

Save the Children Hong Kong Recommendations on the 2021-22 Budget

Save the Children's vision is a world in which every child attains their rights to a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn, protection from harm, and participation in the decisions affecting them. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a legally-binding international agreement on the rights of children, is at the heart of what we do.

Since last year, COVID-19 has brought about significant impact on children. Our research has shown the effect of school closures on children's learning. The physical, mental and psychosocial wellbeing of our children has also been threatened. In addition, the outbreak has brought about challenges to different sectors in society. Hong Kong's unemployment rate is at a 16-year high of 6.6%. This complex and uncertain situation has far reaching impacts on children's lives.

In Hong Kong, we regularly reviews policies related to children and their rights and provides recommendations to support the development of more comprehensive child-centred policies. In advance of this year's government budget, we would like to draw the Government's attention to the following recommendations.

Child Rights Governance

- Adopt transparent finance mechanisms, to enable the community to access information on how child-related government bureaus and departments allocate funding on children-related activities and how budget proposals aim to improve children's well-being and advance their rights.
- Monitor the progress of setting up a Children Central Data Bank in Hong Kong, to provide essential data to make evidence-based and informed decisions for our children.
- Organise opportunities to listen to children's ideas, experiences, and needs during COVID-19 and in general, and ensure their views and suggestions are considered in the budget formulation.

Educational Support

- Place children's educational needs as a top priority, central to the government's COVID-19 response, and take all possible measures to ensure schools are the last to close and first to reopen.
- Work closely with schools and support efforts to build capacity of teachers to incorporate adaptive and flexible online and offline learning arrangements, capturing lessons from ongoing school suspensions.
- Ensure education, both online and offline, focuses on children's mental health and well-being in addition to academic achievements.
- Implement specific policies to support early childhood education, given young children are less able to independently take advantage of and benefit from remote learning and tools.
- Provide additional support to teachers to ensure they receive adequate resources from the Education Bureau or specialised professionals to continue their work amid the crisis.
- Given the exceptional reliance of children on their parents in the pandemic context, prioritise psychosocial and material support for families in order to encourage healthy coping mechanisms and ensure adults are resourced to support their children.

Child Protection

- Put forward a comprehensive law to prohibit all corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading punishment of children in all settings.
- Establish a mandatory reporting system for all professionals that regularly interact with children, to report any level of suspected child abuse and enable immediate intervention.
- Support large-scale parent education programmes to provide appropriate guidance to parents and caregivers to increase their knowledge in nurturing their children. Mandatory parent education should be provided to high risk caregivers or those families in which abuse and neglect has already occurred.
- Implement the recommendation of the Law Reform Commission of Hong Kong to create a new offence on sexual grooming in order to protect children against online sexual abuse.
- Raise public awareness of online risks for children, providing further information for children, parents and teachers on how best to protect children from these risks.
- Create the necessary legal infrastructure to support the full realisation of the rights of the child in the digital environment.

Poverty

- Provide a special Allowance to the eligible Working Family Allowance (WFA) and student financial assistance households, to support low-income households under the deteriorating economic and employment conditions.
- Scale up the Child Development Fund to support more children from underprivileged backgrounds and to better address intergenerational poverty.
- Implement digital inclusion policies to close the digital divide to ensure all children have the information technology capacity and resources needed for full participation in education and society.

Mental Health

- Reduce the waiting time for public child psychiatric specialist outpatient services for those who may suffer from ADHD, autism, depression, anxiety disorder or other psychological illnesses.
- Ensure the supply of psychiatrists, community psychiatric nurses, and case managers are able to meet long-term manpower needs according to the guidelines of the World Health Organization, and increase the supply of educational psychologists to provide better support to students who suffer from psychological and emotional disturbances.
- Establish a coordination mechanism for teachers, social workers, and related professionals, to devise measures to support children on mental health issues, interact socially with their peers, and rebuild a sense of security and connectedness with schools.
- Provide additional training opportunities to teachers and school social workers to enhance professional knowledge in mental health to identify and support students with mental health needs promptly.

