
COVID 19 – The Lockdown Diaries



Hope and Homes for Children

July 2020



The coronavirus sun shone on all the inhabitants of the Earth.

It first affected the East, but quickly spread to our daily lives.

There was no one who did not suffer from its scorching rays.

Some burned hard, others scalded more easily.

And, like those burned on the beach, close contact was limited.

But the Sun of the coronavirus remained too mystical and incomprehensible to us.

We watched it through the window, but we didn't really see it.

We dreamed of going out again, to see our relatives and friends.

The temptation to be together again was too strong, but the risk of the invisible Sun frightened us.

Some remained calm, others went to extremes.

We rearranged our priorities, we learned to adapt, we put our friendships to the test.

Some of us felt lonely, while others took advantage of the privacy.

We are out today.

The coronavirus sun is still shining, but we already know how to protect ourselves.

We are not afraid to share our thoughts and feelings and so we become empathetic.

Now we enjoy the little moments more, we appreciate the time spent with friends.

We know that the Sun will set and then a new day will come.

(Young person, Bulgaria)

Introduction

Across the world the COVID19 pandemic has had a remarkably similar impact – the closure of schools, shops, places of worship, leisure sporting facilities and playgrounds, coupled with a retreat into lockdown. In lockdown across most of the world children and young people have lived through an experience unique to our age.

We asked 168 children and young people from our HHC programmes and partners about their experience of lockdown. These children and young people were aged from five years old to young adults, they came from families, foster families, small group homes, centres for children, communities, day care and community crisis centres.



This work was led by our safeguarding focal people in country, assisted by their colleagues, and they showed great innovation and ingenuity in reaching

children under very difficult circumstances of lockdown. There were WhatsApp calls in Sudan, painting competitions in Romania and Ukraine, poetry writing in Bulgaria, Facebook competitions in Bosnia, keeping diaries in South Africa, games and group activities in Moldova and Transnistria, face-to-face meetings in Nepal and calls, groupwork and interviews in Rwanda.

Here is a presentation of their thoughts on the lockdown experience, the challenges and opportunities and their hopes for the future.¹

¹ Cover picture is from Transnistria and all other pictures and photos are from across HHC programmes and used with permission.

What was most challenging about COVID 19 and the lockdown?

Many of the children cited the **closure of schools** as one of the biggest challenges they faced; not knowing if they would be able to sit exams they had prepared for, if they would have to repeat a whole year, or even if schools would re-open in the same way and how this would affect their development. Children shared their worries about ‘how they would graduate’, ‘if they would take the exams they had prepared for’ and how they would ‘make up the lost time.’ Others reported that they were able to take advantage of online schooling;



‘Online study allows our children to be independent. My child likes to feel like an adult. She has learnt new programs and basically does all her homework on her own and it helps to organise her. Thanks to the new format of study our children have acquired new skills and understanding that any situation can be solved and adapted to new conditions.’ (Mum. Transnistria)

“Relatives do not even trust you to come and visit. The unacceptable thing is that I cannot even get close to my parents because of the virus”
(Tumelo, South Africa)

This seems to have been the experience of relatively few though, with many reporting the frustration of not having access to internet or suitable equipment. The problems ranged from ‘having no tv to watch the

online school' to the high cost of internet access, uncertain power supply and no access to phones or computers to follow the online schooling.

"I stay home and I'm locked behind the gate. I'm upset, I'm in lockdown"
(Andrei, 7 Moldova)

In light of schools being closed, many children expressed a feeling of isolation as school was one of the main places they would meet, connect, play and spend time with friends. *'My experience since the corona virus has started has not been nice because I cannot go to school, and I only have friends at school. I want to go back to school because I want to get my report and see if I passed term 1, I also want to go back to school because I miss my friends and the jokes we make.'* (8-year-old, South Africa)



In Nepal children want things to go back to how they were before the pandemic as *'listening to radio and attending virtual classes doesn't feel like studying.'*

This isolation from friends was highlighted as a problem; *'Stay home without moving around challenged me too much, living without paying visit to my friends embarrassed me, I had fear, thinking that it was the end of the earth.'* (Child, Rwanda)

'They started getting bored and kept questioning our team every week, "When will our school open?"'
(Nepal)

Loneliness and isolation were reported, especially by care leavers and young people in independent living. *'After the announcement of lockdown by the government, all my colleagues went back in their families and I have stayed alone here. This has really challenged me to be alone as it is where I have to stay in independent living.'* (Noel, Rwanda)

This loneliness, compounded with no opportunities to work and a dependence on HHC support, further challenged some of the young people. *'I was challenged to live without my friends, to stay home without doing anything just waiting the support from HHC...and I couldn't understand such life.'* (Rebecca, Rwanda)

"I think we will appreciate more the communities we are living in, I think we will have a different view on how much we spend on goods and wellbeing. I also think we will have more time for loved ones...can't wait to hug my family" (Romania)

Another young adult in Rwanda reported loneliness as the biggest challenge and stated *'What I think should be done is to pay us a visit and comfort us and not over the phone.'*

Several reported issues with accommodation, with 16-year-old Mimi, herself in a happy foster care placement, suggesting that HHC provide accommodation because during lockdown, care leavers in particular can face many problems related to finding and keeping a safe place to stay.

John a young adult with a disability suggested the same as *'the landlord was not kind to me, fearing I will not pay the rent' but adding 'however I have learnt to be patient.'*

The inability to work and earn money was mentioned by a number of young people as being one of the big frustrations at a time where they were learning a new independent way of living. They reported that as well as depriving them of independence and increasing their fear of not being able to be independent in the future, the lockdown 'returned us into past life of institution where we used to be confined.

Many of the children responding talked about fear and anxiety during the lockdown and although they were worried for themselves the majority of responses showed they were very aware and more concerned about family, community and the wider society.



'...the shops and schools are closed, that elderly are more vulnerable.' (Romania)

'Quarantine called into question all future plans' (Bulgaria)

'The old people will die alone.' (Transnistria)

'In my opinion, the worst restrictive measures have been introduced in "SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS" such as the ban on leaving the institution... it bothered me that

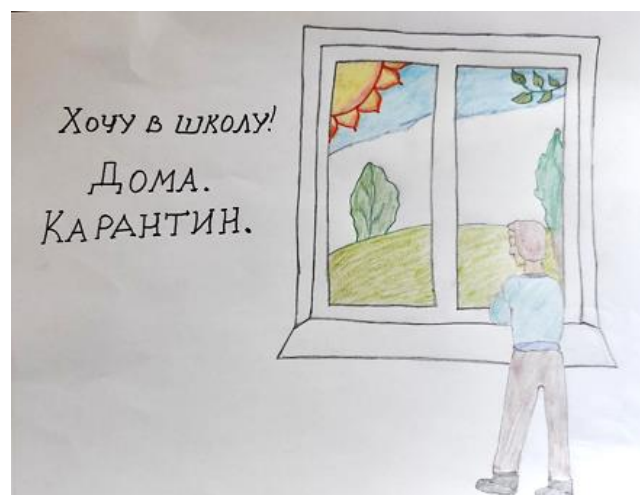
children and young people from such institutions could not go out at least to the yard of such institutions. It is completely inhumane for children and young people to spend months indoors. I believe that there was no difference between "PRISON" and "INSTITUTION" "during the pandemic." (Zlatan, Sarajevo)

'...educators, doctors, police officers need to go to work and are exposed to the sickness,'(Romania)

'It is not right that some people are coming back from countries with the virus and then pass on the infection to their families'(Romania)

"I wouldn't say I'm sad, maybe a bit worried – when will we be able to see our friends? Generally, I'm happy, I'm grown up now, I'm going into 5th grade and I understand that we're supposed to obey and wash our hands, stay at home and protect ourselves so we don't get sick" (Daniil, 11 Moldova)

Along with these concerns many reported feeling anxious, more afraid and worried specifically about rising costs, higher unemployment, more hunger and poverty, social unrest and the impact of this on their families, showing they are not sheltered or unaware of the realities of life and the impact of COVID19.



'Other people do not go to work and by not going to work it means no food on the table. The other problem is people will remain unemployed.' (Gugu, South Africa)

'You know, the alcohol epidemic is also worse because of the virus. It's scary to live when your parents are drinking, when you have nothing to eat, when you don't know if you're going to spend the night at your own home today, as your parents have not stopped getting drunk yet. It's scary...' (Maria 13, Ukraine)

'The gap between the rich and poor will be bigger' (Sudan)

'Many things are upside down, we are not allowed to move around, many families are destroyed due to deaths, people lost their jobs not being able to provide for their families and sometimes forced to steal to be able to put something on the table.' (Romania)

'The pollution will reduce, but the economy of the world will deteriorate.' (Sudan)

Along with difficulty in accessing some services, and the problems of putting on weight during lockdown, there were mixed responses as to how much **information children and young people received and understood before and during the lockdown**. It was clear that many children received confusing or wrong information circulating in the community and were not consulted much or at all about the lockdown conditions. This confusing mix of anger, fear and frustration is well illustrated by the following quote from a young girl in South Africa:

'She noted that her experience of COVID-19 is ridiculous, why the obsession of washing hands frequently. She further stated that her experience of hearing the news about the number of deaths that is increasing everyday she thinks that COVID-19 is one of the schemes to depopulate the high population number of people in South Africa. She also mentioned that the government must not allow the children to go

back to school because they will bring COVID-19 home to their parents. She concluded by saying that the frequent washing of hands its annoying to her and does not understand it. She made an example that she sometimes uses to go to the bathroom after that go straight to the kitchen without washing hands and make food for herself.' (Teenager, South Africa)

Other children confidently repeated the stories they had heard of the origin and nature of the virus.

'You should not let in more hares! Then you do not have to poison them. It all has come from hares, well, the coronavirus. The hares ate something and then bit someone, and so in such a way they had infected everyone. Kolia has told me everything. And is it not true? Tell us, how it has happened!' (Ivan 11, Ukraine)

'COVID is a dangerous virus. I think it comes from cows (korova - in Russian). Cows make messes and the virus spreads through the air, so people can breathe it in and get sick. To protect ourselves we need to wash our hands. When my mom went to the store, she had to wear a mask.' (Daniel, Moldova)



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“Ah, thank you, I have understood everything. It’s like fleas in a dog. If you have already had fleas, then all the dogs will have fleas, who walks nearby it” (Ivan, 11 Ukraine)

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Others said they had been told nothing or were simply ordered to ‘stay indoors’. ‘wash your hands’ or the else the ‘new flu’ would kill them. When they were given the real facts about the virus most of them said it reduced their fear and increased their understanding and their willingness to ‘obey the rules’ because they understood why. Some did say they were able to ask their social worker, educator or teacher.



Were there any positives about the lockdown experience?

Alongside the challenges the children and young people from all countries reported very similar positive experiences. Many of them reported that although staying at home was initially a bit new and strange and then boring they were very happy to spend time in their family units (birth family, foster family, SGHs, children’s centre etc.) and get time to themselves to ‘rest and relax’ as well as grow closer to their siblings, carers, parents and learn about their family stories and memories.

‘I spent a lot of time with my dad and I liked it. He taught me how to ride a bicycle, and I made progress every time.’ (Ivan, 9 Transnistria)

‘During lockdown, I was sleeping deeply and no one could wake me up to go to fetch water every day and I was very happy because I like sleeping.’ (Clementine, 11 Rwanda)



‘What pleased me is to stay with my siblings and have conversations with my parents whereby they told us different stories about our family and culture and we listen together to international news.’ (Karekezi a child with disability placed back in his biological family, Rwanda).

There were many contributions which talked about spending time with their dads, learning skills from mum and dad, like riding a bike, cooking, how to shop at the supermarket, seeing the value of and beginning to manage money and save some, getting closer to brothers and sisters, friends in the SGH or other centres, educators, social workers and teachers. ‘We are not afraid of the virus because we are in a closed area. And we have no lice. And also we all started to become a “fool” (to play) very much, unfortunately we now have more quarrels between children. And we are watered in the yard, because it is very hot, there are various sprinklers, it’s very fun.’ (Bodhana 11, Centre for Social Support, Ukraine)

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'Looking back at the time of the isolation, we could notice an improvement regarding the communication between the staff and the beneficiaries and here we can speak about opinions and common interests shared between beneficiaries who live together in the same home, but also with the staff that was isolated with the young adults. We learned to be more understanding with each other's needs.' (SGH for young adults with disabilities, Romania)

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“Also I see how the educators are nervous on how not to bring the disease to the Centre, how to treat their hands, take off their masks, change their shoes and leave things in bags on the ground floor. At first it had been scary to look at. Like in a horror movie, I had wondered what was happening to the city. I know that the transport does not work. It is difficult for everyone to come to work”
(SGH Romania)

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'We have time to study for the final exams, I am happy that I got closer to some colleagues from the SGH, I also happy that I am happy and did not catch the virus, I have more time for my favourite activities, I call up my family more frequently, I am happy that I have a yard and I can go out and play unlike people living in flats.' (SGH Romania)

For many of the children and young people it was a time which made them realize who their 'support networks' are – family, school, church, community, educators and social workers. They also grew to appreciate and 'cherish' them more, along with appreciating all the small things of life – being able to play, share stories, have fun, live in a safe place with good food, make the most of opportunities available

and enjoy the beauty of the world around them.

'On the positive side, I learned how much to appreciate loved ones and how much to use every second and minute with members of the household. Also, since I have been writing for a long time. I started writing some of my life diaries and reading books.' (Adisa, Sarajevo)



'It was useful because it diversified my communication and tested the sustainability of our relationships.' (Young person, Bulgaria)

One care leaver in Nepal who travelled to her village a few days prior to the nationwide lockdown shared she had time *'...to know more about my family and I now have learnt ploughing in the field. I understand my native language more than ever.'* (Care leaver, Nepal)

'In the end, isolation brought, in addition to negative things, something positive. I think that in isolation we had more time to spend with the family and to enjoy more together. Isolation brought us all closer again and showed us that we live too busy not thinking about each other. I think we will become better people after the pandemic.' (Dragana, Sarajevo)

Mixed in with that was a real concern for others, for the elderly, for poor people, and for other children. *'I feel bad that some people cannot go to the funeral of their relatives, some people who still go to work are being exposed to the illness, the shops and jobs are closing down, elderly with diseases might die due to their condition...'*

A number of the respondents reported *'helping the elderly'*,



teaching their siblings or friends new skills, helping with housework, doing shopping for neighbours, advising friends in the community and making gifts for 'poorer people'. A large number of the children recognised that they could make a contribution by following the rules even though they were frustrated, bored and afraid. 'I wanted to meet my friends but I also wanted for them to be safe, so I stayed inside and advised them to do the same...' (South Africa)



What will COVID19 change about the future?

The children across all countries responded with a mixture of appreciation, cautious optimism and acceptance. Alongside a sharp-eyed awareness that the virus will persist, that economies and livelihoods will be affected and that freedoms and liberties may be curtailed, the children also expressed high hopes, appreciation for family and community and a determination to adapt to be able to live a fulfilling life.

'I think my life will change for the better, because I learned to cherish things more than before.'



'I think my life after the pandemic will be a beautiful, but difficult one as well, because the virus will not disappear and we will have to protect ourselves in the future as well.'

'I think my life will be worse because if the school year

will freeze, I will have to repeat it. We learned to be better persons and be happy with the things we have, unlike other people who do not even have a home. In the future we will know what to expect, life is sometimes good and sometimes bad.'

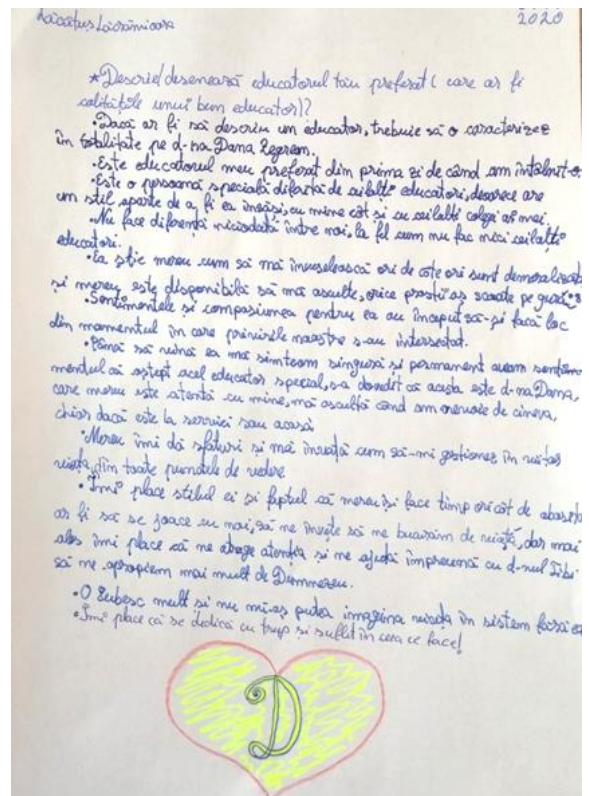
'After the pandemic my life will change both for the better, but also for the worse. I learned to appreciate life and the people around me more. It will also get worse because we are stuck with the fear of getting sick or losing someone dear to us.'



'The gap between the rich and poor will be bigger'

'The tendency to stay at the national boundaries and not to go abroad.'

'The control of the government on the society will increase'



'COVID -19 will change my life because I will always remember the suffering.'

'The change must come from us, the idea of free movement will be re-evaluated in the following years. Sports will be appreciated more and people will enjoy the sport events more. People will not change jobs that easily. We will make more time for the loved ones.'
'In my opinion, the situation after COVID 19 should be very different. Primarily, people should become better, treat each other better, listen more to each other, and watch the weakest and most vulnerable who needed help during the pandemic but also after. We should appreciate this life more because we never know when it will stop, we appreciate the material less because we still realized how money means nothing to us if we don't have each other and if we are not healthy.'

'Another important lesson is that we learned how to be more economical with the things we have: food, sanitizers. I think that this lesson taught us how important life is, actually.'

'We should cherish everything we have and be content with all the things we own. I believe that this pandemic was a lesson to us that made us cherish life more, even if it is good or bad. It also made us respect each other more and learn how to stay safe.'

'I think it's time to get used to living with a pandemic. I am afraid that the pandemic is something that has just started. Masks are our new outfit and we could wear it for at least another year.'

'I think we will appreciate more the communities we are living in.'



Conclusion

One of the more striking features of the children's responses was their **resilience** – the ability to adapt to change and trauma and to bounce back from it. The resilient mindset which says 'things will get better and I am not alone' was evident throughout the responses. While not avoiding the fear and anxiety nor ignoring the negative impacts of COVID19 on community and society, the children and young people consistently expressed appreciation for the care and protection, guidance and support they received from family and from professionals and with it a hope for a fulfilling future, even in the shadow of a pandemic.

Their ability to balance feelings of hope and fear, concern for themselves and concern for others, anxiety about their present circumstances and optimism about the future is a huge tribute to the children and young people themselves and their families and the HHC and other professionals who work with them. We should do more **to hear their voices more often** and more loudly and to allow those voices to shape who we are as an organisation at every level.

Taking the time and creating the space for children and young people **to express themselves**, including their anger, fear and frustration, is vital for the healthy development of children as well as a healthy organisational culture. Practically speaking, providing access to information which is appropriate and accessible is vital and worth the time and effort required. Internet connectivity is no longer a luxury and we should do all we can to ensure that children and young people are connected safely.

But even in the age of internet connection and virtual experiences almost all the children and young people emphasised the need for **human contact, family and peer relationships**, and real support networks of community, family, friends, church and school. It is evident that care leavers and those in independent living who were more vulnerable in this regard, often expressed a feeling of loneliness and the need for human contact, something we as an organization

should keep in our focus.

Even as a snapshot of the views of a small number of children and young people across ten countries these responses and their common themes of appreciation and gratitude, adaptability, awareness and a real concern for others and for society should encourage HHC as an organisation to ask ourselves how well do we know, understand and allow ourselves to be challenged by the children and young people we exist to serve and what practical steps can we take to demonstrate this.

“I also believe that our world is wonderful and gives us all the opportunities we need, but we are the ones who need to take care of it. We have only one life and we need to take care of it” (Child, Romania)

