

Key advocacy messages on primary prevention in child protection in humanitarian action

Purpose of key messages: to support advocacy on the importance of primary prevention, alongside responsive interventions, across humanitarian and fragile contexts.

Who delivers the messages: these messages are designed to be used by Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPHA) staff in their advocacy on primary prevention.

Who the messaging is for: stakeholders who have not engaged with primary prevention in a systematic way previously, including affected communities, non-child protection sectors and clusters, senior humanitarian leadership and donors.

Note for user: According to the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS) there are three levels of prevention - primary, secondary and tertiary. While a comprehensive approach including the three layers is needed, these advocacy messages explain why investing in and committing to primary prevention to address root causes of harm to children is paramount, and how these efforts can be supported.

Overarching message: Prevention is possible even amidst conflict and crises by addressing root causes of harm. If we wait to act until a child suffers an abuse or violation, it is already too late, and the harm can have irreversible impacts. Furthermore, preventing harm to children before it occurs is an ethical responsibility of all actors in humanitarian contexts, including governments and actors across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Primary prevention also increases the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian interventions.

Key messages #1 – Primary prevention in child protection in humanitarian action focuses on preventing harm before it occurs by addressing the underlying risk factors that lead to child protection harms.

- Primary prevention in child protection is a proactive approach that works at population level to create a safe and protective environment for children in a population or sub-population.
- Primary prevention involves identifying and addressing the root causes of harm to children at the population level—and not waiting for these risks to turn into actual harm. It also means supporting protective mechanisms within children, families and communities, such as peer networks, family ties and children's agency, to strengthen resilience during crises.
- For example, addressing drivers such as harmful social norms and household food insecurity, while providing parenting support services and enhancing access to safe, quality education, can protect children from harms such as recruitment by armed groups, child marriage and child labor, through coordinated efforts across child protection, food security and education sectors.

Key messages #2 – Preventing harm to children in humanitarian crises is an ethical responsibility that protects them from devastating and often irreversible impacts on their lives, both now and in the future.

- In humanitarian crises, children face heightened risks of child protection harms such as family separation, recruitment into armed forces or groups, child labor or child, early and forced marriage (CEFM). These harms can leave a devastating impact on children's well-being, adversely affecting their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health and development in childhood and often into adulthood.
- While significant progress has been made responding to these harms – for example, reuniting children with their caregivers after separation – they often cannot fully negate the impact of such harm. Greater investment is required to prevent harm from occurring in the first place.
- Every child has the right to protection from violence, including in humanitarian settings. Preventive measures not only uphold these rights but also address the root causes of harm, promoting long-term improvements in children's physical and mental health.
- Investments in prevention are essential to ensuring accountability to children and the centrality of protection within humanitarian preparedness, Anticipatory Action, and response efforts.
- Investing in primary prevention is also an investment in breaking the cycles of violence and fostering peaceful societies, particularly in areas affected by conflict and armed violence.

Key messages #3 – Investing in primary prevention is a cost-effective approach that delivers significant economic benefits for society.

- Violence against children inflicts a huge financial toll on both victims and societies. Violence's economic burden on society is the sum of all the costs incurred by its child victims, their families, businesses and governments. A seminal study suggests these costs could be as high as 8% of global GDP.¹
- By allocating resources to primary preventative strategies, we not only protect children but also save money in the long run by reducing the need for costly response interventions. Evidence from non-humanitarian child protection efforts and other humanitarian sectors indicates that prevention interventions are more cost-effective than response-focused programming.

¹ The violence prevention dividend – Why Preventing Violence Against Children Makes Economic Sense, Office of the Special Representative on Violence against Children et al., 2022

Key messages #4 – Preventing harm to children is a shared responsibility, which requires a multi-sectoral approach to address the root causes of harm across sectors and provides a concrete path to operationalize the centrality of protection in humanitarian action.

- The prevention of harm against children is everybody's responsibility, as children's needs are holistic and cannot be achieved by one sector alone. Upholding children's rights and addressing root causes of harm to ensure their well-being and protection require a coordinated effort across all sectors.
- A multi-sectoral response is essential for addressing the root causes of child protection harms. While child protection actors can take the lead in analyzing harms and their root causes, the solutions lie across different sectors. For instance, school feeding programmes can mitigate school dropout rates linked to child labor, while livelihood support can reduce risks of child recruitment or early marriage. Evidence also shows that when sectors such as education, food security or health contribute to preventing harm to children, they also advance their own sectoral objectives.
- A holistic and multi-sectoral approach to children, their well-being, and prevention of harm, provides a concrete path to delivering on humanitarian actors' collective responsibility to uphold the centrality of protection. This can be considered a "child lens" on the obligations of humanitarian stakeholders to the centrality of protection and the implementation of the IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action.²
- While awareness of primary prevention in child protection is growing, understanding and capacity among practitioners, managers and decision-makers still need to improve. Efforts should target a multi-sectoral audience and focus on identifying risk and protective factors and developing programming that involve actors from across sectors.

Key messages #5 – Local ownership is essential for sustainable, culturally appropriate and community-owned child protection efforts that effectively prevent harm and build long-term resilience.

- Community ownership is key to sustainable and effective child protection prevention programming. Families, children, communities and local actors bring indispensable knowledge to address root causes of harm and ensure solutions are culturally appropriate and sustainable.
- Engaging children, families and communities in identifying risk and protective factors and designing prevention strategies builds ownership, accountability and resilience. This approach ensures continued and uninterrupted support, even after other forms of support (such as humanitarian response actors) ends.

²https://alliancecpha.org/sites/default/files/technical/attachments/The%20Centrality%20of%20Children%20and%20their%20Protection%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action_English_2.pdf

- The involvement of local actors, including civil society and government actors, as appropriate, will not only increase contextual relevance and sustainability, but will also increase the linkages across community efforts and more formal support systems for children and families.

Key messages #6 – Donors play a critical role in promoting primary prevention programming through funding, policy and influence.

- While short term funding can plant the seeds for primary prevention approaches, multi-year, multi-sector flexible funding is crucial for long term, sustained impact.
- Increasing investments in primary prevention allows for identifying and addressing trends of risk within a population, rather than focusing on individual cases for service provision. In turn, the outcomes of these investments will lead to more sustainable impact.
- Primary prevention interventions must remain flexible, as their design depends on the specific risks and protective factors identified in each context. Successful programs adapt to the unique needs and realities of affected communities.
- **To foster primary prevention programming, donors should:**
 - Promote multi-year, multi-sectoral funding as the norm to allow for more prevention-oriented programs, and where not possible, encourage links across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
 - Increase direct, quality funding for local and national child protection actors and resource preventive interventions through pooled funds.
 - Require operational agencies to demonstrate how their child protection programs include responsive and preventive measures, and are based on multi-sectoral analysis, address root causes of harm, and adhere to the CPMS, promoting primary prevention as outlined in the [Primary Prevention Framework for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#).
 - Invest in further research on the effectiveness of prevention approaches in reducing harmful outcomes for children affected by conflict and crises in a cost-efficient and sustainable manner.

Key messages #7 – Governments, regional stakeholders and humanitarian actors must collaborate to strengthen prevention and response efforts, addressing the root causes of harm and enhancing protection for children in all contexts.

- Combine prevention strategies with responsive child protection services, as prevention reduces but does not eliminate the need for effective response services.
- Identify and promote effective prevention models and strengthen the capacity of humanitarian actors to implement these approaches, helping to attract increased funding.
- Humanitarian actors should partner with development and local actors to address risks and strengthen protective factors before, during and after emergencies, leveraging the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
- The best prevention is ending violence and hostilities while respecting the rights of civilians, especially children. Address the root causes of harm, such as armed conflict, harmful laws and

weak social systems through child rights-based policies, increased resources for schools and social services, and international peace and stability efforts.

- The UN Security Council prioritizes child protection in humanitarian crises, and under the UN 2030 Agenda, all states are committed to respecting child rights. These commitments must now be translated into concrete actions, with states adopting preventive measures to address the root causes of harm to children in a sustainable manner.