

Case study

PALS: Adolescent Life Skills and Parenting in Sudan

Contents

PALS in Sudan: overview	2
Summary	3
Background	4
Setting up PALS	5
Implementing PALS	6
Results	6
Challenges and lessons learnt	7
Recommendations	7

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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.

Cover photo: Plan International

PALS in Sudan

Overview

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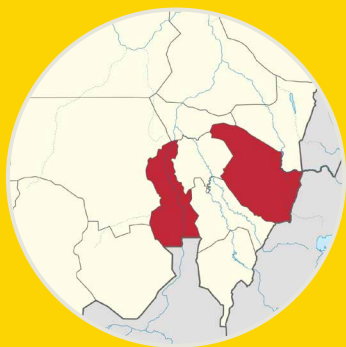
“...my personal behaviour has positively changed. I learned new ways to deal with people in general and in particular with my close friends. I also gained self-esteem and courage in public speaking”

- James (17), PALS Life Skills participant from White Nile

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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



Locations: White Nile and Gedaref states in Sudan



Programme Preparation: Plan International Sudan partnered with local partner the Child Development Foundation (CDF) to leverage local expertise in child protection and adolescent programming. Sessions were adapted to the local context, including translation and cultural modifications, to ensure relevance for refugee populations.



Formation of PALS adolescent and parent groups: Adolescents and their caregivers were identified through Community-Based Child Protection Networks and community leaders. Participants were grouped by age (10–14, 15–17, and 18–19) for Life Skills sessions.



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

Recommendations:

- Allocate funds for transport allowances, refreshments and logistics from the planning stage to avoid unexpected expenses and ensure smooth session operations.
- Develop and distribute handouts summarising key life skills topics to reinforce learning and allow participants to review content independently.
- Implement certificates of completion for both adolescents and facilitators to motivate engagement and acknowledge their commitment.
- Establish clear, structured timelines for sessions and provide pre-session orientations to ensure punctuality and maximise participant engagement.
- Increase the number of Child-Friendly Spaces and integrate more host community members and IDPs to expand reach and address the high demand for PALS.

Impact

- In White Nile, PALS reached 400 adolescents (100 male, 100 female) and 200 parents (100 male, 100 female) through structured sessions, with an additional 100 adolescents (50 male, 50 female) engaged via life skills clubs.
- With formal education disrupted, PALS offered a critical alternative by integrating life skills and psychosocial support, ultimately equipping participants to manage crisis-related challenges and enhance overall well-being.

Challenges and lessons learnt

- Inadequate budgeting for transportation allowances led to unexpected demands from participants, highlighting the need for more detailed planning and clear communication with community leaders to manage expectations.
- Limited space for sessions, especially in Gedaref's Child-Friendly Spaces, required adaptive scheduling and smaller group formations to ensure effective engagement.
- Initial challenges with low participation and time management underscored the importance of establishing clear session timelines and actively encouraging participant involvement to maximise learning outcomes.

CASE STUDY

PALS: Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills

SUMMARY

This case study examines the implementation of the Parenting and Adolescent Life Skills (PALS) programme in White Nile Kosti (2022 to 2024) and Gedaref, Sudan, designed to support South Sudanese and Ethiopian refugees who fled conflict in their countries of origin. Led by Plan International Sudan in partnership with local partner the Child Development Foundation (CDF), the programme addressed the unique challenges faced by adolescents and their caregivers in refugee settings. The study documents the programme's design, preparation and execution, highlighting its integration of psychosocial support and life skills training to help adolescents build resilience, cope with trauma and strengthen social connections. Additionally, it explores how the programme equipped caregivers with effective parenting strategies, improving family dynamics amid crises, offering insights to inform and refine similar humanitarian intervention in the future.

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 to 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.

Key learnings in Sudan

Alternative learning opportunity: With formal education disrupted, the programme provided a critical alternative for adolescents to acquire essential life skills. This not only filled an educational gap but also helped them to develop problem-solving abilities and emotional resilience.

Cultural and linguistic adaptation: Adapting the curriculum to the local context of refugees from Tigray, Ethiopia in Gedaref such as translating materials into the local language of refugees (Tigrinya) ensured that the program was both relevant and widely accepted by participants. This fostered stronger engagement and better learning outcomes.





High demand and accessibility considerations:

The strong participation and enthusiasm from adolescents highlighted the urgent need for structured life skills and psychosocial support programmes in Sudan. The use of mobile outreach sessions, delivered in local languages, improved accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that all adolescents in refugee camps could engage with the programme.

Challenges in budgeting and resource allocation:

A lack of detailed budgeting for participant needs, such as transport allowances, led to engagement challenges as some participants were coming from a long way away. Limited space for sessions emerged as a key challenge, underscoring the importance of securing adequate venues for effective programme implementation.

Strength of peer-led initiatives: The establishment of life skills clubs empowered adolescents to take leadership roles, share knowledge and support their peers. This peer-led approach reinforced the programme's sustainability and encouraged continued learning and engagement beyond the formal sessions.

Umrakoba camp, Tunaydba camp and Babikiri camp.

Refugees arriving to Sudan reported experiencing being caught in the conflict and being victims of various armed groups, including looting of property, recruitment of men and boys by force and sexual violence against women and girls.

Refugees from South Sudan: White Nile State hosts over 400,000 South Sudanese refugees who fled conflict in their home country. White Nile State, particularly more densely populated camps in Kosti, El Jabalain and Al Salam face significant gaps in child protection services, such as case management, family tracing and reunification for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). Gender-based violence (GBV) remains prevalent, compounded by social stigma, economic hardship and underreporting of abuse.

The ongoing conflict in Sudan, the world's largest displacement crisis, has increased overall humanitarian needs in Sudan significantly. Alongside refugee response services, aid organisations are also providing services to internally displaced populations.

BACKGROUND

Humanitarian context in White Nile and Gedaref, Sudan

Despite the ongoing conflict which began in April 2023, Sudan continues to host more than 800,000 refugees from other countries. The majority of Ethiopian refugees currently reside in Gedaref state, while the majority of South Sudanese refugees stay in White Nile.

Refugees from Tigray, Ethiopia: Since the eruption of armed conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia in November 2020, people's thoughts have crossed the border into Sudan. Currently, 46,000 Ethiopian refugees (68% of all Ethiopian refugees in Sudan) reside in Gedaref state including in

Impact of the crisis on adolescents and specific needs of girls

Refugee and displaced adolescents form a particularly vulnerable group, facing issues such as child marriage, early pregnancies and school dropout. The lack of access to safe services, alternative education and vocational training highlights the need for targeted intervention to support their protection and development.

Adolescents in Gedaref face high levels of distress due to loss of their homes and disrupted schooling; loss of family members and daily stress related to lack of basic needs and services. Some adolescent boys have resorted to negative coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse. Many adolescent girls have experienced sexual violence or sexual exploitation. Early pregnancies expose girls to significant health risks and perpetuate cycles of poverty and hardship.

Case study: PALS in Sudan

In White Nile State, displacement, homelessness and family separation have left many adolescents without stable support systems. Unaccompanied and separated adolescents face higher risks of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. Lack of access to education and ongoing economic hardship has forced many into child labour. Many girls are at risk of child marriage, as a coping mechanism by families under economic pressure.

Programmatic priorities for adolescents

In Sudan, Plan International implements targeted programmes for adolescents, with special focus on adolescent girls.

In Gedaref, integrated programmes combined education, psychosocial support and child protection intervention to offer adolescents, particularly girls, opportunities to access safe spaces, engage in recreational, psychosocial and learning activities through child- and adolescent safe spaces. PALS Life Skills and Parenting sessions were embedded in the activity programme in these safe spaces.

In White Nile State, Plan International implements an integrated approach of vocational training for out-of-school adolescents, alternative education (flexible education opportunities to ensure continued learning for displaced adolescents and those unable to attend formal education), psychosocial support including recreational activities, as well as peacebuilding clubs and other youth-led initiatives to promote social cohesion, conflict resolution and social activities for adolescents. PALS is embedded in these activities, targeting the most vulnerable adolescents and their parents/caregivers.

SETTING UP PALS

Implementation partners

The PALS programme in White Nile and Gedaref was implemented by Plan International Sudan in conjunction with the Child Development Foundation (CDF), a national organisation specialising in child protection and adolescent programming. This partnership combined Plan's expertise in child protection and emergency response with the CDF's understanding of working with vulnerable populations in Sudan, ensuring that the programme addressed the psychosocial and developmental needs of adolescents effectively, while strengthening local capacity for sustainable programming.

Programme contextualisation and relevance

To ensure cultural and linguistic relevance, the PALS curriculum was adapted to the local context. In Gedaref State, where the programme served the Ethiopian Tigray ethnic group, materials were translated into Tigrinya, colouring books were printed and references to Amharic were removed to maintain cultural sensitivity. In White Nile State, a contextualisation workshop with Plan International Sudan staff, government representatives and implementing partners resulted in modifications such as incorporating Sudanese games (e.g. those played in South Kordofan), removing culturally sensitive topics like safe sex and condom use in consultation with the Ministry of Health, and translating materials into Arabic with a locally recognised name for the programme.

Training of Facilitators

In White Nile, the programme trained 40 facilitators across 10 camps and 2 host communities, reaching 200 adolescents (100 male, 100 female) and 200 parents (100 male, 100 female) through structured sessions. In Gedaref, 30 participants, including social workers, case workers, psychologists and community volunteers were trained in Um Rakoba camps, while an additional 14 social workers, community volunteers and animators received training in Tenadbbh camp. These individuals were equipped with knowledge of the PALS curriculum, facilitation skills and tools to support adolescents and parents in distress, ensuring high-quality session delivery.

Training of Trainers

Plan International, in conjunction with local partner CDF and the Ministry of Health and Social Development, conducted two Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions in White Nile. The first, a four-day training programme, engaged 12 participants from Al-Alagaya, Dabat Bosin, Al-Ganaa and host communities, focussing on positive adolescent development, life skills and parenting. The second ToT was a five-day training programme at Al-Redaise 2 and included 40 participants from seven additional camps. Both sessions employed participatory methods such as brainstorming, group discussions and games to cover life skills content, communication and adolescent development.

Mobilising participants

The programme targeted most vulnerable and at-risk adolescents and their parents, including children with disabilities, UASC, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), children in child labour, adolescent-headed households and out-of-school youth. Participants were identified and mobilised through Community-Based Child Protection Networks (CBCPNs), community leaders and Plan International caseworkers.

James (17), an adolescent boy and participant in the Life Skills programme in White Nile, shared how he joined PALS.

"I heard from the volunteers in the camp and I self-initiated myself to go to them and request to be included in this programme. I was informed about this programme and its objectives before it started. This programme encouraged me to get knowledge of various life skills such as self-esteem and more importantly, time management. I asked my friends about this new programme and those who knew about it informed me of the importance of this programme".

- James, PALS Life Skills participant

Formation of PALS groups

Life skills groups were mixed-gender and categorised into three age brackets: 10–14 years, 15–17 years and 18–19 years, with each group consisting of 20 participants (10 boys and 10 girls). Similarly, the parenting groups comprised 20 participants (parents/guardians/caregivers of the adolescents participating in Life Skills sessions, 10 men and 10 women) selected through the same networks.

IMPLEMENTING PALS

Implementation of PALS Life Skills and Parenting Sessions

All Life Skills and Parenting sessions were delivered according to the PALS curriculum. In Gedaref, culturally sensitive topics, such as sexual relationships, were carefully handled to align with local norms and avoid discomfort among participants, as a result of the contextualisation process. This approach allowed facilitators to address critical issues in a contextually sensitive way, while maintaining the interest and engagement of the groups.

Referral system

In White Nile, a robust referral system was established to support participants requiring services beyond the scope of PALS. Adolescents and caregivers were referred to health services, including sexual and reproductive health and nutrition support, psychosocial support, shelter and foster family arrangements for safety and security, food security and livelihoods and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. The referral mechanisms were set to ensure that participants had access to comprehensive care beyond the programme. However, although, a robust referral pathway was established, adolescent girls shared that sometimes the services they would go to access were not available. They visited a health facility but then did not receive any medicines as they were not available at the facility. In Gedaref, a similar service map was developed with available services, with Plan International providing case management and child-friendly spaces, while other partners addressed other needs, such as health and shelter.

RESULTS

High demand for PALS

The PALS programme achieved significant reach of 500 adolescents and parents in refugee camps, including through mobile life skills sessions and life skills clubs. A total of 83 PALS facilitators and an additional 52 trainers was trained across both states. An unexpected yet significant outcome was the overwhelming interest from adolescents in attending PALS sessions, leading to larger-than-anticipated gatherings, especially in locations where mobile sessions were held. This enthusiasm underscored the programme's relevance and demand among adolescents.

In White Nile, following graduation of PALS groups, life skills clubs were established, each consisting of 10 adolescents (5 male, 5 female) who previously attended PALS sessions, who reached out to an additional 100 adolescents (50 male, 50 female) to promote peer learning and support. This demonstrated the programme's sustainability and its role in empowering young people within their communities.

Positive outcomes

The PALS programme in White Nile and Gedaref yielded significant positive outcomes. In the absence of formal education, the programme served as a vital alternative for learning essential life skills, helping to bridge educational gaps. Parents reported improved adolescent behaviour, enhanced family relationships, and increased confidence among adolescents in problem-solving. Adolescents became more engaged in child protection and reproductive health awareness, actively sharing knowledge with their families and peers.



Case study: PALS in Sudan

James (17) says that the PALS programme has made him reflect on the importance of having purpose and direction in life. "My personal behaviour has changed positively. I learnt new ways to deal with people in general and in particular, with my close friends. I also gained self-esteem and courage in speaking to groups without fear or shyness".

Psychosocial impact on adolescents and caregivers

Both adolescents and caregivers reported that PALS had helped to improve their sense of well-being, particularly in Gadaref, where adolescents initially experienced severe signs of distress due to their experiences of violence and displacement. Adolescents showed improved coping mechanisms and social relations by the end of the programme. Parents and caregivers also reported enhanced family relationships and communication, attributing these changes to the practical tools and knowledge gained. The programme's integration of psychosocial support with skill-building opportunities such as vocational training was particularly valuable in contexts where formal schooling was disrupted, providing an essential alternative for learning and personal development.

Recognition

Recognising the programme's impact, UNHCR asked Plan International to train teachers and support other implementing partners in integrating PALS into schools, while UNICEF expressed interest in using the model for alternative learning spaces. Plan International also conducted PALS training to additional national implementing partners (NNGOs) and they have implemented the sessions with adolescents and their parents, which is going on well. These developments highlight PALS' growing influence and potential for broader implementation to benefit more adolescents and communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Scale up PALS in refugee and displacement settings:** the project team recommends expanding the programme's reach by increasing the number of participants from 500 to 1,000 participants to meet the high demand for sessions. Additionally, to promote social cohesion and inclusivity, PALS must target and include more internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host community members.
- 2. Enhance participation and attendance:** Address challenges related to time management by ensuring both facilitators and participants agree on and adhere to a clear schedule. Structured session timelines and reminders could help improve attendance and engagement.
- 3. Enhance learning:** Adolescents recommend providing handouts summarising key lessons from each session to reinforce learning and allow participants to review concepts at their own pace at home.
- 4. Introduce certificates of completion:** Recognising participants' efforts with certificates upon program completion could motivate engagement and provide a sense of accomplishment.
- 5. Enhance participant feedback mechanisms:** Establish mechanisms to collect and incorporate participant feedback regularly to refine the curriculum and make necessary adjustments based on their evolving needs.
- 6. Programme budget:** The lack of transport allowances in the budget led to challenges in participant engagement. For future implementation potential barriers to participation must be assessed and appropriate budget items must be included such as allowances, refreshments and other logistics to enable full participation.
- 7. Venues:** Future implementation must also consider safe and secure spaces which can accommodate PALS groups, particularly when scaling up the programme.
- 8. Adolescent programming and empowerment:** Strengthen adolescent leadership development by building on the success of life skills groups and organise post-programme activities such as life skills clubs, incorporating mentorship and leadership training. Continue to integrate PALS with vocational training and alternative education pathways to support adolescents at risk of school dropout and enhance their livelihood opportunities.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Attendance

An unexpected challenge arose in White Nile when participants requested transport allowances. The implementing team engaged community leaders and Community-Based Child Protection Networks (CBCPNs) to clarify that the programme did not provide for transport allowances. However, this affected the participation of some group members.

James (17) noted that attendance was also affected by some participants who did not respect the session hours:

"There were some challenges in the time management during the sessions, particularly from the participants. As a result, some participants did not understand the concept of the programme".

- James, PALS Life Skills participant

To address this, the facilitators discussed with participants the importance of attending the full session and how to attend on time. James noted that also for him personally, time management had also been an important lesson from the programme.

Limited space for sessions

In Gedaref, space constraints in Child-Friendly Spaces posed logistical challenges. To address this, the team implemented a group-based scheduling system, where adolescents attended sessions in smaller groups to maximise available space, while maintaining interactive learning.

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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