

Leaving no child behind: responding to child health needs throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic



April 2020

As COVID-19 continues to affect countries throughout the world, straining health systems, economies and creating uncertainty and anxiety for all, child health is in danger of slipping under the radar. In a recent report published by the UN, it is expected that child health services in developing countries are likely to be neglected as governments focus on COVID-19 treatment, while reduced household income caused by the ongoing pandemic will force families to reduce essential health and food expenditure. This is likely to push an estimated 42 – 66 million children worldwide into extreme poverty in 2020.



This is especially true in Cambodia where, despite there only being 122 confirmed COVID-19 cases to date, the effects of the pandemic are being felt throughout the country as uncertainty continues to decimate Cambodia's essential tourism and garment industries. With a third of the population (or 4.5 million people) living just above the poverty line, millions of children in Cambodia remain vulnerable to falling into poverty, impacting not only short-term health outcomes related to COVID-19 and other associated illness, but also dismantling long-term progress related to reducing child mortality and improving paediatric health throughout Cambodia.

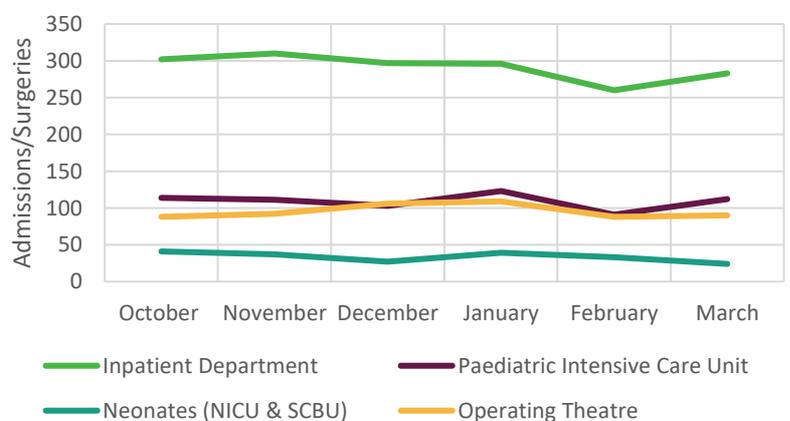
AHC, like organisations around the world, is facing unprecedented challenges. For us, the challenge is two-fold; **we remain committed to providing essential paediatric services for Cambodian's children, yet as a non-profit organization working closely with our donors and supporters, the global and local economic toll of the virus threatens our ability to protect and improve child health in Cambodia.**

AHC's role in child health during the pandemic

As a child health leader within Cambodia, AHC remains committed to improving child health throughout the country. In these extraordinary times, we are working closely with the Ministry of Health and other leading health institutions within Cambodia to not only understand how the pandemic is impacting child health, but also ensure that every child can still access quality, compassionate care. However, as resources are diverted in preparation for a potential COVID-19 outbreak, **access to quality care for children has never been more important and must not be forgotten.**

Over the past three months, AHC has and expects to continue to experience a high demand for essential, specialist care at our hospital in Siem Reap. As can be seen in the table, both before the first case of COVID-19 (January 2020) and afterwards, we have experienced an ongoing demand for inpatient care from children throughout Cambodia. This includes AHC's Paediatric Intensive Care Unit and Inpatient Departments, which have remained at full capacity treating children who are suffering from a range of life-threatening infectious diseases, or require emergency surgery and trauma care. At the local level, caregivers' fear of COVID-19 is reducing normal care seeking behaviors, meaning children are more likely to present at AHC in a more serious condition as households turn to traditional medicine or wait until the child is critically ill. AHC also continues to provide a range of specialist paediatric services, services that are often not accessible elsewhere and remain in high demand. This includes treating 'COVID-19 vulnerable' patient types, such as critical neonates and oncology patients that require specialist care and would otherwise be extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 and its effects.

AHC Admissions/Surgeries by Unit





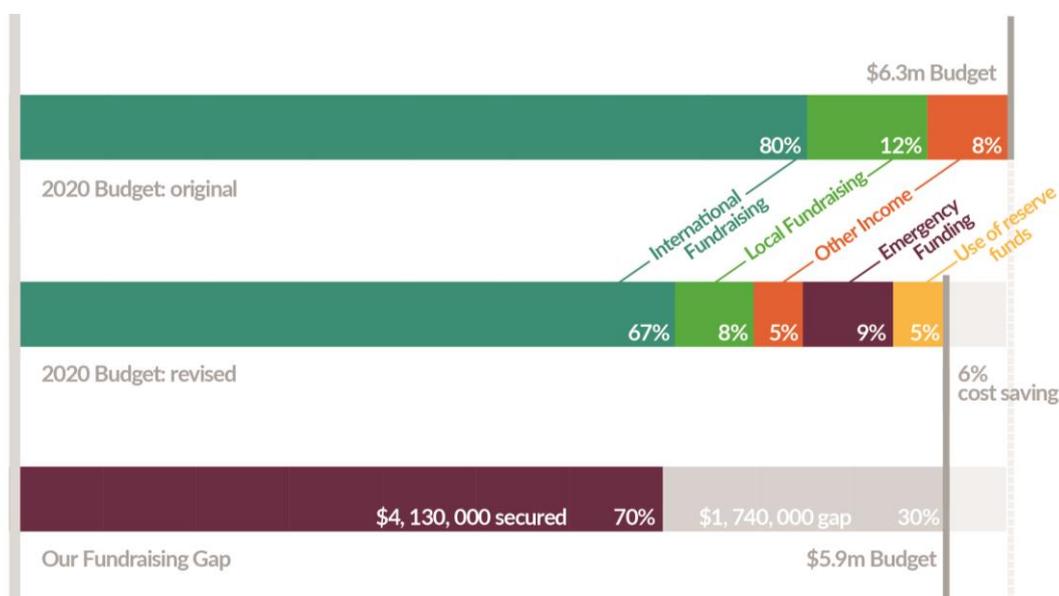
COVID-19 in Cambodia

To date, Cambodia has less than 150 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with 90% of cases having recovered. Despite this, testing capacity has remained relatively low, with approximately 900 tests being completed every week by Cambodia’s only testing center, the Pasteur Institute. A national outbreak would have potentially catastrophic implications for Cambodia, as the health system currently lacks critical capacity; for example, Cambodia currently has approximately 200 ventilators (the majority of which are in Phnom Penh), this equates to roughly one ventilator per 75,000 people.

Financial outlook

Despite the increasing pressure the ongoing pandemic will have on child health throughout Cambodia, the ongoing global economic downturn has and is having a huge impact on AHC’s ability to secure funding. As financial climates become increasingly uncertain, many new donors are reluctant to commit to AHC or are changing their funding priorities to align directly with COVID-19 treatment. On top of this, AHC has also seen the postponement/cancellation of fundraising events which are key in building up our unrestricted funding base, while the collapse of the tourism industry has sharply reduced local funding. Put together, in a worst-case scenario **AHC could fall as much as US\$2 million short of our original \$6.3M budget for 2020, which could severely impact our ability to provide ongoing care to Cambodia’s most vulnerable children.**

As a result, AHC has already taken a number of steps to reduce the funding shortfall and mitigate the impact of this on our organisational strategies. This includes cost saving measures across the organisation while maintaining quality and service to our patients, the use of existing reserve funds to fill in a portion of the funding gap, and we have also sought emergency funding to avoid cash flow issues forecasted in September. However, as this pandemic continues to stretch into the future this approach becomes unsustainable and risks AHC’s long-term future as an organization.



In light of this, AHC’s Executive Committee continues to monitor and review the organization’s financial situation weekly. Undoubtedly, we are all facing challenging times; as a result we are taking action now to avoid even further cost-saving interventions such as staff or service reductions and **ensure that we are here for children who need our help the most, when they need us the most.**

In the past your support has enabled AHC to make great strides towards a healthier and happier future for all Cambodian children. **Together, we have the opportunity to address the short and long term effects on child health, ensuring that essential care for children in Cambodia remain available during the COVID-19 pandemic.** If you are able, we are asking for your support to help us weather this crisis – your donation of any amount helps us meet the continued health and hygiene needs of children across Cambodia.

How is AHC adapting?

On top of maximizing access to relevant care, patient and staff safety remains AHC's top priority throughout this pandemic. As such, we have adopted and fine-tuned a number of operations to ensure quality care can be provided in a safe environment:

- Clear guidelines have been written that detail how AHC will respond to a number of scenarios surrounding the ongoing spread of the virus throughout Cambodia and AHC. Department managers have worked closely with AHC's Executive Committee to develop plans for operating under an outbreak, this includes measures related to staff safety, admission limits and a reduction in non-essential activities.
- Strict infection prevention and control monitoring and enforcement throughout the hospital has been designed to reduce the spread of any infection. All clinical and non-clinical staff have recently received training in infection prevention and control and educated on COVID-19. Procedures have been put in place for AHC staff to manage suspected cases of COVID-19, including testing, laboratory procedures and isolation measures.
- Despite worldwide shortages due to high demand, AHC's administration and logistics team is making sure that AHC is able to secure the correct supplies (masks, personal protective equipment etc.) to continue to operate and to manage any outbreak. Within Cambodia, the price of medical masks has increased ten-fold over the past three months, from \$2.50 to \$25 per box.
- Community and education activities have largely been halted due to government decrees. While this is not ideal as our community health initiatives deal specifically with promoting good hygiene practices including hand washing, AHC continues to provide education at our main hospital to reach as many parents as possible and is adapting our state medical teaching/training activities to an online format.



Looking Forward

While AHC has not currently been designated a COVID-19 treatment facility by the government, we are making every measure should this change. Should we be called upon we will be ready to offer our facilities (including one of the country's most advanced Paediatric Intensive Care Units), staff and essential supplies to ensure any child who is diagnosed with COVID-19 can access the treatment they need. In the meantime, **AHC will willingly accept any referral from other health facilities where paediatric patients cannot receive treatment due to increasing COVID-19 admissions.**

On top of the ongoing gap in specialty care that we continue to fill, AHC also recognizes that the longer this crisis continues the harder and more expansive the health implications will be for Cambodia's children. As households lose income and fall into poverty, **children will be increasingly vulnerable to a range of acute illnesses such as malnutrition and malaria as well as chronic diseases such as TB that affect a child's long-term health. Without proper treatment for such conditions, children face increased risks related co-morbidity and mortality, mental health issues and lower educational attainment.** As a result, it is imperative that AHC prepares and remains ready to fill increasingly large care gaps left by COVID-19 and ensure every child can readily access the services that they need in these challenging times.

Your support is incredibly impactful – thank you for considering AHC and children across Cambodia during these times.