



**COMMUNITY-BASED PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT  
FOR SYRIAN AND EGYPTIAN CHILDREN IN URBAN AREAS:  
A CASE STUDY FROM EGYPT**

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**EMERGENCY:**  
SYRIA CRISIS

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## SUMMARY

This case study describes Plan International Egypt's community-based psychosocial programme for over 4,000 Syrian refugee and vulnerable Egyptian children<sup>1</sup> aged between 2 and 18 years old in poor suburbs in Alexandria.

Since the start of the crisis, Syrian refugee families in Egypt have faced many vulnerabilities, but their situation continues to worsen as humanitarian aid and cash assistance is decreasing, savings are depleted, and livelihood opportunities remain limited. At the same time, Egyptian families are also faced with economic challenges as nearly 28<sup>2</sup> per cent of Egyptians now live below the poverty line. Made worse, jobs are proving even more difficult to find following the recent economic reforms set by the Government of Egypt.

Children are encountering their own hardships, as Syrian children, particularly girls, are experiencing corporal punishment, (sexual) harassment and discrimination in their neighbourhoods and in schools. Egyptian children are also facing similar child protection issues, which remain prevalent in Egyptian culture. Though normalised to an extent in Egyptian culture, some of these child protection issues were previously uncommon in Syrian communities. The daily economic and social distress felt by Syrian and Egyptian children living in the poorer suburbs of Egypt poses a significant risk to their mental health and overall well-being.

In March 2015, Plan International Egypt started a new psychosocial programme for over 4,000 Syrian refugee and vulnerable Egyptian children aged between 2 and 18 years old in poor suburbs in Alexandria. The aim of Plan International's intervention was to prevent and respond to high levels of psychosocial distress of Syrian refugee children and vulnerable Egyptian children. Key activities included centre-based and mobile recreational activities, life skills sessions and parenting circles to disseminate best parenting practices and provide support to parents. At-risk children and families were referred to child protection and more specialised services when required. The activities were implemented through four existing community centres, Community Development Associations (CDA).

Achievements include the increased participation of Syrian children in community activities as well as higher enrolment in education as a result of improved social integration. Awareness activities have led to increased reports of child protection concerns in the community and in schools. Key lessons included the importance of having technical specialists to support the structured implementation of psychosocial support activities by non-specialised staff, and the establishment of a functional referral system to respond to the concerns of Syrian refugee children and their families in a holistic way.

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

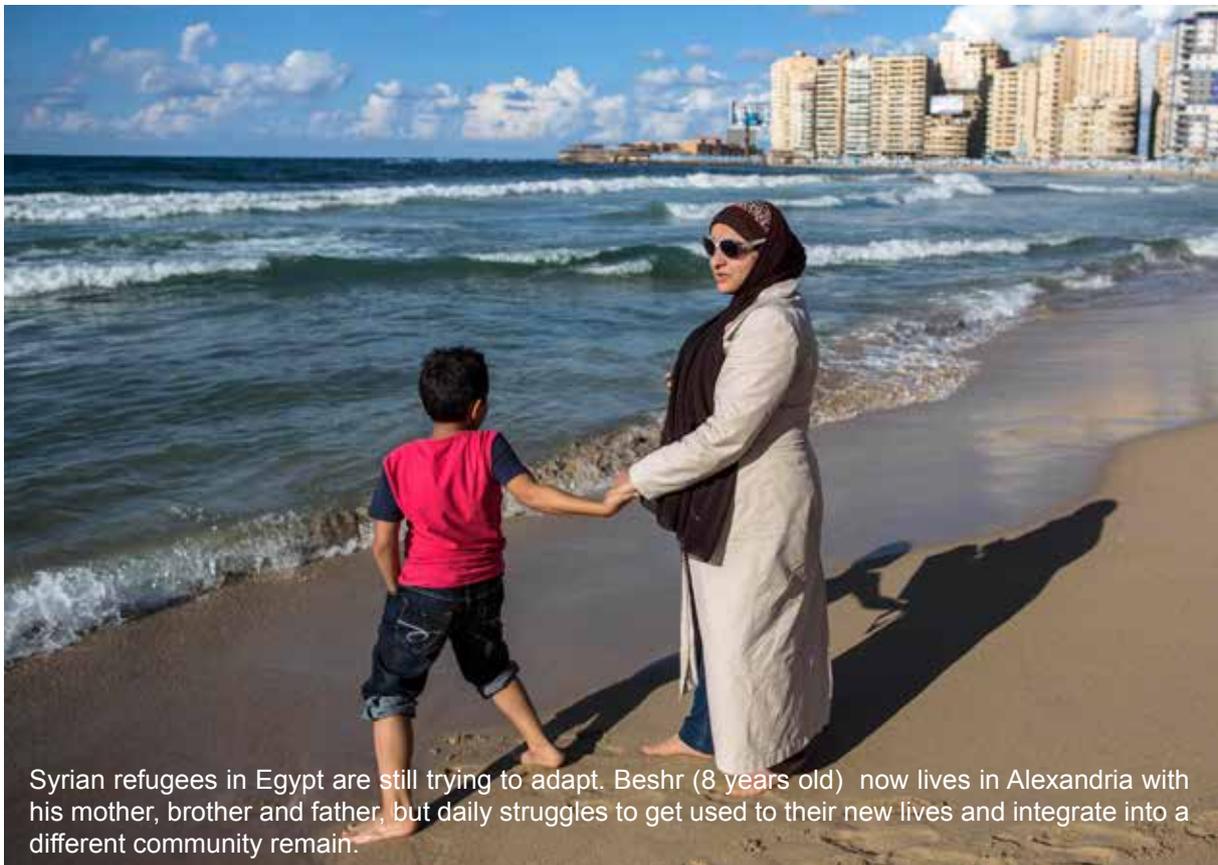
<sup>2</sup> CENTRAL AGENCY FOR PUBLIC MOBILISATION AND STATISTICS (CAPMAS), 2015

## BACKGROUND

Egypt has a long history as a refugee hosting country within the region, due to its geographic position, its comparatively low costs of living and largely ambivalent treatment of refugees. Egypt is hosting refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Palestine and Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria. Despite internal upheaval over recent years in Egypt, the country has continued to attract refugees. Since 2011, refugees from Syria have been arriving in Egypt, prompting a significant scaling up of the humanitarian response in 2012. There are currently about 120,000 Syrian refugees in Egypt, registered with UNHCR, and there is thought to be at least the same number again of unregistered refugees – all living in urban settings. Refugees face many of the same issues as Egypt's poor, as well as additional challenges specific to their status as a refugee, such as a lack of access to services and legal restrictions in accessing jobs and livelihoods opportunities.

The competing needs of the Syrian refugees and Egyptians living in poor urban areas have caused tensions between communities, and Syrians are often blamed for deterioration of the already dire socio-economic situation. Overall there is low participation and integration of Syrians into Egyptian communities, and many refugees report discrimination, harassment and a general sense of insecurity.

As the Syrian conflict becomes increasingly protracted, the prospects of early return are dwindling. Growing numbers of Syrians, as well as Palestinians and other nationalities, are risking the boat journey from the North African coastline in a dangerous attempt to reach Europe.



Syrian refugees in Egypt are still trying to adapt. Beshr (8 years old) now lives in Alexandria with his mother, brother and father, but daily struggles to get used to their new lives and integrate into a different community remain.

## General protection concerns of Syrian refugees in Egypt

Challenges among Syrian families in urban areas in Egypt identified at the start of the intervention:

- Syrian refugees experience difficulties in securing and renewing residence visa, which limits their freedom and mobility both within and outside of Egypt. The introduction of a visa regime for Syrians in Egypt limits family reunification and some people who were previously in Egypt remain trapped. Refugees without valid permits risk being arrested, detained and even deported.
- High number of female-headed Syrian refugee households.
- Harassment and discrimination against refugee and migrants and this spiked in 2013 due to increasing anti-Syrian sentiment.
- Many Syrians in Egypt face social isolation and exclusion. Syrian families live in isolated family units in an unknown urban areas and do not have the usual community or family networks to receive support from. It is difficult for Syrian families to meet Egyptians families as their participation in community activities is low.
- Employment opportunities are limited to the informal sector which leads refugees, including children, to take up jobs with a higher risk to exploitation and abuse in the workplace.
- Domestic violence is a significant issue, due in part to psychosocial pressures that individuals and families face. Refugees facing domestic violence have limited options for emergency shelters and protection.

## Challenges faced by Syrian and Egyptian girls and boys

- Violence and harassment against children, especially girls, occurs largely in public spaces such as on the way to school or on the street but also within schools, workplaces and homes.
- Unaccompanied Syrian children and adolescents are often not included in care arrangements made by Egyptian state or NGOs and thus rely on UNHCR support and informal care arrangements.
- Reports of Syrian families' increasing reliance on child labour to earn an income. Working children are most often between 10 and 18 years old but there are reports of children as young as 8 year olds working. Child labour is also prevalent among Egyptian children.
- Cases reported of Syrian refugee girls forced into early marriage into Egyptian community. A total of 106 individual cases were reported in Plan International's refugee rights study in 2016, the majority aged from 15-17 and 4 cases reported of under 14 years old getting married.
- Refugee children from female-headed households can be left unattended at home when mothers are working, especially the case for after school care. Schools finish at 2:00 pm and school aged children often go home alone or are supervised by other children.

# PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S ACTION

## Provision of community-based psychosocial support as a strategy to protect girls and boys

Plan International supported a community-based, non-specialised psychosocial support through local community centres, Community Development Associations (CDA) in the most marginalised districts of Alexandria with a high number of Syrian refugees and vulnerable Egyptian families. The aim of this intervention was to prevent and respond to psychosocial distress of Syrian refugee children through recreational and social activities, life skills activities and building positive peer networks.

The programme was designed in consideration of the conflict-sensitivity of the situation and to address the social tensions between Syrian and Egyptian host communities. The interventions were developed based upon pre-existing psychosocial activities for vulnerable Egyptian families in the community centres. These activities were adapted to include Syrian children and parents. Group-based interventions were intentionally designed for mixed groups of Syrian and Egyptian children and caregivers, facilitated by both Egyptian and Syrian facilitators. To make the programme sustainable, interventions were delivered through pre-existing, Government-supported community centers.

## KEY ACTIVITIES

Among a wider range of non-specialised psychosocial support interventions, two main interventions were implemented to prevent and respond to psychosocial distress experienced by girls and boys, and to increase their resilience:

1. Psychosocial support sessions for children between 6 and 18 years old. The support sessions were subdivided into different age-groups; 6-8, 9-12 and 13-18 years old. The sessions included game-based activities for children and separate male and female adolescent groups to build life skills, strengthen social and problem solving skills, and promotion of peaceful co-existence between Syrian and Egyptian girls and boys. Creative means such as games, discussions, drawing, theatre and music were used.



The life skills sessions have been modelled on the Aflatoun<sup>3</sup> methodology, which focuses on five core competencies:

- Personal understanding and exploration
- Child Rights and Responsibilities
- Saving and Responsible Spending
- Planning and Budgeting
- Child Social Entrepreneurship

Throughout the course of the project, the life skills sessions have evolved to also include computer skills (introduction to Microsoft office) and English language classes, based upon requests and needs of the Syrian children and youth.

2. Child friendly spaces with special activities for girls and boys between 2 and 5 years old, as well as for older children with disabilities. Within the CDA centers, play rooms were created to offer the youngest children with a safe place to play, learn and interact with each other. The activities were facilitated by trained social workers and included structured play, drawing, painting, story-telling and games. The main materials used are games, play materials and technology to display film and photo stories. Most materials were introduced by the social workers who implemented similar activities in their previous work with Egyptian children and families in the centers.



Mais is a 6-year old girl with Down Syndrome from Damascus, Syria. When the conflict erupted in Syria, her family fled to Egypt. Mais and her brother were severely distressed as a result of the violence and bombing they experienced during the conflict. In Alexandria, Mais' mother regularly attends Parenting Education sessions at the local community centre, which offers advice and support on child care and development. Mais also attends the community centre where she takes part in different recreational and support activities available at the Child Friendly Space. She enjoys it a lot.

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<sup>3</sup> [HTTP://WWW.AFLATOUN.ORG/PROGRAMME](http://www.aflatoun.org/programme)

3. Parenting sessions were provided parallel to the activities for children and adolescents. In these sessions, Syrian and Egyptian caregivers meet each other, are provided with information and learn how to provide support to their children. Syrian caregivers learn how to provide psychosocial care and support to their children when they experience distress and how to care for themselves as parents.
4. Specialized psychosocial support provided by Egyptian Mental Health Association (MHA) specialists inside each CDA. During the project, qualitative and quantitative research conducted with many children aged 4-18 years showed positive impact of the project PSS program provided and significant improvements in children's psychosocial wellbeing. The MHA held sessions for the mothers in each CDA once in a month and sometimes twice for approximately 50 mothers in each session, discussing different topics related to their children and marital life.
5. Recreational activities such as open days and day trips where families and friends gather. Such activities, according to the Syrian children and parents, had a great positive impact on their psychological wellbeing and helped them integrate with and understand Egyptians.

**Fatma, Syrian mother:** "I have been attending the parenting class for a month now and I enjoy it a lot. I like it because I spend my spare time in valuable activity. I also learn a lot about the best practices of child rearing. Thanks to parenting education, I learnt how to manage my temper better and have become more understanding and tolerant to my children's needs. I no longer shout at them as I have learnt what the best ways of teaching them discipline are."

**Hossam, Egyptian youth volunteer in the Syrian Refugee Programme:** "The awareness raising sessions and other information services the programme offers are particularly important. Many of the Syrian families were not aware of their rights as refugees according to the Egyptian law. The awareness raising sessions also help the Syrian families access their rights, as we invite government officials to these meetings who support activating the law at local level and remove barriers families face to access services."

### Staff selection and capacity building

All existing CDA staff including social workers, case workers and both Syrian and Egyptian community facilitators were trained on Child Friendly Spaces curriculum and the Aflatoun methodology with specific guidance on the needs of refugee children. Plan International worked with CDA staff to plan for the integration of Syrian children into the existing community centre activities and developed ways to meet their specific needs. For example, same-sex groups were established for adolescent girls and boys as appropriate according to cultural values. Syrian children with higher levels of distress or other needs such as educational support or support in refugee registration, could be referred to these services via the same centers.

An equal number of male and female social workers, both Syrian and Egyptian, who worked in four CDAs were trained by Plan International and Unicef on the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Mental Health and Psychosocial Support framework (MHPSS) with focus on non-

specialised psychosocial support, and the inter-agency case management standard operating procedures (SOP) which outline the protocols and tools for the support to individual children and families. The training also focused on the identification of child protection concerns during interaction with children and adolescents during the psychosocial support activities. The comprehensive training took place for four consecutive weeks at the start of the project.

In the course of the project several follow-up training sessions were held at the CDAs by Plan International and Unicef. Throughout the project Plan International staff attended activities in each CDA at least two times a month to monitor activities and hold focus group discussion with Syrian and Egyptian participants in the activities to collect feedback about the project and re-adjust where required. Plan International staff oriented the CDAs to integrate the Syrian refugees in the pre-existing, grassroots community centres and supervised the activities through bi-weekly monitoring visits to the centres.



## Outreach to Syrian refugees and vulnerable Egyptian families

The community centres were located in poor urban areas of Alexandria; the areas with the highest concentrations of Syrian refugee and vulnerable Egyptian families. Community outreach was done by the CDS staff, who were from and had strong connections with the local community. The CDAs mobilised families through local announcements and through CDA open days with activities to attract new families. Initially, there were no vulnerability criteria established to identify or prioritise beneficiaries for the psychosocial sessions and Child Friendly Space activities. Any interested children and parents could register at the centre, which was the same procedure as in previous programmes targeting vulnerable Egyptian families.

## Involvement of local host community and local authorities

The CDAs formed an excellent starting point for community engagement, since the Government-established centres were run by local community members and aimed at supporting the most vulnerable families. The local community, including Syrian refugees, was involved in the project design, implementation, monitoring and in evaluation and feedback collection.

At the start of the project, Plan International staff in Alexandria coordinated its services with Ministry of Social Affairs. The CDAs also had close coordination with schools so that out-of-school children could be referred to schools, and school-going children could attend after-school activities in the community centers. There was not any coordination or outreach with police or local law enforcement during this project due to lack of a well-documented, tried and tested referral pathway, which formed a key challenge.

## POSITIVE IMPACT

### Improved integration and social cohesion between Syrian and Egyptian children

Improvements were seen in interaction between Syrian and Egyptian children and adolescents, and between mothers who attended the parenting sessions. The centres facilitated peaceful interaction and joint play session involving both Syrian and Egyptian children, and for women to conduct activities together such as cooking and attending information and discussion sessions. The intervention also contributed to addressing the social isolation which many Syrian families face. Over the course of the project, participants created new relationships and the networks of Syrians among each other also became more beneficial as they started integrating with the Egyptian community and gaining more information and resources on how to help each other.

### Improved school attendance

Children with higher levels of psychosocial distress and behavioural problems, were often identified in schools where they experienced learning difficulties or didn't attend classes regularly. The successful identification and referral of these children to (specialised) psychosocial support services, led to improved school attendance.

Another reason for the improved school attendance was the active awareness raising by the community-based volunteers and project staff. During parenting circles, CDA staff discussed the value and importance of education with parents and caregivers, and they actively encouraged children to return to school.

### Increased reporting of child protection issues

The Syrian and Egyptian children attending the psychosocial support activities reported incidents of violence in schools; the unexpected outcome was the high level of reporting of abuse and violence in schools; this has been discussed in the case

conference meetings. The high number of reported cases exposed the lack of a clear referral pathway in Alexandria for such cases. Plan International worked with CDAs to conduct a mapping of service providers, their roles and responsibilities and make a service directory available to the CDA staff and families. Plan International together with the CDAs, Unicef, the government and other agencies worked to establish a clear referral pathway for child protection cases.

### Changes in psychosocial wellbeing of children and parents

Although no pre-post measurement has been undertaken to evaluate the psychosocial outcomes of children on individual level, the feedback from parents has been largely positive. Below feedback from caregivers illustrate how the activities provided through the CDA have positively contributed to children’s development and wellbeing.

**Hoda, Syrian mother of two sons:** “My youngest child used to be introvert. He became even more introverted after we moved to Egypt. I noticed he used to avoid speaking with anyone and was not happy at school because he couldn’t follow the lessons because of the different dialects. When he started taking part in the activities at the CDA, especially the open days, he began to be more sociable and his performance at school improved significantly. I feel so happy because now my son seems to be happier and he has made many new friends. He is no longer lonely.”

**Kholoud, Syrian mother of 3 children aged 5, 6, and 14:** “The best part of going to the parenting classes is not just information I get but overcoming the boredom and alienation I feel. Here, I meet many Syrian women from different parts of Syria. I feel so happy when we are together, as part of my country is here. I’m looking forward to going back to Syria to help rebuild my country.”



Abdel, 4, whispers in his father's ear while playing. The family fled Syria 2,5 years ago.

## CHALLENGES

### Accessibility

The Syrian refugees in urban Alexandria lived in widespread areas across the city and its suburbs and often, families lived a bus ride or two away from the CDAs. This had associated transport cost implications and meant that children were unable to access CDAs without being accompanied by a parent/older sibling. Plan International learned from a previous project in the CDAs that parenting circles and activities for children should where possible be scheduled at the same time to allow for parents to come to the CDAs with their children and to save money on transportation by reducing the number of trips to and from the CDAs.

### Technical capacity

One of the main challenges was the fact that emergency programming was new for the CDAs. Although the CDA staff had

extensive experience in community-based programming and life skills interventions, the psychosocial support activities such as Child Friendly Spaces and case management were new to all staff, as well as working with refugee children. The comprehensive trainings provided by Plan International and Unicef covered a great deal of new and rather specialised topics in a short time frame, which led to challenges in integrating this all at the same time into ongoing programming. There was a need for continued intensive follow-up training and on the job mentoring in the provision of non-specialised psychosocial support, case management and child protection referrals. Through the follow-up trainings and monitoring visits additional was provided to the CDA staff, although the presence of a permanent technical staff member from Plan International, from the very beginning can be recommended to ensure more intensive mentoring and support to the centers.



### Reaching the most vulnerable

The project was designed to target all Syrian refugees and Egyptian children, regardless of their socio-economic status. As a result, the project did not establish vulnerability criteria for Syrian and Egyptian children in order to target the most vulnerable families for psychosocial support. Vulnerability criteria were only set for recipients of cash programmes that were available through the same CDAs. While the absence of criteria for enrolment of the programme ensured access for all children, it can be assumed that the most vulnerable children and families, such as unaccompanied children or female headed households were not always identified nor actively reached through this project. Based on this learning, it was agreed for the next phase of the project, to establish criteria for the most vulnerable and at-risk children and families and to develop specific outreach strategies for reaching them.

### Engagement of male caregivers

The psychosocial activities and life skills sessions at the centres were mainly attended by children and their mothers. The attendance of men and fathers was relatively low, even though sessions were not exclusively for women. This was mainly related to the fact that during focus group evaluations men reportedly had “less time” to attend the activities at the CDAs, as they were working during the day, but also due to cultural barriers to joint participation of women and men at the activities. Separate activities for male caregivers could be explored.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- Introducing new psychosocial support interventions, including community-based non-specialised forms of support, requires intensive training and follow-up support such as on-the-job guidance

and mentoring to successfully implement these activities; this requires a continued investment in capacity building and supervision by skilled technical support staff from the start of the project.

- It is important to develop vulnerability criteria at the start of the intervention or programme, to ensure that the most marginalised children and families are reached and that at-risk children are adequately supported with case management services.
- In urban settings, different outreach strategies may have to be employed to effectively reach out to the most marginalised families and ensure accessibility for all. Using mobile services to reach locations far away from the centres could be an effective outreach strategy, connected to centre-based activities.
- Involvement of parents is key to reinforce life-saving information and psychosocial skills of children at home. Peer-to-peer parenting circles are an effective way to build parent support networks and to raise awareness on topics important to children, and to find solutions to problems. For example, this project this approach of involving parents has led to more girls and boys returning to school.
- Engagement of fathers is just as important as the involvement of mothers to improve the care and protection of children. Specific ways of engaging fathers could be explored, for example organising activities for men in the centres, or engaging men in toy or furniture production workshops in the Child Friendly Spaces.



### **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.