

Impact Snapshot

Putting Children First

Zimbabwe's prolonged economic crisis and widespread poverty placed significant pressure on families and increased risks for children and women. In Harare and Mashonaland Central, many households relied on informal work or small-scale farming, while prolonged dry spells resulted in repeated poor harvests and growing food insecurity. Economic hardship contributed to child labour and school dropout as families struggled to meet education costs and relied on children to support household livelihoods. In Harare's Hopley, Mabvuku-Tafara and Caledonia communities, poverty and limited economic opportunities were also associated with teenage pregnancy and early marriage, alongside concerns about child sex work involving underage girls in Hopley. Weakening traditional family safety nets further increased children's vulnerability to abuse and neglect.

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these challenges. Lockdowns disrupted livelihoods, reports of gender-based violence increased by more than 60% and school closures heightened risks of child labour and educational disengagement.

These interconnected challenges highlighted the need for an integrated approach addressing both the underlying drivers of vulnerability and immediate protection risks. The Putting Children First project was designed to strengthen families and communities to prevent and respond to child protection concerns, while supporting households to build more secure livelihoods and reduce reliance on negative coping strategies, such as child labour and early marriage.

At A Glance

Country: Zimbabwe

Duration: July 2019 - June 2023

Sectors:

- **Child Protection and Children's Rights**
- **Positive Parenting and Safer Families**
- **Gender Equality and Gender-Based Violence Prevention**
- **Livelihoods**

Total Reach: 24,658 people direct including 15,191 children, 5,649 people and 178 people with disabilities; and 49,316 people indirectly

Funding / donor: Australian Government, through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP), and Caritas Australia

Relevance

The program closely aligned with community priorities and Zimbabwe's national commitments to child protection, gender equality and children's rights, while responding to local risks including poverty, gender-based violence, child abuse and barriers to essential services. Its participatory approach engaged children, parents, community and traditional leaders, teachers, police and health workers in strengthening local protection systems, complemented by livelihoods support to address household vulnerability and protection risks.



Project Interventions and Impact

Implemented across communities in Harare Province's Mbare, Hopley, Glen Norah, Caledonia, Mabvuku and Tafara, and in Mashonaland Central Province's Muzarabani District, the program combined building awareness on child rights, child protection, positive parenting and gender-based violence prevention with livelihood support, education reintegration and stronger referral pathways to protection and essential services, creating safer and more supportive environments for children and women.

Child Protection and Children's Rights

The program sought to increase children's understanding of their rights and ability to protect themselves, while helping parents, caregivers and communities create safer environments. Activities included child rights awareness campaigns, community dialogues, radio and TV programs and roadshows, as well as training and support for community-based child protection structures. The program also strengthened referral pathways linking communities with police, health, education, social services and civil registration authorities.

The end-of-program evaluation found increased awareness of child abuse and greater understanding of where children could seek help. Knowledge of physical abuse increased from 53% at the mid-term review to 82% at endline, while knowledge of sexual abuse remained at 73%. Fifty-two per cent of respondents reported that child abuse was decreasing, compared with 40.5% at baseline. Qualitative evidence also indicated faster community reporting of abuse to police, prosecution of perpetrators and the return to school of children who had previously dropped out.

KEY IMPACTS

82% of children could identify physical abuse at endline, up from 53% at the mid-term review.

52% of respondents reported that child abuse was decreasing in their communities, compared with 40.5% at baseline.

56% of children knew about the project's child protection champions, while 46% knew about child protection committees.

Children who had dropped out of school because of fees returned to education, while girls who had become pregnant were supported to reintegrate.

Positive Parenting and Safer Families

The project challenged harmful approaches to discipline and promoted positive parenting practices that encouraged parents to communicate with, listen to and protect their children. Parenting sessions addressed positive discipline, communication, children's health and education, harmful cultural practices and the importance of protecting children from violence and conflict within the home.

There was strong evidence of improved parenting practices. In Mashambanzou, parents talking individually with their children about their plans, dreams, wishes and challenges increased from 78% at baseline to 94% at endline, while in Mavambo it increased from 89% to 94%. Across all target locations, 92% of parents reported disciplining children in ways that did not cause harm, while 89% reported supporting children to attend school and access necessities such as uniforms and fees. In St Albert's, reported practice of positive parenting techniques was particularly high, ranging from 89% to 100% across the measures assessed.

The evaluation also found qualitative evidence of improved family relationships, with respondents reporting that men had become more responsible and loving and that physical fights had decreased in some communities.

KEY IMPACTS

Parent–child communication increased to 94% in Mashambanzou and Mavambo, from 78% and 89% respectively.

92% of parents reported using positive, non-harmful approaches to discipline their children at endline

89% of parents reported supporting children to attend school and access essential educational support.

Communities reported reduced physical fights and more responsible and supportive behaviour among men.

Gender Equality and Gender Based Violence Prevention

The project challenged harmful gender norms and increased women's and girls' knowledge of their rights, including their ability to seek help and report violence. Activities included gender-based violence awareness campaigns, community dialogues, engagement with men and community leaders, and strengthened referral pathways with police and other service providers. The program also promoted women's participation in community structures.

The evaluation found evidence of improved perceptions of safety and greater willingness to discuss and report gender-based violence. Overall, 73% of women surveyed reported feeling safe from abuse in their communities. In Mashambanzou, this increased substantially from 51% at baseline to 89% at endline, while in Mavambo it increased from 73% to 83%.

Qualitative evidence indicated that women and children were increasingly willing to discuss and report gender-based violence openly, while effective follow-up on reported cases helped build confidence in reporting to police. The evaluation also found evidence of fewer incidents of gender-based violence and physical fights in some communities.

KEY IMPACTS

73% of women reported feeling safe from abuse in their communities, with perceptions of safety increasing from 51% to 89% in Mashambanzou and from 73% to 83% at Mavambo.

Women and children became more confident discussing and reporting gender-based violence, with stronger follow-up on reported cases helping build confidence in police reporting.

Women gained greater awareness of their rights and protection options, including the ability to report abusive spouses and seek protection orders.

Men reported becoming more responsible and supportive of their families, alongside reports of declining gender-based violence and physical fights in some communities.



Livelihoods

Recognising that poverty and limited economic opportunities were linked to risks facing children and women, the project combined income generating activities with protection and rights interventions to help vulnerable households increase their income and meet essential needs, including school fees, healthcare, food and rent. Activities included business and financial literacy training, resources to establish income-generating activities and support for initiatives such as gardening, soap making and small business development.

Evidence highlights that these activities strengthened households' ability to meet children's needs and increased women's economic empowerment. In St Albert's, 44% of respondents reported benefiting from income generating activities at endline, up from 19% at the mid-term review. In Mashambanzou, the proportion of respondents reporting that income from these activities was used to pay school fees increased from 33% to 36%, while in Mavambo it increased from 14% to 19%. Across the project areas, 46% of those benefiting from income generating activities reported earning more than AU$85 per month.

Despite the challenging economic environment, including high inflation and the impacts of COVID-19, many participants demonstrated resilience in maintaining and developing their livelihoods. The experience also highlighted opportunities to strengthen future livelihood support, particularly through improved access to markets and productive equipment as well as stronger support for group enterprises to manage internal challenges.

KEY IMPACTS

At St Albert's, participation in income generating activities increased from 19% to 44% between the mid-term review and endline.

Income from livelihoods activities helped families meet education and other essential household costs, including school fees and rent.

Women were major beneficiaries of livelihoods support, contributing to greater economic empowerment and helping address the gendered impacts of household poverty.

Livelihoods support complement protection programming by strengthening household financial resilience and families' capacity to protect children and women, while reducing reliance on negative coping strategies.



Sustainability

The project established local structures and capabilities to help sustain child protection outcomes beyond the project period. Community volunteers and child protection champions, Child Protection Committees and school-based child rights clubs strengthened local knowledge and ownership of children's rights, positive parenting and pathways to support. Engagement with the Police Victim Friendly Unit and other government and community actors also provided a foundation for continued referral and protection support. The evaluation found that these foundations would require continued support to remain effective. Community volunteers were central to project delivery and would benefit from further capacity building and support to strengthen their resilience. Wider referral systems also remained constrained by limited government resources and social protection infrastructure, including a lack of safe houses. The experience of COVID-19 further highlighted the vulnerability of community-based activities and livelihoods to external shocks. To protect and sustain gains over time, future programming should therefore maintain flexible management, strengthen emergency preparedness and invest in resilient community structures and livelihoods.

Case Study

For girls in the communities served by the Putting Children First project, becoming pregnant while still at school could mean the end of their education. Before the project, girls who became pregnant were generally unable to return to school.

This was particularly significant in St Albert. When a shelter for pregnant women was established, around three-quarters of the 160 women staying there were girls under 16. Most had only reached Grade 7 and had dropped out of school, while many did not have birth certificates. Some travelled 20–30 kilometres to access health and education services.

The project worked to address these barriers. According to a key informant from Mavambo, girls who became pregnant were subsequently supported to reintegrate into school and continue their education.

"Before the coming of the Putting Children First project, once a girl fell pregnant while at school there was no possibility of re-integration," said one respondent.

This change reflects Putting Children First's broader focus on enabling girls and children to access their rights, education and essential services, rather than allowing poverty, pregnancy or social norms to permanently exclude them from these opportunities.



Recommendations / Future Programming

1. Strengthen and support community volunteers, who play a central role in sustaining child protection and community mobilisation.
2. Program partners should deepen efforts to challenge and transform harmful gender and social norms that perpetuate violence against women and children, supporting sustained, community-led change in attitudes and behaviours.
3. Strengthen referral pathways through closer collaboration with government duty bearers and protection services, alongside targeted advocacy to ensure national commitments to women's and children's rights, including the implementation of constitutional Bill of Rights provisions, are translated into action.
4. Build a broader community movement for child rights by engaging both women and men as advocates and defenders of children's rights.
5. Integrate climate-resilient livelihoods and protection programming more deliberately, recognising that household poverty can heighten protection risks. Prioritise climate-smart agriculture and agroecological practices that strengthen livelihoods, build household resilience and reduce vulnerability to environmental shocks.
6. Given high rates of teenage pregnancy, early marriage, drug and substance abuse, child labour and early school dropout, expand programming for adolescents, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, prevention of substance abuse, and support for vulnerable children to access essential services.
7. Strengthen partners' monitoring, evaluation and learning, advocacy and research capacity to support evidence-based programming and strategic engagement with national institutions, including the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, Zimbabwe Gender Commission, Parliament, Parliamentary Women's Caucus and relevant Portfolio Committees.
8. Improve awareness and monitoring of community feedback mechanisms, noting that 31% of respondents were unaware that these mechanisms existed.
9. Strengthen child protection safety nets through greater action on underlying risks such as substance abuse and crime, alongside accessible, safe and confidential reporting mechanisms, including toll-free channels, that enable communities to seek help and report protection concerns.

This Impact Snapshot summarises results from the final evaluation of the 'Putting Children First' project, implemented by Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Mashambanzou Trust, Mavambo Orphan Care Trust and St. Albert's Mission Hospital, and supported by Caritas Australia and the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). The Evaluation was conducted by an independent consultancy.

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