to work with the challenge of keeping children and adolescents safe from violence during and after the lockdown, as well as information and tools to make their mental health a priority during and after the lockdown measures.

Webinar on violence

The first webinar of the cycle was developed on July 18. The topic addressed was violence against children and adolescents. The speakers were:

Heather Stewart (Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF office for the Eastern Caribbean Area),

Sherwin Toyne Stephenson (Programme Manager, Crime, Security and Protection, Caricom secretariat)

Carol Daniel (President of the NGO Caribbean Development Foundation).

Violence in a general scope

During the webinar, three main types of violence were identified in the ECA: sexual violence against children, corporal punishment against children and peer to peer bullying (physical, verbal and cyberbullying).

UNICEF recognizes the efforts governments have been doing to promote actions inthe recent years to ban it. On the other hand, sexual violence against children is one of the more relevant challenges in ECA: about 2600 cases of sexual abuse where reported in 2019. However, there are many cases that are nor reported, because the violence situations occur within the "circle of trust".

It was also referred the alarming data regarding violence as a way of disciplining children[1]. In this sense, 70% of children in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and

1   CADRES (2019). Social Survey Report - Anguilla, Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent CADRES (2016). Knowledge and Attitudes Among Adults and Children on Gender-Based Violence in Trinidad and Tobago Public Opinion Survey on Child Safeguarding in Montserrat, 2017 Social Survey, Public Opinion Survey on Child Safeguarding in British Virgin Islands, 2017.

Saint Lucia experienced some form of violence as a means of disciplining. The same study shows that 5 out of 10 children experienced physical punishment and 6 or more out of 10 experienced psychological aggression.

One conclusion of the violence against children issues in ECA, is the importance of having a gender analysis of the violence against children. Around 90% of sexual abuse victims were girls in the 12-16 age group. Virtually, all perpetrators were male and known to the victim; around two thirds were the victim's of their boyfriend or a family member.

From this experiences, the recommendation is for governments recognize how vital it is to record and review the kind of violence faced by children, identify the main sites of violence making gender differences, note who are the perpetuators of violence against boys and girls, recognize the relation between violence against women and violence against children and acknowledge the relation between the involvement of male youth and men in crime and its link to violence against children.

Work with schools and families

The strategies to reduce crime and violence related to risk behaviors, opportunities and institutional responses that the CARICOM Secretariat has been doing was also addressed.

The objective of the project is to build the capacity of primary school teachers and counsellors to generate strategies to prevent violence and crime, promoting the idea of resilient communities.

Some of the issues identified in schools and communities were: unstable families and adverse environments in homes; inadequate learning environment, teaching methods and techniques, and social services at schools; insecure school environment resulting in gang violence, etc.

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of drugs; domestic violence and crime; unstable families and adverse socio-economic conditions in communities such as poverty; the use of drugs; domestic violence and crime.

As recommendations to address these issues, the recommendations are:

- Enhanced parental training and classes; increased parental monitoring of children in relation to the proper use of technology and social media;

- Family Counselling Services provided for homes in targeted schools;

- The implementation of measures and practices to monitor and evaluate the performance of Principals/School Administrators;

- Training for teachers in areas such as dealing with children who come from abusive homes and problems associated with HIV;

- Implementation of intersectional and multidisciplinary parent education and life skills training;

- Providing employment opportunities for persons to earn an honest living;

- Set up more support groups for issues related to drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and abusive sexual behavior among youths.

Challenges in education

The challenge that represent moving from face-to-face to online teaching was also presented. The pandemic has exposed some deep social problems that existed prior to the pandemic, such as inequality in education.

In this sense, the existence of "prestigious" schools that hire the most qualified teachers and have more resources deepening the gap between rich and poor schools Communities with economic recourses have been able to keep an on-line education, while communities with economic struggle are being left behind, leaving children in a very vulnerable situation.

 The online program that has been implemented due to the pandemic has shown that 60,000 children do not have access to the Internet. In this respect, the need to give all children the opportunity of quality education rises showing that, in order to guarantee 100% access to education during and after the pandemic, Internet access has to be considered essential so that no one is left behind.

Webinar in Mental Health

On July 9, the second webinar on mental health took place. The speakers were:

Ms. Faith Marshall Harris (Member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child)

Dr. Tamu Davidson (Director NCDs and injuries Prevention, Caribbean Public Health Agency)

Mag. Daniel Claverie, Consultant, Rights Restitution of the IIN-OAS.

Concept approach

The concept of mental health, highlighting the importance of its implications for children, is the first step to understand the the impact of the pandemic on children's, "The Covid 19 Effect" is different to other forms of mental health issues among children.

To fully understand how the environment affects children, is important to identify common signs/symptoms of stress in children and adolescents: perform poorly in schoolwork, withdrawal and isolation, difficulty concentrating, increased worries or inability to focus, frequent complaints of physical symptoms, sleeping too much or too little, nightmares or sleepwalking, problems with appetite, among others.

As an effect of the pandemic, children and adolescents with no mental problems may be less able to cope due to the various stressors and it may occur an exacerbation of existing mental health condition.

In this sense, governments, civil society, health care professionals, educators and caregivers need to address mental health problems in children and adolescents in a comprehensive way.The failure to address mental health problems in children and adolescents can have long lasting effects beyond childhood and adolescence.

In this sense, it is recommended to:

- Integrate mental health and psychosocial support interventions for children and adolescents into national plans not only in the health sector but across all sectors.

- Provide mental health services as an essential health service including tele/phone services.

- Implement protective measures to reduce the risk factors for mental health problems and persons with mental health conditions.

- Public education to raise awareness about mental health needs for children and adolescents.

- Communicate COVID-19 messages that promote and support mental health and well-being.

- Advocacy to raise awareness about mental health issues in children and adolescents and protection of rights.

- Provide supportive social services for children and adolescents including parents/caregivers e.g. access to food.

- Promote support for parents and caregivers.

Mental Health as a Right

The health and wellness of every child is a right, and so is stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child: the most ratified of all the UN conventions. Article 24 regards the right to health and the article 23 states that governments have to take specific measures to guarantee the rights of children and adolescents, including mental health services.

The impact of COVID- 19 on mental health of children and adolescents has brought to light that mental health is not only related to mental issues per-se, it is also related to witnessing and suffering violence, something that the pandemic has increased, in particular corporal punishment.

Adolescents are not been listened sufficiently when it comes to the issue of mental health, they are unable to socialize with peers face to face, which has negative consequences on them.

What can we done? Pay more attention to the voice of adolescents, they can find strategies about building safe places. In the communities it is vital to let their voices be heard and participate actively in reflecting about strategies to promote good mental health. Another topic linked to the effects of the pandemic is the use of the online tools and the necessity of making the digital space secure.

It is also vita to combat discrimination and stigma around mental disorders and of making decisions in accordance to the principle of the best interest of the child ensuring child-centered interventions.

Historical pandemic that has to come to an end

We need to revise violence against children as an historical pandemic due to the devastating effects of the adult-centric policies, programs, plans etc.. Some visible consequences of it are the different types of violence children suffer and the difficulty of children to be heard and put their voice the public agenda.

Covid-19 pandemic has introduced quick changes and effects which are important to recognize and respond to. Some negative effects of the pandemic are: isolation or loneliness feeling, stress, high rates of boredom, irritability, anxiety, restlessness, fear of own and loved one illnesses. However, it also bring the opportunity to enrich bonds with parents, create creative and participate new home organization, intergenerational play time, virtual education..

Families are meeting the challenge of facing the situations without hiding children and adolescent difficulties and generate open participation spaces to listen and be part of the new family organization.

It is relevant to recognize children and adolescent capacity to face and propose alternatives by themselves.

Final Recommendations

- To better understand the causes and consequences of violence against children in the Caribbean states, it is necessary to apply a gender-based analysis of the violence against children. This would conduce to better policies, tools and programmes to promote and protect children.

- Strengthen policies, tools and programmes on positive discipline, non-violent relations, dating-without-violence. It is important to build violence-free communities, so children may be able to develop their day-to-day life in safer and healthier families, communities and schools.

- Reduce Internet access gap. Even though the lock-down measures are coming gradually to an end, Internet access would reduce the school drop-outs, and would improve the involvement of children, adolescents and youth with different child-adolescent participation opportunities. Access to Internet must be accompanied by safe Internet use and self-protection policies and programmes.

- Be more attentive to children needs, not only in the economic spectrum, but in how the environment affects children and their health. Integrate mental health and psychosocial support interventions for children and adolescents into national plans not only in the health sector but across all sectors.

- Pay more attention to the voice of adolescents, they can find strategies about building safe places. In the communities it is vital to let their voices be heard and participate actively in reflecting about strategies to promote good mental health.

- Recognize children and adolescent capacity to face and propose alternatives by themselves. Violence against children has been an historical pandemic due to the devastating effects of the adult-centric approach of childhood and adolescence policies; we must listen to children voices to learn to make child-centered policies.