



# Faith in Action for Children Campaign

## Our Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Report to the Arigatou International Advisory Group  
September 2020

In March 2020, Arigatou International launched a global campaign titled “Faith in Action for Children” calling on religious leaders and religious communities, as well as child protection organizations, civil society, educators, parents and caregivers to increase their actions in response to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on children. The campaign builds on the ethical imperative to come together in solidarity as one human community to protect the most vulnerable, particularly children.

Faith in Action for Children was motivated by the concern with the increasing restrictions to the enjoyment of children’s rights due to school

closures, negative socio-economic impacts on families, and surge in domestic violence; as well as with the rapid propagation of online hate rhetoric against certain groups of the population; and the shrinking of the civic space for children to participate and make their voices heard.

It is against this background and acknowledging the critical role that faith plays in emergency situations to strengthen resilience and solidarity, and respond to the needs of the hardest to reach, that Arigatou International launched the Faith in Action for Children campaign.

The purpose of the campaign is threefold:

1. Mobilize religious communities, faith-inspired organizations and child protection experts to protect children from violence and support their well-being;
2. Support parents, caregivers and teachers to foster children's social, emotional and spiritual safety and well-being during and after the lockdown;
3. Raise the voices of children and young people and create spaces for their ethical reflections on the impact of COVID-19 in the world today, and the transformations they want to see in their societies.

Rev. Keishi Miyamoto, President of Arigatou International, extended an invitation to several partners to join hands in action to support and protect children in the framework of the Faith in Action for Children campaign. KAICIID, Religions for Peace, and UNICEF, the World Council of Churches and World Vision International have responded positively to create programmatic synergies and join efforts to put children at the center of the COVID-19 response.

This report provides an overview of the resources and activities developed from March to September 2020, showcases a few examples of implementation, and presents some of the lessons learned and way forward.

## RESOURCES DEVELOPED



Arigatou International created spaces and developed a series of compelling resources to support religious leaders, communities, parents, caregivers, educators and children.

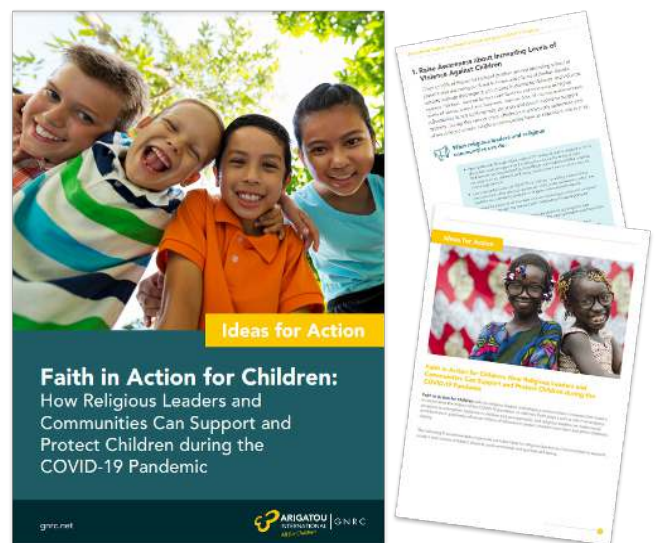
- **Faith in Action for Children: How Religious Leaders and Communities Can Support and Protect Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

This booklet contains nine recommendations for religious leaders and communities to support and protect children during the pandemic. The recommendations were developed based on the reflections shared by several religious leaders and child protection experts as part of the Campaign. They range from raising awareness about the increasing levels of violence against children, strengthening faith and interfaith collaborations, supporting parents to strengthen values and spirituality in children, to building solidarity to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable children.

Each recommendation is followed by concrete examples of actions that can be taken by religious leaders and communities.

The booklet is available in English and Spanish. It was translated in Thai by UNICEF Thailand.

Click here to download the [English](#) version.







### • 12 Messages and Actions to Ensure Children's Wellbeing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The 12 messages were developed for members of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), individuals and organizations to work towards common approaches to ensure children's well-being during the pandemic. The simple messages call for listening to children and youth, keeping with online safety, nurturing positive values within the family, fostering children's spiritual well-being, and teaching children healthy routines; as well as supporting parents and caregivers, promoting interfaith collaborations, building solidarity for the needs of the most vulnerable, and supporting efforts to ensure that children living in conflict-affected and fragile contexts are not left-behind.

The 12 messages are available in English and Spanish. They were translated into Sinhalese and Tamil by Sarvodaya Movement and UNICEF Sri Lanka, in Urdu by GNRC members in Pakistan, and in French by a Zen Buddhist group in Switzerland.

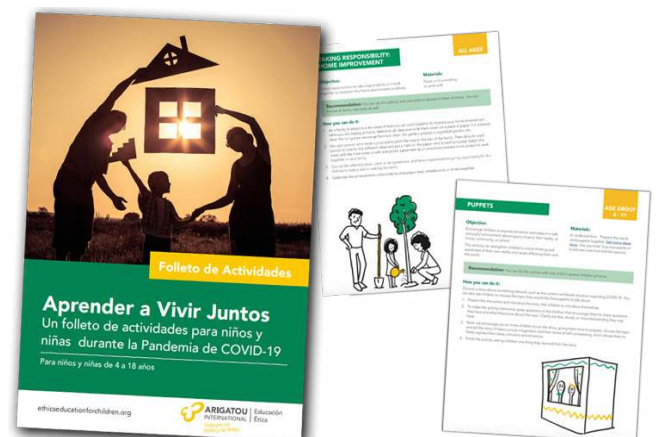
Click [here](#) to download the English version.

### • Resources for Parents and Caregivers: Learning to Live Together - An Activity Booklet for Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic

This Booklet contains 32 activities customized for children 4 to 18 years old that parents and caregivers can use to support children's socio-emotional and spiritual needs during the lockdown. Adapted from our flagship program: Learning to Live Together – An Intercultural and Interfaith Program for Ethics Education, the activities are designed to help parents and caregivers to strengthen family bonds and nurture children's spirituality. Some activities also aim for children to reflect on the current situation, develop their imagination, critical thinking, and think of concrete ways they can connect with one another, while still practicing safe physical distancing with others.

The booklet is available in English and Spanish. Requests for translations were received by World Vision Indonesia and Learning to Live Together facilitators in the Maldives.

Click [here](#) to download the English version.



- **Recommendations for parents and caregivers to nurture children's spirituality and ethical reflections during the COVID-19 lockdown**

Taking into account that some parents and caregivers do not have access or time to go through the booklet of activities, posters were developed with simple recommendations to nurture children's spirituality and ethical reflections during the COVID-19 lockdown. Some of the recommendations include helping children to reach out to family and friends, creating opportunities for them to share their feelings, and providing them with clear and simple information about the situation; as well as encouraging children to support other members of the community through activities they can do from home or while keeping physical distancing. Other messages encourage parents

to create moments for prayer or mediation and to nurture gratitude, connections and to listen to one another.

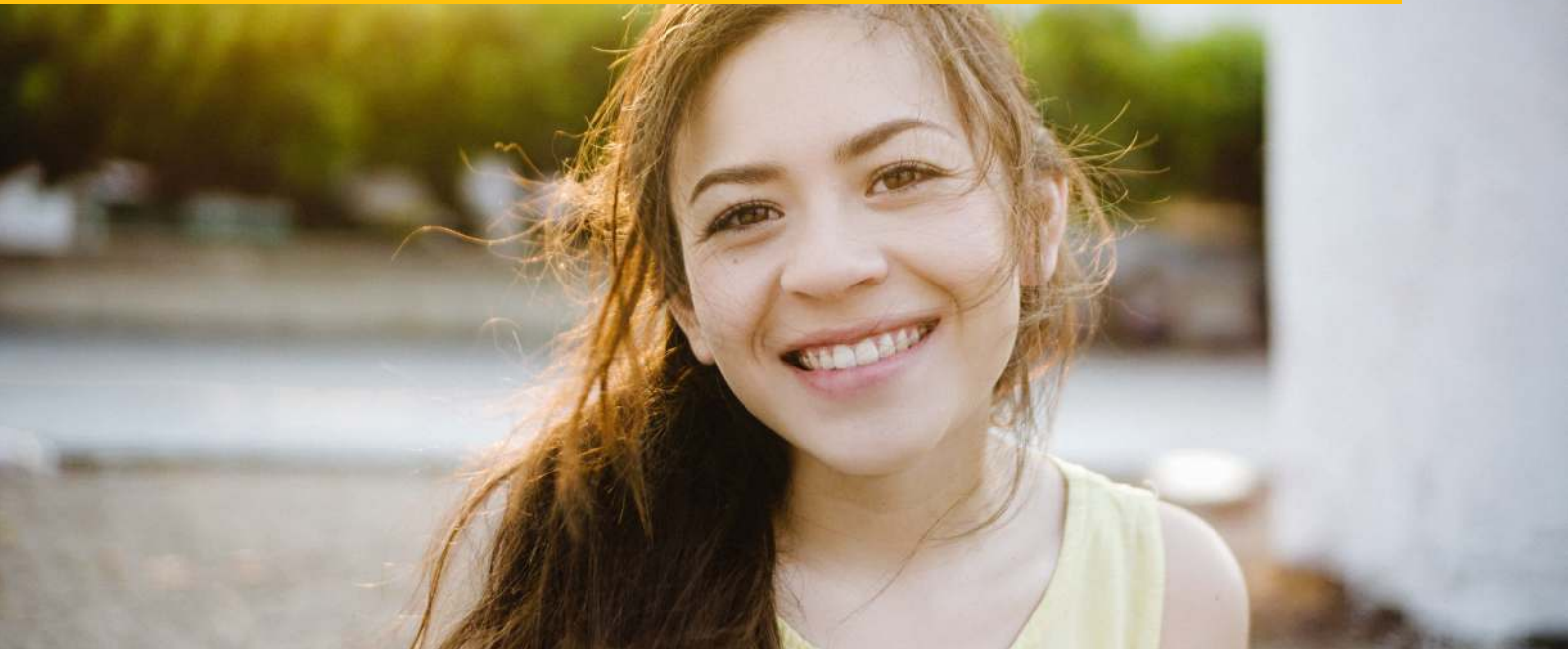
The posters are available in [English](#) and Spanish.



## 4 booklets and posters

were developed for religious leaders, communities, educators, parents, and caregivers on **how to support and protect children during the Covid-19**

## VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Children and young people have been at the core of the campaign, not only as main beneficiaries but also helping us to understand their needs and aspirations during this time. Members of the GNRC mobilized children from



**44 children and youth**

from 9 countries sent messages of hope, reaching more than **3,600 people.**

their groups to reflect on what the pandemic has been for them, share recommendations with their peers, their parents, religious leaders

and governments. We collected 44 videos of children from 10 countries that were shared in our social media and used at the national level to raise awareness among children and youth.

For instance, the GNRC Group in Chile produced 14 videos with the voices of children and youth from the Bahá'í Faith, Brahma Kumaris, several Christian denominations, Jewish and Muslim communities, under the motto "Take care of ourselves and take care of others". The series of videos were shared by the several religious communities in the country creating a chain of mutual support and hope among children and youth.

On August 12, on the occasion of the International Youth Day, we launched a call for children and youth around the world to share their views on the future, what changes they would like to see as countries start opening again and a 'new normal' start to emerge. The

responses came in the form of poems, drawings, videos and opinion pieces from children and youth in more than 15 countries. The call is still open in September and responses from children will serve as preparation for upcoming activities within the campaign.

Through the different submissions, children expressed their sadness and frustrations, but also their excitement to see their friends again and go back to their schools, faith communities and volunteer activities. Lamija, 16 years old from Bosnia & Herzegovina, highlighted in her article when talking about the cancellation of her graduation party: 'I feel like a part of our youth was taken from us'. While Carlos, 15 years old from Nicaragua, shared: "I really miss getting

together with my friends from church. What I would like to do the most when this situation improves is to celebrate with underprivileged people, having lunch or something that brings joy. In the future, I see people being more careful and grateful with God..."

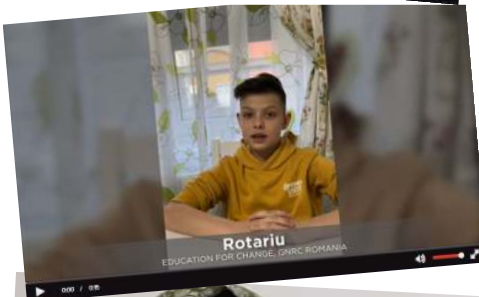
Children and youth also called adults to leave behind greed and selfishness, to work together with others, prioritize education, prevention of violence, the needs of children and youth, and single mothers, and taking care of our planet. They expressed their hope for a better future and governments' joint leadership.



"I would like to see real solidarity in the world. I know that it won't be in the whole world but I would like human solidarity to reign in several communities, hoping that it will spread later in other communities, so we can really care about things like educate those who are not in school, helping single mothers who have no means, or are victims of violence... Unfortunately some countries neglect it however these things must be priorities and give hope to humans who suffer."

**Nawar, 17 years old, India.**





“One thing that needs to be considered here is the cleanliness of our planet. Various scientists have proclaimed that this virus has spread because of dirtiness and depletion of natural resources... We should clean our surroundings and our home....”

Karandeep,  
19 years old, India.

“In the future, I hope people can hug each other, kiss each other, play football, return to school, play games...”

Miguel,  
7 years old, Brazil.

“My expectation for when this pandemic ends is that people will help each other without expecting receiving something in exchange after helping someone.”

Vinicius,  
11 years old, Romania.

“When the world remains crippled, it is the duty of us as youngsters to understand what we need. All that I wish for at the first place is a world where peace prevails. Where we have the strength to overcome pandemics and crises. As said by Tagore, ‘where the mind is without fear and the head is held high’. Where people stay unbreakable amidst divisive mentalities.”

Aditya,  
18 years old, India.

“My hope is that we can find a vaccine because all countries are working together bringing unity. My hope is that with this coronavirus, they will learn to work together bringing more unity.”

Gabriel,  
6 years old, Brazil.





### Une jeunesse apeurée.

Cette once d'espoir ;  
Une arme incontournable, vigilante ;  
Ce chemin de désespoir,  
Cette route glissante.

C'est dans ce monde rempli de rancœurs  
Oh toi pandémie,  
Que tu décides de briser des cœurs .  
Hélas ! tu n'as point d'amie.

Elle montre malgré sa faiblesse ;  
Ses idées et son rêve de demain ;  
Pauvre jeunesse !  
Lèves-toi et lèves haut la main.

Sous l'emprise des bombes ;  
Tu ne nous a point épargnés ;  
Tu as fait des hôpitaux, des tombes ;  
Tu veux à tout prix gagné.

Jeunesse, lèves-toi et bats-toi,  
Rêves d'un monde de couleur et de liberté;  
Je lutterai pour toi ;  
Tu es priorité .

## VOICES OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS



An important component of the campaign was to mobilize the voices of religious leaders to promote physical distancing practices, call upon the prioritization of children's needs in their communities, and provide messages of hope and solidarity.

These messages in the form of videos and written articles, were part of a communications campaign to reach religious communities around the world, building on religious leaders' moral authority and capacity to influence millions of followers.

During this period, more than 30 videos and written articles were collected. In Latin America, 15 religious leaders, members of the GNRC and from different religious denominations, shared their reflections calling for following recommendations of hygiene and physical

distancing; and drawing on their faith to provide advice to their community members to use this time at home to strengthen family relations and protect children from violence.

All messages can be found on our [COVID-19 Response page](#).



## Faith in Action for Children

sending a message to raise awareness about the importance of listening to the voices of children, and of caring, protecting and empowering them **during the COVID-19 Pandemic**



## INTERFAITH PRAYER WITH CHILDREN



The Interfaith Prayer online, held on 22 April, brought together children and religious leaders coming from the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and the Sikh Faith. In a powerful spiritual moment we came together to pray for the most vulnerable, particularly children, during this difficult time. Children led us in reflection, unity and solidarity together with religious leaders. The Interfaith Prayer ended with a message of healing and with renewed hope to work together with children to create a more inclusive and just world.

The Interfaith Prayer was organized in collaboration with the Bahá'í International Community, the Centre for Sustainable Conflict Resolution, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, Islamic Relief worldwide, the International Centre for Interreligious and

Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), the New York Board of Rabbis, Pastoral da Criança, Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Shanti Ashram, and United Religions Initiative.

The Interfaith Prayer with Children was viewed by more than 5,300 people around the world.

Click [here](#) to view further details about the Interfaith Prayer and the recording.



**5,460 people**

were reached by the  
**Interfaith Prayer with Children  
and Religious Leaders in the  
Wake of the Global COVID-19  
Pandemic**

**12** out of 25  
speakers  
were  
**children**



coming from the Bahá'í Faith,  
Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism,  
Islam and Judaism

## REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN



Spaces were created for partners, child protection practitioners, educators, and members of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) to share reflections about children's well-being; the impact of the pandemic on children and in their particular communities. The articles aimed to get a grassroots perspective and insights about the situation for children in different contexts.

Click [here](#) to read some of the articles.

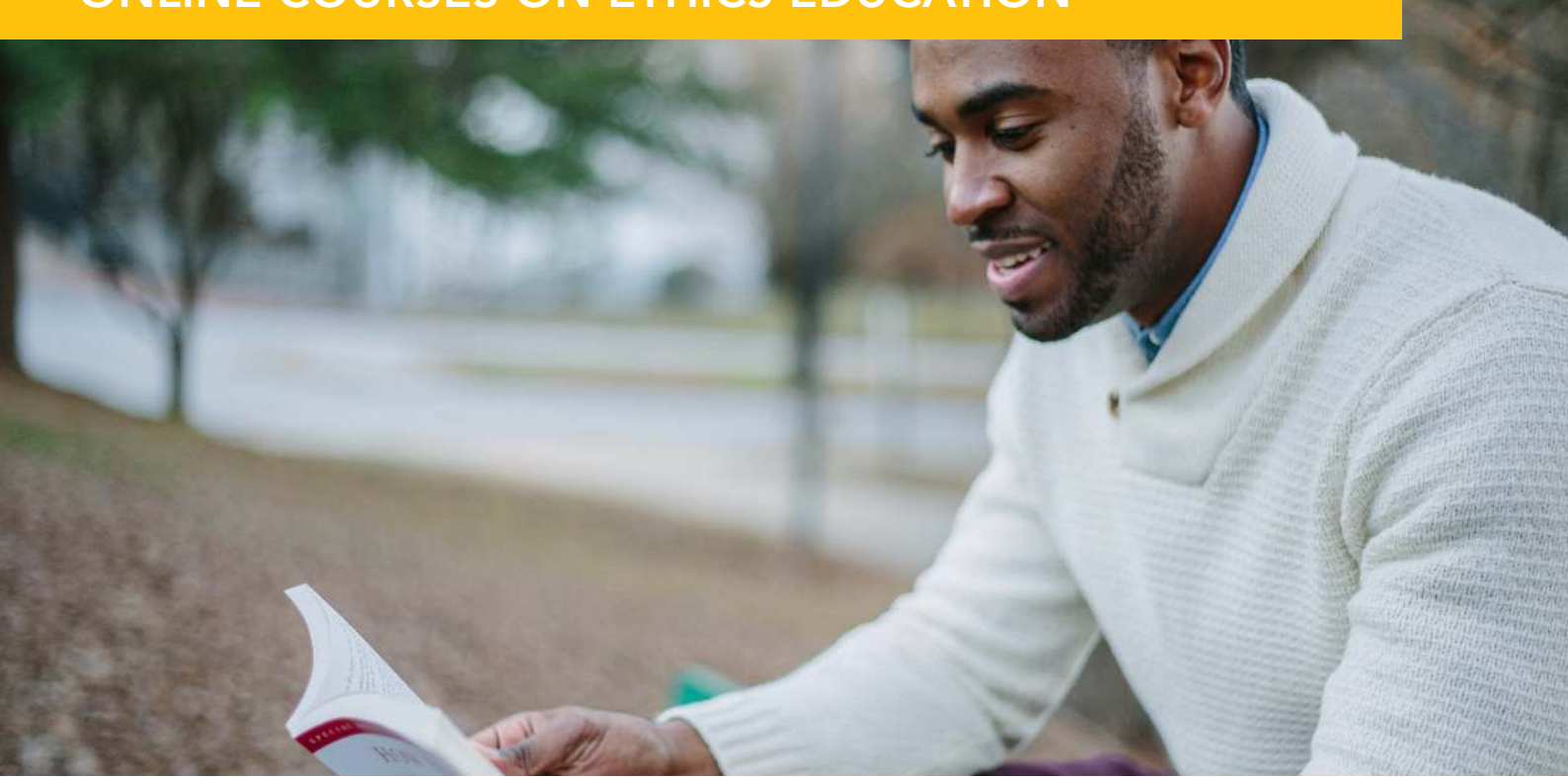


**12 thought  
leaders**

shared their views and  
reflections on this global crisis,  
and on **how faith communities  
can help ensure children's  
wellbeing**



## ONLINE COURSES ON ETHICS EDUCATION



Three online courses on Ethics Education for Children – A Transformative Pedagogy for Learning to Live Together, have been developed to support teachers to create safe, positive and empowering learning environments for children and young people during and after the lockdowns. The course explored how educators can respond to the social and emotional well-being of learners, while using online and face to face participatory methodologies, and provided them with tools and materials to help strengthen the spiritual awareness and development of children, particular in times of distress, anxiety and uncertainty.

The three online courses, two in English and one in Spanish, received more than 600 applications from 69 countries. The first course held in June received very positive feedback from participants and was rated 3.63 in a scale 1- 4, with a high rate for the quality of the learning

content and overall satisfaction with the course. The second course in English was launched in August and will finish during the second week of September, and the one in Spanish will start at the end of September.

The courses included online content materials, interactive forum discussions, and webinars with experts to discuss the ethical challenges posed by the pandemic and its implications for children and youth. Participants explored and reflected on the role and influence that educators and school actors have in protecting children, helping them flourish, and providing opportunities for them to contribute to the transformation of their societies. They shared situations and case studies of children affected by violence at home, victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, children with disabilities, and the challenges connecting children with no Internet access or to a computer. They discussed ways to



**620**  
**educators**  
**from 69 countries**  
registered for our  
**three**  
**online courses on**  
**Ethics Education**  
**for Children**  
in English and Spanish

support those in most vulnerable situations and ways to connect with child protection experts as well as religious communities. Participants reflected on the critical need for education to support children's interconnectedness with others, with nature and the world, as well as to provide spaces and opportunities to strengthen their hope, trust and faith in humanity.

Participants came from as diverse contexts as Ivory Coast, Niger, South Africa, Bhutan, Australia, United Kingdom, United States, Romania, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Mexico, among many others. The participants were teachers from public and private schools, staff from ministries of education and civil society and faith-based organizations, as well as members of religious communities. The course was built based on the 17 years of experience of Arigatou International promoting ethics education for children to foster intercultural

and interfaith learning. The courses are free of charge and self-paced giving the opportunity for many who would not, otherwise, have the opportunity to access this kind of learning opportunities, resources and networking.

“

“This online course is an appropriate platform especially during this pandemic when we are left with confusions. I consider it as the need of the hour. We have many colleagues who are also in dilemma like us, waiting for ways to reach out to our children. The approaches introduced to us will definitely help us to plan and execute our programs better than before.

It will add effectiveness to any interactions or Programs with children. At present, the online teaching and learning has become very difficult because of many reasons. There are children who seek suggestions of what they should do because they cannot concentrate on studies. They also share concerns about family violence as a result of which studying has become almost impossible. So in such cases, we need to move from vertical to horizontal relations and teaching. Furthermore, we need to help create connections, providing opportunities for them to talk about their feelings, fears, challenges to strengthen their faith and hope.”

**Tshering Ihm, Bhutan**

**ARIGATOU** | Ethics Education  
for children

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PROMOTE ETHICS EDUCATION GET TRAINED KNOWLEDGE CENTER DONATE LTL70YEARS

**Online Course for Educators**  
Ethics Education for Children: A Transformative Pedagogy for Learning to Live Together  
Our Response to Support Educators during COVID-19 Pandemic

Welcome!  
The course is now open and you can access sessions 1-3 below.  
We look forward to your active participation.

**SESSION 1**  
Introduction and Context  
[VIEW SESSION 1](#)

**SESSION 2**  
Creating Safe Learning Environments  
[VIEW SESSION 2](#)

**SESSION 3**  
Ethical Challenges during COVID-19 & implications for Children and Youth (\*Webinar)  
[VIEW SESSION 3](#)

**SESSION 4**  
Transformative Pedagogy: An Ethics Education Approach (\*Webinar)  
[VIEW SESSION 4](#)

**SESSION 5**  
Children and Youth as Agents of Positive Change  
[VIEW SESSION 5](#)

**SESSION 6**  
The Educators' Role in Empowering Children  
[VIEW SESSION 6](#)



## WEBINARS



Arigatou International, through its different offices, have organized a series of webinars on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's rights and their well-being, particularly looking at the role of faith communities.

Four webinars, three in English and one in Spanish, have been organized to discuss with experts issues related to the violation of children's rights during the pandemic, child dignity online, and the importance of scaling up social protection for economic recovery post COVID-19 and the impact on children. The webinars have brought together a wide range of partners: the Special Representative to the UN Secretary General on Violence against Children, the Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the founder and former Founding Director of the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, Save the Children, World Vision International, child protection

experts, religious leaders, representatives of faith-based organizations and networks, as well as several GNRC member organizations.

These webinars have provided important insights into the severity of the secondary impacts of COVID-19 on children, particularly exacerbating violence against children, and making more visible the underlying structural issues that deprive children and youth from a sound and healthy development. The role of faith communities have been discussed from practical perspectives but also providing forward-looking reflections and recommendations to strengthen the engagement of religious leaders at the core of the COVID-19 global response.

### Regional Webinars

As part of the efforts to showcase how GNRC members and other partners are supporting, protecting and empowering children and

youth during the Pandemic, a series of regional webinars are being organized in collaboration with KAICIID and regional partners.

The first two webinars, focused on Asia and Europe, explored the impact of COVID-19 on children in terms of child poverty, threats to child survival, heightened risks on child safety and the intensification of the learning crisis. Panelists presented examples of partnerships between civil society organizations, religious communities and governments. They highlighted the exacerbation of stigma and discrimination against minority groups, and pleaded for the most vulnerable, particularly children under institutional care, children living with HIV, and those in extreme poverty. Panelists also shared innovative ways faith communities are responding to the needs of children by adapting child-friendly services online, informing parents how to protect children from online exploitation, promoting helpline centers, and using radio, television and WhatsApp to reach out to the most vulnerable. They advocated for listening to the voices of children and youth, for interfaith and intergenerational support groups as well as strengthening the spiritual resilience of children.

These webinars have also been an opportunity to listen to the voices of children and youth, as they have also been panelists in each of the webinars, providing their insights into their lives and the lives of their peers, and recommendations to adults, governments and religious communities. Their voices have provided a missing narrative in the COVID-19 analysis and reminded us that our response should not just tackle the immediate consequences of the pandemic but look into their future and the transformations

that are needed to create more inclusive and peaceful societies.

### **Webinars for GNRC members**

Two webinars were also organized in May by the GNRC office in collaboration with the other initiatives to introduce the Faith in Action for Children Global Campaign to its members. The webinars in English and Spanish brought together more than 100 GNRC members from all regions.

Click on the links to view the recording in [Spanish](#) and [English](#) and the Presentation of the Campaign in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

More information about the series of webinars can be found [here](#).

Members of Arigatou International were also invited to present the Faith in Action for Children Campaign on several opportunities, providing space to reach out to broader audiences outside our GNRC network and traditional partners.

Webinar Title	Organized by	Audience & Reach
The Role of Faith Communities in Protecting Children during and after the Pandemic, 24 July	Programa Centralidad de la Niñez – Inter-institutional program between the Latin American Episcopal Council, World Vision Latin America, Fe y Alegría International Federation, Pastoral da Criança International.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faith-based organizations and child protection organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean</li> <li>201 participants</li> <li>2,100 Facebook views</li> </ul>
Transforming Parenting Mindset in Bhutan, 28 June	Part of a series of webinars for the Project Chikhar - “Eliminate violence against children at home”, an initiative supported by UNICEF Bhutan, Youth Advocacy Network of Bhutan, and Bhutan Youth Development Fund, GNRC member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents and caregivers</li> <li>90 participants</li> <li>2,900 Facebook views</li> </ul>
Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse and Online Exploitation in the Wake of COVID-19: An Open Discussion from Pakistan, 23 June	Search for Justice, Pakistan, GNRC member, together with the Child Protection & Welfare Bureau – Government of the Punjab	Policy makers, civil society organizations, child protection organizations 130 participants 2,300 Facebook views
Children on the Move: Faith in Action, 4 May	Faith Action for Children on the Move Coalition and KAICIID	Faith-based organizations 70 participants
The Emotional and Spiritual Impact of COVID 19 on Children, 23 April 2020	International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN)	Child-protection experts 370 participants from 71 countries





**638 participants**

joined the **series a seven webinars** organized together with 24 partners.

**7** out of 26  
speakers  
were  
**children  
and youth**



Coming from the Bahá'í Faith,  
Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism,  
Islam and Judaism.

## MULTIPLYING EFFECT



The Faith in Action for Children campaign has inspired and sparked a diverse set of actions in several faith communities, GNRC groups, and partners, as well as by educators and individuals. In addition to some of the examples provided throughout these report, more concrete examples are presented in the Report of the GNRC on the Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The following are video clips developed as part of the Faith in Action for Children Campaign that present three examples of how GNRC members are implementing some of the key messages and recommendations from the Campaign, articulated through their programmatic activities.

Shanti Ashram, India. Shanti Ashram organized a series of activities to support children during the lockdown, including drawing, awareness raising and opportunities to keep children

connected during the lockdown. See video clip [here](#).

GNRC Mexico. Members of the GNRC developed a resource kit for families based on routines that generate emotional and spiritual stability. The GNRC Committee has been using virtual media to carry out educational processes, such as virtual meetings on ethics education to strengthen children's resilience and spirituality. Webinars were held to prevent violence in the home and accompany parents and caregivers in raising their children. See video clip [here](#).

GNRC Pakistan. Some of the members of GNRC Pakistan collected food donations for children in the most vulnerable situations; they organized workshops for families to raise awareness about the protection of children and youth, by using the campaign posters to promote concrete recommendations for parents and caregivers to support their children. See video clip [here](#).

## LEARNINGS GAINED



Putting together the Faith in Action for Children campaign across different Arigatou offices in a very short period of time was challenging but also brought with it the beauty of collaboration, of coming together for a common cause, and helped creating synergies among the different offices. This is the most tangible internal result of the development of the campaign, which has helped bridging communication gaps between offices, strengthening common thematic areas of work, and joining human and financial resources to respond in more strategic ways. This has contributed to the growth of the organization in terms of visibility, recognition but also in terms of benefits for the people we serve.

As the campaign was conceived mainly as an initiative to advocate for the well-being of children and youth during the pandemic, through common messages, learning resources

and online opportunities, measuring impact on communities and particularly children is still difficult to measure. However, there are lessons learned and insights gained through the constant interaction online with the people we serve, the engagement of children and young people, and the spinoffs of the campaign at the national level. The following gives an overview of those lessons learned and provides reflections on unique potential opportunities for Arigatou International to strengthen the response for children and youth.

### **The intrinsic nexus between development and humanitarian work**

A general concern shared by all members of the GNRC in Latin America and the Caribbean is how to ensure the sustainability of interventions



in the medium and long term, beyond specific actions that require immediate response to the public health emergency and needs of children. The same can be said from the several requests received across our network of GNRC members and other partners, even in the Global North, asking for support to donate education equipment such as tablets or computers, or provide food rations for the most vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly shown the siloed approach between the humanitarian and development response, as well as the lack of analysis on the impact on peace building, particularly in fragile contexts.

Latest reports by UNICEF and Save the Children estimate that the ongoing crisis could increase the number of children living in monetary poor households by up to 117 million by the end of the 2020; it has also warned that an additional 1.2 million children and 56,700 mothers could die in 6 months due to disruption in basic interventions, based on the worst-case scenario, and that as many as 132 million people may go hungry in 2020, of that 36 million children and 370 million children may miss out on nutritious school meals.<sup>1</sup> Children risk missing out on growth monitoring, preventive care, and timely management of acute disease and injuries. Some children are experiencing reduced access to social service referrals while suffering from increased rates of domestic violence <sup>2</sup>.

Even though the COVID-19 crisis has provided opportunities to advance peace, the responses

have also exacerbated the underlying roots of conflict, particularly inequality. In some places, this means violence is being reignited and peace processes threatened <sup>3</sup>. The impact of COVID-19 is also reversing the development progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and having a devastated impact on children and youth. This calls for more concerted actions and holistic approaches that transcend the divides between different kinds of responses that address both the immediate needs and the long-term consequences in societies.

Whilst Arigatou International focuses its work on development and peacebuilding through its initiatives, the current pandemic has proved that efforts need to be made to connect our work with humanitarian responses, as well as to strengthen the nexus with peace building. What does this mean for our work on ending child poverty, the prevention of violence against children and education for learning to live together with others? How does this change the way Arigatou International has or has not traditionally responded to humanitarian crises? How can Arigatou International's unique approach to mobilize faith communities and child protection experts be capitalized and strengthened to address the economic fallout and negative impact on social support systems due to COVID-19?

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1 UNICEF. Children in Monetary poor households and COVID-19. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-in-monetary-poor-households-and-covid-19/>

2 Peterman A, Potts A, O'Donnell M et al. Pandemics and violence against women and children. Center for Global Development, Washington, DC2020.

3 COVID-19 and the impact on local peacebuilding. Peace Direct.





## Children's agency and empowerment

The COVID-19 Pandemic has shown the critical importance of citizens empowerment to be able to cope with the challenges of physical distancing, to absorb and decide on the rapid and increasing flow of information; to make individual decisions that can impact their safety and the safety of others; as well as people's ability to hold and affirm each other's lives in the midst of increasing violation of human rights, restriction of fundamental freedoms, and exacerbation of inequities, particularly for minority groups and underprivileged communities.

This imperative need for citizens empowerment is even more relevant for our children and youth today. The unprecedented closure of schools and the transition now to adopt online or hybrid modalities of learning, make children more vulnerable to online risks, including among others, cyberbullying and exposure to online hate speech. Children's capacity to

navigate complex virtual realities, competing, and at times, divisive narratives and interactions is critical for their sound development. The several discussions with experts on child protection, children and youth, religious leaders, as well as with educators, parents and caregivers demonstrate the importance of equipping children with critical thinking skills, knowledge and tools to learn to make ethical decisions and relate to one another in empathic and respectful ways.

As a 'new normal' is created in societies, children and youth need to be empowered to contribute to the transformation of their communities. Their voices, ideas, aspirations, needs and dreams need to have more space and weight in decision-making, policies and new responses emerging from the COVID-19 crisis. In an adult-centered world, children's empowerment is paramount to develop more inclusive and peaceful societies.

Faith communities, faith-based organizations and schools have an important role to play in

expanding the opportunities for children to participate, for their voices to be heard, and their ideas to be taken into account. How can Arigatou International contribute to strengthen the role of children and youth in the transformation of societies? What kinds of partnerships are required and what role can faith communities and education play to bring children and youth at the center of the post COVID-19 response?

### **The spiritual well-being of children**

Arigatou International's approach to working with and for children is centered in their spiritual well-being and development. Several of the resources developed during the pandemic have focused on providing tools for parents, caregivers and educators to support the social, emotional and spiritual well-being of children.

The changes in children's routines, the disruption of school, the stress caused to some by violence in the virtual learning environment or to others by the lack of access to the Internet or to a computer; the lack of participation in significant life events: celebrations, vacations, informal reunions with friends, religious community activities, or inability to say goodbye to family and friends who have passed away; the increasing stress and domestic violence at home; and for millions around the world, the loss of food security and access to health services, create uncertain, unsafe and deprived environments for children and youth.

At Arigatou International we have realized through the interactions with children during this time, the importance of creating spaces for them to share their feelings, to feel connected

with one another, to strengthen their sense of purpose and belonging not just to their family and society but to a global community; and to strengthen their sense of gratitude, and restore their trust and hope for the future. The spaces we have created have shown that it allows children to channel negative emotions into hope and solidarity with others; it provides them with a platform to connect with others, and for their opinions and ideas to be valued and respected.

"...It was fine, but with every day that passed, I started to miss my friends and family very much, I missed playing sports, going out, shopping and even school- and things were getting worse. I realized that all my plans were cancelled: the festivals I was planning on going, the trips with my friends, the birthday parties, the volunteering activities, the holiday with my family... I decided that I have to adapt, I have to remain positive and try to see the good things, to think about the future and organize a routine..." Amalia, 16 years old, Romania

Through our online courses with educators we have learned about the multiple difficulties children experience in many locations around the world, and how unprepared teachers are, as educators but also as parents, to respond to the social and emotional needs of children, particularly through remote learning. Teachers expressed their difficulty in pursuing the curriculum they are meant to deliver when children are deprived of social stimuli or are victims of violence at home. They lacked training and tools to support children's engagement and address the instability and social and emotional upheaval children go through.



UNICEF has recommended to develop community-based policies, programming and services to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children; as well as increasing public and private investments in mental health and psychosocial services and programs for children and young people, especially in low-resource settings <sup>4</sup>.

The focus on the spiritual well-being of children is often not considered in education or social protection programs. However, studies have shown that spirituality contributes to strengthen people's resilience <sup>5</sup> and can be considered as a critical aspect in the response to the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of children. Arigatou International has developed expertise on the spiritual development of children for many years. During the pandemic it has become more relevant than ever before

to equip adults to help children go through the multiple challenges they experience by providing them with tools and opportunities to remain positively connected to themselves, others, nature, their own faith, and with that that grounds them and lifts them up in difficult times.

There is an opportunity for Arigatou International to upscale the work in fostering the spiritual well-being of children. How can this critical component of children's development be brought to the forefront of the international response to support children? How can the work of faith communities in providing spiritual support to children and youth be strengthened and further supported?

4 UNICEF, COVID-19 is hurting children's mental health. Here are 3 ways we can help <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/covid-19-is-hurting-childrens-mental-health/>

5 Foy, David & Drescher, Kent & Watson, Patricia. (2011). Religious and spiritual factors in resilience. Resilience and Mental Health: Challenges Across the Lifespan. 90-102. 10.1017/CBO9780511994791.008.





## The ever more demanding role of faith communities in ending violence against children

Domestic violence and violence against children have increased during the lockdowns. The COVID-19 prevention measures have abruptly cut children off from positive and supportive relationships they rely on when in distress, including at school, in the extended family, and in the community <sup>6</sup>. Children's rights have also been compromised in both high and low income countries.

Recalling the Panama Commitments on Ending Violence against Children, Arigatou International, through the GNRC, has been raising awareness about the different types of violence against children, the violation of children's rights and the risks that children face now but also

the impacts on their future. Members of the GNRC have been working in their communities in training parents and caregivers to protect children and youth, developing child protection mechanisms, and equipping faith communities to support families and children.

Through the online courses on ethics education for children, we have equipped educators on how to develop safe environments for children for them to be protected not just physically but also socially, emotionally and spiritually. Educators have shared the difficulties addressing violence against children in their communities when children are in confinement, as well as communicating with parents to promote positive ways to deal with children. Faith communities have been identified as key allies in addressing domestic violence,

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<sup>6</sup> The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, End Violence Against Children, UNICEF, WHO, COVID-19: Protecting Children from Violence, Abuse and Neglect in the Home, Version 1, May 2020 <https://www.unicef.org/media/68711/file/COVID-19-Protecting-children-from-violence-abuse-and-neglect-in-home-2020.pdf>



providing counselling to families, promoting child protection tools; raising awareness in their communities, and serving as referrals to protect children from harm. This role is not new for religious communities and religious leaders, but the current situation and the devastating impacts on children's well-being, require them to become more active, responsive and equipped.

What else can Arigatou International do to reach more religious leaders and communities around the world? How can the great work initiated in Panama during the Fifth Forum of the GNRC, and that has ignited a movement of faith communities and leaders to end violence against children, be given more impetus and further support now?

## The transformative role of education

Through the online courses on ethics education and transformative pedagogy conducted for educators, we have seen an overwhelming response to receive more knowledge, tools and resources. Participants, as well as experts invited to the webinars during the online courses, have also shared the demand for education to become more responsive to the needs of children and youth, to prioritize children's social and emotional well-being, and change its focus on examinations to foster education of the heart and relational well-being.

During the online courses, educators expressed the importance for education to be seen as part of and connected to the community; they expressed the disconnect between what children learn, what they value, what

they experience, and their realities; they also expressed concern with the widened digital divide, affecting those already at the margins, and the role of education in fostering inclusion.

Education has a powerful role in helping children transcend some of the challenges they are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as it is an important tool to empower children and youth to develop the competencies needed in an interconnected and yet fragile world. Ethics Education for Children is an approach to education that empowers, connects, and helps building children's capacity to work collaboratively with others across religious, ethnic and socio-economic divides. How can Arigatou International work with other stakeholders more prominently to help transform education and promote the critical role that education plays in the post COVID-19 reality?

## SECOND PHASE OF THE FAITH IN ACTION FOR CHILDREN CAMPAIGN



### Children's Summit

As the world struggles to adapt to the challenging circumstances, people and communities in different parts of the globe continue to reflect on how best to respond to the multiple effects of the pandemic. There is an ethical demand for all of us, children, young people and adults alike, to help develop a 'new normal' where human rights and the dignity of each and every human being are affirmed. A world that responds to the needs, dreams and hopes of children and young people. A world that leaves no one behind.

The discussions and reflections about the impacts of COVID-19 on the world and the implications for our future, would be incomplete if children's voices are not heard and if they are not fully engaged in the discussions to propose new alternatives and work on the solutions. This is the purpose of the Children's

Online Summit to be held between 16 to 20 November, organized by Arigatou International, in collaboration with several partners, as part of the Faith in Action for Children Campaign.

An intergenerational and interreligious dialogue on the future we want to see can serve as a platform for reflection and sharing and also as an opportunity to identify common actions and joint projects.

Objectives of the Children's Online Summit

1. Engage in dialogue between children and adults representing different sectors of society about the situation of children in times of COVID-19
2. Discuss the measures needed to address the underlying issues that impact children's well-being, and the role of each stakeholder

3. Identify coping mechanisms that children, young people, adults are using to tackle the negative impact of the crisis while working for the wellbeing of children and their communities
4. Highlight inspirational stories and interfaith actions carried out by children, young people, adults, religious communities and faith-based organizations working for the well-being of children and their communities
5. Identify recommendations and actions that can help foster the physical, socio-emotional and spiritual well-being of children and their communities, and enhance their participation in matters that concern them
6. Lead to a Call to Action recalling the Panama Commitments.

The event will focus on Arigatou International's three priority areas addressing children's rights and wellbeing in the light of the Faith in Action for Children Campaign to protect, support and empower children during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The event will culminate with the celebration of the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children on 20 November.

The event will take place in the form a conference that offers different participation opportunities including panel discussions, workshops, debates, regional interfaith prayers, and other formats, including child-led sessions.

## CONCLUSIONS



During this time when people have been forced to isolate themselves, when life has become so vulnerable for each and everyone, and when the foundations of our life in community have been shaken by measures of physical distancing, fear of the other, and restricted geographical boundaries, faith becomes more important than ever. Faith in humanity and in one another, and our capacity to move beyond fear to engagement, caring and solidarity, are critical to respond to the many challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has posed in the short, medium and long-term, particularly on our children.

Arigatou International, through its Faith in Action for Children Campaign, has become more aware of the critical role that people of faith have in responding to the current situation;

we have also become even more cognizant of their role in transforming our societies. The innumerable consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the way societies interact, people connect, children grow and learn, are still to be seen and understood. We know that the economic fallout will have great consequences in peoples and societies, particularly in the global south and in the most vulnerable, transforming communities and creating more pressure on the need to improve social protection systems and develop community-based approaches. Interfaith collaboration and action is now more critical than ever, as it is the need to mobilize a collective leadership and develop a moral imagination that can help us transform our societies together for the well-being of our children.