



## **COMMUNITY BASED CHILD PROTECTION**

**AS A STRATEGY FOR PROTECTING SOUTH SUDANESE REFUGEE CHILDREN  
A CASE STUDY FROM GAMBELLA, ETHIOPIA**

**February 2017**

This publication is also available online at: [www.plan-international.org](http://www.plan-international.org)

First published 2017 – Text and photos © Plan International 2017

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Recommended citation: *Plan International (2017) Community-based child protection as a strategy for protecting South Sudanese refugee children: a case study from Gambella, Ethiopia*, United Kingdom: Plan International.

**EMERGENCY:**  
SOUTH SUDAN REFUGEE CRISIS

**PROJECT TEAM:**  
PLAN INTERNATIONAL ETHIOPIA, CHILD PROTECTION IN EMERGENCIES  
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***“Supporting refugee communities to make the camp safer for girls and boys and to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children”***

## **SUMMARY**

This case study describes the role of community-based child protection committees in improving the safety and protection of children in three South Sudanese refugee camps in Gambella, Ethiopia.

In December 2013, widespread violence in South Sudan led nearly 300,000 people to flee the country, across the border into Western Ethiopia. Over 80% of the refugees are women and children. The refugee girls and boys face high risks, both during their journey into Ethiopia as well as upon arrival in the camps. Risks of family separation, sexual violence and psychosocial distress are common.

From 2014, Plan International has been responding to the humanitarian needs of children in refugee camps of Kule, Jewi and Pugnido 2. These camps have a total population of nearly 130,000 refugees, of whom more than 60% are children<sup>1</sup>. One of the most effective, community-based strategies to strengthen the prevention and response to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children in the camps, was the establishment of Child Protection Committees (CPC). The aim of the CPCs was to mobilise and sensitise the community on child protection concerns and to ensure effective identification of children and families at-risk for referral and support. The CPCs were composed of representatives of existing community structures and were linked to other community groups and services available to support the needs of children.

Two years of intensive work by the CPCs in the refugee camps have shown positive impact on the protective environment in the camps. More child protection concerns and violations are being reported in a timely way so that children can be referred to appropriate services and receive the support they need. The CPCs have also greatly contributed to the prevention of child protection issues through engaging local leaders, children, youth and parents in prevention work and response to early signs of child abuse and neglect. Plan International's approach to play a facilitating and supporting role to guide the CPCs, has enabled CPCs to progressively take ownership and leadership in their own protection work.

Key lessons include the importance of building new structures upon and in coordination with existing groups, networks and authorities; the importance of intensive capacity building support, providing ongoing technical support and monitoring in the initial phase of the response; as well as the need to establish a clear and confidential reporting and recording system for each CPC.

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<sup>1</sup> PLAN INTERNATIONAL DEFINES A CHILD AS A PERSON BELOW THE AGE OF 18 YEARS.

## BACKGROUND

More than a million people have fled their homes in South Sudan since fighting between Government forces and rebel groups broke out in December 2013. Ongoing violence has led to the killing of thousands and mass displacement of over 600,000 people into neighbouring countries. Nearly 300,000 people fled to Ethiopia, particularly to the Gambella Region. Women and children constitute the vast majority of the total number of South Sudanese refugees in Gambella, accounting for more than 80% of the population. Children alone constitute more than 60% of the total refugee population and more than half of them are of school-going age. Refugees depend on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs such as shelter, food, health and clean water.



### The needs of conflict-affected girls and boys

Children arriving in Ethiopia have witnessed terrible violence, lost friends and family, have travelled long distances, and are uncertain about what the future holds for them. Almost 10 per cent of all children arriving in Ethiopia, are alone; having lost their caregivers in the conflict or on their way to Ethiopia. Even upon arrival in Ethiopia children, especially girls, are at risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. This happens in particular at border points, in camps and outside of camps, especially when fetching firewood or travelling to town. In the camps most services, such as health care and schools, are not sufficient to cover the needs of all children. Especially adolescents and young people barely have access to education or income generating opportunities. Refugees are dependent on food aid and have no access to paid jobs in or outside the camps. As a result, a high number of children face the risk of child labour, begging, or child marriage to survive.



Many South Sudanese refugee children arrive alone in Ethiopia

## PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S ACTION

### Community-based child protection as a strategy to protect refugee girls and boys

Plan International puts children and communities at the centre of its humanitarian response. As a child-centred community organisation, Plan International believes that engaging local communities in delivering assistance leads to more relevant, appropriate and effective results. The purpose of the community-based approach to child protection is to empower refugee communities to take charge of issues affecting children and to take action to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. Traditionally not only the parents, but also wider family and community members are seen as the main caregivers of children in South Sudan and they are usually also the first responders in an emergency situation. Girls and boys themselves also play an important role in protecting themselves and their peers. By strengthening the knowledge, skills and capacities of both children and adults, key risks such as family separation, child labour and violence against children can be prevented and eliminated more effectively. On community level, Plan International supports community-based child protection networks, such as local child protection groups, child, adolescent and youth clubs and foster-care families. This case study highlights Plan International's work with Child Protection Committees.

## KEY ACTIVITIES

### Assessing the situation

In 2014, at the beginning of Plan International's humanitarian response programme in the Gambella refugee camps, a child protection system mapping was carried out in the camps and in host communities. In the newly established refugee camps, the refugee governance structure was comprised by South Sudanese

leaders, each responsible for a zone in the camp. These leaders then represented their zone in the central Refugee Central Committee (RCC) as the main decision-making and coordination body for refugees in the camp. The RCC coordinated the humanitarian assistance with the UN and ARRA on behalf of the South Sudanese refugees, covering all refugee concerns including shelter, food, water, protection, health governance and justice in the camps.

The assessment of pre-existing child protection structures was initially conducted through engagement with these community leaders. Through several meetings more information was collected about different community groups, resources and focal points for specific issues around child welfare and protection. Some informal structures included religious leaders, the Shurta (local court) youth and women's groups. Depending on the issue identified in the camp, one of these groups would address it. Mostly, children's issues dealt with by women's groups or the Shurta. In the host communities, the mapping was carried out by Unicef in coordination with the Ethiopian government as main service provider for child protection concerns in Gambella.

Plan International discussed the high prevalence of urgent child protection issues reported during the child protection rapid assessment with the zonal leaders and the RCC. Such issues included the high number of unaccompanied and separated children, which was the case for ten per cent of all arriving children; and the risk to sexual violence and other forms of abuse in the camps. Together with the zonal leaders, the RCC, UNHCR and the Government of Ethiopia Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), Plan International agreed to established a new, dedicated community structure to deal with protection issues more effectively, and to ensure strong representation in all zones of the camps.

A woman with dark skin and braided hair is smiling at the camera. She is wearing a yellow dress with large, colorful floral patterns. She is holding a baby who is wearing a striped shirt. The background shows other people's legs and feet, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

Mayer Pal is 28 years old and has four children, but became separated from two of them when she fled to Ethiopia. "My husband is in the military in South Sudan and I don't know whether he is dead or alive. We lost contact when the conflict broke out for the second time. I am always thinking of my two lost children - a boy and a girl, they are both so young - they may be living in Nasir or have been taken to another country. Now I just have my baby boy and my 5-year old daughter.

### Establishing community-based Child Protection Committees (CPC)

In each zone of the camp, a local Child Protection Committee (CPC) was set up; each zone covering four to 16 blocks, each block with around 20 households. The initial selection of committee members was done by the zonal leaders. These included representatives from already existing informal groups such as women's groups, religious leaders and youth, who were seen as trusted community members and current or potential resource persons to support vulnerable children and their families. Plan International ensured that in each zone foster caregivers were included in the selection, who were responsible for the care and protection of the many unaccompanied minors. The initial selection of members constituted of female and male volunteers from the community, aiming for at least 50% female members. An orientation meeting was held with all invitees before the official Child Protection Committees (CPC) were formed. Each CPC consisted of 10 to 13 members.

Parallel to the CPCs, child groups were established in which children and adolescents participated in activities and discussed issues affecting their life in the camp. Instead of having child members on the CPC, the decision for separate groups was made to ensure children could freely interact and contribute. Issues brought forward by the children, were then shared with the CPCs by Plan International social workers.

In each CPC a youth representative above the age of 18 years represented young people between the age of 15 until 24 years old. This youth was part of a local youth committee and shared specific youth concerns to the CPC and the other way around, passed on important information to the youth groups, for example on protection issues in the camp that the youth group could then raise awareness on.

Religious leaders were often members of the CPCs as they play an influential role in the South Sudanese community. Recently, Plan International has intensified its work with religious leaders to engage them in broader child protection work, especially in community sensitisation on child protection issues, as they have a wide reach and influence in the community.

### Roles and responsibilities of the Child Protection Committees (CPC)

The CPC members were introduced as the community focal points and resource persons for child protection including gender-based violence against children in their locality. Other, broader protection concerns are handled by other committees in the camp as established by Administration of Returning Refugees Affairs (ARRA) and UNHCR. The initial responsibilities of the CPC included:

- Community mobilisation of community members including parents and local leaders;
- Awareness raising regarding available services for children and child protection issues;
- Identification of challenges affecting children in the community and provide solutions;
- Identification of child protection concerns and mediation and/or referral to appropriate services;
- Organising parenting information and awareness sessions on specific topics.

Plan International established and supported Child Protection Committees both in the refugee camps and in the surrounding communities where a large number of South Sudanese refugees resided. The main difference between the two settings was the availability of service providers and functionality of the referral system. While in the refugee camps,

humanitarian actors were the main service providers for protection, medical aid and other assistance, in the host community the government was the main service provider. The referral pathway is mostly comprising of government departments, not humanitarian aid organisations. This presented some key challenges in the effectiveness of the work of the CPCs, as the availability and functionality of government services was generally low. As a result, the CPC did not receive the essential support required to function and therefore relied more heavily upon Plan International for technical and financial support to identify, refer and respond to child protection cases.

### Capacity building

In the first year of the response Plan International played a supporting and facilitating role in the establishment of the CPCs. An orientation, followed by regular trainings and biweekly meetings were organised to intensively build the capacity of the committee members and to form a cohesive group.

The first orientation covered the basics of child rights and child protection to create a common understanding of the situation and explore protection concerns identified and prioritised by the community. The members were also trained on Plan International's organisational Child Protection policy aimed at safeguarding children at all times during any intervention. Through a series of follow-up meetings the CPCs were oriented on the process of case management cycle and trained on their role in the identification of child protection cases, the rapid documentation of identified cases and referral to Plan International and other service providers. CPC members were trained on community mobilisation techniques including facilitating community conversations and providing parenting sessions related to positive discipline. These training sessions were delivered

over a period of several months in a phased manner. In this phase each CPC developed an action plan that included their priority actions as well as involvement in other ongoing camp activities such as verification exercises of separated children and community activities organised in schools and community centres, or Child Friendly Spaces. In addition to technical support, Plan International equipped each CPC with essential materials such as rain coats, umbrellas and rain boots to perform their work.

### Community mobilisation and sensitisation

One of the main functions of the CPCs was to mobilise people in their own locality and conduct sensitisation sessions related to the prevention and response to child protection. The CPCs employ techniques such as engaging the zonal leaders to communicate to the community members during community meetings, pass on information during church services through religious leaders, and through the different community groups such as the women, youth, and child groups. The CPC organised community dialogues as a way to explore cultural care practices and how they could form protection or harm to a child. This form of community engagement was aimed at addressing negative perceptions, attitudes and practices that cause harm to children such as child marriage or neglect, as well as to identify positive practices that could be reinforced. The CPCs also conducted 'door to door' and 'one on one' approach to sensitise individual families and community members about child protection issues, reporting and referral pathways and child protection focal points in the community. Plan International consulted the CPCs on a regular basis on how to reach out to already existing structures or certain population groups such as women groups, child or youth groups and people with disabilities.

### Identification and referral of child protection cases

As there were many vulnerable children identified in the camps, the CPCs played a significant role in the identification and referral of children facing child protection risks. CPC members acted as child protection focal points in their camp zone and reported cases that were identified or reported to them, to Plan International social workers for further action and follow-up. At the time of writing this paper, a total of 187 cases had been identified through CPCs in the camps in the previous nine months. Cases included unaccompanied and separated children, child neglect, temporary child abandonment by parents who return to South Sudan for short periods leaving their children on their own for some weeks or months, children without ration cards (lost) resulting in a lack of food, children who have not been registered, and child survivors of (sexual) violence.

Given the high number of vulnerable children in the camp, the CPCs also played a role in verifying and monitoring of child protection

cases. In entry points and upon arrival in the camps, thousands of children has been registered as being unaccompanied or separated. All these cases had to be verified, as often children would find family members once in the camp. The CPCs played a role in the verification of around 700 children and confirming their status to enable adequate follow-up.

The CPCs also played a role in the actual case management services that Plan International provided. Although the high risk cases were handled by trained social workers, refugee incentive workers, some CPC member were assigned a number of households that they monitored in their own area. For example, a CPC member would be responsible to monitor a number of child-headed households, unaccompanied children below the age of 18 living together. The designated CPC member would visit them on a regular basis, identify any concerns and ensure their needs were met. This way, they provided extended, non-specialised support to vulnerable children, in addition to the official case management support provided by trained social workers.



### Meetings and monitoring of action plans

Most CPCs met on a weekly basis, while some met fortnightly. The meetings are chaired by the CPC chairperson and by a delegated member in the absence of the chairperson. During the meetings, issues affecting children are discussed and prioritised depending on the urgency, severity and action points agreed upon. All reported cases were documented and referred to the refugee social worker or Plan International child protection officer that was present during the meetings to facilitate the referral.

### Support and supervision

The CPCs were supervised and supported by Plan International child protection officers and supported by refugee incentive workers, trained to provide social work support to individual children. In each area, the refugee incentive workers who ran the activities in the Child Friendly Spaces and conducted case management support to children in the same area, worked closely together with the local CPC. For example, the social workers working in the CFS and case work, would attend the CPC meetings and ensure referral and follow-up went smoothly, and to ensure effective information sharing between the different programmes and activities. These social workers would also bring emerging child protection issues to the attention of the CPC and jointly discuss strategies to prevent and respond to these issues.

## POSITIVE IMPACT

### Increased community awareness on child protection

Overall, the community-based Child Protection Committees contributed significantly to the protective environment for girls and boys in the South Sudanese refugee camps in Gambella. Increased awareness of child protection risks and rights violations among the community has contributed to increased prevention and

reporting of concerns. The CPC members worked closely with other community groups, such as women and youth groups, enabling effective information sharing and ensuring a wider reach. During quarterly stakeholder evaluation meetings in 2016, Plan International concluded that more cases were reported in a timely way to local leaders, ARRA (Administration of Returning Refugees Affairs), Plan International, and other service providers including those who provide legal support. As a result of intensive efforts to improve the overall protection situation in the camps, humanitarian actors reported that perpetrators were more often held accountable for their actions and punished when they were identified.

### Increase of reported child protection concerns

The culture of silence around child abuse and violence issues has gradually changed. Towards the second year of the response more child protection cases were being reported compared to the start of the programme. Many of the urgent cases, such as rape cases are now reported within 72 hours. Although the most sensitive issues such as sexual violence and early marriage are still not always reported, CPCs report during their quarterly evaluation meetings with Plan International that the change in awareness of child protection risks and ways to report abuse has significantly increased in the community.

### Prevention of child protection violations

The CPC did not only support the identification and reporting of punishable acts of crimes, but was also active in the prevention of child abuse, neglect and other issues affecting the well-being of children. The CPC members were active in resolving disputes, mediation and early detection of child protection issues. For example in cases of domestic violence, neglect of children or when false accusations were made against members of the community regarding child abuse. CPC members were trained to advise and mentor vulnerable

caregivers on positive parenting and care practices and they collaborated with zonal and block leaders and other respected community members to address identified issues. Responding to early warning signs such as neglect prevented the development of more severe child protection concerns, which subsequently contributed to the reduction of the already high caseloads of social workers in the camp.

**Strengthened case management services for separated children**

The case management system in the camps was greatly supported by the CPCs through their work on the identification and verification of over 700 unaccompanied girls and boys out of thousands of registered separated children. As a result for the local verification work by the CPCs the most urgent cases could be identified and prioritised for case management services by Plan International. This effort was recognised and highly appreciated by camp authorities including UNHCR and ARRA.

**Empowerment of the community**

CPC members reported that through the different CPC initiatives they felt they had become more engaged members of their community. Their personal empowerment also had a positive effect on the capacity of other informal community groups. Since most CPC members were also part of other networks, such as youth and women’s groups, the training and work experience they gained through the CPC was also applied in these groups. Also the coordination between the different community groups improved as different CPC members provided updates on their respective group’s activities on a weekly basis during the CPC meetings.

**Support to other child protection work**

The CPCs have been instrumental in supporting existing child protection programmes such as the Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) and case management interventions. Upon their own initiative, some members worked as volunteers to support case management workers and



social workers in the Child Friendly Spaces. They did this on rotational basis, for example by supporting recreational activities with adolescents, or helping out during distributions of relief items for children. This way, some CPC members gained good work experience to be recruited as refugee incentive workers in Plan International's response programme. CPC members were also part of the accountability mechanism that was established in Kule and Pugnido 2 camps, through participation in a compliance management committee that managed the feedback and complaints received from the community via suggestion boxes and other feedback mechanisms.

## CHALLENGES

### Cultural challenges in underreporting of child protection issues

Although reporting of child protection issues has slowly increased, the existing taboos on reporting protection concerns still jeopardize the reporting of sensitive protection cases. Continuous sensitisation, awareness raising, safe reporting and response mechanisms are still required to build trust and ensure the safety of child survivors. The engagement and sensitisation of local leaders, the local court (Shurta) is crucial to reinforce the law and ensure children are protected in this process. Creating awareness and building trust among community members about the available legal, health and child protection services is critical to ensure children and families come forward to report concerns without fear.

### Volunteerism

Although the CPCs were initiated as a community-based, non-paid community structure, its members requested incentives as soon as the work became more labour intensive. To strengthen community

ownership and sustainability of the structure, Plan International decided to provide support to CPC members in other ways. Firstly, periodic reflection meetings with the CPC members were introduced to review ongoing work and jointly plan for future activities and create greater ownership of the committees over their own work plans. The required materials assistance for the CPCs was identified and provided to the groups, such as stationary, boots, rain coats and bikes to reach the far-flung areas of the camps. Secondly, different capacity building events were organised, to provide CPC members with skills and knowledge, which was highly appreciated by members who were largely low-educated. During intensive trainings or day-long meetings a per diem was provided to cover food during the day. Furthermore, Plan International ensured that all CPC members as volunteers were regularly updated about the objectives of Plan International's humanitarian assistance in the camps to help them understand the great needs on the ground, the available resources and gaps therein. This created a better understanding of the allocation of resources and priorities.

### Language

Language barriers exist for most Ethiopian staff to directly engage with South Sudanese children and adults who do not speak English. This means that the CPCs, similarly to refugee incentive social workers contracted by Plan International, fulfil the role of the frontline work force. This necessitates a strong capacity building approach from Plan International to capacitate refugees to take up critical responsibilities, such as responding directly to child protection cases. All key documents have to be translated into local languages, and the collaboration with English speaking refugee workers is critical, as they act as translators and also participate in meetings to guide and support with documentation.

### Burden on key community members

Many of the CPC members also doubled as leaders in various capacities such as zonal leaders, block leaders, leaders within the Refugee Central Committee (RCC) and other groups and committees. This made it challenging when it comes to weekly meetings, some members become ineffective as they are rarely available. However, most of the members were active and ensured that meetings were held and issues affecting children highlighted, actions planned for and implemented.

### High turnover

Many of the South Sudanese refugees frequently returned to South Sudan or relocated out of the camps to another camps or host communities. This led to high turnover of CPC members. At times when zonal leaders changed, the new leaders would select and appointed new CPC members based on personal ties and relationships. This often required Plan International to negotiate with local leaders to ensure continuity of the CPCs, as well as to orient and train new CPC members to ensure the institutional knowledge was maintained.



## Key lessons learned

### Establishing and supporting local CPCs:

- Before establishing community-based structures, the existing formal and informal child protection actors, groups and networks in the community should be mapped, assessed on their scope and functionality, and consulted. Even if a new and dedicated structure may be required to address the high number of child protection issues, this has to be built on and linked to pre-existing community resources.
- To form CPCs, it is crucial to identify community members who are known and trusted by children. When appropriate and safe to do so, children can elect candidate members to become part of the CPC. The interview process should not just focus on knowledge and skills, but also the commitment and motivation of a candidate to work with and for children's protection and wellbeing. Considering that the selection is done by the community and their leaders, support should be given to the leaders to enable them effectively guide the process.
- Whether it is decided to establish a new child protection structure or support a pre-existing child protection committee, it is key to ensure linkages between the CPC and other (in)formal groups and structures are made, such as women's groups, child and youth clubs and local leaders.
- In addition, the CPCs should be fully supported by the child protection responsible agency and other service providers to effective reporting and response mechanisms.
- From the start, establish a simple and confidential monitoring and reporting system for the CPC, which tracks the meetings, progress of action plans and most critically, all reported child protection concerns and follow-up steps. This will especially be important when turn-over is high, to ensure continuity and prevent loss of data when committee members change or leave.
- Establish a monitoring and evaluation system and ensure that CPCs are part of accountability systems. Activities that are not monitored or supported may not be carried out effectively or with quality, especially in the early phase of the response when usually intensive support is required.

### Community ownership:

- To strengthen ownership and support volunteerism of CPC members, especially in communities where families can barely meet their basic needs, it is important at the start of the project to agree on a Terms of Reference for the group that outlines the type of work that can be done on a voluntary basis and what alternative forms of support can be provided to group members, such as material support.
- Volunteerism should be encouraged as part of a wider sustainability strategy. The mandate of CPCs should be realistic and time-bound to enable volunteerism in the first place. A medium to long term plan that sets out the capacity development opportunities for CPC members, a progressively leading role of the CPC in planning, budget allocation and implementation of the work and coordination with humanitarian actors could help to increase ownership.

### Support requirements

- Visibility is an important aspect of CPCs to gain recognition and establish trust in the community. Consider providing visibility items such as an ID card for members and t-shirts with a logo, title and/or name of the locality. If possible, create a space in the community where members can meet and organise their activities.
- IEC materials are important to ensure that CPC members can carry out their activities in an effective way. For instance, provide local translations of relevant guidelines, campaign and awareness raising materials, child protection forms and tools. This equips but also motivates the members.
- Other support materials may include an umbrella, rain boots, a bag, or a bike when CPC members have to travel to far-flung areas. They may also receive other NFIs such as clothing, and sanitary kits as a way of motivating them since they are not incentive workers.



### **About Plan International:**

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge.

For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.