

The IRC in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): Child Protection Program Overview

Children represent more than 60.5% of the displaced population in the DRC, corporal punishment within schools is widespread, and girls in particular face sexual and gender-based violence in multiple settings.

The IRC in the DRC

The IRC Child Protection Program has been providing child protection services to children in need in the provinces of North and South Kivu, Ituri and Tanganyika in the DRC since 2013. The Program's objective is to protect children from various forms of violence, neglect, exploitation and abuse, provide individualized support to children according to their protection needs and help realize their rights so that they are safe at home, in school and in their communities. This also includes changing social norms.

IRC's Child Protection Program focuses on four outcome areas: (1) prevention of violence and improving children's safety in settings such as the home and community, (2) family strengthening, including the socio-economic reintegration of children into families and communities and preventing child recruitment, (3) child protection in schools, and (4) child protection in emergencies (e.g. conflict, outbreaks). Throughout these areas, IRC's program interventions concentrate on the response to harm, such as through case management, as well as on using an integrated, family- and community-based approach to prevent and respond to harm when it occurs, such as through safe healing and learning spaces, parenting interventions and community-based child protection work.

Child Protection Outcome Areas

1. Children's safety in settings such as the home and community: IRC's Child Protection Program in the DRC seeks to ensure that children are safe and cared for in an environment that promotes their wellbeing, and that they receive support when they experience harm. To achieve this, the program focuses on preventing and responding to violence and addressing root causes of the same, while promoting a setting in which children can be well, live, learn, develop and thrive. In fact, this approach lays at the core of all IRC's child protection interventions implemented in North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri and Tanganyika provinces in the DRC.

2. Family strengthening, including the socio-economic reintegration of children into families and communities and preventing child recruitment: Children need a safe, loving and protective environment so that they can develop their full potential and thrive in society. Therefore, the IRC supports parents, caregivers and families to help strengthen a protective and non-violent environment in which children can grow up happy and healthy. In so doing, the IRC particularly focuses on strengthening families of children formerly,

DRC Country Context

DRC has spent decades in the grip of violent conflict and economic unrest. In recent years, it was also confronted with several Ebola outbreaks and grapples with COVID-19. Structural problems remain, such as limited access to basic services, insufficient public development and social protection policies, and deep gender inequalities.

Violence, neglect, exploitation and abuse against children is widespread, including in families, schools and communities. Grave violations of children's rights remain a major problem: In 2019, the UN verified grave violations graves affecting 3,796 enfants (2,908 boys, 888 girls). Verified cases often under present the scale of the issue due to barriers to safe reporting of violations.

or at risk of being, recruited into armed groups, and supporting their socio-economic reintegration into families and communities. To complement this, the IRC furthermore supports strategies to prevent child recruitment by closely working together with children, families and communities.

3. Child protection in schools: When children are not in school, girls are at increased risk of forced marriage and sexual exploitation, and both girls and boys at an increased risk of recruitment into armed groups and child labor. Therefore, IRC's Child Protection Program helps to strengthen the protection of children by offering educational reintegration support to out-of-school children and supporting children's retention in school. In addition to this, child protection is a central element in IRC's Education Program in the DRC. Within the framework of CYERA (*Child and Youth Education Response Activity*), funded by USAID, the Child Protection Program offers school-based case management services / connects children in need to those services, establishes school and violence monitoring committees and supports the development and implementation of school safety plans.

4. Child protection in emergencies (CPiE): Emergency situations, ranging from armed conflict over disease outbreaks to volcanic eruptions, are widespread in the DRC and pose children to new protection risks, exacerbate existing protection risks and undermine protection mechanisms. Within this context, it is clear that CPiE is a core component of IRC's Child Protection Program in the DRC. As such, emergency child protection interventions have been included in numerous emergency responses, such as (1) IRC's emergency response to the Ebola outbreaks between 2018 and 2021 in North Kivu and Ituri, funded by BHA and IRC internal funds (2) IRC's current mobile emergency responses in Ituri and North Kivu, funded by BHA, and (3) IRC's emergency response to the volcanic eruption in Goma on 22nd May 2021, funded by FH-RDC and IRC internal funds.

IRC's Response to Child Protection Violations

In order to respond to child protection violations in the DRC, the IRC focuses on the following approaches:

1. Child Protection Case Management: To ensure children's immediate safety and address their specific protection needs, IRC's Child Protection Program offers child protection case management services to children eligible for case management. An emergency fund also exists to support particularly vulnerable and urgent cases in need with non-food items, food items and payment of vital services.

2. Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Violence: The IRC is currently scaling up to offer specialized case management services to child survivors of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence with the support of child protection case workers specially trained to respond to child sexual abuse cases in humanitarian settings. Child survivors of sexual violence have specific needs and require a specific response that promotes and protects their short- and long-term physical and emotional safety. Throughout the case management process, close coordination is ensured with all relevant sectors, particularly IRC's Women's Protection and Empowerment (WPE) and Health departments.

3. Alternative Care and Family Reunification: In close collaboration with local NGOs and community-based child protection networks (RECOPE), the IRC supports the reunification of children separated from their caregivers, including children released from armed groups. While waiting for their family reunification, children are placed in foster families who have been pre-selected, trained and are supported to ensure they are able to offer quality care to children in this difficult period of their life.

Family and community strengthening for prevention and response to child protection violations

IRC's Child Protection Program seeks to strengthen families and communities to help prevent child protection violations and respond to them when they occur. While some of the following explained approaches may be classified as solely "preventive", others may be classified as "preventive and responsive when violence occurs".

1. Safe Healing and Learning Spaces (SHLS): A [SHLS](#) is a secure and caring area where children aged 6 to 11 years can heal from trauma, learn and feel protected. Within the SHLS, the IRC trains community facilitators to implement **social-emotional learning (SEL) sessions for children**. In the DRC, the SEL program is adapted to the particular intervention context to help children acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and

maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

2. Parenting Interventions: To help strengthen families to be able to prevent and respond to child protection violations, the IRC implements three types of parenting interventions in the DRC, which are chosen from depending on the particular context:

On the one hand, the IRC conducts **sessions for parents and caregivers** of children who participate in SEL sessions in the SHLS (*explained above*), so that parents and caregivers can help their children reintegrate into their family and community and promote their well-being by strengthening positive parenting skills, improving their stress management skills and using strategies to support children with psychosocial needs.



Cover picture of IRC's parenting curriculum

On the other hand, the IRC has contributed and implemented the parenting program **SPARC** (*Strengthening Protection and Reintegration for Children*). More specifically, using IRC's parenting model and targeted work with adolescents, the DRC Child Protection team contributed to the piloting of a BHA-funded curriculum for parents and caregivers to prevent child recruitment and promote and strengthen children's reintegration, well-being and protection after having been recruited into armed groups, so that they can reach their full potential. This project built on an EU-funded CAAFAG (*children associated with armed forces or armed groups*) response project that highlighted the need to better engage with caregivers of formerly recruited children to achieve meaningful reintegration at home and in the community. This program will continue being implemented in the DRC.

Depending on the families' specific needs, the IRC furthermore trains and supports parents and caregivers to carry out **income generating / small business activities**. The objective here is to facilitate the establishment of a family environment where children's basic needs can be met and do not lead them to revert to some negative coping mechanisms, such as to join or return to armed groups.

3. Adolescent programming: Another important component of IRC's family and community strengthening work focuses on adolescent programming. Within this framework, the IRC implements the program **SAFE** (*Supporting Adolescents and their Families in Emergencies*), which

aims to support adolescent girls and boys (ages 10 to 19 years) to be safer, feel more supported, and better equipped with positive coping strategies in acute emergencies.

DRC's Child Protection Outcome Areas:

- ✓ Children's safety in settings such as the home and community
- ✓ Family strengthening, including the socio-economic reintegration of children into families and communities and preventing child recruitment
- ✓ Child Protection in schools
- ✓ Child protection in emergencies

IRC's Response to Child Protection Violations:

- ✓ Case Management
- ✓ Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Violence
- ✓ Alternative Care and Family Reunifications

Family and Community Strengthening for prevention and response to Child Protection Violations

- ✓ SHLS
- ✓ Parenting Interventions
- ✓ Adolescents Programming
- ✓ Professional Development
- ✓ Child Protection in School
- ✓ Community-Based Work

For adolescents who show increased signs of psychological distress, have experienced abuse, exploitation, or not accustomed to attending scheduled sessions of play and/or school, the IRC is currently scaling up the implementation of the focused psychosocial support (PSS) curriculum **"Now I'm Stronger"**. This curriculum promotes active participation of adolescents and the development of their basic life skills to support positive coping and resilience capacities, by reinforcing various skills, such as to be self-reflective, to believe in strengths rather than to focus on wounds, to encourage empathy and to function and belong within a collective system.



4. Professional development: For adolescents who may not be able to return to school due to long periods of absence in schools, or lack of basic literacy, the IRC aims to prevent and reduce urgent protection risks through life and professional skills training. Thus, the IRC implements the youth-focused **"Learn to Earn"** adolescent intervention, contextualized for DRC, which combines youth self-esteem and communications skills

IRC's child protection programs at the global level aim to ensure that children are safe, can exercise their rights and are cared for, ideally in a family or family-like environment promoting their physical, social, emotional, cognitive and economic well-being. For more information on IRC's global child protection work, visit <https://childprotectionpractitioners.org>

while teaching participants how to leverage market opportunities in their communities, linking them with business owners and providing cash or kits for those able to initiate income generation. To further complement this, the IRC also supports adolescents to participate in professional trainings over several months and trains mentors to work with the adolescents and follow up with their small businesses.

5. Child Protection in schools: Creating a safe and protective school environment for children in school is another key element of IRC's Child Protection Program to help strengthen prevention and response to child protection violations at the school and community level. As part of this, the IRC provides direct, tangible support to children and families to facilitate their school reintegration, works with school directors and teachers to strengthen their capacities to provide PSS to children and reinforce child safeguarding, strengthen school-level based referral mechanisms to more specialised services for children in need (e.g. case management services), establishes school and violence monitoring committees and supports the development and implementation of school safety and improvement plans by closely working with and training school representatives and parents' committees,

6. Community-based work, including community awareness, education, and engagement: The IRC works with community-based child protection networks (RECOPE), actors and groups to strengthen their capacities and engagement to address the protection needs of children. Together with these stakeholders, the IRC raises awareness on child protection and child rights, using information tailored to the specific community, and reinforces their capacities to identify and refer child protection cases to specialized services.

Way Forward

- ✓ Scaling up PSS interventions, for example by implementing IRC's **"Now I am stronger"** and **"Comic"** programs
- ✓ Strengthening case management services to better support child survivors of sexual violence and prevent child GBV violations
- ✓ Building on existing capacities of local child protection staff, local NGOs and community-based child protection actors to scale-up quality child protection programs and support more children in need.
- ✓ Continuously learn from other countries, actors and interventions and adapt learnings to the local context



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