



COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION

A STRATEGY FOR PROTECTING CONFLICT-AFFECTED GIRLS AND BOYS: A CASE STUDY FROM CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR)

March 2017

This publication is also available online at: 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: A strategy for Protecting Conflict-Affected girls and boys: A Case Study from Central African Republic (CAR)*, United Kingdom: Plan International.

EMERGENCY:
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC CONFLICT

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SUMMARY

This case study describes the role of community-based child protection groups in protecting children in conflict-affected Central African Republic.

The outbreak of a violent conflict in Central African Republic (CAR) led to mass displacement in December 2013, leaving 2.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance - half of them children¹. Since 2014, Plan International supports the education and protection needs of children affected by armed conflict, including girls and boys associated with armed forces and groups (CAAFAG): for example as fighters, cooks, sex slaves, or spies. Plan International provides a comprehensive integrated child protection, psychosocial and education programme in the provinces of Mambere-Kadei, Ouham and Lobaye. The programme's aim is to prevent child recruitment and support the reintegration of former child soldiers, unaccompanied and separated children and other vulnerable children into the community.

In a context where formal services and government presence are limited, Plan International CAR uses a community-based child protection strategy to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of girls and boys. At the same time, Plan works to strengthen the statutory government services to respond to the needs of specific groups of at-risk children such as former child soldiers, unaccompanied minors and survivors of violence and abuse.

Achievements include the gradual capacity and ownership of communities in the identification, prevention and responding to child protection issues such as neglect, violence, family separation and child recruitment into armed groups. While community mobilisation has been successful, inadequate human and financial resources as well as weak structures in the local government posed a key challenge to the sustainability of the humanitarian assistance provided by Plan International in CAR. Key lesson learnt is the importance of intensive mentoring and support to community-based structures, especially in the first phase of the programme, as well as providing technical and operational support to both local and national Government structures to support community-based groups and respond to identified cases. Continued engagement with formal child protection services is also required to ensure the sustainability community-based protection work.

¹ PLAN INTERNATIONAL DEFINES A CHILD AS A PERSON BELOW THE AGE OF 18 YEARS.

BACKGROUND

Central African Republic (CAR) is one of the poorest and most under developed countries in the world. Life-expectancy is among the lowest in the world and nearly 14% of all children die before their fifth birthday (Unicef, 2017)². Basic services such as education, health care, social welfare and protection services are limited. In 2013, a violent coup led to widespread displacement and brutal attacks on civilians, leading to a humanitarian crisis in the country. Nearly 20% of the population of 4,7 million has been forced to flee their homes as a result of the violence, many of them to neighboring countries Cameroon, Chad and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A total of 2.7 million people, including 1.3 million children, were left in need of humanitarian assistance. The conflict disrupted health and education services as many schools and hospitals were destroyed or occupied by armed groups. Today, many displaced families are still dependent on humanitarian aid for food and other basic services. At the same time, humanitarian actors face severe limitations in safe access to affected areas due to insecurity, and a lack of funding to respond to the urgent needs of affected children and families.

The needs of conflict-affected girls and boys

Displaced girls and boys are among the most vulnerable in CAR. Many lack basic needs such as health, shelter, water, sanitation and food. During the conflict, many children have become separated from their parents due to displacement, poverty or death of their caregivers. Unaccompanied and separated children face high risk of abuse, exploitation and sexual violence in the absence of parental care. Since 2013, many girls and boys have been abducted or forcibly recruited into armed groups, as fighters, spies, cooks, or sex slaves. Unicef estimates that up to 10,000 children have been associated with armed groupsⁱ. Many children have witnessed their homes and schools being destroyed and their friends and parents attacked by armed groups. The experience of violence and continued daily stress due to insecurity, the lack of basic needs and education severely hampers the development and well-being of children in CAR. The Government has limited capacity to provide comprehensive support to survivors of violence, abuse and exploitation, as the technical, human resource and financial resources are scarce. In May 2015, at the National Reconciliation Forum in Bangui, the leaders of ten armed groups committed to release all the children under their control. In 2016, Unicef reported to have supported the release of 3,720 children from armed forcesⁱⁱ. The target for 2017 is 3,500 childrenⁱⁱⁱ.

Girls and boys affected by the conflict in CAR, including the most vulnerable such as separated children and those used by armed groups, require urgent support to return to their normal lives and routines, return to their families and reintegrate back into their communities.

² [HTTPS://DATA.UNICEF.ORG/COUNTRY/CAF/](https://data.unicef.org/country/caf/)

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S ACTION

Strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms to protect conflict-affected girls and boys from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation

The purpose of Plan International's community-based child protection programme is to strengthen the capacity of children, their families and local communities to identify risks, and prevent and respond to protection concerns. At the same time, Plan International worked with the national and local government and non-governmental actors to strengthen the capacities of formal child protection services and ensuring linkages between the formal and informal, community-based services.

The objective of this approach is to strengthen and restore the protective environment of children. The community, including children themselves, parents and caregivers, and community members all have a crucial role to play in keeping children safe and supporting their healthy development. In the CAR conflict, the community is usually also the first responder in an emergency situation. By strengthening the knowledge, skills and capacities of children and adults, key risks such as child recruitment, family separation and violence against children can be prevented and eliminated more effectively. At the community level, Plan supported informal community-based child protection networks, such as local child protection groups, youth clubs and foster-care families.

Plan's community based child protection interventions are integrated with a range of psychosocial, livelihoods and education interventions for children of all ages affected by the conflict in CAR, with special attention to unaccompanied and separated children and other vulnerable children.



Key activities

Strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms

Due to the conflict and instability in CAR, many pre-existing community support structures for children were either absent or of limited functionality; due to the conflict, more children and families were in need of support, schools were closed or non-functional, and displacement had disrupted pre-existing community routines and resources. Plan International supported the (re-)establishment of community-based child protection structures in 16 villages in CAR. The main structure for the protection of children, were local child protection committees (Réseau Communautaire Protection de l'Enfant, or: RECOPE). The establishment RECOPE responded to the need for a more coordinated effort to provide support to the high number of children in need of special protection in the community. The RECOPE members were all recognised community resources, such as teachers, health workers, and women's leaders who were trusted by the community.

Establishing the RECOPE

For a common understanding on how to set up community-based child protection mechanisms in line with minimum humanitarian standards, Plan International in coordination with other actors developed guidelines on how to set up RECOPE in CAR. To form the RECOPE, Plan International organised discussions with girls and boys in different age groups: primary school aged children, younger and older adolescents. Girls and boys were asked to provide the names of persons in the community to whom they address when they encounter problems. The names were cross checked and lists of most frequently

nominated persons were generated. These could be community members as young as 19 years old. The names were also cross-checked with the community chiefs, as well as with the nominated persons themselves. Subsequently, the list of persons nominated by children was presented in a community assembly meeting during which the role and functions of the RECOPE is explained to the community. Importantly, the RECOPE members and the community were informed that this role was on voluntary basis. Plan International involved the representatives of service providers in this exercise to establish their initial contact and linkage with the community groups in working on child protection issues. In the communities where displaced people were hosted, Plan International ensured that internally displaced people (IDP) were represented in the nominees for the RECOPE membership.

The role of the RECOPE:

In agreement with other non-governmental organisations and the local communities, the mandate of the local RECOPE was agreed upon. Based on this agreement, Plan International CAR developed a Terms of Reference for RECOPEs and its members. The RECOPE had three main roles:

- (1) To identify vulnerable girls and boys in communities eligible for case management services provided by a child protection agency;
- (2) To sensitize communities and raise awareness on children's rights and protection;
- (3) To mobilize community-level activity to realise children's rights and protection

Developing action plans

After the RECOPEs were established, all members received an induction and training from Plan International that included several topics, such as child protection in the context of (post-) conflict, psychosocial support, community mobilisation and community sensitization techniques. Once the RECOPEs were formalised, Plan International helped them develop action plans. The action plans took into account the three main areas in which RECOPEs intervene. A plan of actions sets dates of visits to different communities and the specific actions (i.e. Monday, visit village A to raise awareness of CP). For the effective implementation of their action plans, the RECOPEs were provided with megaphones, community sensitisation tools and information, education and communication materials, notebooks, pens, boots, vests, back packs, and rain jackets. Where possible and required, Plan International linked RECOPE members with income-generating activities that could help support their transportation and other costs related to their work in the communities.

The RECOPE met on agreed times, sometimes once a week, sometimes twice per month, in a designated community space or after school hours in a temporary learning space established by Plan International. The RECOPE reported on a regular basis to Plan International about the progress made in the implementation of their actions and in addressing child protection issues in the community.

Identifying priority child protection concerns in the community

Plan International started with a risk and resource mapping at community level with the participation of community members and children in targeted villages. The mapping looked into both existing risks in the communities as well as services already available at community level and estimated their capacity to respond to children's needs.

Separate groups of older and younger girls or boys (representing a mix of children who were in school and out-of-school, those in their biological families and in foster families, etc.) were formed to participate in the risk and resource mapping. Children identified the different risks they experienced or knew of in their communities, and mapped out what the safe and unsafe places were in their environment, including homes, schools and other community places. Lastly, supporting services or resources were identified and indicated on the maps. Child-friendly methodologies were used such as drawings and group discussions. This exercise was facilitated by Plan International staff.

The risk and resource mapping gave a good indication of the priorities of protection concerns by children themselves, the high risk and low risk areas in their communities and often also a sense of the perpetrators of violence in the community. This information was kept confidential but used by Plan International staff when conducting the same exercise with the RECOPE members.

With this information, the RECOPEs identified priority child protection issues to work on such as domestic violence or child recruitment, and they prioritised families in need of specific attention and support, such as foster families or single-headed households.

Identification and referral of vulnerable children

After initial training and action planning, Plan International provided the RECOPE with a more specialised training on how to identify and report or refer child protection incidents to Plan International and other service providers. Plan International's child protection staff coached each RECOPE on a weekly basis throughout the programme implementation to increase their capacity to provide quality and prompt response to identified child protection incidents.

The RECOPE formulated plans to identify, support and regularly monitor vulnerable families. On a weekly basis, Plan International's child protection staff met with designated RECOPE members to discuss all identified cases and agreed on the steps to take in referral and follow-up. All data was recorded in designated forms and stored in the case management system run by Plan International.

The RECOPE identified and supported unaccompanied and separated children and other vulnerable children such as girls and boys (formerly) associated with armed forces and armed groups. As the groups became more acquainted with their basic tasks and activities, they started to also play an important role in the demobilisation of children and reintegration of children released from armed groups, by identifying at-risk children, linking those with child protection and education actors at community level and by following up on individual children and families. Whenever a child was identified in need of specific support or referral by a school or through the locally established early childhood centre or Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), the RECOPE would be consulted to find the appropriate community services.

Developing community-based referral pathways

In each community, Plan International worked with the RECOPE to develop a referral pathway based on the existing services, and provided guidance on how to safely and confidentially identify a case, refer and then follow-up. Parallel to this, Plan International trained existing service providers on child protection, the referral pathway and safe reporting procedures between the RECOPE and service providers. Plan International developed basic case management tools including basic forms for identification, documentation, referral and follow-up to ensure basic data and follow-up information for each child was recorded. These forms and the accompanying guidelines were developed in consultation with the RECOPE and local service providers. For unaccompanied children and children associated with armed forces and groups, the inter-agency agreed forms were used.

Follow-up on referred cases

Due to limited availability of Government social workers in the conflict affected areas, the follow-up on cases was led by Plan International, where possible (i.e. where local social workers were in place) in coordination with the local Social Welfare office. For low and medium risk cases, the RECOPE member who identified the cases was responsible for follow-up. This could imply accompanying the child and his or her caregivers to the community structures or service providers, and discuss and inform next steps with the child and caregivers. Throughout the programme, Plan International staff met with RECOPE members individually to discuss the follow-up process of on-going cases. For high risk or urgent cases, a Plan International child protection officer was the responsible case worker.



Female community members discuss the protection risks girls and boys face in the community.

The linkages between the community-based child protection committees and other community groups and services

The RECOPE coordinated their work with other community-based groups such as youth groups and foster family networks.

- Youth Groups: As part of the community-based child protection programme, Plan International supported youth groups in each community. These groups organised their own activities in the community and were consulted about issues affecting children. The RECOPEs involved youth clubs in their risk and resources mapping and subsequently in the development of action plans. Plan International produced context-specific guidelines for capacity building of youth groups

in child protection, including safe and confidential identification and referral of children in need of protection. Youth groups turned out to be one of the community-based resources to help identify children at risk of recruitment into armed groups. The other way around, the RECOPE could refer vulnerable children to take part in youth club activities such as recreational activities or life skills cycles.

- Foster families: Foster care networks formed another important community structure to protect girls and boys in the community. Foster families were identified, trained and supported to care for unaccompanied and separated children, including children returning from armed groups. The



foster families were actively linked to the RECOPE, youth clubs, child-friendly spaces and other forms of psychosocial, educational and protection support to ensure their children has access to all services. Foster carers were actively involved in the risk and resource mapping at community level, in orientations and child protection trainings as well as awareness raising activities. The RECOPEs provided ongoing support to foster-care families, including organising parenting sessions and regular monitoring where required.

Working with the government

Plan International supported the RECOPEs in CAR in establishing linkages with community service providers to promote

a timely and appropriate response to children in need of protection. RECOPEs were coached by Plan International child protection staff to follow-up on each referred case with the government services. However, this was sometimes difficult as the Government service providers were often understaffed, absent or not able to provide support to the community members. To improve the communication and coordination Plan International organised meetings with community service providers such as teachers, social workers, health and police staff to discuss the collaboration with community chiefs and RECOPEs in the case management process. Plan International staff was responsible for overseeing the case management process including the timely referral, service provision and follow-up until case closure.



POSITIVE IMPACT

Community engagement in the protection of children

The absence of formal services in most parts of CAR leads to an over-reliance on the community capacity to prevent and respond to child protection issues. RECOPEs were established as a more coordinated effort to respond to the high numbers of children in need of special protection in the conflict-affected communities in CAR. RECOPE was a new function in the community but built on pre-existing resources and with members known and trusted by the community. From the very start, RECOPE members were committed and motivated to improve the protection of children in their community. All orientations, trainings and meetings held with Plan International, were greatly appreciated by RECOPE

members and they all developed their own action plans. As RECOPE's capacity was gradually built, their activity and ownership in organising activities in their community had continuously increased. Despite of instability, insecurity and poverty in most of the communities, RECOPE members continued their work throughout the years on a voluntary basis. Linking RECOPE to income-generating activities positively contributed to their sustainability.

Community-based reintegration support

The engagement of RECOPEs in the care for and support to children affected by conflict, has led to very positive results for the most vulnerable children including separated children and girls and boys released from armed groups. RECOPEs played an instrumental role in supporting



Children holding up sign 'paix' (peace) at a community event to mark the Day of the African Child on 16 June 2016

and monitoring foster families who receive unaccompanied children and provide care and protection until they are reunified with their original families. When a child needed more specialised support, RECOPE members were the link between the family, Plan International and the service provider.

Referral and follow-up for at-risk children

Although in the beginning RECOPEs focused more on general community-level activities and awareness raising and initial identification of at-risk children, gradually their capacity has been built to become more active in the case management process. Limitations in access to communities, lack of Government social workers and a relatively high number of cases made it necessary for RECOPEs to take a greater responsibility and role in the case management work. While Plan International remained responsible for case management supervision, RECOPEs played an increasingly important role in the referral, monitoring and follow-up of individual cases in close coordination with the government service providers.

Coordination and technical leadership

As a co-lead of the national working groups on Community-based Child Protection, Plan International shared its expertise in the community-based approach with other national organisations and the Government. Through sharing technical guidance and tools within the child protection sub-cluster and education cluster, the community-based approach was promoted as an effective strategy to protect children in the community.

CHALLENGES

Security situation

One of the most striking operational challenges is the volatile security situation in which Plan International operates. In most programme areas, armed groups are still operational and security incidents are not uncommon. Insecurity has led to restrained access to communities and hindered Plan International staff from monitoring and following up on referred cases. The rise of violence in Bangui in autumn 2015, caused the paralysis of humanitarian assistance for several weeks, and led to additional population movement in communities.

Lack of formal government child protection services

In most target areas, government services such as social welfare, child protection and education are limited. This leads to an over-reliance on already strained communities and families in supporting children formerly associated with or at risk of joining armed groups. Although the community plays a crucial role in the protection of children, the community-based support structures and resources remain fragile due to insecurity, population displacement and a general lack of knowledge, skills and resources to assist children who require specialised support. Strengthening community-based care arrangements and protection structures therefore require a heavy investment of technical, financial and human resources to supervise programme actions and quality of services.

Capacity of the RECOPE

RECOPE groups had three main roles and a number of specific responsibilities. At times, RECOPEs were not as active in certain activities and responsibilities (i.e. local level advocacy) as others (identification of vulnerable children in need of specialised services). For example, in some cases the collaboration with the local government authorities was difficult as RECOPE members were not taken as seriously as other, more formal, service providers and NGOs like Plan International when addressing challenges or gaps. It was then Plan International's role to help encourage RECOPE members, help them identify their advocacy messages and lobby with the government on their behalf.

Sustainability

Plan International's efforts to train local and government stakeholders such as health, legal and social welfare service providers on child protection were hampered by continuous insecurity and population movement. A good way to address this challenge, was engaging with the education and social welfare (and protection) state structures at national and sub-national level. Working with the government at different levels and supporting their capacity has notably increased their long-term commitment to support community-based child protection efforts. For example, where possible Plan International has included state level social workers in all trainings both at province and community levels. Plan International also provided logistical support to the same social workers to accompany Plan International in case management work including home visits and case planning and evaluation meetings, to build their technical capacity.

Key lessons learned

Working with communities:

- Involve girls and boys of different ages in the selection of trusted and respected adults in the community to become RECOPE members, to ensure the trust and acceptance of the group in the community, especially among children and parents;
- Involve local service providers in the process of establishing a RECOPE to ensure support for, and collaboration with, the RECOPE from the very start of the intervention;
- Conduct a participatory risk and resource mapping in the first phase of the community-based child protection programme to identify priority issues in the community as well as resources to build on in the development of action plans for the RECOPE;
- Intensively invest in and support community-based structures in the early phase of the response programme. This requires continuous presence of Plan International staff in the communities to provide on-the-job support in case identification and referral, monitor community-based protection services and provide technical support to community workers.
- While volunteerism can be stimulated by Plan International by providing ongoing technical support and by being present in the community, the RECOPE members require basic equipment to fulfil their responsibilities in protecting children. Provide facilitator bags, basic stationary, communications materials, umbrella and boots, t-shirts and other visibility equipment, as per the local context;

Working with the Government and other humanitarian actors:

- It is essential to provide continued technical and operational support to local Government structures to strengthen formal child protection services, for example providing operational support to local social welfare services, technical training and on-the-job coaching of government social workers.
- In a context where formal services are mostly absent locally it is essential that Plan International has its own case workers to respond to and follow-up on identified child protection cases that require specialised support. Over time, local community capacity to provide this support can then gradually be built.

Sustainability:

- In contexts such as CAR where community-based child protection programmes are implemented in extremely poor communities, and formal services are limited or non-existent, community-based groups are often placed with greater responsibilities in the service provision for children and families. These additional activities and responsibilities may not be realistically implemented solely on a voluntary basis and additional budget maybe sought for transportation, implementation and people's time, to ensure sustainability. While the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS) advise against payment of local community groups for their work in child protection, the possibility of linking community-based child protection groups to income-generating activities should be further explored. Any income-generating activities should be determined based on an assessment and thorough understanding of what activities are appropriate and sustainable.

ⁱ [HTTP://RELIEFWEB.INT/REPORT/WORLD/LEAST-65000-CHILDREN-RELEASED-ARMED-FORCES-AND-GROUPS-OVER-LAST-10-YEARS-UNICEF](http://reliefweb.int/report/world/least-65000-children-released-armed-forces-and-groups-over-last-10-years-unicef)
21 FEBRUARY 2017

ⁱⁱ [HTTPS://WWW.UNICEF.ORG/APPEALS/CAR.HTML](https://www.unicef.org/appeals/car.html) UNICEF 2016 PROGRAMME TARGETS AND RESULTS

ⁱⁱⁱ [HTTPS://WWW.UNICEF.ORG/APPEALS/CAR.HTML](https://www.unicef.org/appeals/car.html) UNICEF 2017 APPEAL



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.