

Plan International partnering with EU to impact children's lives

By Andrew Masinde

At Teadwong Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centre in Teadwong Parish, children can be heard singing and running about under the watchful eye of three adult minders. The children take turns to lead others in singing.

As you enter the classrooms, you will notice that parent educators are actively engaged with the pupils. When a parent educator flashes a card with a letter, the pupils respond with the corresponding phonetic sound in unison.

Indeed, before the ECCD centres were introduced, many children would not express themselves confidently, locals say. Parents did not know the value of educating children, care, nutrition, psycho-social stimulation, sanitation and hygiene. They also did not know much about protection and cognitive development. This is because the primary schools in the area are far from their homes. This confined children at home as they waited to join primary school. However, this predisposed them to domestic violence due to their curiosity as they explored the world around them.

Felix Ocak, a lead care giver says education was considered a by-the-way since children had to walk up to 10km to the nearest primary school. Being a rural area, most children here started school without having gone through the ECCD programme. This made it difficult for teachers to orient new pupils into the education system, hence affecting their completion of the primary school curriculum within the allotted time.

"When the ECCD programme was introduced in the sub county, children nowadays go for early learning which prepares them for primary school. Even the education standards in the area have improved since parents are also sensitised on the value of educating their children," Ocak says.

At snack time, Mary Adongo, a parent enters one of the classes. The children are sitting in a circle. The parent educator asks them to pray before they eat their snack. They all recite a prayer in English. Adongo is impressed.

"This centre has given my son a head start in education. Before he started coming, he could not say a word in English. Now he speaks some broken English, but he is better than other children who are already in primary school," Adongo, says.

The centre has writings all over the premises. Micheal Ongom, one of the Parent Educators says the writings help the learners to read at their own pace. "Sometimes learners are organised in reading circles so as to share with each other what they have learned in class," he says.

These are just a few of the many success stories that are a result of Plan International Uganda's efforts supported by the European Union to combat silence against children in post conflict districts of northern Uganda.

Plan International Uganda with support from the European Union (EU) has since October 2013 been implementing the Combating Silent Violence Against Children (VAC) project in the five districts of Lira, Apac, Kole, Dokolo and Alebtong. The project targets children and families in post-conflict districts of northern Uganda. Plan International Finland provides technical coordination between Plan International Uganda and the EU.



Children at Teadwong Early Childhood Care and Development Centre, Teadwong Parish - Lira, attend a lesson

"THE PROJECT HAS ESTABLISHED 50 COMMUNITY-MANAGED ECCD CENTRES AT PARISH LEVEL ACROSS THE TARGETED FIVE POST-CONFLICT DISTRICTS"

About the EU-VAC project

At the inception of the project, Plan international Uganda conducted a child rights situational analysis in 2014, which revealed that many girls and boys experienced violence, abuse and exploitation.

Patrick Okello, the project coordinator for the EC- VAC project says the study revealed that the most common form of violence towards children below eight years of age was physical abuse (70.7%) and child labour (25.3%). Children, the report noted, who were most affected by violence at home include orphans, girls and children who live with their step-parents.

"Stepmothers are the commonest perpetrators (49.3%) of such violence. In school, children are subjected to corporal punishment and bullying, and girls are at the risk of sexual abuse by male teachers. More girls aged 15-24 experience sexual violence (22.8%) than boys (8.8%). Factors that contribute to the high prevalence of violence against children are lack of knowledge and appreciation of child rights, poor enforcement of the law, negative traditional norms and poverty," he explains.

He adds that the issue of "silent violence", or violence occurring in families due to neglect or mistreatment was also not tackled generally in Uganda and in the target region in

particular.

"Northern Uganda is just recovering from a long insurgency and children are experiencing high levels of violence as social support structures are almost dysfunctional and parents suffer from extreme poverty, high disease burden and trauma," Okello explains.

Patrick Adupa, the National Programmes Manager for the Strengthening Child Protection Systems says the project applies a holistic, multi-level approach which seeks to create a setting where the key duty-bearers, including parents, public service actors, Community Based Organisations and local communities are mobilised to act against violence against children.

He says that is why they address the problem of violence against children through ECCD centres and strengthening child protection structures.

"EU-VAC project's strategic approach towards the reduction of silent violence within homes and communities has been through establishment of ECCD centres in communities, forming and training parenting groups, supporting village and loan association groups and facilitating community-based organisations to create awareness on child rights and gender based violence," says Adupa.

He adds that the project has established 50 community-managed ECCD centres at parish level across the targeted five post-conflict districts. The centres also provide a safe-learning and child-friendly environment for children aged three to five years.

Adupa explains that the centres are managed by trained centre management communities. At least 150 caregivers, were trained through Tutor Time Colleagues and are facilitating age-appropriate indoor and outdoor sessions. He adds that more than 12,056 children (6,256 girls and 5,800 boys) have benefited from the early learning programmes across the 50 centres. "In 2017 alone, 4,377 children have been enrolled across all our project centres," he says.

Andrew Omuno, a senior education officer in Apac district says over 3,670 children who

graduated from the centres are performing well in various primary schools across the region in comparison to children who were not exposed to early learning.

National toll free child help line

Adupa says the project supports the national toll free child help line number 116, in Dokolo, Kole, Apac, Lira and Alebtong to combat child abuse.

"This has strengthened the reporting path between the community child protection response system and the offices of the probation and social welfare officers, as well as the child and family protection unit in Police," he explains. Adupa says the project supported the translation of the Children's Act Amendment 2016, and the Domestic Violence Act into Langi. He adds that Plan International is working in partnership with Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association to advocate for the implementation of the Children's Act Amendment, Domestic Violence Act and Early Childhood Development policy.

Morris Ogwang, a child protection committee member from one of the villages in the Lango sub-region says traditionally children in the area are punished regardless of age and that parents tend to think that children cannot change by merely being talked to. "Many parents made children dig anthills and some would be caned at community gatherings by the elders. This was bad. However, the project trained members in child protection and we started sensitising parents and community members and today, cases of violence and corporal punishment have reduced," Ogwang says.

Adupa says the EU-VAC project supports sub county community development officers, probation and social welfare officers as well as Police child and family protection units of the targeted districts to manage the relationship between parents, caregivers and children.

According to Adupa, 53,370 (23,335 female and 30,035 male) parents have benefitted from joint community awareness programmes on child rights through meetings, drama and dialogue.