

Case study

PALS: Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting in South Sudan

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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 is 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 help children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practices and policy at local, national and global level through 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.

Photos: Plan International

PALS in South Sudan

Overview

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“Before, my brothers did not help with household chores. But after the programme, they have started helping, and we even plan our timetable together.”

- Judith, PALS participant (19 years old)¹

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PALS programme goal: To promote the psychosocial well-being, health and safety of adolescents aged 10-19 in crisis settings.

Steps towards implementation



PALS is embedded in multisectoral adolescent projects



Locations: Yei, Morobo, and Kajo-Keji counties, Central Equatoria state, South Sudan



Formation of PALS adolescent and parent groups



Delivery of 13-week life skills and 10-week parenting programmes using creative and participatory methods

Challenges and lessons learnt

- Male engagement remained a challenge due to pervasive gender norms and food insecurity.
- Attendance was limited due to session timings and distance to the venue.
- Only a limited number of adolescents had access to other, complementary support such as vocational training.

Impact

- 234 adolescents (164 females, 70 males) and 161 parents and caregivers (113 female, 48 male) completed the PALS programme.
- Adolescents and their parents/caregivers report improvements in girls' self-confidence, parenting practices, family relations and adolescents' positive outlook on the future.

Recommendations:

- Involve communities in programme planning to reduce barriers for participation.
- Consult male caregivers and develop a targeted strategy to enhance male engagement.
- In food-insecure areas, implement PALS alongside humanitarian interventions which meet basic needs and offer adolescents opportunities to learn vocational skills.
- Provide sustainable hygiene items to support the outcomes of the PALS programme.

¹ To maintain the confidentiality of participants in this case study, all names used are fictional. Actual names have been withheld to protect the privacy and anonymity of the individuals involved.

CASE STUDY

PALS: Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills

SUMMARY

This case study examines the implementation of the Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills (PALS) programme by Plan International in Central Equatoria state, South Sudan. The study focusses on the programme's design, implementation and outcomes, aiming to provide insights into how PALS addressed the unique needs of adolescents and their caregivers in South Sudan. A safeguarding risk assessment was conducted and informed consent/ assent was obtained from the adolescents, parents and caregivers prior to holding interviews.

About PALS

Plan International's Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills (PALS) programme promotes the psychosocial well-being, health and safety of adolescents aged 10 to 19 in crisis settings.

The PALS programme uses four strategies:

- Providing life-saving **information** to adolescents and their families
- Strengthening the **life skills** of adolescents and positive **parenting practices** of their parents and caregivers
- Promoting positive and supportive **parent-child relations**
- Linking adolescents and their families to locally available **services and support**

PALS is a three-month programme with weekly Life Skills sessions for adolescents and Parenting sessions for their parents/caregivers.

PALS Life Skills and Parenting groups run separately but in parallel with one another. This helps to reinforce mutual learning, increase families' access to services and promote supportive parent-child relations.

PALS Life Skills sessions engage adolescents in participatory ways to learn, share and practise skills which support adolescent well-being, health and protection. Through creative play and arts such as games, music and drama,

adolescents can express themselves, build confidence, learn and connect with peers. Play-based methods have been developed in partnership with Clowns without Borders.

PALS Parenting sessions are discussion- and activity-based and aim to support parents to access essential information, skills and services which support their own well-being and that of their adolescents.

This case study was developed based on conversations with PALS implementing teams and individual participants, as well as analysis of M&E data and project documentation including project reports. All information was collected using informed consent in line with ethical data collection and safeguarding measures. The case study does not include real names or other identifiable information of programme participants.

Results in South Sudan

Positive impact on family relations: Participants shared how the sessions improved the relations between adolescents and their parents and caregivers. John, a male caregiver, said that he previously did not know how to control his temper and used to beat his wife, but now he has also learnt to listen to his wife and their relations at home have generally improved. James, a male caregiver participant, stated that "The only support I have known has mostly been food assistance. There has been little focus on spending time with children. I wish this type of programme had existed during my parents' time. It could have helped them avoid challenges, such as abuse at home. I urge that more groups and sessions like these be created in our community."

Equitable responsibilities between girls and boys:

Adolescents highlighted how the programme promoted equitable family relations and responsibilities at home. One of the female adolescents, Judith (aged 19) shared that, "Before, my brothers did not help with household chores. But after the programme, they have started helping, and we even plan our timetable together."

Girl empowerment: Some PALS graduates became advocates for child protection following the PALS programming, promoting these practices within their communities. Judith stated that PALS motivated her to continue her education, help her peers and advocate against child marriage in her community.





Attendance and male engagement: The PALS programme supported participants with small children by offering a space where they could take part in recreational activities while their parents participate in the session. However, attendance was lower when sessions were delivered during lunch hours, as no refreshments were offered during the sessions. Attendance was also affected when participants had to walk long distances to the session. Male attendance was generally lower than female attendance because men were often out in search of food during the day.

Relevance of contextualised content: The PALS programme content was contextualised at national level and then adapted to the different locations where the project was implemented. This helped to effectively address cultural terms, definitions and sensitivities, particularly around adolescent sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence. Translation of key terms and definitions into the South Sudanese local language of Kakwa facilitated easy understanding of the session content in Yei, Morobo and Kajo-Keji.

High humanitarian needs: Although PALS was implemented as part of broader, multi-sectoral projects, participants highlighted the need for more assistance and opportunities for adolescents outside of the PALS programme including hygiene materials and access to education and vocational training opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Humanitarian crisis in South Sudan

The humanitarian crisis in South Sudan is deteriorating due to ongoing conflicts, food insecurity, outbreaks of disease

and frequent flooding. In 2024, food insecurity increased with 7.1 million people experiencing high levels of hunger, up 20% on 2023². Since the onset of the war in Sudan in 2023, over 1 million Sudanese people have crossed the border into South Sudan³. Plan International has been working in South Sudan since 2006 and implements child- and adolescent-centred programming in five states: Central Equatoria, Eastern Equatoria, Lakes, Upper Nile and Greater Pibor Administrative Area. Central Equatoria, which is the focus of this case study, faces a range of threats including armed conflict, outbreaks of infectious disease and environmental hazards.

Impact on adolescents

Adolescents account for nearly one-third of the total population in South Sudan⁴. Adolescent girls and boys are exposed to a range of risks including violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Inter-communal violence has disrupted supportive family environments and affected adolescents' access to education, leaving many away from school. South Sudanese adolescents are expected to take on adult responsibilities in their families. The tasks which adolescent girls and boys take on are determined by gender-specific norms and expectations, and they often limit the opportunities adolescents have for studying, recreation or participation in social activities. Adolescent girls, in particular, are at higher risk of school drop-out and experiencing gender-based violence including child marriage.

"As a girl, when I returned from school, I was given a lot of work at home, unlike boys who only take care of animals. This left me exhausted, unable to study and at risk of failing at school," - Judith (19)

² [UNHCR press release](#) (January 2025).

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. [South Sudan: Humanitarian snapshot June 2024](#).

⁴ UNFPA (2024) [World Population Dashboard South Sudan](#).

Adolescent programming in Central Equatoria state

Plan International's programming in Yei, Morobo and Kajo-Keji counties in Central Equatoria state aims to support adolescents' resilience, providing them with the skills and resources necessary to overcome the challenges of everyday life. The PALS programme was implemented as part of the "Integrated Protection, Skills Building and Learning for Empowerment of Adolescents, Youths, Families and Communities" project in Central Equatoria state. Key interventions include the PALS life skills and parenting programme, psychosocial support implemented through child-friendly safe spaces, child protection case management, distribution of hygiene kits and referrals to other sector services including food security and vocational training for older adolescents.

SETTING UP PALS

Community mobilisation

The PALS programme targeted adolescents aged 10-19, including South Sudanese adolescents and Sudanese refugee adolescents. Participants were identified and mobilised from target communities and schools using specific participant selection criteria. PALS targeted out-of-school adolescents, adolescents engaged in child labour, adolescent mothers and fathers, adolescents without appropriate care, child survivors of SGBV, refugees and returnees, unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) and children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG). Adolescents with child protection concerns were referred through the case management team. The programme also invited parents and caregivers of adolescents – the same number of male and female caregivers were targeted. Life skills groups were formed with mixed-gender participants, divided into groups of younger (aged 10-14) and older (aged 15-19) adolescents. The groups would be split into separate groups of girls and boys, depending on the session topic. Facilitators would consult with the participants on the topics, for which separate groups were preferred. The same approach was taken in the parent and caregiver groups. Each group consisted of 15-20 participants.

Contextualisation

Prior to implementation, a contextualisation workshop was held to adapt the programme to the local context. The workshop was held with 29 Plan staff and volunteers (17 male and 9 female) including 7 Plan staff, 6 child helpdesk community volunteers and 13 sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) peer educators. During the workshop, the team reviewed the PALS programme content and methods. The decision was made to implement all 13 life skills sessions and 10 parenting sessions. The team made slight adaptations to tailor session content to local cultural practices and norms, using local languages for better comprehension, and addressing specific risks and challenges faced by the local communities. The team translated some terms into the South Sudanese local language of Kakwa. These translations were especially focussed on sensitive topics/ words such as rape, sexual violence, sexual consent, sexual intercourse, masturbation, genital mutilation etc.

Adolescents and parents were not involved during the contextualisation process of the PALS programme. However, participants felt that the PALS facilitators encouraged active participation and addressed their concerns, making the sessions both engaging and informative. Judith shared that "the facilitators would ask us about our challenges and we

would share openly. They responded to our questions and helped us find solutions."

Facilitator training

In South Sudan, Training of Trainers (ToT) was organised with staff from each state and technical specialists from the country office to introduce the PALS package and prepare for state-level Training of Facilitators (ToF). Following the ToT, 4 days of PALS ToF took place in Yei and Morobo counties, with a total of 33 PALS community facilitators (19 male, 14 female) who were recruited locally. The PALS training familiarised facilitators with the programme content and offered a range of practice activities which would help strengthen key facilitator competencies for delivering the PALS programme. The training covered an introduction to the PALS programme, how to become an effective facilitator and learning the curriculum content. The training methods included group discussions, plays and games using the Laughter and Play manual, storytelling, role plays, question and answer techniques and presentation slides.

Complementarity with other humanitarian intervention

The PALS programme was closely connected with other intervention implemented by Plan International such as psychosocial support, case management and vocational training, which eligible adolescents could also access. Some adolescents and caregivers were referred and enrolled to food security and livelihood programmes, education services for adolescents who had dropped out of school, SRHR services and vocational training opportunities (hairdressing, mechanics and bakery).

IMPLEMENTING PALS

Engaging male caregivers

The PALS implementation team aimed to engage both male and female parents and caregivers in the PALS parenting sessions. As caregiving is strongly perceived as a responsibility of women, a specific community mobilisation approach was developed to mobilise fathers. Plan International approached Boma (local village/block) chiefs to help inform fathers about the programme and mobilise them for the sessions. During programme implementation, PALS facilitators carried out home visits to engage male caregivers and encourage them to take part in the programme.

As female caregivers are traditionally tasked with taking care of the children, caregivers were encouraged to bring their children to the child-friendly space where PALS sessions would help. Dedicated facilitators organised separate recreational activities to children so that their parents could attend the sessions.

Population movement

Since the start of the war in Sudan in April 2023, Central Equatoria has seen frequent population movement of Sudanese refugees, including new arrivals and returnees. Due to the movement of programme participants, the number of PALS sessions per week was increased from two to four sessions to ensure that participants who would be absent for a day or two would still get an opportunity to attend the session. The PALS sessions were implemented at child-friendly spaces by CFS facilitators. The increased frequency of PALS sessions limited PALS facilitators' availability to conduct other activities at the child-friendly spaces.

RESULTS

The programme in Morobo and Yei reached 234 adolescents (164 females, 70 males) and 161 parents and caregivers (113 female, 48 male). The greatest success of the PALS programme according to participants and staff was its transformative impact on adolescents, particularly girls' self-confidence, parenting practices, family relations and positive outlook on the future.

Self-confidence

One adolescent participant said, "The activities helped me build confidence and feel part of a supportive community," highlighting the programme's role in fostering personal growth and community connection. Judith reflected on how learning about risks in her community and how to stay safe from these risks made her feel more secure.

"When I joined the life skills sessions, I learnt a lot of positive things like my future, good and bad friends and solving problems and what I learnt made me change my ways of doing things. I stopped going to discos and nightclubs, I left the bad friends who were misleading me. I now have new friends in school where we share many things including giving advice to each other. After completing the life skills sessions, I reflected about what my mother had been telling me and realised I went wrong and changed my lifestyle. I now have hope for the future and am planning to study so that I can help my mother and younger siblings in future. I am now stress-free, know how to solve problems with friends and family members and also participate in Plan International activities in the child-friendly space". – Paul (17)

Social norm change

The sessions also empowered girls to resist harmful societal norms. One notable impact on Judith's life was her decision not to get married before the age of 18, despite family pressures. Judith explained that her community and family, in particular, believes in marrying off a girl child to get money for other expenses, whilst sending boys to school.

"Before, I did not know child marriage was harmful, but through the sessions, I learnt its effects. Now, I am committed to continuing my education,"
– Judith (19)

Family relations

Parents and caregivers shared how the programme effectively improved relationships within families through improved stress management, positive parenting and raising awareness of the negative impact of gender-based violence.

Parents and caregivers reported that they changed their own behaviour to care for and protect their children from harm. John, a male caregiver, highlighted a profound personal change: "I used to beat and slap my wife, but now I have learnt to listen to my wife, and our relationship at home has generally improved." The programme also fostered awareness of age-appropriate responsibilities, as evidenced by Joyce, a female caregiver:

"I used to force my children to do heavy work, not considering the hours, but now I know children are supposed to be assigned work according to their ages." Deborah, a female caregiver, said that: "These days, my husband and I co-operate and understand each other," reflecting on the programme's impact on her relations with her husband.



Future outlook

Overall, participants provided feedback throughout the programme, indicating that the sessions were relevant to them. Certain life skills sessions stood out as especially important. Judith (aged 19) found topics like “hopes and dreams,” “support networks,” and “safe relations” particularly beneficial. Paul (aged 17) valued the last life skills session on future planning: “I now have hope and the skills to achieve my dreams”, highlighting the personal empowerment gained through the sessions. Finally, having the participants’ graduation ceremony at the end of the programme was highly appreciated by participants.

“These sessions gave me courage to continue education and believe in my future.” – Judith (19)

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Male engagement

Despite the targeted outreach to fathers, the enrolment of male caregivers remained low: Out of 45 parents/caregivers in Yei, 15 were male and 30 were female. In Morobo county, 116 parents/caregivers were enrolled, including 33 male and 83 female. The attendance rate of female caregivers was higher with 90% compared to the 79% attendance of male caregivers.

Programme staff and participants raised that the persistent gender-specific norms continued to form an important barrier to male caregivers’ participation. Another challenge was food insecurity, which meant that often, one or both caregivers engaged in searching for food during the day. Despite their low attendance, the feedback from male caregivers who attended the programme was very positive.

“I wish this type of programme had existed during my parents’ time. It could have helped them avoid challenges, such as abuse at home. I urge that more groups and sessions like these be created in our community.” – James, male caregiver participant

Attendance

Other factors which influenced participants’ attendance were related to the distance of the venue, timings of the sessions and the fact that some parents and caregivers brought younger children along to the PALS sessions.

Adolescents shared that because the sessions were held at lunchtime and the programme did not provide refreshments, it was hard to stay focussed. As Judith described: “We attended the sessions hungry, which made it hard to concentrate.” For this reason, sometimes participants skipped the sessions or arrived late. Adolescents suggested introducing refreshments to help them stay focussed during the sessions. Following feedback from parents and caregivers, some parenting sessions were changed to different hours.

Availability of services and support

Participants were generally very happy with the PALS programme, but they highlighted the limited availability of other services and support provided through the project such as hygiene items and vocational training. Adolescents recommended a more frequent supply of soap and hygiene items and raised that they would be interested in learning how to make reuseable sanitary pads. In addition, adolescents felt that the vocational training, which was offered only to a limited number of adolescents in the project, should be made available to all adolescents to help them support themselves. Judith: “Vocational skills training for all would be highly beneficial”. Paul (17): “I want Plan International to continue and extend to other areas so that many adolescents who are currently doing bad things in the communities in Yei learn to live life in a positive way”.

Other services and support

Participants wanted to see more support and services provided alongside the PALS programme. Judith noted that adolescents were initially provided with soap and other hygiene items but that it was not enough. “We only received soap twice during the programme, and after that, we had to buy our own.” Additionally, adolescents were also interested in joining vocational skills training whilst there was only limited space for participants.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Involve communities in programme planning:

- Introduce orientation sessions to inform participants about the PALS programme objectives.
- Conduct community consultations to identify venues closer to families' homes, agree on suitable timings and make provisions for meaningful participation of all.

2. Enhance male engagement:

- Develop a more targeted mobilisation strategy for male caregivers through a consultative and co-operative process with fathers and other male caregivers.

3. Integrate PALS with multi-sectoral interventions:

- Combine the PALS programme with other sector support such as food security, livelihoods and vocational training

to address participants' interconnected needs and provide practical skills for their futures.

- Integrate practical skills training in the PALS programme, for example include sessions on making reusable sanitary pads to address menstrual health and hygiene among adolescent girls.

4. Provide basic supplies to support PALS sessions:

- In food-insecure areas, provide refreshments or adjust session timings, particularly if sessions take place at lunchtime, to help participants focus on the session.
- Provide participants with more hygiene items, such as soap and menstrual products and/or more sustainable products which last throughout the programme and beyond.

About Plan International

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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.

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Plan International

Global Hub
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155

Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505

E-mail: info@plan-international.org



plan-international.org



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