



Until we are all equal



Changing Lives 2024

The impact of Plan
International's child
sponsorship programmes
in Bangladesh, Ecuador
and Uganda

Summary Report



Contents

Introduction	1
Findings from Changing Lives 2024	4
Concluding insights	9
Recommendations and Plan's response	10



COVER PHOTO:
A young girl attends a festival
in the Bolivar province of Ecuador.
©Plan International

A young girl from Uganda
uses one of the learning kits
to study at home.
© Plan International



Girls from Bangladesh.
© Plan International

Plan International strives for continuous programme and quality improvements. This has led to an action-oriented research series – Changing Lives – on the impact of child sponsorship on sponsored children, their families and communities.

Plan International's 2024 Changing Lives research study shows that child sponsorship has the potential to make concrete and positive changes in the lives of children, their families and their communities. The study offers important insights for Plan International and other child sponsorship organisations.

Introduction

Child sponsorship is a widely adopted approach to development, which helps to create meaningful, lasting change for children, their families and communities.¹

Child sponsorship is a cornerstone of Plan International's work with children and their communities. Through child sponsorship, Plan International is engaging with more than 1 million children in 44 countries around the world. Plan International takes a community-based approach to child sponsorship, building long-term relationships with sponsored children and their families, so that improvements in their communities are tailored to local needs and are durable and sustainable.

All children in sponsored communities where Plan International works benefit from this programming, whether or not they have an individual sponsor. This programming aims to improve access for all to essential services such as education and healthcare. Vulnerable and marginalised communities are prioritised – as is support for girls' rights and gender equality in line with the Global Strategy – *All Girls Standing Strong Creating Global Change*.²

01 It shows how child sponsorship enables Plan International to establish long-term relationships and programming that have impacts for sponsored children and their communities.

02 It highlights areas where Plan International can improve child sponsorship approaches and presents key action points.

Plan International is committed to using the evidence from the study to inform changes as part of the Next Gen Sponsorship initiative aimed at revitalising the sponsorship model.

Next Gen Sponsorship

Sponsorship lies at the heart of Plan International – it's a key component of how we reach and impact girls and young people. As the world continues to change, it is clear we need to reframe how we think about and implement our sponsorship work, so that we can be in the best possible position to achieve our ambition to reach 200 million girls.

Next Gen Sponsorship was launched in 2024 to revitalise Plan's sponsorship by keeping the best of what we have and building and expanding on it to appeal to new sponsors in new ways. Modernising our sponsorship model will help us explore new avenues for fundraising, make frontline work more efficient, and create more impact for girls and young people worldwide.

1. Wydick, B., Glewwe, P., Rutledge, L. (2013). "Does child sponsorship Work? A Six-Country Study of Impacts on Adult Life Outcomes", *Journal of Political Economy*, 212: 393–436.; Wydick, B., Glewwe, P., Rutledge, L. (2017). "Does child sponsorship Pay off in Adulthood? An International Study of Impacts on Income and Wealth", *The World Bank Economic Review*, 31 (2): 434–458.

2. Plan International (2024). "Our strategy", <https://plan-international.org/organisation/strategy/>

Changing Lives Sponsorship Research Series

A learning journey to generate evidence on the impact of child sponsorship

Plan International has conducted a number of studies to identify the impact of child sponsorship. In 2018, Plan embarked on a learning journey together with RMIT University in Australia. A critical aspect has been identifying the most effective ways to understand the impact of sponsorship. The Changing Lives Sponsorship Research Series included the following studies led by RMIT that provided different but complementary insights on the impact of sponsorship:

2019 An analysis of Plan International’s Child Sponsorship data³

This quantitative study used Plan International’s child sponsorship data and a supplementary questionnaire on wellbeing. It generated important evidence on the impact of child sponsorship on sponsored children, showing, for example, that sponsorship helps to increase school attendance and birth registration – with younger children benefiting more from sponsorship activities than older children. While this analysis generated important insights, the data only provided information on sponsored children and not on the non-sponsored children and other community members who are part of Plan International sponsored communities.

2022 Snapshot of the Child Sponsorship Data

Using Plan International’s child sponsorship data set, this study provided insights into the reach of Plan International’s sponsorship for the period 2008–2021 at global and regional levels. The objective was to provide an accessible overview of the breadth of operations as well as a high-level indication of if and how development outcomes vary across time, region, gender and between children who have an individual sponsor and those who do not.

2023 Secondary data analysis on the impact of child sponsorship

RMIT conducted rigorous quantitative analysis of Plan International’s sponsored child data and other secondary data for Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda.⁴ The focus was on: (i) examining how development outcomes for sponsored children in Plan International’s database had changed through time; and (ii) how development outcomes in geographic areas where Plan International works compare to outcomes in areas where Plan International does not work. While this approach showed promise, the research team felt that primary data comparing sponsored and non-sponsored communities would generate important additional insights.

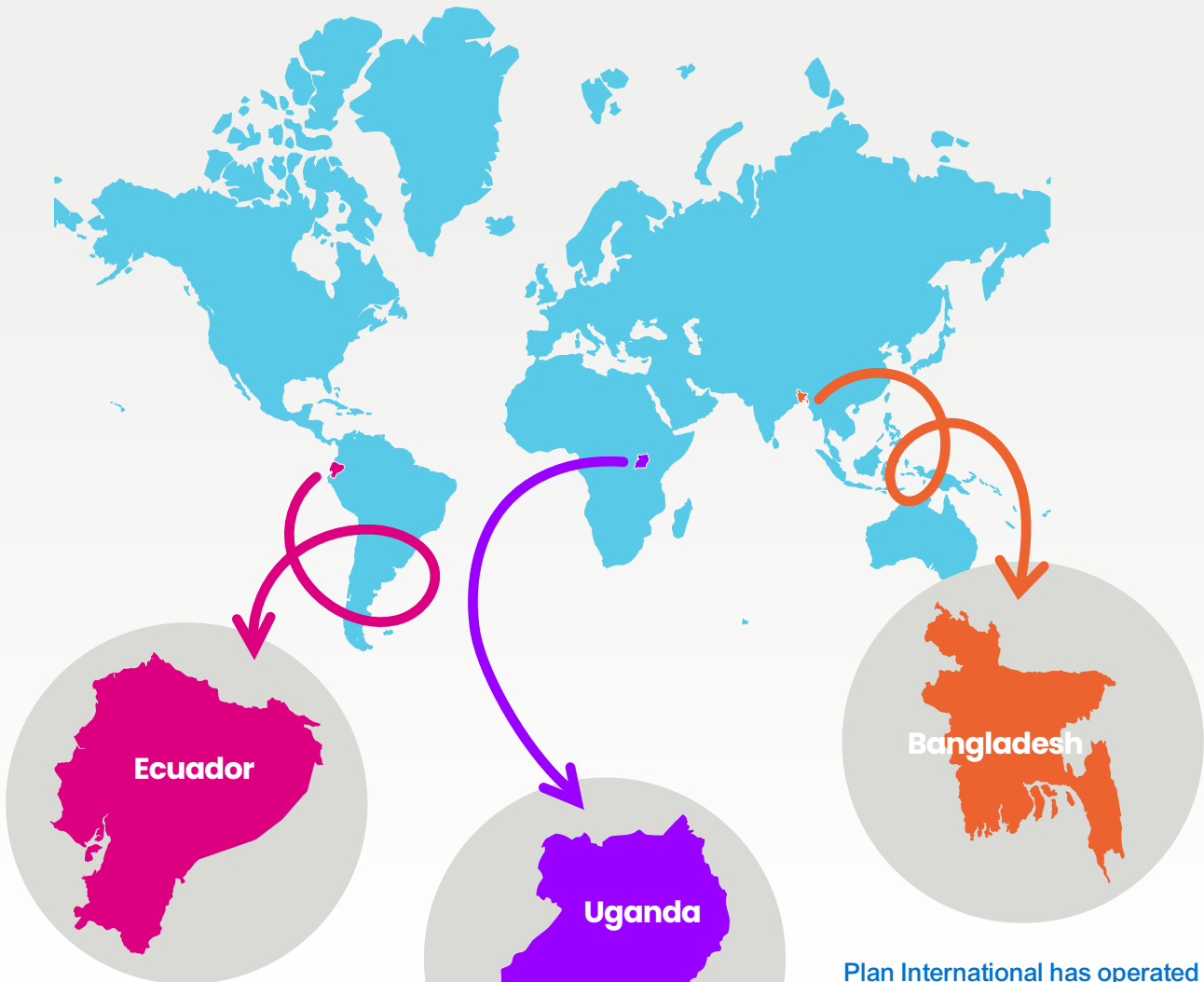
2024 The impact of Plan International’s child sponsorship programmes in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda⁵

To provide further insights into the impacts of child sponsorship, RMIT collected new primary data in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda. For each site, approximately 400 surveys were conducted in Plan International communities and a further 200 in communities where Plan is not present. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a total of 145 participants across the three countries. Data was collected from sponsored children, their families, formerly sponsored children and community leaders. Although data was captured only after Plan International programming started in communities, the evidence generated rich insights into the impacts of Plan International’s child sponsorship programmes.

This summary report presents findings from the Changing Lives 2024 study, based on data collection in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda.

3. Plan International (2019). “Changing Lives: An analysis of Plan International’s Child Sponsorship Data”, https://www.plan-international.org/uploads/2021/12/glo-sponsorship_study-final-eng-jun19.pdf
4. Data sources used were the International Food Policy Research Institute’s (IFPRI) Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), the most comprehensive, nationally representative rural household panel survey in the country; Ecuadorian Census data for the years 1962, 1974, 1982, 1990, 2001, and 2010 from IPUMS International; and the Uganda National Panel Survey (UNPS), a nationally representative survey conducted in 2009/10, 2010/11, 2011/12, 2013/14, 2015/16 and 2018/19.
5. Research undertaken in urban slum communities in the capital Dhaka (Bangladesh); rural areas in the central Sierra region (Ecuador); and rural and urban areas in Kamuli District (Uganda).

Plan International’s child sponsorship work in Bangladesh, Uganda and Ecuador



Plan International has been operating in Ecuador since 1962. Since the 1990s, Plan International adopted a holistic approach to child sponsorship and community development, becoming more child-centric, directly engaging children, in collaboration with their teachers, community leaders and parents, to adopt a leadership role in their communities and environment.

Plan International started operating in Uganda in 1992 to respond to the needs of children affected by a guerrilla war in Luwero district. The current focus areas and priorities include: skills development and empowerment; early childhood care and primary education; improving maternal, neonatal and child health as well as the sexual and reproductive health of young people; and responding to disasters and the influx of refugees into Uganda.

Plan International has operated in Bangladesh since 1992, with a focus on improving gender equality and inclusion through programming in education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, child protection, girls’ economic empowerment and the prevention of child, early and forced marriage.

Findings from Changing Lives 2024

Findings from the Changing Lives 2024 primary data analysis suggest that child sponsorship can make significant differences to the lives of children and their communities.

The research looked at the impact of child sponsorship in terms of education, health, empowerment, child protection, child marriage and unintended pregnancy, multi-dimensional poverty and community cohesion.



Education

The study found that regular school attendance among children in Plan International's sponsorship programme is very high. In 2021, 94 per cent of sponsored children of primary school age and 95 per cent of post-primary age children attended formal education. Regular school attendance improves the longer that Plan International has been working in a community.

Within Plan International communities, findings show that sponsored adolescents have better education outcomes than non-sponsored adolescents.

In communities with Plan International sponsorship programming, enrolment and attendance rates are higher among girls relative to boys. Sponsored adolescents reporting a disability are more likely to be enrolled in school and attending school regularly relative to those without a disability, in those communities.

Adolescent girls in Plan International communities in Bangladesh were 14 per cent more likely to be regularly attending school than boys.

In Bangladesh sponsored adolescents with a disability were 19 per cent more likely to be in school in Plan International communities than in comparison communities, where Plan International was not present. Adolescents joining at least one sponsorship programme were 9.5 per cent more likely to be enrolled in school and 15 per cent more likely to attend school regularly.

Qualitative data revealed that financial assistance provided by Plan International Bangladesh and Plan International Uganda was effective at keeping adolescents in school – but also that adolescents may no longer continue with their education once sponsorship stops.

“My life wouldn't be the same if I didn't participate in Plan's programme because I wouldn't go to school if it was not for Plan. My father never had money to pay for me and my siblings. I wouldn't reach where I am now if Plan didn't come to our community.”

Dembe,⁶ female, 22, Uganda, formerly sponsored child

“After the sponsorship ended, I lost the opportunity to continue my studies. I feel bad. Education is important for leading a proper life with family. I got the chance to study well but the poverty of my family could not allow me to study well.”

Omar, male, 18, Bangladesh, formerly sponsored child

6. All names have been changed to protect participants' identities.



A young mother will make sure her daughter knows the correct facts about menstruation (Bangladesh).
©Plan International



Health

Adolescent research participants were asked to rate their general health on a five-point scale from “very poor” to “very good”.

In Uganda, self-reported good health for adolescents in Plan International communities was 19 per cent higher than for those in comparison sites.

High health levels were reported in Bangladesh and Ecuador, but no differences were found between sites with Plan International presence and those without. The qualitative findings, however, highlight the importance of sponsorship for health in all three contexts. Interviewees in Uganda and Bangladesh described the positive contribution of Plan International to improving girls’ health, especially menstrual health management and nutrition.

“Through the sponsorship of our community, they taught us how to practise better menstrual hygiene including making sanitary pads out of local materials.”

Joana, female, 16, Buwalo, Uganda, formerly sponsored child

Parents in Ecuador and Uganda said investments in better sanitation, toilet facilities and safe drinking water were improving community health, particularly in controlling and reducing disease outbreaks. Other benefits mentioned were accessing primary healthcare facilities, with reliable supplies of medicines and regular check-ups following Plan International interventions.

“Before Plan, the community did not have, for example, bathrooms. There were no sanitary bathrooms. Thanks to Plan we accessed a water heater to shower with hot water and everything. The whole community has learned maintenance and sanitation of drinking water.”

Jose, male, 37, Ecuador, parent of sponsored adolescent

Plan International interventions are improving girls’ health, making primary healthcare more accessible and helping communities to prevent disease.

A 15-year-old is breaking gender stereotypes through karate (Bangladesh).

©Plan International



Empowerment

Empowerment was measured by asking participants to what extent they agreed with seven statements related to empowerment. Adolescents in Bangladesh's Plan International communities have noticeably higher levels of empowerment than adolescents in comparison sites where there was no presence of Plan International. Empowerment in Ugandan Plan International sites was also higher than in comparison sites but slightly less so compared to Bangladesh. However, the reverse was seen in Ecuador, where a small but lower score was found in Plan International sites.

Plan International activities contribute to enhancing the empowerment of girls and women. Girls described acquiring skills for decision-making, speaking and leadership, noting how this has changed their lives.

Being sponsored empowered girls to stay in school and avoid child, early and forced marriages, and subsequent early pregnancy.

Women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh is improving through Plan International's investment in childcare, enabling mothers to pursue their own livelihoods. Traditional norms and attitudes about women's roles are shifting due to Plan International's work in communities in Ecuador.

“Thanks to Plan, we have been made aware that women also have the same value as men. Today there are already some women professionals, and women are also studying. On the other hand, before, from birth, little importance was given to women because it was said that women are only to have children and take care of animals, nothing more. They had no other importance. It was not believed that they could assume other things, that they had the capacity to assume leadership and authority as well. Now, that has changed ...”

Iker, male, 55, Ecuador, community leader



A woman processes barley grains into flour in the Chimborazo province of Ecuador.

©Plan International



Child marriage and unintended adolescent pregnancy

The research indicates that sponsorship activities are associated with preventing child, early and forced marriages and unintended adolescent pregnancy, according to interviewees. Effects are chiefly seen as linked to support for education and empowerment, and they intersect with findings on child protection. Working with families and households, Plan International activities help them to envisage different futures for girls.



Child protection

Levels of awareness about reporting harm to children were generally high in all three countries. Bangladesh was the only place where we found clear differences between sites:

More than 91 per cent of adolescents in Plan International communities know where to report harm to children, compared to 82 per cent in the comparison site in Bangladesh.⁷

“Before, I used to say ‘yes’ to everything. I would feel ashamed to say ‘no’. We are taught what is good and what is not. Now I can say ‘no’. I don’t feel ashamed. Previously, I used to think how they would react if I said no. Now, I prioritise my own safety first.”

Anika, female, 20, Bangladesh, formerly sponsored child

Community-led child protection work is enhancing child protection through training directed at families and through Plan International’s broader community services. In Uganda, Plan International has worked to improve law enforcement for cases of abuse against girls. Parents there noted that gaining knowledge about children’s rights has improved how they parent their children.

“Our life has changed due to Plan coming here. Previously, my elder sister couldn’t study. My sister was married to someone when she was 12. My sisters were confined at home; they couldn’t participate in any activities. On the other hand, I got all these services. Without Plan, I couldn’t get all these services like education and drawing. I would have gotten married early if they hadn’t come to our community.”

Divya, female, 18, Bangladesh, formerly sponsored adolescent



A community meeting in Uganda to raise awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage.

©Plan International

7. This difference was not statistically significant.



Multi-dimensional poverty

The research team used a multi-dimensional poverty index for sponsored children based on information on food security, health, education and living standards.⁸ Poverty affects all the sites analysed in all the three countries. Bangladesh's Plan International sites had a much higher multi-dimensional poverty rate than the comparison site – 48 per cent compared to 29 per cent. The extent of poverty in the Bangladesh sponsored sites makes any improvements there in development outcomes particularly striking. Differences were not significant between sites in the other two countries.

Plan International programmes help to alleviate poverty and develop income-generating skills.

Plan International programmes have improved families' incomes in all three countries, according to interviewees. In some cases, this was via indirect financial assistance, such as credits for food or fuel or paying school fees. Programmes also enable participants to gain income-generating skills – such as training for farming as well as receiving animals to begin a farming business in Uganda and Ecuador.

“My family was running out of money, and I could not afford my daughter's education expenses. Now, this sponsorship has made my daughter's education easy. Now we do have good meals. The money that was spent on her education is now spent in other sectors of my family and also, we can save some money from this. As my daughter's education is being continued by this sponsorship, I can invest this money for further income in other sectors and I can increase my property and buy agricultural land.”

Fatima, female, 45, Bangladesh, parent of sponsored adolescent



A young girl hands out leaflets containing flood awareness messages in Bangladesh.
© Plan International



Community cohesion

Plan International communities in Bangladesh had noticeably higher levels of trust and cohesion than comparison sites – which could be due in part to Plan International's long-term, community-led approach in these areas. However, Plan International sites in Ecuador had slightly lower levels of trust than the comparison site. No differences were seen in Uganda.

Positive community changes in Plan International sites include increased collaboration and addressing gender-based violence.

In Ecuador, interviewees spoke positively about Plan International efforts to educate local people on collaboration and communalism. Projects were praised for teaching children to treat others with respect, including girls and those with disabilities, and to avoid early pregnancy. The changes in attitudes are helping social cohesion. In Uganda, raising awareness on non-violent resolution of problems is improving cohesion and helping to reduce gender-based violence against women.

8. The measures are based on the multi-dimensional poverty index developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI).

Concluding insights

“If I didn’t get involved with the sponsorship programme of Plan ... My life would have been completely different ... Thanks to Plan, positive things have happened. I have been able to pursue education because child marriage has stopped. I couldn’t speak before. Brothers used to come, and I used to sit behind rows. Now I can say a lot in front of people.”

Anika, female, 20, Bangladesh, formerly sponsored child

The 2024 Changing Lives research study shows that child sponsorship has the potential to make concrete and positive changes in the lives of children, their families and communities. There are some important insights for Plan International and other child sponsorship organisations.

First, the research demonstrates that the child sponsorship approach contributes positively to development outcomes for children in different ways depending on their context. In each of the studied contexts Plan International’s sponsored work had a positive impact on sponsored children and their communities even though the approaches and outcomes differed.

Second, findings indicate that important development outcomes such as regular school attendance and access to water and sanitation facilities, improve the longer that Plan International has been working in a community. This lends support to adopting a long-term partnership approach to development as improvements in outcomes are likely to take time to arise. Further support for the approach arises from our finding that levels of community cohesion and trust were found to be higher in Plan International communities than in comparison sites in Bangladesh. Because Plan International works



with local community organisations and many community members are involved in the work, the community-led approach to development has the potential to increase cohesion and trust.

An overarching conclusion is that the long-term approach of child sponsorship is beneficial for children and their communities and should be continued.

Child sponsorship allows NGOs to undertake a long-term community approach to development. However, models of child sponsorship can be viewed as incompatible with moves to decolonise development. The international NGO sector is in the process of decolonising development. Plan International believes it is essential to continually reflect on all our work, including sponsorship approaches. We must actively and decisively align with anti-racist and anti-colonial principles. This forms one of the priorities of the Next Gen Sponsorship work currently underway.

Recommendations and Plan's response

As an evidence-based and learning organisation, Plan International is committed to using the evidence from the Changing Lives Sponsorship Research Series to inform and improve our work and sponsorship approaches. Findings from this study will be used to inform the Next Gen Sponsorship initiative aimed at revitalising our sponsorship model. The following recommendations are proposed to enhance the impact of child sponsorship programmes across the development sector. They include action points specific to Plan International that are part of the response to the research.



Inclusion

Child sponsorship approaches and models across the sector should be based on principles of inclusivity and should be mindful of the intersectional needs of children in all their diversity, including but not limited to gender, disability, ethnicity and age.

Plan International action point »

Improve outcomes for sponsored children with a **disability** through efforts to build staff capacity and data visibility of sponsored children with disabilities. Continue efforts to roll out **anti-racist and anti-colonial** principles and approaches across the organisation as part of the Next Gen Sponsorship initiative.

Education

Sponsorship organisations should increase advocacy for government support for children’s education and financing for gender transformative education, as well as efforts to improve girls’ health education, especially in relation to menstrual health and nutrition.

Plan International action point »

Work closely with programme and influencing units to improve government partnerships on **education** and explore ways of addressing menstrual health and nutrition education in programmes.

Sustainability

Organisations should focus on making sponsorship and programming approaches more sustainable, including strengthening partnerships with local governments and communities to reduce community reliance on child sponsorship programmes.

Plan International action point »

Increase efforts to ensure **sustainability** of sponsorship programming through strengthening coordination with local governments as well as alignment with Plan’s Global Policy on Programme Influencing Quality.

Research

Child sponsorship organisations should continue to assess the impact of child sponsorship programmes on developmental outcomes, and explore the option of a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) to prove the causal impact of child sponsorship on key development outcomes.



**Plan International
action point »**

Continue the **learning journey** as part of the Changing Lives Sponsorship Research Series to demonstrate impact and improve outcomes for children and their communities.

The findings from this study will be contribute to Plan’s constant evolution to make sure sponsorship is fit for the modern world. Plan International is on a journey to revitalise and modernise our sponsorship approach. We will keep the best of what we have and build and expand on it to help to create more impact for girls and young people worldwide.

A young woman at the annual girls' movement workshop in Ecuador. She has been involved with Plan International's work since she was a young girl, after becoming part of Plan's sponsorship programme.

© Plan International



DON'T WORRY
ABOUT THE RULES



Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we 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 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

Plan International

International Headquarters
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

T +44 (0) 1483 755155

F +44 (0) 1483 756505

E info@plan-international.org

plan-international.org

[facebook.com/planinternational](https://www.facebook.com/planinternational)

twitter.com/planglobal

[instagram.com/planinternational](https://www.instagram.com/planinternational)

[linkedin.com/company/plan-international](https://www.linkedin.com/company/plan-international)

[youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv](https://www.youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv)

Design: Out of the Blue Creative Communication
Solutions – www.outoftheblue.co.za

Published in 2024. Text © Plan International

Acknowledgements

This summary report is based on a study carried out by Professor Simon Feeny, Professor Alberto Posso, Dr Sefa Awaworyi Churchill and Associate Professor Samuelson Appau from RMIT University.

At Plan International Dr Karin Diaconu and Dr Martha Guevara managed the study with support from Dr Lucia Rost, Dr Jacqueline Gallinetti and Isobel Fergus.

The summary report was written by Dr Lucia Rost, Dr Martha Lucia Borrás Guevara and Anna Brown.

Appreciation is due to Plan International colleagues who offered feedback and input: Frank Schaettiger, Danny Plunkett, Magdalena Bastidas, Kathleen Sherwin, Damien Queally, Jennifer Delgado, Juliana Pierossi, Ming Viado, Dana Kabbani, Louise Meincke, Marianne Sondergaard, Carla Jones, Morten Lynge, Sandra Dudley, Gladys Rivera, Patricia Tobar, Judith Nakanda, Nova Schams and Tariq Ul Hassan Khan.

Thank you to all current and former sponsored children and their families for their participation in the research, as well as to the Plan International staff and volunteers who conducted the interviews.