



RESPONDING TO COVID-19



Save the Children

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Save the Children South Africa (SCSA) is a child rights-based organisation that works to give children a good start in life as well as the opportunity to learn, be healthy and to be protected from violence. Our outreach was drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in rolling national lockdowns that began on 27 March 2020. The harsh lockdowns led to an increase in risk factors that contribute to violence, sexual assault, poverty and starvation across the country, but that did not stop us from working as hard as we possibly could to ensure we could reach those who needed our help.

In this document, you will find real stories and statistics about the children's rights we focus on and how they have been affected by COVID-19. Through the real stories and interviews with children and their families, we will explain what our COVID-19 humanitarian response is and why we do what we do. At SCSA we are not only focused on statistics and figures – we care about the story and the people behind these numbers. Our mission is to ensure a world in which every child receives the rights to survival, protection, development and participation.

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SAVING LIVES IN THE PANDEMIC

In areas affected by high levels of poverty and unemployment, there were basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing needs that had to be met in order for the people in these communities to survive.

But, when the pandemic spread to South Africa, we quickly realised there was more that was needed to ensure survival; sanitisers, face masks and hand soaps became essential commodities, and the greatest protection between health and the virus. We made certain that with our donors we could ensure that none of our children and their families in the communities we support went unprotected with the newest basic needs that were required. With the support of Colgate we distributed one million soap bars nationally.

Due to the lockdown, SCSA's officials needed to be declared essential workers as we had outreach programmes for our emergency responses to the pandemic, which included distributing hygiene kits, school support, food vouchers to the communities that needed these the most and campaigns to raise funds. We partnered with the Hope Primary School in Musina, Limpopo to distribute hygiene packs consisting of maxi-pads, tampons, water bottles, cloth face masks, toilet paper, water filtering dispensers, hand soaps and sanitisers. We ensured that the cleanliness and the hygiene of the school and the community was up to the standard of protection needed against COVID-19 for the most vulnerable children. Our frontline officials educated the teachers and children at the school on all of the products that were in the hygiene packs emphasising the importance of these to defend themselves against the COVID-19 virus and to support their well-being. Our partner, Colgate made this outreach possible with the donations of some products.

One million
soap bars nationally



Siboniso of Umlazi

A look into the communities we work in through the eyes of 16-year-old Siboniso during the pandemic revealed the devastating and little-known facts about impoverished communities in South Africa. Siboniso opens our eyes to how difficult it has been for the men, women and children in these communities before and during the pandemic.

Siboniso is from Umlazi – the fourth largest township in South Africa. Even though Siboniso is a child himself, he is a child rights activist who sees the importance of having valid and accountable rights for children like himself and the children of the future. Siboniso expresses his thoughts, feelings and concerns about all the areas of his life that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected. One of the key facts he revealed was that hygiene and social distancing (the most important safeguard between him and the virus) has been almost impossible to exercise in his township because of the overcrowding in his township. Siboniso lives with eight people in one room and so protocols are extremely difficult to carry out and this has created an extremely stressful and cramped environment to live in during a lockdown.

Siboniso has also had the added responsibility and pressure to teach himself all of his schoolwork without the guidance of educators or peers. It is up to him to ensure that he not only copes with the mental stresses, worldwide panic, financial pressures but also passing his grade by educating himself. Through all of the chaos, Siboniso also expressed his fear about the defiance of his community against the tobacco and alcohol bans that the South African government imposed during the lockdowns; this defiance created chaos in the midst of chaos for young Siboniso in his community as he states that there were no soldiers or police to enforce any of the laws that went along with the pandemic. The rebellion against these product bans caused increased financial pressures for individuals and families in the community due to the inflated prices of these banned products on the black market, and apparently led to increased violence.

“I can no longer just be me, be free or act like a child. My parents are always angry because they’re wondering how they are going to provide for that child or this child – with a parent who is always angry there is no peace, and for a child who is always hungry there is no harmony.”

These are the heartbreaking words from a 16-year-old boy who has to come to grips with his reality, a teenager who has the weight of the world on his shoulders and who had to abruptly end his childhood and become a man. This is the tragic reality of not only Siboniso, but millions of other children in rural communities and townships, children who had to stop playing with their friends and family and had to begin worrying about reality. They had to stop playing make-believe and begin worrying about where their next meal would come from.

We have changed the name of this child in order to protect his identity.

Around the world there are more than 86 million children living in poverty – these children are fighting for survival every single day. South Africa is regarded one of the world’s most unequal societies with more than half of the population living in poverty, and with the COVID-19 pandemic the unfortunate reality is that the poorest and most vulnerable are affected the most so we are likely to continue experiencing increased inequality across the country.

SCSA reached 285 512 children and their families in five provinces (Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Mpumalanga) with, among other things, personal protective equipment, food aid, educational support for learners, ECD COVID-19 compliance for operating within the COVID-19 context and hygiene kits. We reached 267 328 children and 18 184 adults to protect them against the COVID-19 virus between May 2020 to February 2021, and we did this during several harsh and limiting lockdowns. The protective equipment we distributed to essential workers, children and vulnerable communities included hand gloves, face masks, sanitisers, soaps, water tanks, water purifiers and more in both homes and schools. We needed to promote that people practise safety against the COVID-19 virus, even within the confines of their homes.

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SUPPORTING FAMILY SURVIVAL

In 2019, the World Bank stated that South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world; with the COVID-19 pandemic, the divide between wealth and poverty increased. Various classes of people within our society were negatively affected by the global pandemic – people lost jobs and businesses and financial situations became harsher. Regardless of class or stature, when it comes to protecting children’s rights, many of our children are from low-income homes and have their rights violated and many of our children are from middle-income homes and have their rights violated and we are there to ensure that regardless of colour and regardless of class these children are protected.

Families battled to survive and they could not afford to feed themselves; starvation was not a choice but a daily battle. Even in their most desperate times, they could not go to the streets to beg for money in order to survive because all they would be met with were empty roads and silence. When the lockdown regulations were eased, this was still not an option because even though the roads were busier, they were met with fear.

Fear of the virus caused a rift between human connection, between wanting to help and actually helping. While many were comfortable, others were struggling and many more were desperate for survival.

Hope became a tiresome effort and desperation the most common feeling. The hungry grumbles from parents turned into the panic of starvation for their children. Malnutrition was on the rise and with the pandemic came more tragic realities – extreme suffering and even death for those who became infected with COVID-19. The South African people and government did their best to create food parcels for families throughout the pandemic, however, malnutrition, starvation and poverty are not due to the COVID-19 pandemic but have been a plague on the most vulnerable for far longer than they should have been. What is tragic is that it took a global event for us to look at our own country and our people who are living in dire situations.

Children were asked how they felt about the effect of COVID-19 on their family’s financial situation. Eighty percent of children were very worried that the pandemic would affect their family’s finances, compared to 16% who were a little worried, and 3% who were not worried at all. Children in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal were more likely to be very worried about their family’s finances compared to children in the Free State and Limpopo.

In an interview with Kathryn Cleary of Spotlight in July 2020, Dr Chantell Witten, a lecturer at the University of the Free State’s Faculty of Health Sciences, explained that poor nutrition in children under the age of two can lead to higher risks of impaired growth and development, obesity, lower cognitive development and delayed milestones as well as long-term health issues like diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

“Although South Africa experienced food insecurity even before the COVID-19 lockdown – 11% of South Africans

(about 6.5 million people) suffered from hunger – this increased significantly over the last five months as a result of measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19. During hard levels of lockdown, the Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (Crams), published in July 2020, found that 47% of adults surveyed reported that their household ran out of money to buy food in April 2020. Between May and June, 21% said that someone in the household went hungry in the previous seven days and 15% that a child went hungry in the previous week.”¹



SCSA works every day to give children a good start in life. A study in 2015 revealed that 62.1% of children (from newborns to 17 years) were multi-dimensionally poor meaning that they were being deprived of one or more of their seven basic needs, namely health, housing, education, nutrition, protection, water and sanitation. A 2020 report from Stats SA revealed that 88.4% of children in rural areas are multi-dimensionally poor and 41.3% of children living in urban areas are multi-dimensionally poor. All children, irrespective of their class or background, deserve to have their basic needs met.

SCSA reached 24 672 children and their families in five provinces with food parcels and food vouchers. Our mission was to ensure that we met the basic need of our children and their families and eased the pain of hunger for them and their families. They deserve to have specific needs met and a fighting chance at survival.

¹ <https://bhakisisa.org/article/2020-10-05-covid-19-has-increased-hunger-in-sa-so-what-works-best-to-improve-access-to-food/>

PROTECTING THE CHILDREN

At SCSA we advocate for children's voices to be heard. We have made it our responsibility to give children a good start in life, the opportunity to learn and to be protected from violence and harm.

What many people fail to notice is that there has been a pandemic for years and this pandemic has broken spirits and taken the lives of children worldwide; this pandemic is the violation of children's rights. The number of children that had traumatic experiences prior to COVID-19 was disturbingly high, and during the pandemic this increased into unprecedented numbers. Childline South Africa reported a more than 36% increase in the overall call volumes for August 2020, compared with the same month in 2019.

What we do, the rights we try to protect and the outreach programmes we put in place are solely due to the fact that the children of our country need us, they need you and for you to vicariously take action through SCSA.

Your contribution, donation, kind word or awareness for our work and organisation counts and your action will save a life, increase the quality of a life or give a life the best possible chance for survival.

"Violence against women and children in South Africa is one of the highest in the world and the child protection services are under strain," explains Steve Miller, CEO of SCSA. "We cannot keep putting a band-aid on an open wound so we have changed our strategy and we look to shift the needle on the issues of children's rights in South Africa instead of focusing on very specific parts of the country, we look to change policies to ensure accountability in our officials."

When the word *abuse* is said, people generally link it to either physical or sexual abuse and what is often neglected or seen as "less important" types of abuse are emotional and mental abuse – and this is far from the case.

One of our anonymous interviewees from our compilation for the Jozi Film Festival from the film *Pain to Ashes* was asked a question which deserved an answer of "I have never". Instead, when she was asked how old she was when she began having suicidal thoughts, she answered an astounding "14 years old".

At 14, this is a child who has not even reached the first quarter of the average lifetime, a child who had not even seen two decades, a child who has just began high school, a child who has not yet been able to experience or learn about her hopes and dreams, a child who could be any child we know, and this child wanted to end her life in a self-violent way.

This child had known she was sad throughout her entire and yet incomplete childhood, whether it was due to the fact that she had lost her mother when she was two-years-old, did not know her father and was now seen as a burden to her family that she was left with – this child was sad, crying out for help and being invalidated for sharing her cries for help. Desperate to end her life yet knowing it was not what she truly wanted, this child was invalidated and shut

down with her mental health issues, like millions of other children worldwide. This child suffered with depression, which is another pandemic that is taking over the world; this pandemic is working in a silent and deadly way.

This child grew into a woman who got the help she needed to overcome her battles, but will be left with the scars for the rest of her life. Yet her incredible strength and determination shone through when she said: "You are strong. You are capable. You know that little voice inside your head telling you to do better? Listen to it."

She goes out into the world everyday living a life that may have not existed if she was not heard, a life that would have been tragically cut short just because a voice desperate for help was silenced. She writes to herself every single day, praising and congratulating herself on her small and big victories. For mental health survivors, these small victories and small praises remind them of the life they deserve to live and almost lost due to this detrimental and "invisible" illness.

Depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and many other mental illnesses are alarmingly increasing among adults and children, even children as young as three-years-old are experiencing childhood depression¹. Children who have just learnt to walk not too long before this age and are starting to discover their emotions, are confused as all they feel are the key symptoms of depression such as extreme sadness and irritation for extended periods of time. Depression and anxiety are no longer a mental illness, but rather a permanent and common feeling shared between children and teenagers worldwide. In SCSA's Rapid Assessment Report conducted in April 2020, it was discovered that the majority of children (84%) reported feeling mostly sad over the past week, with little difference between provinces. Similarly, 79% of children felt mostly stressed over the past week.

We reached 44 children in five provinces who were referred to the organisation for mental, psychological and social support.

Through these referrals, we offer mental health diagnoses and counselling to each individual child to ensure their mental well-being is being protected and that they are getting the help they need.

The various types of abuse leave our children vulnerable. Whether a child is being emotionally abused (neglected, invalidated or dismissed when it comes to their thoughts and feelings) or physically abused, one can cause or affect the other – they are very much interlinked. Physical abuse is a violation of a child's well-being in the most direct way, the body that they use to play and hug is violated with brutal knocks, scalding burns and various other forms of abuse.

¹ <https://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/depression-children>

Sarah from Zimbabwe

Our interviewee, Sarah, from our podcast *Girls on The Move* in Southern Africa, speaks out about how she ran away from home to go across the border just to escape the physical abuse from her family members and to find peace. Sarah is now a 21-year-old Zimbabwean woman who lives in Johannesburg, South Africa. Sarah shares her story about the pain she endured both emotionally and physically.

She lost her mother when she was very young to Aids and she then needed to move in with her aunt who lived a short distance outside of the capital of Harare. Her aunt was extremely physically abusive and she would beat Sarah at any chance she could get.

"I would prefer to sleep outside than to sleep in my aunty's house." These are the heartbreaking words that came from a young woman's lips and you can hear the child in her crying through these words.

At the age of 10, her aunt went out and Sarah stole the food money for the month which her aunt would hide around the house. Sarah took the measly Z\$3 and ran away. She took a taxi into Harare not knowing where she was going or what she was going to do, only knowing that she needed to get away from the severe abuse. Sarah met other girls who lived on the street and decided to spend one night with them. And one night turned into three years.

Sarah and the other girls decided they needed to get to Johannesburg, because they were not making enough money in Harare begging and they had been told that Johannesburg was the "City of Gold". The three young girls hitchhiked to the infamous Beitbridge from Harare, a nine-hour journey to get one step closer to their freedom. The Beitbridge border from Zimbabwe to South Africa is heavily patrolled, therefore it is difficult to go undetected and making a sprint across the border could be deadly. The girls devised a plan to pretend to pick up rubbish along the bridge until they were out of sight long enough to run towards the border.

Sarah crossed the border barefoot, desperate and with nothing more than the clothes on her back in the hopes of finding a better way to survive. She felt every painful step, every harsh sprint, every pebble, every twig pushing up against her bare feet, cutting them open, all so she could be free from abuse.

We have changed the name of this child in order to protect her identity.

Sarah's story shows the severity of what abuse can do to a child's world. As a young child of 10 she believed she had no option other than to live on the streets – hungry and cold – and eventually escaped to another country rather enduring the physical abuse from a family member. It shows how children can feel so desperate, confused and misplaced that they would rather endure the pains of the world than the pains of the hand that abuses them.

We at SCSA are here to protect the dreams, hopes and spirits of our children and protect them from the harm they endure not only because that is what is right and just, not only because they deserve to have a childhood free from abuse, but also because these children we are protecting now will be the adults of the future. If we don't act now, the cycle of abuse will go through generations not because that is what the individual wants, but because that is how they have been conditioned, that is what they have been taught to do in

² <https://tears.co.za/wp-content/uploads/presentation.pdf>

³ <https://tears.co.za/wp-content/uploads/presentation.pdf>

situations that they think *requires* a form of abuse and also because that is the only way they know.

Earlier, we discussed emotional and other forms of abuse and how fragile and necessary the mental and emotional well-being of a child is to their health and security. We also discussed how physical abuse can deeply scar and affect children for the rest of their lives and the choices that they will make well into adulthood. Now let's turn our attention to sexual abuse, a horrifying reality that is not only abuse against women and children, but men as well. Sexual abuse is a form of abuse that takes away mental well-being, emotional well-being, self-confidence, trust, love and the soul of the person who has to endure such psychological and physical trauma.

For adults, sexual abuse can cause many mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In children, sexual abuse can cause many more mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), dissociative identity disorder, depersonalisation disorder, derealisation disorder, insomnia, intermittent explosive disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, eating disorders, personality disorders and substance-related disorders. That is an unbelievably long list of potential disorders the child could be left with after enduring sexual abuse of any kind and the chances are that the child will experience one or more disorders after the trauma. That is a sickeningly long list of risks that one child is exposed to after enduring sexual abuse. The reason there are so many mental disorders that could potentially come with childhood abuse is because that is the child's formative stage mentally and any trauma could stunt mental health or trigger underlying mental health issues.

Sexual abuse does not necessarily mean only *rape* because rape is not the only form of sexual abuse that can cause trauma, and it is in no way seen as worse over the other forms of sexual abuse. All types of sexual abuse are extremely traumatic, all are a massive violation of one's body, all are deeply impactful on the mind and all are violent. Sexual abuse includes groping, forced intercourse (rape), forced sodomy, forcible object penetration, sexual harassment, exposing an individual to graphic images or videos against their will, unwanted touching, forcible fulfilling of sexual favours by one individual for the other. We realise this is a difficult and explicit list to read, but words on a page for you are another person's reality.

In 2014, *Interpol* ranked South Africa as the rape capital of the world, because in South Africa someone is raped or sexually abused every 25 seconds². Within one minute at least two people are sexually abused; within one hour it is 120 people; and within one day 2 880 people at the minimum are raped or sexually abused every day in South Africa. This amounts to approximately 20 160 people a week and 1 051 202 people per year. It is estimated that a woman born in South Africa has a greater chance of being raped than learning to read. We know it is not just women and children who are sexually abused in South Africa or worldwide for that matter. A 2014 survey that was carried out in 1 in 200 schools across the country showed that two out of five South Africa male learners had been raped³. This survey was conducted seven years ago and we know the problem has not received the attention it deserves so the chances are that these numbers have increased. And with the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers have increased even more.

Kim from Alexandra

Kim is a 17-year-old girl who SCSA followed for two years because of her story. Kim is homosexual and advocates for LGBTQ rights in South Africa, a right that is greatly deserved but not protected in the rural communities. There are laws that prohibit LGBTQ discrimination in South Africa but Kim says that when you get into the communities, there are no rights for LGBTQ people. These rights are oppressed because no one is educating the people in the communities about homosexuality and sexuality in general.

Kim stays in a well-known township, Alexandra (also known as Alex) in Johannesburg where there are thousands of shacks without running water and where violence, poverty, lack of healthcare and unemployment are prevalent.

“For a girl to live in Alex or grow up in Alex I would say it is not a good thing because girls get mugged and raped in the parks in Alex,” explains Kim. “You do have to think about the threats when you are going and coming back from school because if I come late from school, I stay in the township and the school is in the suburb so I have to think: *How am I going to cross the bridge? Am I going to get mugged or something?*”

The chances of a young girl being abducted, murdered, sexually violated or raped in Alex are alarmingly high. Sexual harassment and violence in Alex have become so common that people do not see it for what it is – only that it is a part of their daily lives.

Kim struggles in her daily life not just living as a young girl in a township like Alex, but also struggling with being an open homosexual because her church and community try to change her. She has been told to pray, ask for forgiveness, dress up nicely, do her nails, do her makeup and essentially practise being a girl.

“Many young women in schools who were sexually violated in Alex, for them they do not take it as rape because they have made rape a culture in Alexandra. When you go home in Alex to tell your mom you were raped, she says *‘alright why were you using that street, next time use another street’*. Society is not supporting young girls when they come seeking help.” – Kgomotso (SCSA, Johannesburg branch).

Openness to the LGBTQ community depends on where you live. If you are living in the suburbs you are more likely to be accepted versus if you are living in the townships because there it is frowned upon and when you are open in a township such as Alex, you will get threatened with rape or violence. The concept behind raping a homosexual person is that being raped by the opposite sex will convert you to heterosexuality.

Kim attended the Pride Festival in Sandton for the first time and she expressed her overall feelings towards the day with one sentence that says it all (between her giggles): “I don’t party, I pride.”

South Africa’s crime statistics for 2018/19 showed that 114 rapes were reported each day. Of all reports of sexual abuse, 46.5% were related to children.* These numbers are alarmingly high, but they are only the tip of the iceberg because the majority of rapes and sexual abuse are not reported for fear of speaking out.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, sexual abuse, physical abuse and mental abuse against children in South Africa and around the world have increased. Due to the rising rates of unemployment and poverty and due to the lockdowns, many children were trapped with their abusers for extended periods of time.

This is not just the victim’s fight; it needs to be our fight. A human rights advocate whom we interviewed was a victim of sexual assault and she said that at the time she was too petrified to speak out. But, through her trauma she found her voice and now she advocates for human rights. She strives to help young people know and exercise their rights and through this she says: “We can rise up together”.

SCSA visits schools in impoverished communities in order to educate children through sex education talks. Through these talks we hope to educate children on how their bodies work in order for them to get a better understanding of their bodies and their rights with their bodies.

Sexual abuse is almost impossible to completely wipe out the scourge of sexual violence in South Africa, but if we as a country worked together, if you worked through organisations like us, we could drastically reduce the number of sexual abuse victims and perpetrators. Community-based and faith-based organisations were at the epicentre of support to children and their families. More than 30 community-based and faith-based organisations were equipped through a series of webinars with information on children’s rights, what violence against children is, child protection and safeguarding as well as how to identify children who are at risk.

SCSA worked with trusted community members, volunteers and child protection committee members who assisted in identifying children at risk and then referred them to SCSA and also to local municipal social workers and the police. Follow-ups and feedback were provided where it was safe and relevant to do so. The police, government and municipal social workers formed part of the child protection committee, which made referrals easier in the Alexandra and Ekurhuleni municipalities. In KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo, the child protection team worked with the network of child protection agencies such as Childline and Child Welfare. SCSA’s child protection team provided counselling services and referrals to best-placed service providers. The team received a few cases of suicide attempts as a result of sexual violence; these were referred to the police and are currently being dealt with in court and two children are currently receiving therapy from Teddy Bears Clinic and Child Welfare.

* <https://ewn.co.za/video/10529/crime-stats--an-average-of-114-rapes-reported-every-day-in-sa>

Members of child protection structures also served as the first line of support to children as someone they know or can ask questions and most importantly someone who will listen to them. The child protection team identified negative coping mechanisms or behaviours such as excessive alcohol consumption exacerbated by the lockdowns, and these cases were referred to the emergency teams who provided food packs and counselling services to the affected community members.

Children’s clubs were identified and supported through remote online platforms. Instead of finding and assisting children through school clubs, new clubs were identified in communities through community-based, faith-based and sports organisations. These clubs continue to be supported and strengthened to assume responsibility to create safe environments for themselves and other vulnerable groups, such as migrant children and children with disabilities.

More than

30 community-based

and faith-based organisations



LEARN SAFELY AND RETURN TO SCHOOL

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only take away jobs, family, friends and support structures worldwide, it took away stability that children need to grow and develop emotionally, and it took away the education they need to grow and develop mentally.

Education is an invaluable tool necessary to navigate life after school. Through education children are taught how to think and not what to think; doing this will open up their minds to let their individuality shine, to help them realise their hopes and dreams and to help them form their own values and beliefs. All of this will help them discover who they are and what their purpose is. It can begin with a simple step of discovering their favourite subjects and through this they decide on their path and their purpose. The children who are in the educational system now, the children who struggled to be educated through the pandemic are the doctors, nurses, engineers, activists, influencers and human beings of tomorrow. Our purpose at SCSA is to ensure that each child's right to education is fulfilled and protected and ensure that their future is protected and not taken away from them.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were shut down, education stalled and children sat dazed and confused on what to do and where to go next. The majority of children within the private school system and few government schools were afforded the privilege of online classes because they had access to an internet connection, laptop and cellphone. These children had an immense amount of pressure to self-motivate and self-teach themselves the knowledge they needed to pass the academic year. Parents, caregivers and teachers stated that the biggest challenge children faced was the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown on their education; their ability to make up for lost time and progress through to the next year. According to the SCSA Rapid Assessment Report compiled in May 2020, 59% of adults and 57% of children reported that they had trouble accessing educational resources and material, such as textbooks and lessons to continue their learning. In total, 94% of children were very worried about how COVID-19 would impact their education.

However, the children in some communities were not afforded the luxury of online classes and were left fully to their own devices. Information they had no knowledge on spread across the page of a textbook was a cryptic code they alone needed to work out; there were no educators to guide them; just them, their textbook and their limited knowledge. The pressure these children felt was overwhelming and caused a great deal of stress in an already stressful situation.

Closed schools in communities also meant a greater shortage of food, a higher chance for starvation or malnourishment for the child. As with most poverty-stricken areas worldwide, parents send their children to school not only for education but above all so their children can receive a meal two to three times a day, five days a week.

Schools, being overcrowded with children who had little or no knowledge of the dangers of not wearing a mask, sanitising or washing their hands, seemed like a dangerous gamble the government was not willing to take. It then came into play that the government had opened up schools once again for 2021 but the majority of the schools did not have the material readiness to reopen, meaning they did not have the means to stock or purchase sanitisers, surface cleaners or face masks to not only meet government regulations but also to protect children, teachers and staff. SCSA assisted the schools of our country to open safely. We guided them on the protocols required for reopening during the pandemic and also provided them with protective equipment (such as sanitisers, face masks, soaps and more) in order to ensure the safety of the children, teachers and staff.

What began towards the end of March 2020 as a three-week loss of education turned into a disrupted year-long process of on-again, off-again schooling. The education system has not only taken a financial blow as a whole with schools needing to shut down, but a drain on student numbers due to parents being unable to afford school fees and a loss of business sponsors due to the lack of income caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also caused mass disruption for the teachers who have had to trim down the curriculum in order for students to pass to the next grade. This means that instead of a grade 11 pupil just being able to focus on the matric curriculum for 2021, they will need to fit in both the grade 11 and grade 12 curricula in 2021.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, SCSA started a programme where we offered support and mentoring for those who came from rural areas who wanted to study a Bachelor of Education, and our intention was to allow these students to be full-time student teachers. One of our student teachers had a beautiful way of looking at the education system and how it could be moulded towards the future. She said, "South African teachers should not just teach but should make an impact. They should teach learners skills that will help them learn more throughout their life and be a role model to these learners."

During the lockdown we assisted the *MG Matsaung Centre* – a women and children shelter in Limpopo – with a brand new computer lab including several laptops. This was a key resource for the children, especially matrics, in this community as they were among the children discussed above who were left to their own devices. In the world we live in, technology is vital for education as encyclopaedias and other hard copy learning materials have become difficult to access due to fewer libraries or are outdated.

Due to the shutdown of schools during the severe lockdowns, Save the Children Global partnered with *No Kid Hungry* and had help from major A-list celebrities such as Jennifer Garner and Amy Adams for the #savewithstories movement. This was to offer story readings on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to provide fun and education to children and parents locked down at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the movement, we got the public involved to also tag Save the Children and #savewithstories to

join in the movement or donate to the cause. This cause was to ensure schools and community programmes had the support they needed to keep their minds active, learning and access to a meal every single day.

We reached 30 092 children and 885 parents in five provinces with remote educational support through provision of learning materials, access to virtual learning platforms and IEC (Information, Education and Communication) materials. A number of the children who were given data support for grade 12 virtual learnings have passed with degrees and diplomas. We did this to ensure that although the schools were shut down and the parents were at home due to the lockdowns, the children received interactive education that could stimulate their minds throughout the day and so that they could still stay on par with their schooling curriculum. Doing these small things not only ensured education, but also ensured the mental and emotional well-being of the child through an extremely uncertain time where mental health issues were on the rise and cognitive function was decreasing.

30 092

children and 885 parents in remote educational support



COMING TO SOUTH AFRICA

SCSA's focus is on the people in our country – those who were born here and those who had to flee here for safety or survival. We are here to protect the rights of the children, regardless of which country they are from, because children's rights know no borders.

Migrants including asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants and unaccompanied or separated migrant children are not a recent phenomenon in South Africa. Crossing the border from surrounding countries such as Zimbabwe or Mozambique into our country for safety has been a *flight* for survival for most of our children and their families, and here in our country they were meant to be met with open arms. Instead, the sad reality for most undocumented migrants, and even most documented migrants in the communities we work with, is that they are met with hostility, threats, violence and discrimination.

Xenophobia is known as the fear or hatred of foreigners and here in South Africa the motivation behind xenophobia is that these migrants are viewed as a burden to society by taking jobs and social benefits away from the local people.

Almost every single day, there are children who cross the border with nothing more than the promise that life on the other side is filled with hopes, dreams and stability. These children have either run away from abusive homes or lost their parents and have nowhere else to turn. When they arrive in South Africa, they have no support, they are away from home and they are at risk from not only xenophobic attacks but sexual abuse, child trafficking, exploitation and more. Most of these children cross the border without documentation and when they arrive in South Africa they often suffer exclusion from accessing basic protective services such as health and education because they don't have documents. They are homeless because they don't have family; and they are often hungry because they don't have the means to provide for themselves. These children came with hopes and dreams and they were met with a tragic reality of a lack of support, education, nutrition and abuse from a place they expected protection.

There are potentially thousands of unaccompanied and separated children every year who cross the borders from various countries into South Africa. In most cases, these children cross through irregular means such as rivers to seek refuge from the economic or humanitarian crises or violence in their country of origin. The children are in turn exposed to risks such as diseases, potential danger from wildlife such as crocodiles or potentially drowning because they cannot swim. These children are also exposed to notorious gangs waiting to assault, rob or rape them as they cross the border; and they have no second thoughts on using violence – they use rocks or other weapons to assault anyone who crosses them.

For children crossing the border from their country of origin without documents could be the only choice in order to seek asylum. For most, crossing the border into South Africa is a way to escape abuse, seek survival or work to send money home to their families for survival.

One of our interventions was for a family from Zimbabwe who told us about their harsh reality in Zimbabwe and why they fled to South Africa, undocumented. Bridget (*names have been changed to protect the identities of the families we support*) and her husband are both teachers by profession and have a family of five beautiful, young children. They were politically victimised because they were advocating for better children's rights, better living conditions and better educational standards and they were forced to seek asylum in South Africa for their family's safety. They had to leave their home so quickly that they could not gather money and they could not apply for refugee papers.

SCSA intervened and assisted this family with food and education. Bridget stated that she was so grateful for this intervention. Bridget's family is one of many families that are seeking political refuge due to the victimisation they face in their country, all because they are speaking out and calling for justice and children's rights. Due to advocating for children's rights, Bridget's family lost their own rights as they come to South Africa; they lost their right to food, they lost their right to safety, they lost their right to education, they lost their right to their heritage and they lost their right to a home. This family needed to fend for themselves and although they were an already established and stable family back in Zimbabwe they needed to start over again, they needed to live in poverty once again, but now it was in a country they did not know.

While we don't support irregular migration, it is critical to realise that seeking protection comes first for those families and children who feel their lives are in danger and need to flee in order to save their lives. Our organisation ensures that children's rights even in such circumstances remain protected and guaranteed. Undocumented migrants are in no way less entitled to human connection, support and survival. While they may not be citizens, they are here as our people now and we need to ensure and advocate for their rights.

SCSA's interventions do not discriminate on any grounds including documentation or migration status of a child. We are here to help, to give children a voice and to provide what they need for a chance at survival. We at Save the Children are here to save.

Ma Mapula

One of our most inspirational stories that we at SCSA have discovered and even submitted into the Jozi Film Festival, comes from a woman named Mapula Joyce Marudi, affectionately named *Ma*.

Ma Mapula lives in a rural community in Witveld, Gauteng. She would watch the children in her community roam around the streets and play in the rubbish dump day in and day out and she decided she had to make a change and give these children a place to learn and a place to eat. She opened up Nosa Early Learning Centre to be that place for the children in her community. Most of the children are undocumented, meaning that they do not have the right in South Africa to go to school without South African identification documents. Ma Mapula saw the need to assist the children in her community whether they were documented or undocumented as most of them had never had the opportunity to even be in a classroom. Ma Mapula educates her children to read and write; she feeds around 450 children every day, five days a week; and she gives them access to clean drinking water and sanitation areas to wash their hands.

Ma Mapula brings an energy of purity and kindness to the community. You can see her radiance as she greets the children in the mornings, her kindness as she sits with them to pray before meal times and her overall passion for what she does and how she helps with her words. The love Ma Mapula projects through her hugs with the children, her dances with the children and her conversations with the children – past and present – is a truly special and heartwarming sight to behold. Because of her, Nosa Early Learning Centre is infused with energy, love, positivity, kindness and joy. Ma Mapula, we at SCSA thank you for your kindness and for doing your part for the children of our country.



CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect families across the globe. It affects financial well-being, mental well-being and physical well-being worldwide. It is detrimental pandemic and threw the world into chaos on all fronts. It took away the basic rights of many worldwide and of all of our children and their families. SCSA fought and worked unceasingly to find new avenues that were available during the harsh lockdowns and that lined up with the new needs that families required, all to return the basic rights to our country's people.

During the pandemic, we saw an increase in, violence against children, sexual abuse against children, child labour and the risk of losing education altogether. We still need your help, in order

for us to continue reaching more families and children across the country. We need your support to fight this fight alongside us, we need you to help us make the change and we need you to be the change.

It starts with you, it goes through us and it ends with a life that has been saved, a life that stands a fighting chance at survival and a life that will be changed. A small life, just like that of your children, your nieces, nephews, brothers or sisters, a small life that deserves a chance to live and make a difference in the world.



We want to thank our donors, our sponsors, our supporters, our partners, our ground workers and you as the people of South Africa for supporting Save the Children South Africa as we continuously work to help those who need it through the continuing pandemic and the “new normal”.

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To stay up to date with our journey and what we are continuously doing to save our children follow us on our social media platforms. A follow, like, comment or share is a bigger contribution than you know for raising awareness.



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