



United Nations Association of Australia WA Division



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Photos (L to R): Finimize Female Financial Dialogue (Cloud9Projects), Youth Engagement Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic (Daniel Sherifi)

Inside This Issue:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| From the President | 2 |
| Business As Usual at UNA AWA | 3 |
| Editorial | 4 |
| Special Contributor: Grace Forrest | 5 |
| Prioritising Children's Wellbeing | 7 |
| Remembering Bessie Mabel Rischbieth | 9 |
| SDG Business Forum Series | 10 |
| Female Financial Dialogue #Finimized | 11 |
| World Water Day | 12 |
| ANZAC Day | 12 |
| Distributed Energy Resources Roadmap | 13 |
| Members Corner | 15 |
| Upcoming Events | 16 |



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Prioritising Children's Wellbeing During and After COVID-19



The novelty of learning from home is wearing off. Australian children (and their adults) are keen to get back to 'normal'. But will our normal ever be the same again? Many suggest not and others are ready to embrace the potential of change in hope for a more positive society. As we make the transition from lockdown to a new normal we must give greater priority to the impact on children.

A 'broader child-rights crisis' due to the pandemic has been predicted by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. As often is the case, the most vulnerable members of our community are at highest risk - the homeless, those living with disability, the elderly, those in poverty, those experiencing violence, abuse and neglect, and children.

The harmful effects will impact some children more than others. The recently published UN Policy Brief speculates on the likely risks for the world's children:

- Up to 66 million children falling into poverty through the forecast global recession precipitated by the economic lockdown.
- Exacerbating the learning crisis through school closures disrupting learning and affecting more than 1.5 billion children and youth.
- Threats to child survival and health through reduced financial resources available for health care and nutrition. In addition, there are risks to child mental health and wellbeing.
- Risks for child safety through lockdown measures combined with household financial stress heightening the chances of children witnessing or suffering violence and abuse.
- Delayed implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals designed by all the world's nations to fight inequality and injustice, protect the planet, and tackle extreme poverty.

Australia is better placed than most nations to minimise these impacts as long as priority is given to mitigation measures including:

- Maintaining an economic safety net and social protection programs, particularly for the most vulnerable households and communities.
- Prioritising the continuity of child-centred services and community-based child protection programs.
- Providing practical advice and support for parents and caregivers focused on their own and their children's mental health.

These measures provide an opportunity to ensure that children are involved in decision-making that will affect their future. As citizens with a right to education, children's voices must be incorporated into the thinking, planning, systems change and new policy required.

As a society we have an unwritten rule to care for children, protect children and develop our future generations. As we navigate these unparalleled times, we rely on politicians, teachers, coaches and parents more than ever to prioritise all children's wellbeing. We hear the phrase "it takes a village to raise a child"- during these challenging times, the wellbeing including safety of children is paramount.

The role of schools and teachers will be particularly crucial. They represent society's front line in monitoring and supporting the wellbeing and learning progress of our children. With school closures early warning mechanisms are missing.

Understandably, priority has been given so far to the provision of learning materials to support student learning in the home environment at the same time as maintaining the school learning environment for students requiring it. This will be extremely challenging for teachers, particularly if it is to be sustained over an extended period.

It is essential that teachers are able to monitor the wellbeing and learning progress of all of their students. Priority also needs to be given to the implementation of digital coaching and monitoring tools for use by students and teachers.

Continued on page 8

Prioritising Children's Wellbeing During and After COVID-19

Continued from page 7

Giving students agency in monitoring and communicating their progress potentially has twin benefits. It requires them to take greater responsibility for their learning. Secondly, it has the potential to develop a greater sense of empowerment and wellbeing. Some teachers and schools are well placed to implement such approaches. Others will need significant and effective support.

One way that parents and their children may support each other is to talk about the impact that the COVID-19 shock has had on our society and economy. How do we build a stronger, sustainable future for Australia? In our work with children aged from 8 to 18 years, we've observed a ready engagement with the UN SDGs. These goals represent a common vision for the future based on scientific evidence and business models.



Students frequently comment on the positive impact of working with the Goals and the optimism it generates. Instead of feeling like powerless victims of globalisation they comment how sharing a common vision and working with others empowers them to make a difference.

The concept of the generational bargain is also crucial as we focus on the needs of our children at this time. It is an unwritten social contract whereby working generations support the non-working generations (the young and elderly). As Sonia Arakkal, founder of Think Forward an intergenerational fairness advocacy group, wrote recently:

"As a society we have asked a generation of young, working age people to put their dreams on hold to

slow the progress of a virus that's more likely to seriously affect older Australians. Meanwhile, the sectors hardest hit by the government's shutdown disproportionately affect young people and, unlike the Baby Boomer generation, Millennials do not have the asset base to weather this storm."

The same may be said for children - Generation Z and Generation Alpha. They will be starting their working lives at a time of high public debt incurred during the pandemic crisis. Developing a vision and plan for a sustainable, resilient Australia based on the SDGs has game-changing potential. Some pundits estimate that implementing the SDGs over the next decade will generate globally 380 million jobs and US\$12 trillion economic growth.

German psychologist Hannah Arendt defined wisdom as "a loving concern for the future of the world". When we work with students to design community projects around the SDGs we are struck by their wisdom. Moreover, these students express their optimism when they observe older generations sharing their wisdom.

In managing a unique situation like the pandemic, we encourage you to think forward and estimate the short, medium and long-term effects of COVID-19 for children and families, with a preventative lens. In doing so, we have the opportunity to reduce and prevent instances of risk to children that may affect their wellbeing and learning.

Strong and consistent messaging is crucial to communicate with a wide population, starting with a mental model level of thinking, to help support and encourage positive behaviors with an empathic approach. The inclusion of children's needs and perspectives are essential. As a population we are seeking information and resources to guide us through unknown waters. A clear communication strategy to prioritising children's wellbeing will be the success of how we manage COVID-19 for children and young people.

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