



**CHILD FRIENDLY SPACES
PROVIDING CHILD PROTECTION
AND EDUCATION IN CONFLICT
SETTINGS: A CASE STUDY FROM
TIMBUKTU, MALI**

February 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) *Child Friendly Spaces Providing child protection and education in conflict settings: a case study from Timbuktu, Mali*. United Kingdom: Plan International.

EMERGENCY:

SAHEL COMPLEX EMERGENCY, DROUGHT, CONFLICT AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

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SUMMARY

Plan International has been providing humanitarian assistance to girls and boys affected by the complex emergency in Northern Mali since 2012. In Timbuktu, Plan International established 3 Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) to provide holistic child protection, education and early childhood care and development (ECCD) for 4,400 at-risk children¹. When schools closed during the conflict, the CFS offered children a safe space to continue to play, learn and receive psychosocial support to overcome their experiences of violence and conflict. After relocation of the CFS from school premises to the community, the CFS started functioning as multi-functional centers to prevent and respond to protection concerns and link children and families to humanitarian services.

Achievements include the strong community engagement in providing learning and protection services to children in times of crisis, and the successful targeting of the most vulnerable children, including adolescent² girls, and the youngest children (3-5 years) and their caregivers.

The main challenge was the insecurity situation; the frequent uprising of violence impacted on the continuity of the activities, and it made it difficult for Plan International to reach the locations.

The key learning is the importance of establishing safe spaces at trusted, central places in the community to be able to reach out to the most vulnerable children including those out-of-school, and to maximize community engagement, ownership and sustainability of the activities. The main advantage of school-based CFS was the rehabilitation of existing education infrastructure as well as effective mobilization of children to return to school.

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

² THE UNITED NATIONS DEFINITION OF AN ADOLESCENT IS A PERSON BETWEEN THE AGE OF 10-19 YEARS OLD. YOUTH ARE DEFINED AS 15-24 YEARS OLD. THE AGE RANGE FOR ADOLESCENTS THAT PLAN INTERNATIONAL APPLIED IN MALI DURING THE RESPONSE WAS 12-18 YEARS, AND THE AGE RANGE FOR YOUTH WAS 15-25 YEARS OLD. THE ACTUAL AGE GROUP OF TARGETED ADOLESCENTS VARIED DEPENDING ON THE INTERVENTION.

BACKGROUND

Mali is located in the Sahel region that is exposed to frequent periods of drought, leading to severe food insecurity in 2011 and well into 2012. In January 2012, fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels broke out in Northern Mali. This led to instability, insecurity and displacement of about 340,000 people in the region. The combined food crisis and armed conflict in Northern Mali has resulted in a protracted complex emergency and widespread humanitarian need for food, clean water and shelter³. Malnutrition is chronic in Mali and child mortality is high; one in three child deaths is caused by under nutrition. Health centres are shut or limited functioning, and suffer from acute shortage of supplies, medication and staffing. Many families have lost their livelihoods and struggle to feed their children as a result of price inflation in the markets. Apart from except humanitarian aid, the instability in Northern Mali has led to suspension of foreign aid, impacting on longer-term development and social spending⁴.

The needs of children

About half of the affected population in Northern Mali are children below the age of 18 years. They do not only lack fundamental basic services to survive, but also the protection, learning and development opportunities to thrive. In the areas of Gao, Kidal, Mopti and Timbuktu, access to education is a major challenge due to the ongoing fighting, displacement and school occupation by armed forces. An increasing number of children are not able to go to school due to financial hardship, illness or the long distance to school. In the schools that are functioning, supplies are limited and classrooms are overcrowded.

The security situation for children in Northern Mali is critical. The armed conflict poses the risk of physical injury, exploitation and emotional stress to girls and boys. Children witness and experience high levels violence and abuse as well as harsh punitive measures that are imposed by Sharia law. Girls are at risk of sexual and gender-based violence such as rape or forced marriage to soldiers, while boys are targeted for recruitment into armed forces, sometimes even as suicide bombers. Monitoring and verification of grave child rights violations is challenging for the UN and NGO staff due to limited access to affected areas⁵.

Needs assessment carried out by Plan International in 2012 showed a high need for physically safe spaces for children to play, learn and socialise. Parents, children and community leaders further expressed the need for girls and boys to be able to play outside their homes, as the risk of armed groups and land mines had become facilitators of social isolation in the communities.

³ UNICEF MALI, SUPPORTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN THROUGH AN EMERGENCY (2015).

⁴ IBID

⁵ IBID



PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S ACTION

Child Friendly Spaces as a strategy to provide integrated Child Protection and Education services in conflict settings

The purpose of the Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) was to support the development and learning needs of 4400 boys and girls (0-18 years old) through integrated protection, psychosocial and educational services. Basic water and sanitation facilities were provided in all spaces and hygiene promotion was integrated in the CFS curriculum.

Key activities included:

- Recreational, learning and psychosocial activities including local games for children (6-18 years) facilitated by local community facilitators;
- Life skills sessions for older children and adolescents (12-18 years);
- Awareness raising sessions on health and hygiene, how to prevent the spread of diseases, and on protection risks including mine risk education;
- Catch-up education for out-of-school children, provided by a partner NGO through the spaces;
- Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) for children of pre-school age (3-5 years old) and their caregivers;
- Parenting sessions for caregivers of infants (0-2 years) and children enrolled in ECCD (3-5 years) focused on child development and care, play-based early learning and stimulation, nutrition and breastfeeding;
- Identification and referral and/or direct support to at-risk children including survivors of violence, abuse and exploitation;
- Identification and linking of vulnerable adolescents such as adolescent girls at risk of early marriage, to basic needs and livelihoods support.

Establishing Child Friendly spaces

In total 3 Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) were established in conflict-affected communities in Timbuktu, out of a total of 8 spaces that reached 4,400 children in Plan International's humanitarian response in Northern Mali. In the initial phase of the project in 2012, the CFS were established in existing schools, as they were considered to be the safest place for children to play and stay safe from landmines and armed groups. Children attended their classes in the morning and participated in CFS activities in the afternoon between 2pm and 5pm three times per week. School teachers facilitated the activities together with local partner organisations. The extra-curricular activities motivated many children to come back to school, keeping them in safe environment throughout the day.

While the CFS successfully supported primary-school aged children to stay in school, the most vulnerable children such as out-of-school children and adolescents

were not reached through this approach. Also, community engagement remained limited as the activities were ran by the schools and a local NGO. Therefore, in the second phase of the project, the CFS were re-located to pre-existing 'multi-functional' centers. This took extensive coordination with local Government authorities to negotiate the use of centers that were normally used by different NGOs for their project activities. The relocation of CFS to the centers that the community was already familiar with led to strong community involvement and increased participation of more vulnerable children such as out-of-school children and adolescent girls. The spaces were open all day and included activities for diverse groups including the youngest children, caregivers, out-of-school children and adolescents.



Running the activities

Plan International Mali, together with community leaders and children, identified resource persons from the local community such as older women and local groups, who could be involved in the multifunctional centres and act as support persons, specifically for girls. This initiative helped the project to reach out to girls and the most vulnerable children through the already existing strong connection to the community by the resource persons.

A mix of creative, recreational, learning and social activities was offered on a daily basis, selected and implemented by the community. The community members were in charge of the scheduling, role division and facilitation of activities which created a strong community engagement and a feeling of ownership already from the start-up of this second phase of the project. Specific effort was made to include local games and songs on the agenda where parents had the opportunity to be involved and support the cultural activities they were familiar with. Plan International Mali's partner organisation in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector provided training for children and parents about safe and child-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene practices and how to prevent spread of diseases.

Life skills and awareness training were important parts of the activities as well as the mine risk education to increase awareness among children of the danger with mines. Accelerated education was also offered at the center, but delivered by another NGO for out-of-school children. ECCD activities started when the CFS became community-based. The activities offered were basic and play-based, but meeting the basic level of

knowledge and experience of the community facilitators. As a part of the ECCD activities parenting sessions were held about child development and care, play-based stimulation and learning and breastfeeding training for young mothers.

Staffing of the CFS

About nine (9) CFS facilitators and animators, per location, were selected by the local community to run the centres. All CFS facilitators had to be at least 18 years old, in order to receive an incentive for their work. The facilitator team was composed of respected and trusted community members. Although no specific programming was offered to the youth, Plan International encouraged them to get involved in the CFS by becoming a youth group leader or a CFS facilitator. Special attention was given to the ethnic diversity of the facilitator teams, by continuously ensuring representatives from all ethnic groups in the area were included in the CFS. This was critical to ensure participation of all children from different ethnic background in the CFS. For example, when internally displaced people returned to the communities, the CFS facilitator team composition had to be revised to ensure successful inclusion and participation of newly returned children in the activities. The local volunteers received training on the Child Protection minimum standards, Child Friendly Space management and CFS curriculum. Activities were all validated and adapted to the specific context of Northern Mali, taking into consideration the cultural sensitivity of the activities.

Services for at-risk children and adolescents

In Timbuktu, child protection and especially case management are not widely available and most health facilities and social welfare offices closed down as a result of the conflict. The multi-sectoral CFS became an important establishment in the community for prevention and awareness raising, identification and referral of child protection concerns. The CFS offered a safe place for children to interact with their peers outside of their homes and

to receive direct psychosocial support. When community facilitators identified a child protection concern, this was referred to local and international NGOs for the appropriate specialised support and case management. Through the CFS spaces, adolescents, especially girls at risk of early marriage were identified and prioritized for access to relief items, psychosocial support, life skills and different types of vocational training and small business development.



POSITIVE IMPACT

Positive development outcomes for boys and girls

The fact that the CFS was located in a central place in the community and led by local facilitators contributed to successful community mobilisation and facilitated access to activities for the most vulnerable children, including out-of-school children. Parents reported that their children had become more active by participating in social activities in the CFS, and reported an increase in wellbeing. The non-formal

education programmes, such as the accelerated learning programmes led to successful reintegration of many children who had previously dropped out of school due to the conflict, including many girls, into the education system. Increased support was provided to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and girls and young women at risk of early and/or forced marriage.



Integrated child protection and education spaces

The integrated approach of child protection, psychosocial and educational activities in the Child Friendly Spaces was a successful strategy for avoiding long-time disruption of education and to provide learners with extra support during the crisis. The continuity of CFS activities enabled pupils to easily return back to learning as soon as schools reopened. In the second phase, when CFS relocated to the community, the multi-sectoral activities the CFS offered, enabled holistic response to the protection and development needs of conflict-affected children and young people.

Promoting Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD)

One of the key interventions offered through the spaces, was ECCD with activities for children between 3 and 5 years old and their caregivers. This was a new service in the intervention areas, and assistance that corresponded to the

nutrition, protection and education needs of children in the conflict affected areas. Through the programme new knowledge and capacities were built locally, through training of both community facilitators and caregivers on child development, child protection, nutrition, breastfeeding, pre-school learning and play-based stimulation.

Local capacity development

For all community volunteers involved in the CFS, the training and coaching they received from Plan International was not only important to prepare for their work in the CFS, but it also offered community members unique skills, given the limited educational opportunities in Timbuktu. Through their work in the CFS, the facilitators for example became acquainted with practical skills in non-formal education, psychosocial support and child protection. These skills enabled the best of the volunteers to be recruited as field officers for international NGOs.



CHALLENGES

Insecurity

The security situation was a constant concern because the situation remained volatile. Given this situation, Plan International staff could not always travel to the sites of the project, which made local leadership and ownership even more important. The local authorities and CFS supervisors were in charge of the continuous assessment of the safety and security of the CFS location. When risks increased, activities were suspended. provide the CFS services to these children.

Outreach to the most vulnerable children

An initial challenge was how to reach the vulnerable children through the school-based CFS. Whereas school-based activities helped school-going children to return back to learning and taught the teachers basic psychosocial techniques, the activities didn't target the most vulnerable children. The most vulnerable children were ultimately reached, and provided with tailored activities and support, through the community-based CFS and local facilitators.

Sustainability and exit strategy

Although the CFS were largely run and supported by the community, the need for technical and financial support by Plan International remained high. Volunteerism or working without payment or an incentive was difficult as the humanitarian needs and economic disparity of families in Timbuktu were widespread. Fluctuating funding levels led to the closure of two out of three CFS after two years, affecting the continuity of psychosocial support and protection of children. Limitations to funding and physical access by NGOs to the areas also affected the availability of other specialized services for child protection and gender-based violence cases. This led to challenges related to delays in referral of child protection cases to appropriate services.

Lessons learned

- In conflict settings, it is important to determine the location and the implementation strategy for Child Friendly Space early on in the response. Consider physical safety and accessibility, social accessibility, local ownership, inclusion of the most marginalised children and accessibility of other services.
- When schools are the safest and most accessible location for CFS activities, engage and support the community in raising awareness about the purpose of the CFS and develop a strategy to also reach non-school going children.
- Involve teachers and other community workers or active members in CFS activities and trainings, to ensure local capacity to provide psychosocial support and protection is built.
- When the CFS is located in the community, ensure engagement of local authorities and community members in the space, e.g. by offering multi-sectoral activities for different target groups.
- At all times, develop contingency plans for the CFS in situations of (new) displacements, return of IDPs and changes in the security situation.
- In context where access is difficult, develop from the onset an exit strategy with community stakeholders that outlines the process to work towards community-led CFS.



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.