

JOFA-ACTE Project Learning Brief on Social Protection

This Learning Brief aims to summarize key insights, learnings and reflections from the four implementation areas of the JOFA-ACTE project (Mali, Burkina Faso, Malawi, and Madagascar). After pointing to the need for child-sensitive social protection policies, it highlights lessons learned, challenges faced, and recommendations for future actions and/or improvement.

The need for child-sensitive social protection policies

According to UNICEF, “roughly 1 billion children worldwide experience multidimensional poverty – meaning they lack necessities like food, water, shelter, education and health care. Approximately 333 million children live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than \$2.15 each day” (UNICEF, n. d.). Even in some wealthier countries, millions of children are affected by poverty, however extreme poverty is especially concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the World Bank, three-quarters of all people in extreme poverty (almost 700 million) live in Sub-Saharan Africa or in fragile and conflict-affected countries (World Bank, n. d.). The development of children is affected if they experience poverty (UNICEF, n. d.; APSP/Save the Children, 2017, pp. 2, 3). Additionally, children are in several ways more sensitive and vulnerable to an array of economic, social, and environmental shocks and stresses than adults (ACPF/ODI, 2013, p. 1). A study conducted by the Africa Platform for Social Protection (APSP) and Save the Children in 2017 highlights the concept of multiple deprivation, which measures the number of dimensions (nutrition, health, education, information, water, sanitation, housing, domestic violence) that affect children. It reveals that the majority of children across ten countries in East and Southern Africa Region face deprivation in three or more dimensions (APSP/Save the Children, 2017 pp. 16,17).

The acknowledgment that beyond extreme income poverty, more children lack access to a myriad of resources and rights leads to the urgent need to reinforce mechanisms for children-inclusive social protection policies (APSP/Save the Children, 2017; ACPF/ODI, 2013, p. 2). More broadly, social protection refers to the evolving set of strategies and mechanisms aimed at reducing poverty and vulnerability. These are designed to help the world’s poorest and most vulnerable populations improve their ability to cope with external economic, social, and environmental shocks and risks. With regard to children, this includes direct measures (e. g. child-focused cash transfer programs) or indirect measures (e. g. through children’s families), improved access to essential services and protection of children from risks such as malnutrition, abuse, and exploitation.

By addressing the needs of children, social protection helps to target inequality and exclusion, break the cycle of poverty, and supports children’s overall development



and future opportunities, also by including the wider environment (e. g. communities) determining children’s socio-economic vulnerability (APSP/Save the Children, 2017, pp. iv, 27; ACPF/ODI, 2013, pp. 1, 2). Therefore, social protection is founded in a rights-based approach, embodied with human rights principles of universality, accountability, equality, non-discrimination and participation (ACPF/ODI, 2013, p. 5; APSP/Save the Children, 2017, p. 28). The approach helps realizing, “human rights for all through guaranteeing universal access to essential services including health, education, housing, water and sanitation, and other services as nationally defined” (APSP/Save the Children, 2017, p. 28).

Child-sensitive social protection, also based on children rights, can be grouped in terms of survival (e. g. access to adequate basic nutrition, health and care), development (e. g. access to education), protection (e. g. protection from abuse, exploitation, neglect, child labor, trafficking) and participation (in e. g. decision-making processes) needs (ACPF/ODI, 2013). “A national social protection framework also assists in strengthening the link between emergency or relief programmes and longer-term transition and development programming” (ACPF/ODI, 2013, p. 6). It is necessary that the measures consider the unique demands of target beneficiaries, for example gender aspects and/or children with disabilities. Moreover, the approach addresses not only children, but also their families and caregivers (the whole system). Actions to strengthen the economic and social capacity of vulnerable parents are necessary for a holistic approach.

Drawing on the frameworks proposed by Devereux/Sabates-Wheeler and Jones/Holmes, social protection must be protective, preventative, promotional and transformative (ACPF/ODI, 2013, pp. iii, iv, 3; FAO, 2020, p. 9). This also includes the provision of “alternatives to potentially negative coping strategies which might otherwise increase child risk, such as dropping out of school, child labor or inadequate adult care” (ACPF/ODI, 2013, p. iii).

The JOFA-ACTE project aims to contribute to the eradication of child labor in Mali, Malawi, Burkina Faso, and Madagascar. The projects address two major sectors: the traditional and informal mining sector in all

four countries, and the agriculture sector with particular attention to sexual abuse, exploitation, and trafficking (Joining Forces, n. d.).

Child labor is often the result of inefficient and unproductive livelihoods, driven by problems such as limited access to markets, social and financial services, infrastructure, and other dimensions of deprivation mentioned above. In the agriculture sector the large prevalence of child labor can be characterized by, for example, social challenges (e. g. poverty, informality, low labor law enforcement or coverage), economic threats (e. g. price fluctuations) and environmental limitations (e. g. limited access to natural resources) (FAO, 2020, p. 6). External shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can reinforce the negative effects on the survival, development, protection, and participation of children. The direct and indirect economic impacts due to the pandemic affected for example rural populations, leading to an increase in hunger and poverty. Coping mechanism might have included child labor, facilitated by the closure of schools in response to the spread of the virus (FAO, 2020, p. 5).

Thus, putting in place inclusive, comprehensive, and adaptable social protection systems is key to reducing and eliminating child labor (Joining Forces, n. d.). Social protection can contribute to the elimination of child labor by addressing several economic and non-economic drivers of child labor. The approach often encompasses social assistance, social insurance, social services and social equity measures. Further examples are school feeding, cash transfer, school enrolment, social and health





insurance, and economic inclusion (FAO, 2020; ACPF/ODI, 2013). But it is important to note that measures such as cash transfer, if not adequately designed or holistically complemented by other interventions, can occasionally increase child labor. In some cases, cash

transfer contributes to supporting children's education, but in other cases it can also be utilized for other areas deemed necessary by the family, like raising cattle or farming, which can in turn contribute to child labor (FAO, 2020; Joining Forces, n. d.).

Project insights, implemented models and existing policies – What worked well?

This section looks at existing and implemented policies, project models and programs with a focus on what has worked in every context to address child labor through mechanisms of social protection/case management.

In **Malawi**, the JOFA-ACTE project, implemented by Save the Children and Plan International, aims to address the risks of child labor in gold panning sites in the Central Region, in the districts of Ntchisi (TA Vuso Jere, TA Kalumo) and Lilongwe (TA Chimutu, TA Njewa). In Malawi, different child protection case

management systems have helped identify vulnerable children in and at risk of child labor who were assessed at the individual and household levels and then referred to relevant social services. More specifically, Save the Children in Malawi uses a CONNECT Community-level Integrated Case Management Model¹, which promotes an integrated community-led case management system to systematically link vulnerable children to various types of social services while also empowering the communities and families to be able to identify protection risks and be able to address the root causes in a systematic way

¹<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/integrated-community-level-case-management-model/>

while linking up with child protection workers. This model was adopted prominently during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, where over 1,700 children benefitted from 'Cash Plus'² protection and education. Within this project, the model will be adapted to ending child labor through the Connect Plus model that identifies children at-risk for different services and follows them until the case management is finalized. There is also provision of economic alternatives to households at risk and those with child labor cases where vulnerable households are linked to micro credit/loan facilities as well as bringing vulnerable households together in village savings and loan groups. The beneficiaries have been empowered through targeted Income Generating Activities. Additionally, there are also skill development programmes for school dropouts aged 14 to 17 years old provided by various partners.

This comes in addition to social protection programmes led by the government and supported by partners. There are no specific laws to govern social protection programmes in Malawi, but relevant provisions exist within the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, the Child Care, Protection, and Justice Act No. 22 of 2010, and other strategies and policies related to social protection. There are state policies such as Malawi Social Support Policy (MSSP) and Malawi National Social Support Program (MNSSP II) which have set the building blocks of the country's strategy in the field of social protection. Others include the National Social Welfare Policy, Malawi Social Cash Transfer Programme Strategic Plan 2022 – 2027. There are specific guidelines for each of the social protection programmes. However, households with child labor cases do not directly fall under any of the criteria, thus excluding them from all social protection programmes.

Existing Social Protection Programmes led by the government in Malawi and supported by partners are the Social Cash Transfer Program which predominantly targets labor-constrained ultra-poor households, the Public Works Programs which provide regular payments to individuals in exchange for work, especially in public construction projects, and the Affordable Inputs Program (AIP) formerly known as Farm Input Subsidy Program (FISP), which targets resource poor farmers in rural Malawi with special attention to vulnerable groups. Additionally, there is the School Meals Programs which includes elements of social protection, since it considers different aspects, such as: targeting districts and schools based on indicators of food insecurity, poverty, gender disparities in schooling, education outcomes, and malnutrition to ensure that the most vulnerable children receive daily school feeding.

In **Burkina Faso**, the project is implemented by SOS Village and Educo. The project is focused on child labor in small-scale artisanal gold mining and is developed in the Central region in the Commune de Ouagadougou and in the Central-Nord region. The budgetary

appropriations allocated to social protection in Burkina Faso increased from 1.84% in 2019 to 2.49% in 2020, to 3.18% in 2021 and to 3.11% in 2022, in view of the national security situation. In order to provide social protection to the population, Burkina Faso adopted its first National Policy for Social Protection (PNPS) in 2012, integrating the two components of social protection (social insurance and social safety nets). Additionally, programmes such as cash transfer (social safety nets on state level), social insurances (Universal Health Insurance and Voluntary old-age insurance on state level) and social assistance (e. g. communal social services) are implemented either by the state or by international donors. Those programmes come within the framework of the National Social Protection Strategy (2023-2027) issued in March 2023, the National Strategy to Combat the Worst Forms of Child Labor and the National Child Protection Strategy (2022 – 2024).

Within this project and when it comes to combatting the worst forms of child labor (WFCL), both implementing organizations have witnessed a good collaboration with the decentralized government departments. In Burkina Faso, there are working groups serving as child protection units, those units bring together all ministries that have a mandate on child protection and relevant associative structures, like NGOs. This consultative framework on a decentralized level has succeeded in putting in place a mechanism to fight the WFCL. Additionally, there is effective participation of community leaders in actions to combat the WFCL through community child protection units involving community leaders, including religious leaders. Those community leaders are also trained to better carry out awareness-raising activities and care for children.

In line with social protection mechanisms, the organizations have also succeeded in supporting victims of WFCL by removing them from dangerous jobs and placing them in vocational training centers, workshops, education and training programs and enrolling them in schools. This was achieved through the consultative approach of working with the decentralized state entities and the community as a whole. Moreover, there is a holistic care system for victims which addresses their needs for food, healthcare and clothing, in addition to setting plans aimed at resolving the victims' cases.

Another approach is offering children themselves the chance to participate in the fight against the WFCL through their involvement in children's clubs where they debate issues related to child protection and create initiatives that can help reduce child labor. This is complemented by capacitating stakeholders to carry out actions to prevent, care for and rehabilitate victims of the WFCL. The effective involvement of the authorities has been key in facilitating the implementing organizations' access to certain communities as well as children victims of WFCL.

²<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/cash-plus-programmes-children/>

In **Madagascar**, the JOFA-ACTE project is implemented by Terre des Hommes and Save the Children. The project tackles child labor in mica mines and is implemented in the Commune de Ranopiso, in the district of Toalagnaro, in the Anosy region. On the national policy level there is the National Social Protection Policy (PNPS) and the National Social Protection Strategy (SNPS). According to the latter, social protection is a set of interventions designed to mitigate risks, cope with various shocks (natural, socio-economic, cultural, political, etc.) and ensures a minimum level of income security and access to basic social services for the population, particularly the most vulnerable groups. The social protection systems in Madagascar cover a wide range of contributory (Law n° 94-026 on the Social Protection Code) and non-contributory schemes and programs such as insurance schemes and pension funds, programs to provide access to basic social services, support programs for poor and vulnerable groups, social assistance programs for specific vulnerable groups, including elderly and disabled people, children and women. Furthermore, the following aspects have been part of the National Social Protection Strategy from 2019-2023: Cash transfers for human development, cash for work or productive social safety nets, urban social safety nets to complement the government's response to COVID-19, social counter system (entry point for supporting households, serving as a referral and orientation point), shock-responsive social protection, education and health services (e. g. canteens), anticipatory and adaptive transfers, a national action plan for nutrition (2022-2026), benefits/ social protection for pregnant women, children and people living with disabilities and social security (for accidents at work and occupational illnesses, old age, disability, death (survivors), pensions, family benefits).

A social protection programme called 'TSIMBINA' was officially launched on August 9th, 2024. Supported by the World Bank, this programme aims to help economically vulnerable households cope with inflation, but also to help them finance their children's schooling through two cash transfers and targeted support measures. Initially planned for 657,000 households, the number of beneficiaries has increased to 821,250 households in 120 districts across Madagascar's 23 regions. In addition to cash transfers, TSIMBINA also offers beneficiaries awareness-raising sessions designed to strengthen their resilience. These sessions aim to promote positive practices to improve family well-being, foster children's education, encourage better nutrition and increase sources of income.

In 2022, and in parallel with the implementation of the Terre des Hommes Netherlands FAMAHA project (fight against child labor in the mica sector), a social protection project was implemented in the project sites. The project consisted of supporting communities through cash transfers and food distribution. This programme has contributed to the fight against child labor insofar as there has been a significant reduction in child labor in the mica quarries at the project sites.

In addition to poverty, the lack of educational facilities is also a key factor contributing to the prevalence of child labor. To address this, Terre des Hommes Netherlands' projects have supported existing structures and local communities through the construction of schools and the provision of school canteens to improve access and retention of children in school, contributing to the protection of children from child labor. This has resulted in a considerable increase in the number of children enrolled in school in the Terre des Hommes intervention sites in the Betroka District. In efforts to monitor the situation of child labor in its areas of intervention, Terre des Hommes is aligning itself with state policy by strengthening the capacities of child protection committees in order to contribute to a significant reduction in child labor.



In collaborating with government and state structures, the JOFA-ACTE project has worked with existing mechanisms, such as the network for child protection, as well as working on establishing local units for the fight against WFCL in the areas of implementation and in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor. This collaboration with the ministry has enabled a meaningful implementation.

The following aspects have worked well in the Malagasy context: a. Awareness-raising campaigns and attitude change within communities on the dangers of child labor and the importance of education (community leaders and parents are always involved in these activities), b. setting up and strengthening the capacity of various social protection agents and structures within the project areas (e. g. children's clubs), c. putting in place a system for monitoring the situation of families in difficulty that can help to identify children at risk, d. various workshops involving all stakeholders, partnerships with NGOs, community groups and civil society players,

e. the involvement of the relevant ministries and local authorities, each of which plays a crucial role in the fight against child labor, in line with their respective areas of competence, f. family support programs to help with household finances, g. the creation of local structures for children (children's clubs) and training for local managers and social workers so that they can better identify the needs of populations and propose appropriate responses.

World Vision and Terre des Hommes Lausanne are leading the implementation of the project in **Mali**. The project implements communication and advocacy activities at national level. It tackles the risks of child labor in general, and more specifically in the traditional gold-mining sites in Sikasso, Bamako, the communes of Sikasso, Fourou (24 villages/7 gold-mining sites), Loulouni (28 villages/1 gold-mining site), Misseni (21 villages/4 gold-mining sites) and Nièna (60 villages/3 gold-mining sites).

One aspect that has worked in this context to combat child labor through social protection/case management mechanisms is capacity building for stakeholders. More specifically, this involves the training and effective involvement of all stakeholders: local authorities, technical services, town halls, tomboloma (gold panning site managers), hunters, gendarmerie, police, sub-prefecture, national and regional children's parliaments, children's clubs and other child and youth organizations.

There is an existing framework for consultation between formal and non-formal players. Capacity building is crucial for effective identification and prevention of child labor. Therefore, the stakeholders need the skills and knowledge. Moreover, capacity building can improve the coordination and collaboration efforts, while providing sustainable solutions. By collectively addressing all stakeholders, social protection is more holistic and comprehensive. Additionally, adopting this approach has led communities to become better informed and awareness is raised through trainings on children's rights and labor exploitation, psychosocial support, case management, and child participation.

Furthermore, community protection mechanisms put in place include a number of measures, such as setting up a steering and monitoring committee for the project, creating an informal agreement between the communities living on the gold panning sites with the aim of reducing the presence of children on the sites, enforcing informal community sanctions against the perpetrators or parents responsible for cases of WFCL, and establishing children's clubs along with local protection committees and school management committees. Gold miners' cooperatives have also been involved and participated in the project activities.

As part of the case management, in addition to child victims of the WFCL being identified and managed, a mapping of all existing players involved in child

protection was undertaken. Some child victims could be reintegrated into school and other needs were also addressed. A strategy for supporting children who have dropped out of school following their departure to traditional gold-panning sites has been put in place for the 2022-2023 school year at the "Centre d'Animation Pédagogique (CAP)" in Nièna. This includes measures



such as free re-enrolment, the exemption of these pupils from paying school fees and encouraging children to return to school. The retention policy resulted in 779 students returning to school in 2023 and 215 in 2024.

As part of this project, there was also an international cooperation dimension. Sixteen migrant children could return to their families outside of Mali. Also important to mention are the following measures to improve social protection: entrepreneurship and micro-business for some vulnerable families, and trade training for children.

Lessons learned, challenges and gaps - What can be done better?

In all the project implementation areas, organizations and their partners are facing challenges and gaps. Identifying those will help improve the work and offer insights for further actions.

Social policies need to be developed by the state on time. Moreover, there is a need to improve the targeting. Here NGOs need to target specific groups in a cross-cutting way that creates synergies.



In **Malawi** additionally to the above-mentioned policies there are specific guidelines for each protection existing program, but households with child labor cases do not directly fall under any of the criteria. The government needs to review the national social support policy to expand coverage, inclusivity, quality and adequacy of the social protection system.

Another aspect that can be improved is working on the fragmentation of data and decision-making pertaining to child labor. For example, data from the community-level is channeled through two different ministries. Moreover, these two Ministries could also be coordinating even better. The responsibilities and mandates between the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Community Development in Malawi are not well-connected and have led to few entitlements to social protection.

Furthermore, social protection is often donor-driven and donor-financed and consists primarily of programmes implemented on an ad-hoc basis. On the one hand, it is difficult for the government to oversee the sector as it relies on reports from implementers. On the other hand, current social programmes are deemed as tackling immediate relief rather than building long-term resilience for families.

In **Burkina Faso** some identified shortcomings include the lack of publicity for legislation against the WFCL and transparency. There is also insufficient coordination of and limited funding for the governmental strategies, legal framework and policy frameworks and mechanisms.

Moreover, and this is an important point in relation to social protection, there is limited action to combat parental poverty. Additionally, the existence of socio-cultural constraints on the interpretation of child labor make impactful action difficult. This reinforces the importance for protective, preventative, promotional and transformative social protection.

Furthermore, there is a failure to take into account the security context along with a weakness in the implementation of consultation frameworks dedicated to child protection. In Burkina Faso there is also the need for a system that takes into account the needs of internally displaced children, in order to prevent them from being recruited by militias or armed groups.

In **Madagascar**, there is insufficient access to quality education in the areas of intervention. This can increase the vulnerability of children, pushing them to child labor and other forms of exploitation. Moreover, external shocks have an influence on the situation as well. Although the construction of schools is one solution against child labor, the continuing drought in the south of Madagascar has led to a need for school canteens to provide meals during some periods to prevent the recurrence of child labor.

Cases of domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse of children can often go unnoticed or unreported due to socio-cultural stigmas in communities. Project beneficiaries may not be aware of the resources and services available, or of the eligibility criteria of the competent care structure, so they can reach out to

them. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualified staff and financial resources for effective case management and the various organizations and institutions working to protect children are not always well coordinated in terms of operations, which limits the effectiveness of interventions and the response to children's needs. The dispersal and fragmentation of programmes means that there is insufficient coordination in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of actions. The absence of a data/ information collection system makes it impossible to assess interventions at national level.

Additionally, poor and vulnerable people do not always have access to contributory or non-contributory social protection schemes and the geographical coverage of programs is significantly limited, making it impossible to address their poverty.

In **Mali**, identified gaps include the inadequate reporting of information or data and difficulties in filling in registers identifying cases of WFCL at community level. There have also been some isolated cases of extortion by the police and gendarmerie for referral of child victims for case management. Also, in Mali similar to the other countries, there is a lack of coordination of case management between protection actors at local level, poor involvement of technical services in the selection of vulnerable households and inadequate funding for action plans drawn up by children's clubs and the children's parliament. Another key gap is the poor coverage of state social protection schemes in rural communities.



Policy recommendations

Based on the above-mentioned positive project results, but mainly on the challenges, gaps and lessons learned, this learning brief puts forward policy recommendations and solutions to strengthen the social protection mechanism (specifically in case management) within projects and intervention sites:

Better understanding of social and economic context (CSOs and NGOs involved in project implementation, development, and design, as well as international donors)

- Identifying, addressing and involving all the vulnerable groups (e.g. women, internally displaced children, abandoned children, street children, unaccompanied and separated children, orphans and children associated with armed groups). Here NGOs need to target specific groups in a synergistic and cross-cutting way,
- Ensuring coverage of/extension of social protection schemes to communities in rural areas and overcoming the limited geographical coverage of programs.
- Strengthening participation and involvement of community organizations and local associations in implementing social protection programs.
- Ensuring the use of efficient digital channels that provide large-scale access, while addressing network coverage issues and mitigating the risk of digital exclusion.

- Exploring how to effectively extend coverage of social insurance schemes to the informal economy,
- Considering the country's economic landscape and potential risks of hyperinflation when designing cash transfer programs.



Better coordination between different stakeholders

- Improving coordination between and within responsible authorities, such as Ministries, government, institutions, organizations, and NGOs, including the establishment of a centralized monitoring and coordination system for social protection programs and case management to maximize synergies and align actions between state and non-state actors.
- Mobilizing additional financial resources, qualified staff, and improving time management to enhance program effectiveness.
- Conducting risk assessments and addressing external factors and shocks, such as security issues, droughts, and pandemics, in program planning and implementation.
- Addressing data fragmentation by establishing a unified database system to enhance data management and accessibility.

Stronger focus on capacity building (CSOs and NGOs involved in project implementation, development, and design, as well as international donors)

- Building the capacity of various actors, such as members of Local Protection Committees, on topics like child labor, the Worst Forms of Child Labor (WFCL), light work, case management tools, techniques for identifying cases, active listening, and providing psychosocial care/psychological first aid.

- Putting in place a strategy for strong parental support is key for child rights-compliant and inclusive social protection– especially for mothers. This includes income support, universal access to health, and unemployment benefits, as well as pensions for parents.
- Developing tools to provide participants with more information about the services available and the procedures for accessing the various stakeholders and structures working to protect children.
- Gathering of testimonials and feedback from participants to continually improve the programs and service offered.
- Improving access to, for example, health, education and employment services by developing appropriate infrastructure.

Improved accountability (Political and state actors)

- Improving accountability and transparency in social protection programs and case management, particularly those being independently implemented.
- Enhancing the implementation and monitoring of laws, holding duty bearers accountable, and advocating for greater public awareness.

Long-term transformative vision (national governments, state entities, and international donors)

- Transforming existing socio-cultural barriers to the understanding of child labor.
- Developing programs and policies that go beyond emergency aid, focusing on building long-term family and community resilience, stability, and ownership, while avoiding the creation of dependency.

Resources

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