Summary Report
Real Time Review of the

Multi-Country COVID-19 response, 2020 of
War Child Holland

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This brief provides the summary findings from a Real-Time Review of War Child Holland's emergency response to the Covid-19 crisis in its ten country offices. WCH's immediate responses include awareness-raising about infection, education, psychosocial services, child protection, water, food and income. It is undertaking a review to make immediate changes as well as long-term changes to enhance its emergency capacities.

WCH recruited two consultants for the RTR:
- one focused on management and coordination issues and
- one on program and grassroots perspectives.

Detailed reports were submitted separately by both consultants.
This document consolidates their final recommendations.

MANAGEMENT AND COORDINATION ISSUES

Findings

Opinions were divided about responding to the crisis among WCH staff. Some said that WCH should not respond as it lacks the mandate and expertise. Others said that it should because:

1. **WCH Mandate is broad and** doesn't bar emergency work in war/post-war states
2. **Children's suffering is** much higher during emergencies.
3. **Strong expectation from communities and partners that** agencies working with them on long-term issues will also help children during their worst phases of lives.
4. **Emergencies undermine WCH's long-term work** and not responding to emergencies can undermine it even further while esponding helps in protecting gains of WCH's longer-term work.
5. **WCH can develop unique emergency approach**: Emergency work is not only about meeting immediate needs but also protecting longer-term rights.
6. **Keep dinosaurs out**: Not responding may let into WCH communities agencies with short-term focus which can harm communities even if it saves lives.
7. **WCH gets a place on the table** among agencies which it can utilize to advocate with and influence larger agencies about its own values and principles.
8. **Expanding to new areas is easier during emergencies as they** attract more funding and agencies can use it to establish themselves in new geographical areas of interest
9. **WCH Covid-19 response shows organizational AGILITY can help build emergency capacity quickly** to deal even with a global crisis despite limited emergency experience and resources given the buy-in of top leadership.

As shown below, WCH's response rates high on 3 criteria, medium on 5 criteria and low on only one criteria among the nine common criteria for evaluating emergency responses:

Criteria	Overall rating	Strengths and Work-in-progress
Relevance	High	Highly relevant program focus given community needs based on strong assessments; More focus on cash and income needed
Effectiveness/ timeliness	High	Organizational agility allowed quick response within 2 weeks of crisis; use of effective delivery modes; More focus on gender, youth and disabilities issues needed
Local capacities	Medium	Most countries use established local partners; Greater use of local partners across remaining countries needed
Communication and participation	Medium	Strong communication and feedback via partners and community volunteers; Need to undertake planning for future Covid-19 programming with participation of communities for coming months
Complaint mechanisms	Low	Complaint mechanisms not set up or largely ineffective
Coordination	Medium	Strong presence in clusters; strong internal coordination and communication n via sitreps; Greater focus on advocacy, communication and leadership in core WCH sectors in external coordination; using partnerships for joint assessments and funding
Learning	Medium	Training arranged via HQ staff; RTR being conducted; More focus on formal in-country reflection exercise at the 90-day mark
Staff well-being	High	Elaborate measures in almost all countries to safeguard staff; More need for HQ guidance and adherence to People in Aid principles
Resource use	Medium	Almost 75% of the money has come from new grants from donors. More emphasis needed on developing partnerships with other agencies for funding for the early recovery phase

The key drivers of success were as follows: National staff motivation and commitment; Organizational agility and ability to come together; Existing links with partners and communities; Strong leadership from HQ, especially from the Emergency Director position; Availability of Start-up funds; Flexibility of donors; Technical guidance from the Covid-19 team.

In terms of lessons learnt, staff felt that there is still a need for clarity at the top level about WCH's mandate and focus during emergencies and better emergency preparedness within WCH including preparedness plans, a regular emergency unit, deployable staff capacity and immediate availability of funding. It was felt that while the Covid-19 unit had worked well in this crisis since agency-wide regular work was disrupted, the use of such ad-hoc units may not be possible in other crises where regular work is less disrupted. In light of these findings, it is recommended that WCH should continue working during emergencies and develop its unique brand of emergency work based on its strengths as follows:

Recommendations
8 Ideas for Developing a Unique WCH Emergency Brand
- **Build on 3 core expertise**: Child protection, education, MHPSS
- **Add emergency cash work as a flexible tool** for sectors where it does not have capacity to meet emergency needs of children: e.g., shelter, water, therapeutic nutrition
- **Save lives, protect long-term rights**: Protect community gains from WCH long-term work (protection), meet children's critical needs and help them bounce back later (resilience); develop local capacities
- **Disaster-proof long-term work earlier**: to protect against future emergency risks and develop resilience cycle
- **Do Research-based Programs**: Uses WCH research capacities to develop evidence-based emergency programming models for children
- **Be a Technical leader**: for other agencies in the three core sectors
- **Be a Lead Advocate for durable solutions for children:** for the emergency needs of children also in regions where WCH is not working
- **Build partnerships and networks: with like-minded agencies** for funding and for sectors WCH does not work in

12 ideas to build WCH brand in 3 years

8 Low-hanging, low-investment fruits
- **Humanitarian Policy approval** through IMT or Board that clarifies WCH emergency mandate: unique brand, approach, sectors etc.
- **3 years Humanitarian strategy** to implement Policy
- **National emergency strategies**: in overall national strategies
- **National Emergency Preparedness Plans**: Help countries develop
- **Emergency roster of national staff**: can be deployed during emergencies
- **Emergency protocols for support functions**: to allow faster response
- **Donor representation**: with key donors to showcase unique brand and Covid-19 successes

4 ideas that need investment and possible low-budget solutions
- **Emergency training**: technical and management-build it in country and unit budgets and some HQ money
- **Emergency manuals**: technical and management-adapt existing ones immediately, e.g., good Enough Guide and develop own gradually
- **Emergency funds**: can be quickly recouped from emergency appeals

- **Emergency HQ capacity**: part-time positions, short-term consultants, interns, volunteers, job shares and occasional full-time position

Next steps recommended:
- IMT response to recommendations
- Prioritize way forward
- Develop an implementation committee
- Develop implementation plan

GRASSROOTS COMPONENT

The grassroot component generated considerable learning and documented it in multiple ways:

- a **working blog** (warchildrtrcovid.wordpress.com/), written "real time", shared insights from conversations and "food for thought".
- A **report** consolidated findings. It was designed to be a practical tool for action-reflection: for staff in HQ and in countries and for partners. For each commitment of the Core Humanitarian Standard the report highlighted a set of lessons, captured interesting experiences and provided ideas and options for thinking ahead.

The following are the final recommendations… the tip of the iceberg of lot of learning!

Embrace the "working in the grey area"

War Child situated itself as working in developmental / post-conflict settings. The COVID-19 emergency was a wake-up call. It became evident - to a global scale - what many field staff and partners already acknowledged: in many locations War Child operates in a grey area. In this space, threats and challenges continuously undermine the wellbeing of children and families and the options they have. Acknowledging working in the grey area demand to readjust the organization work, coherently.

Are you providing what the community should expect from you? Be prepared to stretch your intervention – coherently and within reach.

The flipside of relevance is: if needs arise beyond its core programming areas, is it appropriate for an organization – with a strict mandate and expertise – to provide what is asked? This was a strong tension within War Child when deciding to respond. There were fears that venturing beyond the tried and tested Care System could mean to provide children with less than the highest standards of assistance. In the experience of field workers, the choices made in broadening activities – the "menu of actions" - worked well. They responded to untapped needs. They opened possibilities for action. They were perceived as fully coherent with the organizational mandate. They played on organizational strengths. Stronger real-time and participatory monitoring will be needed to validate these perceptions with input from communities, to improve and tailor the menu of options. But this first-time emergency response seems to have demonstrated capacity, relevance, coherence.

The way forward does not stop with "rapid emergency response". It is "disaster risk management" - for resilience building (invest in it).

The humanitarian capacities needed by War Child are not about flying out to the next disaster. Acknowledging the "grey area" involves helping local communities to be resilient to hazards and threats. To back them up when they are overwhelmed. And to acknowledge that risk-proofing the future children is not an option in areas threatened by conflict and other major hazards (COVID, but also climate-change and other localized threats). Implementing this approach within the organization will require to continue investing in a humanitarian department, with dedicated resources and staff (for coordination, capacity building, surge capacity), but also in a strategic intent to mainstream a DRM culture and approach throughout the organization.

Rethink modalities to effectively generate evidence for action, reflection, accountability.

There is a big hole in the organization, where appreciation of context, outcomes and learning should happen. The systems in place are insufficient to gather and aggregate needed information and evidence for decision making, real time. M&E is mostly about tracking outreach – leading

to broad number aggregations (not the quality evidence needed for evidence-based management). This is a major weakness for an organization operating at time of uncertainty. The R&D department has no connection with ongoing programming. This generates systemic weakness on evidence-oriented actions, outcome assessment, learning. The response exhibited promising initiatives showing the potential of horizontal sharing, and the desire to acquire new tools for evidence generation, analysis, use.

Emphasize the role of children as active actors: a shift to active protection.

Surprisingly for a child-oriented organization, limited examples were found of activities that deliberately involved children as active actors (e.g. participation in radio programming). Passive protection was often the stance. Yet War Child should be well aware that children are often the best responders and motivators. They have unique capabilities to persuade their own communities about risk, threats, and to generate needed shifts in lifestyles. Can the COVID-19 response be an opportunity to put them in the driving seat?

Give more visibility to partners and to the agency of communities.

In the accounts so far, it is hard to see the community in action. There was mention of volunteers, of local government. But, other than this, the image emerging is often War Child centric. Also, when (implementing) partners were mentioned, it was hard to find more specific details of their work, and of their achievements. There is certainly much more to see on the ground – and it is unfortunate that review could not capture it. But the absence of communities and partners in the narrative, as active actors, demands that War Child shifts its perspective: in putting the voices, the account of the communities first. And in giving them more deserved visibility, as equal partners.

Value the capacities of your teams to adapt, innovate. Bottom up.

The COVID-19 response was certainly a unique moment in time. The usual roles and responsibilities had to be put aside, to deal – together - with the unknown. Staff was galvanized. The response showed untapped individual capacities. The immense potential of horizontal teams. It also showed the value of delegating decision making at the grassroots: teams, countries, field staff thrived in a new space allowing for innovation, experimentation. War Child in this response exhibited the leadership model that the humanitarian sector is craving for.

Agile or established?

Does War Child want to be agile or established? The two models are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to establish a virtuous circle whereby some established, and "flagship" practices and approaches are used, but are continuously improved, nourished with experimentation.
There is now a massive imbalance in favour of the "established" side, as a strategic organizational choice. The COVID response, however, was definitely on the Agile side, showing the untapped potential of this approach to change. The response revealed opportunities for the organization well beyond the management of an individual emergency. But for the potential to materialize, a strategic rebalancing will need to happen.

Envision and shape the "new normal".

Emergencies are not just about "response". They can be about "re-writing the rules of the game" – as now recognized widely re: disaster capitalism. Hence the urgency, at this historical juncture, to be part of these who can re-write the rules (taking along partners, communities). As War Child is engaging in strategic formulation processes, it should engage in future casting to identify opportunities and challenges in shaping a better, child-friendly "new normal". At it should enable this at all levels: from the grassroots to the global, with involvement of partners and communities. It is a big ambition. But this is a unique time in history to make it happen.