



Strengthening Child Protection Systems

The Challenge

Children in many parts of the world, including in humanitarian settings are at risk of exploitation, neglect, and other forms of violence. The rise in conflict, violence and displacement exacerbates risk and undermines children's safety in the home and the community. Every child deserves a childhood free from violence, and to grow up in an environment where they feel safe and protected. As of December 2024, 473 million children lived in conflict areas. By the end of 2023, 47.2 million children were living in forced displacement globally. Globally it is estimated that over a billion children have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect every year.

IRC objectives

As part of child protection programs, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) aims to support the adaptation, recovery and and strengthening of existing or nascent child protection systems at national and community levels, whether in emergencies or conflict environments. Strong child protection systems are integral to ensuring children are protected including in fragile and conflict-affected countries from both systemic child protection risks such as violence against children as well as risks emerging from conflict and crisis such as family separation and recruitment into armed groups.

IRC's approach

The IRC's approach to child protection combines immediate service delivery to prevent and mitigate the impact of violence, abuse and neglect with support for the adaptation of child welfare and protection systems to crisis situations. The IRC recognizes the reality of child protection systems shaped by formal systems (including social work systems and specialized services across all sectors, including justice, health, and education) as well as the criticality of community-based systems to ensure continuity, and inclusive reach.

In all countries this public-civil society partnership is critical to create an environment that protects children from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence and supports their wellbeing. Approaches differ depending on the problem at hand, the context and the populations we wish to serve, including but not limited to:

- **Strengthening the capacity of public institutions responsible for social services, justice and safeguarding, community-based organizations,** and other service providers to deliver timely and quality protection services to children and families, placing emphasis on strengthening technical capacity of providers as well as strengthening the policy, resource allocation and management systems that enable or constrain service delivery.

Strengthening Child Protection Systems

- **Fostering linkages between stakeholders and duty bearers** across sectors, ministries and at different levels of the child's environment, to improve accountability, coordination, accessibility and acceptability of services.
- **Strengthening capacity of families** to provide a caring home environment for children, working with child welfare committees, NGOs and community-based organizations, communities, social workers, traditional leaders and relevant ministries at national, district and local levels.
- **Generating evidence and developing tools** to guide child protection systems adaptation and strengthening.
- **Brokering relationships** to connect data and insights about the crisis-induced child protection risks and how existing systems need to adapt to remain relevant to the situation.
- **Document and support the operational uptake and scaling** of impactful child protection strategies that are increasingly crisis-informed, inclusive and adaptive.

How does system strengthening support child protection?

Almost a quarter of the world's population lives in contexts impacted by protracted crises and conflicts, a third of them being children. And with conflicts being increasingly protracted, generations are born and raised in crisis in many parts of our world. These figures are an indication of the scale of child protection systems impacted by crises, where humanitarian action is a major contributor to policies, practices and systems.

Adopting a systems-based approach recognizes this fact as not only incidental, but an opportunity to enhance the quality, scale and impact of child protection programming. It is critical to meaningfully address the full spectrum of risk factors from inadequate care to acute needs arising from conflict. We work in partnership with a range of stakeholders including local and national governments, civil society and children and their caregivers to create systems that can ensure that children's rights are met in humanitarian situations and offer lasting benefits for longer term services. The work we do provide actionable blueprints for the complex risk environments in which children grow up.

Raising the Quality of Care for Children without Safe Parental Care in Burundi

Being separated from their parents is one of the greatest risks children face in crises. Inadequate care represents the single largest threat to child health and safety. In Burundi, between 2017 and 2022, the IRC worked with the Ministry of National Solidarity, Social Affairs, Human Rights and Gender to develop a National Strategy on Alternative Care. The Strategy defines how children without appropriate care are supported in line with the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care.^[1]

[1] Any formal or informal arrangement where a child lives outside their parental home, either through a decision by a judicial or administrative authority or at the initiative of the child, their parent(s), or a caregiver. This includes various forms of care such as kinship care, foster care, residential care, and supervised independent living. The primary goal of alternative care is to ensure the child's well-being and best interests when they cannot live with their parents.

Strengthening Child Protection Systems

Through a consultative process across multiple provinces, the IRC worked with the national and local government and different stakeholders to identify care gaps for children without appropriate care from the policy level to the household level. Gaps at the policy level include a lack of data and information on children supported through alternative care; gaps at the household level arise from a lack of access to quality alternative support. The activities taken forward as a result of this consultation included the development of national resources and guidelines, training and building the capacities of social workers, raising awareness on the benefits of deinstitutionalization, and offering parenting support, among many others. By addressing some of the drivers of institutionalisation in Burundi, IRC's work has supported the closure of 15 institutions and the reintegration of 647 children into their homes, the development of minimum standards on alternative care as well as the enhancement of the skills of the Child Protection Committees.

Strengthening Child Protection Policy and Access to the Judicial System in Lebanon

Establishing government policies on ending violence and protecting children is key to building protective environments and responding to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The IRC's Child Protection Program in Lebanon worked with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) to review the national case management Standard Operating Procedures and add a humanitarian lens to the standards. They are now inclusive of threats to children living in displacement - for example separation of children from caregivers - thereby enhancing the protection of children affected by crises. The standards have been approved by the Ministry and are used by all service providers and humanitarian agencies working on child protection in Lebanon. The IRC has consequently been appointed as trainers of Case Management approaches to ensure coordinated quality services for all affected children, including displaced children. Recognizing the ability of communities and the importance of their agency over protection, the program also trains local community actors, including outreach volunteers and members of the municipal bodies, to achieve effective outreach and referrals of children to child protection and other services provided in the community.

IRC's Child Protection Access to Justice Program in Lebanon aims to ensure that the legal rights of children affected by conflict are promoted, preserved and enforced, and their well-being is improved through enhanced access to comprehensive protection and justice services. IRC works with key government stakeholders such as the Tripoli Bar Association, Tripoli Municipality, Mina Municipality, and Palestinian committees in North Lebanon to identify capacity gaps and provide training, workshops and resources aimed at strengthening child safeguarding policies and practices. Training - on critical areas such as positive communication, early identification, safe referral practices, safe-guarding children and child protection concepts - are provided for key government workers, lawyers, internal security forces (ISF) and caseworkers. In 2024, 200 lawyers from the Tripoli Bar association graduated from the child protection training program which will have an impact on children who come in contact with these lawyers for years to come.