



# **CURRENT SITUATION AND PROJECTIONS IN THE REGION REAFFIRMING THE CONVICTION AND PROMOTING PROGRESS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

By the team and the Latin American Council of RELAF

RELAF is an active organisation that promotes the exchange of information regarding the situation and the measures taken in each country of the region, provides technical support and stimulates reflection. The relevant actors of the Consultative Council that make up RELAF and the permanent presence of its specialised team in the countries of the continent and in global instances allow for the organisation to have specialised and updated information. By virtue of this, RELAF offers the international community the following analysis to facilitate the reflection and immediate action.

## **1 What is the current situation for alternative care systems in the region, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread throughout the region. Its presence **threatens to further weaken the fragile and fledgling systems** for the protection of rights and **generate setbacks in deinstitutionalisation** and guarantee of the right of family and community life of **hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents deprived of parental care** or at risk of being so in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The protection services in the region were unprepared to respond to such a complex and unprecedented sanitary crisis. We have taken note of some decisions taken, taken in the face of fear and with a lack of clarity of how to operate in this context, which are of great concern to RELAF. Among them:

- **The weakening of the presence, or absence, of the judges, public ministries or prosecutors specialised** in children and adolescents, which impedes or diminishes the specific actions required to guarantee their rights, especially the right to live in a family.
- **The closure of childcare facilities** and the abrupt relocation of children to other contexts without the necessary planning, preparation or follow-up.
- **Interruption of family bonding processes** between children in alternative care and their birth families, adoptive families or relatives.



- **The unnecessary prolongation of residential alternative care**, when the measure could cease through the definitive adoption of the child or their return to the family of origin.
- The placement of children and adolescents in fostering families **without the required evaluation and preparatory processes**.
- **The weakening or lack of monitoring, supervision and follow-up of the alternative care processes** by administrative and judicial institutions and independent human rights entities.
- **The lack of spaces for listening to and containing children** in the face of this isolating, uncertain and anguished situation which comes with the threat of this disease.
- The absence of specific protective actions that guarantee the rights of children and adolescents in migratory situations.
- **The lack of cooperation agreements and funding** for organisations that cooperate with the State in the care of children and adolescents, weakening the work of caregivers and technical teams to guarantee basic human rights like food, education and recreation of the attended population.
- **The lack of access to online education** due to the lack of technological resources for all children and adolescents who are received by the residences.
- The lack of visibility of the situation of children and adolescents in residential centres, and its **articulation with the existing health measures** for child populations in general.
- The **informal foster care** for children who lose their carers to the pandemic, ignoring the conditions in which care is being provided and omitting the need for support in these situations.
- **The absence of care policies for caregivers who**, during the pandemic, find themselves overburdened with responsibilities, significantly compromising the quality of the care that the children in alternative care receive.

Paradoxically, even with the aforementioned problems, some States in the region have found an opportunity to **improve and strengthen the standards and action procedures** and they have produced documents and guidelines that we hope will be applied in a practical manner.

For their part, the international cooperation entities, donors, and companies that support the protection of children without parental care **were also unprepared for circumstances such as these, and in many cases they are withdrawing funding from projects.**

## **2** What is the reality for children and adolescents?

The situation for children and adolescents is very delicate. **The characteristics and effects of the disease are leaving families and communities seriously damaged: thousands of deaths, collapsed health systems, damage to physical and mental health.** Measures to control the pandemic are affecting families in diverse ways, particularly those family groups that are in a situation of poverty, which can experience situations of extreme stress due to the social isolation, unemployment or decreased income, closure of schools and community containment spaces, the interruption or difficulty in accessing social programmes, mental health services, among others. **These high-stress situations are increasing the occurrence of violence, abuse -including online abuse-, trafficking, exploitation, abandonment and suicide of children and adolescents.**

In addition, **the pandemic is leaving millions of families in absolute poverty, which implies the precariousness of the living conditions of children and adolescents and the growing risk of family separation.**

In this context, and with the aforementioned weaknesses, the authorities and technical teams are making a substantial effort to sustain the services, programs and actions. Additionally, identifying, developing and implementing actions and specific responses in such a complex and unusual contingency, like that of the COVID-19 pandemic. The document **“Recommendations for the implementation of measures to guarantee the right to family and community life in the context of the pandemic”**, issued by the RELAF Consultative Council, is proving to be an important tool for decision-making by the authorities and for the operation of technical teams working to improve and strengthen it. **The fate of children and adolescents is closely linked to the capacity or inability of states and society to organise emergency assistance to families and to the community.**

## **3** In this context, what actions is RELAF implementing?

RELAF is supporting those responsible for providing the care and protection of children in alternative care, in **order to strengthen the actions that preserve the right to family and community life of children, even in this highly complex context.** That support is being directed to State protection entities, civil society organisations, small community organisations, international conglomerates, and entities that are associated with churches. All of them bring together staff with different levels of responsibility



to ensure that, during this context of emergency, childcare is maintained and assured. This staff includes, but is not limited to, **decision makers, managers, professionals from across different disciplines (social workers, psychologists, lawyers), skilled operators, volunteers, childcare workers**. RELAF is reaching, in this way, all those responsible for the wellbeing of children interested in strengthening themselves and who are in daily contact with them, assuming care and protective duties.

For this purpose, RELAF is developing the following actions with associates and partners:

- **Support for technical teams of the programs in the countries:** RELAF is supporting the installation, support and strengthening of foster care programs in Argentina (particularly in the Santa Fe and Misiones provinces), Mexico (particularly in Mexico City, Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Sonora and Tlaxcala) and Venezuela (particularly in Caracas and in the states of Miranda, Aragua, Lara, Bolívar, Táchira and Anzoátegui). Through virtual tools, RELAF is supporting the technical teams to organise care duties, providing containment, guidance and supervision.
- **Support with a regional impact:** RELAF is developing a series of webinars, the first two of which have been an open subscription: “The contingency of COVID-19 and the protection of children and adolescents in alternative care” (100 participants, 15 countries) and “Participation of children and adolescents in alternative care. Therapeutic tools for the COVID-19 contingency” (330 participants, 13 countries). The third of these, “Family and community within the framework of COVID-19”, was especially aimed at 80 members of national offices in 14 countries in the region of the global entity World Vision. The fourth webinar, “Recommendations for guaranteeing the right to family and community life in the context of the pandemic”, was held at the request of the FIO network, to support the Ombudspersons and independent human rights entities for the defense of children of Ibero-America.
- **Support for the development of a global strategy:** RELAF is actively participating in global groups to provide specific responses to the current context. From these areas, RELAF is contributing to the development of tools, such as the “Protection of children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and alternative care. Immediate response measures.” ([https://www.relaf.org/biblioteca/COVID-19%20TN\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.relaf.org/biblioteca/COVID-19%20TN_Spanish.pdf)) It is also contributing to the strengthening of the MOOC on the alternative care of migrant children (MOOC- Children on the Move <http://www.childrenon-themovemooc.com/index.php/en/>), for the incorporation of specific content to strengthen the capacity of teams, professionals and operators in this context of great technical challenge.
- **Presence in media and social media networks:** RELAF is present in the media and social media networks in specialised articles, contributing to the sensitisation of society as a whole, (<https://www.relaf.org/noticias/historial/>).

## **4 What are our predictions for the future?**

The current context not only challenges us to sustain services, programmes, and professional development, but also to identify, develop **and implement specific actions and responses** to such a complex and unusual contingency, like the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. **This current context has the potential to become a learning scenario for crisis situations that, for many reasons, are constantly emerging in Latin America: natural disasters, massive displacements, political crises that gravely affect democracy, etc.**

**In this scenario of change, new effective mechanisms with creativity and ethical responsibility must be imposed.**

**In the immediate future, it is paramount that governments, society, and the co-responsible families, with the support of organisations, international donors and companies, work to expand** the social and child protection measures; specifically, **with innovative proposals that break with the traditional way of developing said measures.** These must be developed according to the crisis and the isolated situation that children and adolescents will face for the rest of the year, considering them not as beneficiaries, but as subjects of rights, always taking into account their experiences, their voice, and their proposals.

In the mediate future, when the contingency comes to an end, **one of the great challenges the system will face will be strengthening the strategies to prevent unnecessary separation and abandonment.** Poverty is a persistent characteristic in the families of origin of children that are deprived of parental, even though poverty is not a legitimate cause of separation. It will be necessary to build comprehensive, articulated, intersectoral and timely strategies that strengthen the conditions and capacities to care of the millions of families that will find themselves in a very fragile situation after the pandemic.

**On the other hand, for the children in need of alternative care, more foster families will be needed.** The challenge will be to continue investing efforts, and installing and multiplying the programs to provide suitable alternative care **that guarantees the right of all children and adolescents to develop within a family and a community, regardless of the situation they find themselves in.**