



ECOWAS COMMISSION
COMMISSION DE LA CEDEAO
COMISSÃO DA CEDEAO

POLICY BRIEF:
ECOWAS Child Rights Information Management System (ECRIMS)
Child Protection in West Africa Report 2023



Department Human Development and Social Affairs
Directorate Humanitarian and Social Affairs,
ECOWAS Commission

January, 2024

INTRODUCTION

Child protection is the key component of the ECOWAS Child Protection Policy of 2019, aimed to prevent and respond all forms of abuse, neglect, violence, and exploitation of children. The protection rights also designed to ensure the right to special assistance to marginalized, vulnerable children, and the one with disabilities. The EXCOWAS Child Policy of 2019 served as an overarching child rights instruments in guiding the strategy documents for child protection. The objectives of the Child Policy included: member state laws, policies, and institutions support prevention response actions that protect children from violence, abuse, and exploitation; meeting international standards for children in detention; allocating at least three percent budget to finance prevention and response actions; developing positive attitude to social protection programs for children by community institutions. Strong child protection systems are said to provide the surest safeguards against the various risks and vulnerabilities that children face as well as stronger capacities for ensuring sustainable case management. The Strategic Framework defines a child protection system as, a set of coordinated formal and informal. The framework rests on 10 pillars for strengthening national child protection systems, with focused attention on the 5 critical issues of Violence against Children – sexual (including FGM/C, physical and emotional); Child Marriage; Child Labour; Birth Registration; and Children on the Move. The Framework notes that effective child protection in West Africa depends largely on the efficient delivery of the 10 Commitments into tangible actions in in the fifteen Member States of ECOWAS. The commitments seek compliance with international legal frameworks while strengthening policy, structures, functions and institutional frameworks. Cooperation with national and international stakeholders through networking, collaboration, and partnership along with capacity building and service delivery seemed significant in the framework. Furthermore, commitment towards information management system, resource mobilization and its allocation and accountability, and strengthened monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Nevertheless, there still exists several legislative and administrative barriers that are need to get overcome to facilitate an effective implementation of ECOWAS Child Protection Policy and the Strategic Framework.

CHILD PROTECTION IN WEST AFRICA: POLICY GAPS AND IMPLEMENTATION HAZARDS

Rules of Engagement for the Security Forces in Child Protection

The ECOWAS Child Policy adopted strategies to avert the increasing grave violations of children’s rights that occur in conflict situations by prohibiting the abduction, sexual abuse, and use of children by both state and non-state actors. A few countries have taken some commendable steps in this direction, but no measurable reduction or improvement has yet been recorded in the phenomenon of child soldiers, nor in the rampant abduction and sexual exploitation of children in conflict situations in the region. Although some member states have established specialised child protection units / departments in relevant security institutions.

Juvenile Justice Standards for Handling of Children in Contact with the Law

In line with the standards of the ECOWAS Child Policy, most member states have specialized juvenile justice systems. Notably, a few of them implement alternative to detention programs for children in conflict with the law. And the training of legal practitioners, security forces and child protection actors is also prioritized to enhance children's access to justice. There are however some gaps, and a slow process of implementing the best practices standards for juvenile justice in some States. MS efforts should be directed towards ensuring more child friendly justice procedures, and to provide increased access to legal aid benefits and assistance, including free legal representation to children in conflict with the law. Better record keeping of the numbers and services to children in conflict with the law is an issue that also needs to be addressed. For example, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare in the Gambia, working in collaboration with the Prisons Department, the Police Child Welfare department, and the Children's Court, keeps detailed and up to date records of children in contact or conflict with the law.

Compliance with International Legal Frameworks for Child Protection

Information obtained from United Nations sources reveals the status of ratification by ECOWAS Member States of the key international treaties and protocols that are relevant to child rights and protection. These findings are reflected in the maps below. ECOWAS Member States score 100% in terms of ratification of some major child rights treaties and protocols,¹ such as □UN Child Rights Convention, □ILO Conventions on minimum age; Worst forms of child labour and Forced Labour Convention, □United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and Rome Convention of the International Criminal Court ICC. However, nearly 13% of member states have not ratified the optional CRC protocols.² Liberia is yet to accede to the United Nations Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict or the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography.

Domestic Laws promote child rights and ensure equal access to justice for all.

Most countries in West Africa have domestic laws that prohibit the globally designated grave violations of child rights, including: Commercial sexual exploitation of children, Compulsory recruitment of children in armed forces, Recruitment of children by armed groups, and Child trafficking. There is however insufficient information for Ghana and Guinea Bissau regarding the existence of laws prohibiting commercial sexual exploitation of children; Liberia, Niger, and Sierra Leone regarding laws prohibiting compulsory recruitment of children by the armed forces; and Ghana, Guinea Bissau, and Senegal regarding laws prohibiting recruitment of children by armed groups. Not a single member state has adopted legislation regarding sexual health and reproduction.³

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/>;

² <https://treaties.un.org>; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/>

³ https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2021

Human Resources and Capacity Building

A robust human resource, both in quantity and the quality are important to the successful implementation of child protection laws, policies, strategies, or procedures in member states. In West Africa, child protection actors broadly comprise the social service workforce, including professional social workers as well as paraprofessionals such as NGO and CBO workers who work to prevent and respond to violence, abuse and exploitation of vulnerable children and families. The findings of a 2014 study conducted for UNICEF by the CPC Learning Network commissioned by UNICEF, on the training of the social service workforce in West and Central Africa, revealed that formal social workers' job descriptions and legal mandate are unclear in most countries in the region, and that the staffing levels are so low that social workers do not have the possibility to specialize in these contexts. This situation may not be significantly different today.⁴The viability of those training institutions is however dependent on the consistent and determined efforts of ECOWAS and the Member States to identify gaps, key competencies, and training needs, and address these to ensure the availability of a pool of qualified Social Welfare Officers. Member States should honor their commitment to apply the key competency framework for child protection social actors as a basis for the review of training curricula of social work training institutes in the region. The competency framework should also serve as a guidance tool for any in-service training. The role of informal community actors should be clearly defined and recognized as vital in the child protection system.

Information Management System

The ECOWAS CPSS Accountability tool is in place and in use at the ECOWAS Commission. However, the ECRIMS framework provides an opportunity to further fine-tune and simplify the reporting process to enhance the level of compliance by the Member States to the reporting requirements. Cote D'Ivoire has two significant child rights related information management systems. The G-PROTECT is an integrated data collection, storage and analysis system of the Ministry of Women, Families and Children. It is made up of the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) and the Child Protection Information System (SIPE). These different tools of this system allow the identification of an optimal reporting circuit which produces reliable data capable of guiding decision-making to reduce or even eradicate all vulnerabilities towards children. Unfortunately, the G-PROTECT information management system does not collect information regarding some notable indicators in the ECOWAS Strategic Framework for Child Protection. In Nigeria, as in most other member states, there no single, comprehensive National Information Management System that is dedicated to child protection.

⁴ Canavera, Mark & Akesson, Bree & Landis, Debbie. (2014). Social Service Workforce Training in the West and Central Africa Region. 10.13140/2.1.3145.6008. study conducted for UNICEF by the CPC Learning Network.

Resource Mobilization, Allocation and Accountability

The trend in funding for diverse field clusters of child protection is not as progressive as would be expected. For example, the level of education funding as revealed by UNESCO data, in a region where millions of children are out of school is not encouraging.⁵ Furthermore, the population receiving social security in West Africa as reflected in ILO data, is not commensurate with the level of poverty and deprivations and inequality across the region.⁶ Also, the details of Humanitarian Response Plans Funding[<https://www.unocha.org>; published by OCHA for West and Central Africa shows that the value of unmet humanitarian response plans is on the increase as reflected in the table below. Of the total 6.6 billion dollars required for humanitarian response plan for between 2015 to 2022, 3.8 billion ⁷ dollars [58%] was funded, while 2.8 billion dollars [43%] was unmet.

Communication and Social Mobilization

Social mobilisation is therefore an integral part of policy implementation, and the content and manner of communication is crucial in social mobilisation.⁸ A definitive national communication strategy for addressing child protection issues in the Member States is imperative to communicate the message that failure to protect children today can have serious consequences for national security and retard future development of the state.⁹ Widespread public sensitization campaigns in the member states should happen within the scope of a well-defined national communications strategy that makes optimal use of all available media resources, and keeps financial expenditures within reasonable limits. Implementing a social and behavioral change communication strategy for child protection would help guide the design of all interventions, define the intended audience in each case, and the communication objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Compliance with International Legal frameworks:** Appreciable progress was recorded here as, member states have ratified and domesticated most of the key legal instruments for child protection. Notably, they all have legal prohibitions against the internationally recognised grievous offences against children. But the laws and policies generally remain in the books and must be brought off the shelves and applied or implemented to impact the lives of children in need of protection measures. It is recommended that future reports emphasise reporting in this area directly by the member states. Another significant gap is in the ratification of ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Work by most member

⁵ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). UIS.Stat Bulk Data Download Service. Accessed September 19, 2023. apiportal.uis.unesco.org/bdds

⁶ ILO World Social Protection Database, based on the SSI and the ILO Social Protection Platform.

⁷ <https://www.unocha.org>; www.reliefweb.int Financial Tracking Service (FTS).

⁹ ECOWAS Guidelines for Implementation of the Strategic Framework for Strengthening National Child Protection Systems in West Africa.

states, even though working children especially girls in this sector are in dire need of protection.

2. **Strengthening of Policy and Institutional Frameworks:** Member states need to report on the policies to control online violence against children, and address hidden charges in birth registration offices and basic education institutions. There is need to also reflect the level of integration and implementation of child protection policies in their agriculture and mining policies and in the unregulated sectors of the economy where the worst forms of child labour often occur in many parts of the region.
3. **International and Regional Cooperation:** more information is needed of the level of legal cooperation by the member states to curtail offences of a global nature; to arrest and prosecute offenders; prevent unnecessary detention of children on the move and refugees; and to identify victims and protect child rights in the justice system.
4. **Partnerships, Networking and Collaborations; and Child and Youth Participation:** Details of partnership agreements implemented in member states among different groups of stakeholders should be documented and provided. Information about Child and youth participation are also scanty.
5. **Human resources and capacity building:** information on compliance with the regional key competencies framework for social work should be the basis of future assessment of human capacity reports in the future. This as well as improvements recorded in the ratio of social workers to the population.
6. **Service delivery to children:** This is the broadest area of the 10 benchmarks and requires to be closely monitored, as improvement in the status of children is the primary reason for system strengthening. There has been little or no noticeable progress with regards to the provision of basic social services to children across the region, neither in health, education, justice or social security. Focus should be directed at the increased adoption and implementation of effective social protection programs to address inequalities and break the circle of poverty that exposes children to increased risks of abuse, violence, neglect and exploitation. Member states should also clearly report on the level of service provision to child victims and their treatment in the justice system including the adoption of alternatives to detention mechanisms.
7. **Information Management Systems:** the ECOWAS Commission should commit to providing technical support to the establishment or reinforcement of member states child protection information management systems that links up to the ECRIMS. Innovative approaches would be useful towards mining existing child related data and information from diverse sectors, and advanced monitoring and reporting systems.
8. **Resource mobilisation, Allocation and Accountability:** A common mechanism is needed to define the full range of human and material resources that constitute child protection budgets/resources in the region as there may often be no direct budget head referenced as child protection. Member states should also document and report directly on both governmental and non-governmental sources of revenue available to child rights and financial as well as non-financial resources mobilized and deployed in a member state to protect all children from abuse, violence, and exploitation.
9. **Communication and social mobilisation:** Reporting for this benchmark should reflect the adoption or steps towards the adoption of relevant numbers

of definitive *National Communication Strategies* to be implemented through behavioural change communication experts in the member states.



ECOWAS COMMISSION
COMMISSION DE LA CEDEAO
COMISSÃO DA CEDEAO

101 Yakubu Gowon Crescent,
Asokoro District, P.M.B 401
Abuja Nigeria

