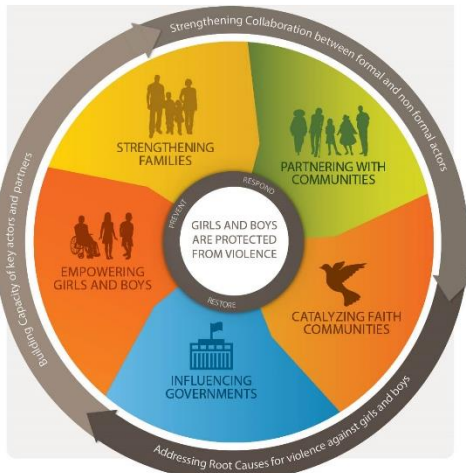


## Strengthening the protective environment for children in fragile contexts

### 1. Why take a systems / ecological resilience approach in fragile contexts?

World Vision work across humanitarian, fragile and development contexts in over 90 countries. WV defines fragile contexts as those where “children suffer extreme levels of violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. These are called ‘fragile contexts’ because political and social pressure make them vulnerable to conflict and have fractured the institutions that should protect children. Fragility can cover many nations or only a few neighbourhoods, and can change rapidly”.



**World Vision’s child protection approach** focuses on strengthening actors and factors across the ecology of the child to strengthen her protective environment (with a focus on prevention and response). To do this, we utilize a systems approach. This includes participatory analysis of the local context, identifying and addressing root causes, working with multiple types of actors, and strengthening capacity and collaboration. WV developed its systems approach to child protection (CP) in longer-term transformational development contexts.

**The Minimum Standards for CP in Humanitarian Action** lay out principles that resonate strongly with our systems approach. These include enhanced child

participation; evidence-based interventions; a focus on prevention; a multi sectoral approach, and the use of a socio-ecological model to frame the influences that inform strategies for prevention and drivers of violence against children. In the past, our work in fragile contexts incorporated some of these principles but drew from different conceptual frameworks and approaches, such as limited direct service provision.

To learn more about applying a systems approach in fragile contexts we conducted a **desk review** of the available literature. We found limited evidence (and knowledge) on the extent or success of systems approaches to child protection in fragile contexts. Recommendations emerging from the desk review were:

- To build CP work on a strong understanding of context, the root causes of fragility and the relationship of poverty to CP issues.
- The importance of building on community protective factors, strengths and assets.

We believed that a systems approach could be legitimate, feasible, adaptable and sustainable even in turbulent fragile contexts. Whilst we had anecdotal examples from the field that showed that the approach could work, we could not back up this assumption with evidence based on systematic learning and research.

### 2. Research questions

We decided to undertake an operational action-research process in fragile contexts, to explore the following questions:

- How can we take a **systems approach** to child protection programming in fragile contexts?
- What **child protection interventions** can be used for each domain of change in child protection, across fragile context variability?
- **Are they adaptable?** Are they feasible (cost, technical and human resources)?

### 3. Overview of pilot contexts



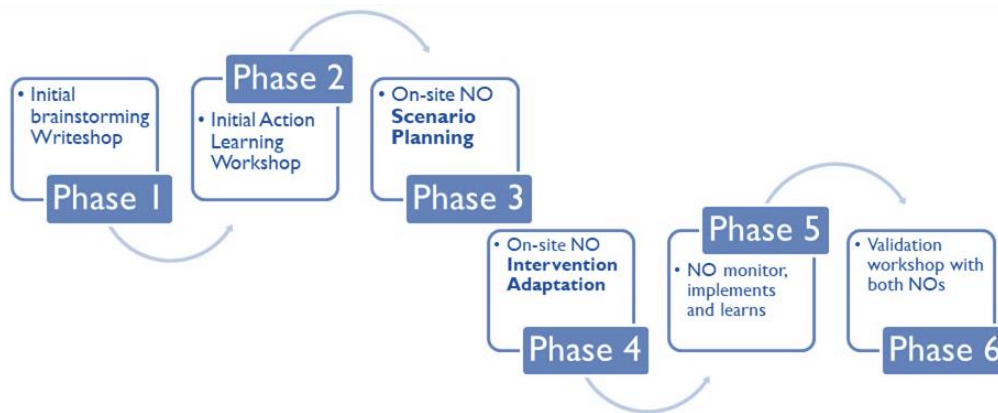
We wanted to have two fragile contexts with flexible funding, which had different elements of fragility. We decided upon Mutwanga district in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Azraq Refugee Camp in Jordan.



### 4. Methodology: Scenario planning and adaptation

We designed an operational research process to test and learn to what extent we could utilize a systems approach to strengthening the protective environment in fragile contexts. Two participatory workshops initiated the research.

**Workshop 1: Scenario planning.** Each site team reviewed the data from context assessment tools and identified weaknesses and strengths in the existing CP systems. Based on this information, the teams developed worst and best case scenarios, and created contingency plans based on appropriate interventions to strengthen the actors and elements in the system.



**Workshop 2: Intervention Adaptation.** The teams then adapted the evidence-based interventions in their project plans. They identified barriers to implementation in a given scenario (from Workshop 1) and the causes of those barriers, and then created alternative strategies to implementation. Critically, they maintained the integrity of each intervention, ensuring that the core components derived from the evidence base remained intact. The diagram above illustrates the six major phases of the Child Protection in Fragile Contexts project. Following the preparatory workshops, the implementing offices conducted regular learning and monitoring sessions, culminating in a validation workshop.

### 5. Adapting evidence based interventions

During the action-research project, each site dealt with significant challenges from the COVID 19 pandemic. However, the adaptive capacities and processes established in the early phases of this project enabled the teams to continue adaptation and implementation despite the restrictions. The teams established a routine of meeting regularly to reflect on context changes, barriers to programme implementation, and adaptations needed to continue. The DRC team built from their experience of

handling Ebola outbreaks, but repetitive army attacks in the region caused the team to shift plans between various scenarios, adapting the models to meet logistical challenges and the physical and mental needs of the population.

With the challenges presented by the changing scenarios mentioned above, each team adapted their approaches to meet immediate needs whilst still maintaining their focus on strengthening and leveraging the existing CP system. See examples below:

### DRC

*Inclusion of livelihood, education and social cohesion interventions to respond to direct needs of the most vulnerable children and at the same time addressing the root causes of sexual exploitation and child recruitment.*

*Inclusion of Ebola and COVID 19 topics in the Peace road life skills project activities including the distribution of handwashing kits, and raising awareness on prevention measures.*

*CP in emergency interventions: Psychosocial support, health care, identification/ documentation/tracing/reunification for unaccompanied and separated children (during attacks and flood survivors).*

### Jordan

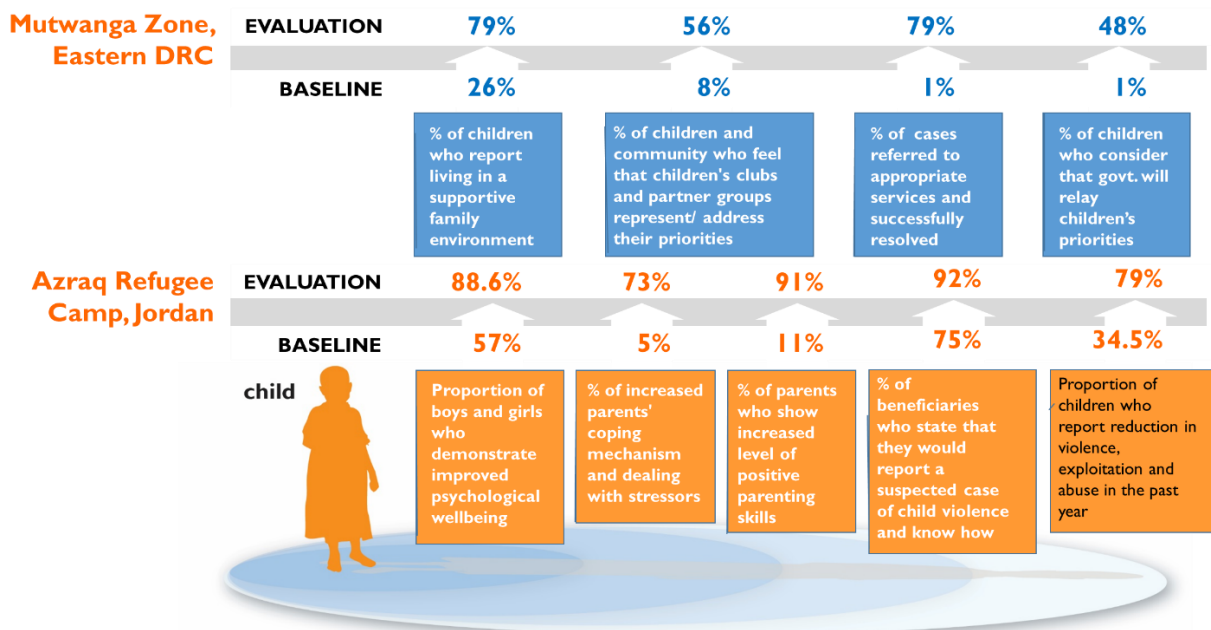
*Created a special outreach unit to foster social cohesion. The unit organizes community events, conducts home visits and finds other ways to nurture trusting relationships with children, their parents, and the community. As a result, participation in project activities increased.*

*Institutionalized the Community Child Protection Group as an official body in the Azraq Camp Referral Mechanism, identifying and referring CP and GBV cases. Their work was critical during the COVID 19 crisis.*

*Ran parallel sessions of the life skills project to accommodate for increased demand.*

## 6. Effectiveness of adapted interventions – evaluation findings.

The projects in each pilot location showed significant gains in child resilience, parenting skills, reporting and referral, and resolution of cases. This represents a strengthening of the child protection system across the child's ecology. See a selection of baseline and evaluation measures from each site below.



## 7. Recommendations

**Take a systems approach to address CP vulnerabilities:** Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding needs in fragile states and protracted crises are interlinked. A systems approach helps to address simultaneous survival needs for targeted vulnerable children and at the same time address the systemic root causes of the vulnerability. A CP system looks different depending on the context<sup>1</sup>, and even in the most turbulent environments, there is some sort of de facto child protection system that can be strengthened. Even in fragile contexts, a level of government capacity exists and formal and informal actors can build CP interventions using a robust analysis of issues, root causes, drivers of fragility and the strengths and weaknesses of the CP system.

**Develop adaptive capabilities and mindset:** an enabling management approach allows teams the freedom to adapt their approaches based on the realities and challenges they face. As one staff commented later in the project: “Challenges became opportunities.” This approach requires staff to take on multiple skills sets and to work with a more flexible attitude. The adaptation process equipped CP front-line staff with the organizational permission and tools needed to prepare for and navigate the shifting context to ensure meaningful and relevant interventions.

**Organize programme interventions around evidence based core components:** Understanding the key elements within each model allows field staff and management to adapt designs to dynamic contexts and emergent challenges without losing the integrity or fidelity of the approach.

**Keep M&E focused on the core components:** Try to zero in on key indicators based on an intervention’s core components. This enables staff to maintain consistency and integrity to the approach yet have the flexibility to adapt how they implement based on the context.

**Work with the donors:** Donor flexibility is key. It is critical to negotiate expectations around adaptive programming with donors prior to implementation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Conolly, M. & Katz, J. *Typologies of Child Protection Systems: An International Approach*. **Child Abuse Review** Vol. 28. 381-394 (2019). Wiley Online Library.