

Keywords:

Urban crises, children, Mali, humanitarian response, migration, Urban Crises Learning Fund

Policy pointers

Formal actors, including government and nongovernmental organisations, should recognise endogenous child protection practices — those that originate from within local communities — as a foundation for their own work and seek to support these approaches.

All actors must recognise the dramatically increased vulnerability of displaced children in emergency contexts, and that their protection is made more demanding and challenging by the specific risks linked with the crisis.

To ensure protection mechanisms for children on the move are effective, activity across sectors (formal and community-level) should be aligned and efforts to cooperate on implementation should be reinforced.

Stakeholders assisting children on the move should prioritise a participatory approach, using consultation, active listening and community involvement to improve services to meet children's needs.

Protecting children on the move: using endogenous practices in urban Mali

Children driven from their homes — by conflict, poverty or other difficulties — are a particularly vulnerable group, with a range of urgent physical and emotional needs. Our research into protecting children on the move seeks to improve their quality of care in urban environments, particularly in the context of a humanitarian crisis. We suggest this can be achieved by identifying and strengthening 'endogenous child protection practices' (PEP): the approaches established and implemented by local people and communities themselves. This briefing summarises research that identified PEP in the cities of Timbuktu and Gao in Mali after the invasion of armed groups in 2012.¹ We analyse how the practices protect children and how international and national humanitarian actors have attempted to strengthen local approaches. We also identify challenges to PEP and good practice for its integration and recognition in future humanitarian responses.

Child protection: key community stakeholders

The cities of Gao and Timbuktu are home to a number of endogenous child protection practices (PEP) — those that originate from local people and communities, rather than outside influencers — and community-based child protection mechanisms. These practices permeate individual and community representations, beliefs and behaviors. A variety of actors are directly involved in child protection at the community level: children, parents and guardians, community leaders (traditional leaders, heads of families, religious leaders, women, youth, village and district leaders) and community-based organisations.

Alongside the local community stakeholders in child protection, there are numerous formal actors (listed in Table 1).

Endogenous practices in Mali's cities

We identified a number of child protection practices developed and implemented by communities in Timbuktu and Gao:

- **Fostering.** Developed to protect children affected during the 2012 humanitarian crisis, fostering enables separated or unaccompanied children to be hosted by families and to benefit from family protection.

Even before the 2012 crisis, formal actors had begun to recognise the relevance of community-based child protection mechanisms

- **Provision of food products and resources.** This approach enables children to receive subsidies during the first days they are on the move, before finding a landlord or a job.
- **Intervention by district and village councils.** Composed mainly of heads of families, religious leaders, women, young people, and village and district chiefs, the councils are an important local decision-making body, able to intervene in specific situations involving children.
- **Village crisis management committees.** These community structures — made up of wise and respected villagers, imams, dignitaries, young people and district chiefs — have an important role. They are able to settle conflicts and to act as mediators and consultants on the needs of the local population.
- **Peer-to-peer support by age group, or ‘Cafo’.** Children are grouped according to their gender or age in order to receive information on specific topics and to share their knowledge with others, under the guidance of young leaders.
- **‘Wise mums’.** In every district of Timbuktu, influential women provide protection for children affected by violence and other issues. These ‘wise mums’ listen to children and can refer them on to relevant services, provided by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and others.

Communities and formal actors: examples of collaboration

Long before the 2012 crisis, but much more so during it, national and international NGOs, state structures and other formal actors began to recognise the relevance of community-based child protection mechanisms. They also saw the potential for sustainability. A number of NGOs and others made efforts to reinforce PEP within their responses to the 2012 crisis. Examples include:

- **Local protection committees** are an important community mechanism that has been strengthened by support from a variety of NGOs including Save the Children; Groupe de Recherche, d’Étude, de Formation Femme Action (GREFFA); and Plan Mali.
- Formal actors have also strengthened the protection provided by **peer-to-peer ‘age group’ strategies** and informal gatherings of ‘Cafo’ children, by creating and supporting children’s community spaces (including Hope Spaces, Child Friendly Spaces and others). These spaces enable children to meet regularly and safely.
- NGOs and the state have recognised the **role of community leaders** in identifying and supervising children at risk and encouraging grassroots involvement with child protection.
- Mercy Corps is one of a number of organisations to adopt the **‘wise mums’ approach**: its Wise programme (‘Maman sages’) provides safe spaces for migrant and non-migrant girls aged 7 to 16, managed by local female mentors. A similar strategy, ‘Gnagna’ (‘the mother of children’), establishes a local mother figure to protect vulnerable

Table 1. Formal actors in urban child protection, Mali

State actors	Non-state actors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decentralised state structures, including: police; justice, defense and security forces; and decentralised departments of key ministries such as Social Development and Family and Child Protection • Municipalities (ie local government) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN agencies, such as: UNICEF, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Health Organization (WHO), and so on • International nongovernmental organisations, such as: Terre des Hommes, Save the Children, Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Plan Mali, International Rescue Committee (IRC), and others • National nongovernmental organisations • Local associations

girls. The girls can sleep with the 'gnagna' in her hut, who will use discussions around the fireplace to promote the value of women.

Recommendations: integrating PEP into humanitarian response

In order to strengthen the implementation and integration of PEP, and so improve humanitarian response in Mali, our research makes the following key recommendations:

Formal actors should work to improve the quality of child protection:

- One of our study's main recommendations is that humanitarian actors and state structures support the creation and operation of children's community spaces. These spaces, often managed by community organisations, offer real bridges to reach vulnerable children, opportunities for identifying those in difficulty, and openings to implement responses (support, empowerment) and to monitor their situations.
- All actors must support the creation of local protection networks in each intervention context (local and central), which bring together formal and non-formal actors. For example, NGOs and communities can collaborate to identify and strengthen the capacities of host families in advance of children being placed with them, helping to ensure appropriate emergency shelter is prepared and ready for the arrival of young victims of violence and exploitation.

Collaboration between formal actors and community structures should be stronger:

- The study observed that NGOs, the state and UN agencies must clearly include and work on child protection mechanisms that empower communities, especially parents, families and community leaders.
- On a more operational level, it would be wise to integrate community leaders into the case management process more fully. The different processes (based on the challenges of providing each child with an individual response in line with their protection needs) will improve if social workers, protection networks and humanitarian actors take up the challenge of involving community actors.
- The various formal humanitarian actors must work directly with communities in a participatory manner in order to reach a common understanding of risk and protection factors when designing urban crisis responses.

Formal actors should advocate for the use of PEP:

- Humanitarian and children's organisations should encourage the government to formally integrate community child protection mechanisms into national policies. They should also be encouraging fellow development actors to integrate PEP into their programmes.
- Formal actors working at the local level (NGOs, national associations and others) should support municipalities and community partners to develop and implement community child protection action plans. This will help to restore local leadership to child protection measures.

Formal actors must grow their knowledge of PEP:

- Formal actors should continue to use research to grow their recognition and knowledge of PEP. Cooperation between formal and local child protection stakeholders could be improved if the former makes a substantial effort to document and disseminate studies that aid understanding of community-level operations and organisation.
- It is also important that NGOs, the state, UN agencies and others systematically document and disseminate good practice and lessons learned about integrating and coordinating PEP with formal systems.

PEP and community actors should be valued:

- Finally, agencies involved in child protection — in particular formal actors — must not routinely encourage or impose the formalisation of PEP. Major or enforced changes to PEP risk distorting them, or disrupting the appropriate actions, motivations and interests of community-level actors (including the children themselves).

Conclusion

Our study of Timbuktu and Gao documented the existence of a range of endogenous and community-based mechanisms for child protection; it also highlighted communities' interest in and commitment to this work. Community-based approaches are effective in restoring the wellbeing of children affected by conflict or natural disasters. They also enable communities to regain control over their own lives by facilitating the restoration of services (schools, health facilities, recreational activities), helping to restore or create a host of other support structures within the community (such as children's peer support groups) and enabling

people to address the problems that continue to cause them stress.

It is clear that local endogenous practices and community mechanisms are fundamental child protection assets that humanitarian and development organisations must continue to identify and seek to strengthen. We have observed that, in practice, there are already examples of very good collaborative child protection initiatives between community actors and formal bodies. NGOs and state structures in both Gao and Timbuktu have built on existing community-led practices and in doing so have strengthened the support provided to children in need of protection.

For grassroots child protection projects and community-level interventions, establishing

these connections with bigger and better-resourced formal actors remains the major challenge to achieving good child protection outcomes. For a shared vision of safer children to become a reality, humanitarian and development organisations must commit to supporting community initiatives by enhancing the accountability and efficiency of existing local networks.

Herman Pingwendé Zougrana, Baye Diakite and Atta Harber Mahamane

Herman Pingwendé Zougrana is an international consultant specialised in law and child protection, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Baye Diakite is a sociologist at the University of Bamako and a national consultant specialised in child protection. Atta Harber Mahamane is an anthropologist in the Monitoring and evaluation office at Terre des Hommes.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

Established in 1960, Terre des hommes is a Swiss foundation that builds a better future for poor children and their communities through innovative approaches and concrete and sustainable solutions in the fields of health and protection, in over 30 countries worldwide.

This paper is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Urban Crises Learning Fund. The fund is part of DFID's Urban Crises Programme on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, which involves IIED and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

Contact

Diane Archer
diane.archer@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
Fax: +44 (0)20 3514 9055
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback
via: @IIED and
www.facebook.com/theiied

This research was funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government.



Notes

¹ Zougrana, HP, Diakite, B and Mahamane, AH (2017) Les pratiques endogènes de protection des enfants concernés par la mobilité dans le contexte d'urgence à Gao et Tombouctou au Mali. IIED, London. <http://pubs.iied.org/10838FIIED>