

A black and white photograph of a young girl with her hair in braids, looking directly at the camera with a thoughtful expression, her hand resting on her chin. The background is blurred, showing other people.

“IT TAKES A WORLD”
IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Background



Faith Uwizeye,
Child Protection Coordinator,
Kasese, Uganda

Child Protection programming is essential in fragile contexts because more often than not, children do not have a voice. When a disaster strikes, such as a flood, everybody is trying to survive and the protection and well-being of children is often overlooked. It happened when World Vision responded to the floods that affected close to 50,000 people in May. The floods came at a time when families were coping with the effects of the lockdown. These two emergencies greatly affected every aspect of children's lives and the need for a child-focused response was immense. The displacement and impact of livelihoods of the floods contributed to a rash of child abuse and child well-being issues that made children vulnerable to abuse:

- Lack of basic needs, such as children who reported having just one meal a day. This makes children vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in exchange for food and other basic needs.
- The risk of exposure to sexual activities between adults and sexual exploitation of children resulting in early pregnancies due to congestion of adolescent boys and girls and men and women in the camps.
- Poor menstrual hygiene management. The need for sanitary items for girls including pads, panties and soap. It was reported that girls and women used dry banana leaves as sanitary pads.
- Children traumatised by the near-death experience. There are no play materials for children—this is necessary for the children's physical and psychological wellbeing.
- Child neglect. There were a few children living on their own, having been separated from their families.
- The absence of lighting in the camps, which threatens the safety of children and their families, especially at night when it is completely dark.
- The location of some camps near the national parks is a safety threat, as wild animals could attack the children and families.
- Children experienced gender-based violence, especially when their parents engaged in fights and other forms of violence.
- Law enforcement agencies, specifically the police, are only accessible to people in camps in urban areas. The camps in rural areas do not have such social services and thus manage their affairs themselves. Worse still, structures such as the Child Protection Committees do not seem to exist or are not active.

World Vision responded with a 5-month project to support the districts' interventions—taking care of the children, supporting them, and ensuring that they were safe in the camps and community. Understanding that we are supporting the community for a short period, staff had to ensure that the communities were empowered. This became increasingly necessary as flooding and displacement continuously affected these communities, and communities beyond. We worked with children, parents/caregivers, local leaders, faith and cultural leaders as it is everyone's responsibility to end violence against children.

We implemented this project along with a multi-purpose cash project, supported by ECHO, which enabled the most vulnerable families to find an income generating source. This has enabled many families to get back on their feet and, in turn, protect children.

I believe that these revived and empowered child protection structures and the wider appreciation of the role everyone has to protect children, along with renewed local leadership vigour will ensure that communities continue to remain safer for children.

Empowering Children

You cannot protect a child if they do not know their rights. In Kasese, we found that some of the children would be abused but think that this is what life should be. We empower children with the skills and knowledge to protect themselves and help protect one another.

We teach children about their rights, how to keep themselves safe, and how to make their communities and schools safer for all, especially the most vulnerable girls and boys.

This is because we believe children are active partners in positive change in their homes and communities. They are equipped by World Vision to voice their concerns, to speak up for children's rights and protection, and to participate in decision-making.





It Takes Me ... Empowering children through Child Protection Clubs

Every afternoon, members of the Child Protection Clubs in Bulembia Division, Kasese District make their way up the hill to a football pitch. The pitch sits just a stone's throw away from the foot of Mt. Rwenzori and is skirted by green, rolling hills. As the children gather, they hold hands and make a circle, with each child taking a turn to dance in the circle. There is a chorus of laughter from the children as they copy the dance moves.

As the children play, sing, and dance, for a moment, they are just kids, laughing at jokes and not weighed down by the tough realities of their lives. These children, as young as 3, all have heart-breaking stories to tell of the floods that displaced them, destroyed their families' properties, and threw them into deeper uncertainty. Already grappling with the secondary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, these children and their families lost everything. Now, with schools partially opened, this pitch is the only space children, who are not back to school, can meet.

So, every day, the children gather to learn about their rights, how to protect themselves and each other. For many of the children, these rights were something they just learned. Now that they are aware of their rights, it is painfully clear how the floods affected them. "After the floods, we were not enjoying our rights. Church was not there, school was not there, we were not getting enough medical care," says Masiika, 12, a member of the Child Protection Club. Disasters, she says, affect nearly all children's rights from basic rights like education, shelter, food and medical care to protection from abuse and exploitation.

The effects are felt even after the disaster as families try to get by with limited resources. "There are so many cases of parents beating children for losing small amounts of money or breaking a cup," says Jafari. "The parents are stressed having to provide for big families with little. So any material loss, however, small seems like a great one."

Masiika has been on the receiving end of her mother's stress. "When I was in the camp, my mother had given me 200 UGX (about 50 cents) to buy a matchbox. I lost it on my way," Masiika says. "I came back and told her I had lost it. She told me to go and look for it, but I did not get it. When I went back home, she got the cane and told me to lie down then she beat me," she says. This experience hurt Masiika because she did not understand her mother's reaction to an honest mistake.

Through the club, Masiika was able to take what she learned and speak up for herself. "I learned how to speak to my mother when she is harsh with me or my siblings," she says. "One day she wanted to beat me, and I knelt down and told her that she should not beat me because I will never repeat my mistake." Remembering this, Masiika smiles.

Children like Masiika now have agency to stop abuse before it happens because they are given the tools and knowledge to protect themselves. In addition, the children are becoming advocates. "Members of the clubs go to the local radio station to speak about children's rights and teach fellow children how to protect themselves," says Faith. Masiika enjoys using the lessons she has learned from the child protection club to teach children and parents through the radio.



Equipping Parents

We strengthen families and caregivers to be the first line of protection and care for children by growing social support networks, linking them to economic and social assistance, equipping them with positive parenting skills, and engaging husbands and fathers to play a leading role in combating violence against children. We also help vulnerable families gain access to social services.





Transforming Parents

Albert, 9, is shy, often looking down or tagging at his clothes during a conversation but when he gets hold of a football, he is a star. His feet are sure and assertive. He loves football and spends a lot of his free time playing. It is only on the pitch, when he is in control of a ball, that he feels loved and appreciated unconditionally unlike at home where the pressure of being the perfect firstborn makes him close up.

A few months ago, Albert broke his leg while playing football. When he got home, he showed his father and stepmother his injury. They were not happy. To them, it was another cost to incur; a preventable cost had Albert been more careful. Albert's father, Thembo Godwin, and his stepmother, Sylvia Kiiza, like everyone in their community in Bulembia division, were affected by the May floods.

Thembo Godwin is a guide for climbers going to the peak of Mount Rwenzori. Sylvia is a tailor in the town. Their livelihoods were both affected by the floods, and with five children to look after, things were not as easy at home. "We had pigs, goats and they were all taken by the floods. The kitchen and everything in it was also destroyed," says Sylvia.

This setback escalated the rift between the parents. "When poverty is in the family, cooperation fails," says Sylvia. Frustrated by the economic situation, both parents ignored Albert. "His father never cared about him. So, I thought, if his own parent does not care, why should I?" she asks.

One day, Sylvia attended a meeting called by the Child Protection Committee for parents. "The committee was talking about how to treat children, how to love and protect them. I realised that we had ignored and mistreated Albert and I was wrong to leave his health to his father," she says. After the meeting, Sylvia approached a Child Protection Committee member for help. "I talked to Madam Marianne Masiika and asked her to come home to speak to my husband. When she came, she talked to him and he agreed to find a way to treat Albert," she says.

The family had received cash assistance from World Vision in partnership with European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Operations (ECHO). Sylvia was able to use the money to start a small business. From this, Sylvia was able to earn money to contribute for Albert's medical bills. "I had started a business selling cassava flour. From that I was able to contribute to the hospital bill," she explains. Her husband, sold one of his poultry to add to the money Sylvia had.

After months, Albert was able to get much-needed medical care and attention. "Looking back, I realise how bad the situation was," says Sylvia. "He could have got another problem because we did not fix his broken leg." Now, Albert is able to continue with his passion.

The support of Marianne, a Child Protection committee member, has helped the parents. "We are now cooperating. The love that was not there before is now there. We learned to work together, and know that what I have is for the whole family not just me and my biological children," Sylvia says. She adds, "I learned that it is not good to ignore a child who is not your biological child. I used to say the child is not mine, but now I see him as my son."





Igniting Communities

Rather than just addressing the symptoms, we address the root causes of violence against children, including harmful attitudes, beliefs and practices. We equip communities to provide services when children are abused. We listen to children and work with everyone who has a duty to protect them, including families, churches, faith leaders, local officials, teachers, doctors, police, courts, and government agencies. Our programmes work to strengthen the laws, services, norms and circles of care that keep children safe.

In the wake of the floods and lockdown, children in the camps remained vulnerable to abuse. World Vision, with the support of the community constituted Child Protection committees in 10 camps to monitor children in and around the camps. "The communities had parasocial workers who supported the Community Development Officer. However, the camps did not have any protection structures. The camp leadership focused more on logistics and management of the camps," says Faith Uwizeye. "So, we thought it was really important to have a child focused structure in the camps."

Child Protection Committees were constituted, with the communities nominating five members to take on the voluntary role. These committees are essential for community mobilisation, enhancing referrals, raising awareness on child's rights and ensuring communities take part in creating a protective environment for children.

The 50 members went through a three-day training by World Vision and district leaders. "We were taught case management, reporting structures, and how to work with the community and local leaders to protect children," says Jafari Bwambale, a Child Protection Committee member. "Before that training, we did not know how children could be protected in the community. Now, we are the first people children and parents come to for support," he says.

The committees have now become a community structure, supporting families outside the camp. "We have been amazed that people outside the camp are coming to report to these CPC members in case of any violence against children," says Faith. "They are supporting government protection structures and are a vibrant and dependable and it is making a difference in the lives of the children," she says.





The Proverbial Fire Place

“In our Bakonjo culture, mothers would gather young girls by the fireplace and educate them on menstrual hygiene. This was replaced by schools. Now, with the lockdown and the floods, it is up to us, the women in the Child Protection Committees, to educate these girls,” explains Marianne Masiika, a member of the Child Protection Committee in Bulembia division, Kasese district.

Beyond the more obvious effects of floods on them, girls approaching and in their teenage years suffer silently every month, says Marianne. “All our water sources were damaged or contaminated. You could not get any clean water. So, imagine a girl in the time of her period. They struggled to get clean water and it is really hard to stay hygienic.” She adds, “When it rained, then they could get some water and bathe. Some would decide to walk some distance to the springs.”

In addition, the floods took most of their property, and coupled with the lockdown, constricted families' earnings. “It was not easy for girls to access sanitary pads. So, they had to be creative in what they used or tear up the little clothes they had, for that purpose,” says Marianne.

This is what Barbara Murungi experienced when she got her first period. “I was in the camp, washing some clothes when I felt pain in my stomach. I went to the bathroom and found I had begun my periods,” she says shyly. Barbara had heard about menstruation from school so she was not alarmed, but she was not prepared either. “I didn't have anything to use. So, I got some old clothes and used them.” Barbara has been reusing these clothes for five months.

Through the World Vision Child Protection programme, girls like Barbara have been able to receive packs of reusable pads. Sitting in a circle, under a tree, Marianne shows them how to use the pads, wash them and store them. “We teach them menstrual hygiene—how to properly wash and dry the pads,” she says. With support from ECHO, World Vision has provided clean water to the community.

Now, the girls are able to have easy access to clean water to clean their reusable pads. “I thank World Vision for bringing water for us in the tanks at the camp. Now the whole community can get clean water easily,” Marianne says.

Marianne also takes this time to caution them about teenage pregnancy. “I warn them that menstruation means that they can be mothers anytime, so they have to be careful and feel free to speak to us when they feel such pressure.”

This daily meeting has not only replaced the fireplace and school for these girls, it has become much more. “We have started giving the girls some skills like basket weaving and making ropes out of used bottle tops,” Marianne says.

These skills are vital in protecting girls. Poverty is a major cause of girls' vulnerability to child marriage and teenage pregnancy. With the economic situation, these skills allow girls to cater for their needs.



It takes a community...protecting children through Child Protection Committees in Uganda



Mahoro's mother disappeared three years ago when she was only 8. "My parents would fight all the time and sometimes it was violent," says Mahoro. "When they decided to separate, my mother left." A year later, her father her left. "He had many debts and so he ran away because he could not pay them," says Mahoro, holding her 3-year-old sister. "I do not know where they went and I do not know their phone numbers."

Abandoned, Tumuramye, Mahoro's elder sister, dropped out of school and became the main provider for the family of nine. She started small scale farming and working as a casual labourer in their neighbour's gardens. Tumuramye earns about 4000 UGX (\$1.08) a day. However, this can barely meet their needs. So, during the weekends, the other siblings also found work in the community. Six of the children attend government schools, where they are exempt from paying school fees. However, the additional costs are too much for the family. "We were not buying materials for school or to pay the exam fees fully so we miss out on classes and we do not even get our end of year results," Mahoro says.

With relatives in the area, community members did not see a need to step in and support the children. "Community members expected the family members to take care of the children, they felt since they had relatives, that was their responsibility," says Beatrice Namande, a Child Protection Committee member.

However, with limited resources, the relatives could not take the children in. "Both the aunt and uncle have large families so they are not able to take on their nieces and nephews," explains Faith Uwizeye, the project coordinator. The situation made it so that the family stayed unseen.

When the floods came, the family was stranded. In the dead of the night, the children made their way to their uncle's home for safety. Their uncle has eight children of his own and so he felt he could not accommodate them for long. The following morning, the children made their way to Kabaka Primary School camp.

What would be a traumatising experience for most families, was an upgrade for the children. "It was fun," Mahoro says. "We were with other families, with other children. We also got food every day which we did not get here at home," she says. It was also when the World Vision-supported Child Protection Committee members took notice of the children.

For families like Mahoro and her siblings, the Child Protection Committees have filled a great gap. "Ms. Beatrice comes to talk to us," says Mahoro. "She teaches us how to protect ourselves, like not going out at night." Beatrice has become like a mother to Mahoro's older sisters. "She talks to us about boys and men who may try to lure us with money or material things. Whenever we have an issue, we ran to her because we know she cares about us."

Beatrice and other CPC members monitor the family to make sure that even as they stay alone, they are safe. "We come once a week, and listen to what their challenges are and we try to solve them," she says. "We are working to find a safe home for them and following up their case with the local government leadership."

At night, as Mahoro prays, she asks God for her parents to return, but thanks him for Beatrice, who has become the parent she has longed for. Unlike the River Nyamwamba, she knows Beatrice will always be there.



Partnering to end violence against children.

We don't just work to keep children free from dangerous situations, but to counteract the poverty that often leads to atrocities against children, such as abuse. Because extreme financial hardship can make parents more susceptible to child labour and child marriage, we connect vulnerable families to income-generation support.



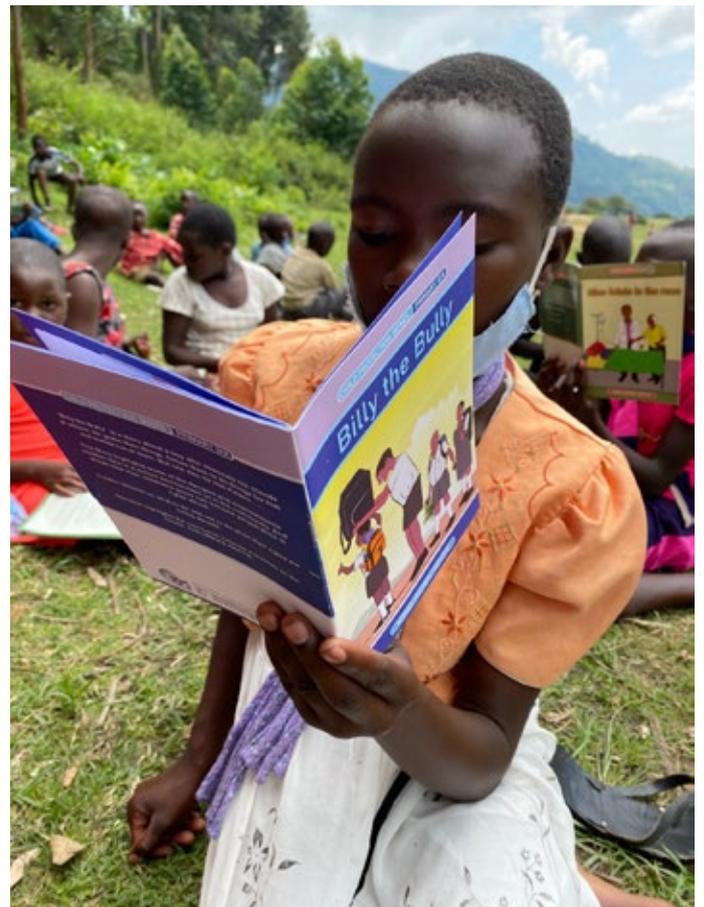
Cash assistance protecting children

World Vision, in partnership with the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid, implemented a multi-sector support project for vulnerable flood victims in Kasese District. It reached 1,250 households in the three Sub-Counties of Bulembia, Karusandara and Ibanda-Bugoya. Each household was supported with 184,950 UGX (about \$50) three times during the six months of the project. An additional amount is included for young women to procure sanitary pads. The beneficiaries are first trained in financial literacy, gender training and business skills to help them properly prioritise family needs, without excluding women and children.

Masiika Christine's family was one of the beneficiaries of this assistance. "I sat down with my three siblings and mother. We planned, and bought food, clothes and the next money we received, we bought solar. The remaining money we invested it in my mother's business," she says. In addition, Christine was able to buy sanitary pads, books, pens and pencils for their school work, and a few clothes for Christmas Day.

The family is looking forward to celebrating Christmas in their own house. "We are staying with some relatives, since the floods took our home. Now, we have saved enough money to put up another home," says Christine.

The cash assistance has enabled Christine and her siblings to meet their basic needs, construct a new home, and give her confidence to contribute to the family. "I felt good planning with my mother. I felt good because it was my first time to plan with her. I have continued planning with her. I am involved with planning for grocery business and garden," Christine says.





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