



THE DESERT FLOWER



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Save the Children®

Human interest stories

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Background Information.



It is extremely hot in Dadaab, gusty winds are blowing and a film of dust covers visibility, yet in reality this day has presented a better weather for Dadaab as it usually gets worse. It is impossible to believe that just a few days ago this area had received very heavy rainfalls, the thirsty sand swallowed it all up and the only evidence left of this is a few puddles of water by the road side where children dive in to cool their little bodies from the scorching sun.

Over the last 2 decades refugees have been flocking into Dadaab in north Eastern Kenya to escape armed conflict and famine in neighboring countries such as Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Ifo 2 is one of the five camps in the Dadaab complex but owing to its sheer size, a visitor would be forgiven to think that this alone forms the entire refugee camp; there are four other equally big camps. Ifo was established

following the influx of refugees mainly from Somalia. It is one of the most recent camps. Dadaab currently has a total population of 343,884 (UNHCR population statistics as at May 2nd 2016) the majority of who are women and Children.

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unaccompanied or separated from their biological parents, have experienced abuse, are at risk of gender based violence, neglect, exploitation, and exposure to harmful cultural and traditional practices that rob them of their childhood.

Over the years, Save the Children has been working in Dadaab to protect the well-being of children especially those categorized as vulnerable. As populations streamed into the camps, Save the Children set up safe spaces to address the emergency needs of the children who were arriving. Here the children played and socialized in a child friendly environment away from the harsh reality

that surrounded them. With the prolonged stay of refugee families in these camps there was need to rethink the strategy and include more components in the program that would develop the children holistically.

With an enthusiastic refugee and the host community population, the program was expanded to include more activities that the children could participate in; the child friendly spaces were expanded to include play, education, vocational skills training as well as culture education and were renamed to Children Education and Welfare Centers (CEWCs). This marked the birth of the Desert Flower Strategy, which is borrowed from a Somali analogy where children are seen as flowers which should be taken care of. The Desert Flower Initiative started in four of the five camps in Dadaab refugee camp namely: Dagahaley, Ifo main, Ifo 2, and Hagadera.



The focus of the initiative is to provide child friendly spaces for children to participate in supervised play, empower teenage mothers to care for their children and themselves, provide education through accelerated basic education and also link vulnerable children with services essential for their wellbeing. Of importance in the initiative is to empower community structures to care and protect their children through trainings on child protection with a general objective of making every child's life much better.



Child friendly Spaces

Transforming the lives of children in Dadaab



Children in Dadaab come to the Child Education and Welfare Centers established by Save the Children to play, have fun and socialize with their peers.

The refugees housing structures in Dadaab are nothing unusual. They are made out of plastic sheets and sticks. The better ones have iron sheet roofs and mud walls, common in refugee camps. The camp is divided into blocks of meandering paths, leaving little or no space for children to play.

There is really nothing more than the structures and towering water tanks provided by the non-governmental organizations. As usual children are curious about visitors and as we stop to take pictures they swam around us.

However in one block of the Ifo camp, which is one of the five camps that form the larger Dadaab camp, there is something totally

different. From a far we can hear children's voices, and our eyes are drawn to a compound that is very colorful. This is one of the Child Education and Welfare Centers established by Save the Children, where children come to play, have fun and socialize with their peers. In one of the three stone built structures, a class is going on, and in another we are told that a training session for the adolescent peer leaders is being conducted. My attention is

however still held by the colorful swings, slides and merry go rounds. The children here have their guards down and they can enjoy being just that again, children. This is in contrast to the information we got earlier that Somalis do not value play for their children especially girls but again we are informed that a lot of sensitization has gone into this to have the community appreciate and participate in this efforts.



There is something different about the play though; there are adults community volunteers who supervise the children to monitor their play behavior in order to pick up signs of distress or trauma in the children. For example, in situations where a child isolates themselves from the play activities the child is observed and if it is suspected that s/he has signs of distress they are taken for counseling to ensure a quick turnaround time for support. In one corner the boys are on a merry go round, two boys take turns at giving the machine speed every time jumping back onto their seats once it is at top speed. Across the field a group of girls dash across the field chasing each other and a boy on a wheel chair rides in from the gate as his friends help to push him into the compound. In the past such sights were very rare as people hid children with disabilities.

However following the construction of disability friendly structures in partnership with Handicap International, coupled with sustained community sensitization, more and more children with disabilities are accessing the center and taking part in activities just like their able bodied counterparts a stark contrast from life in the blocks. Here the children are happy and in their eyes there is a sense of hope for the future.

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Girl Mothers

Mending the lives of girl mothers



It is a few minutes to 1pm when we arrive at Samira Abdikadir's home in Hagadera, one of the five camps in the larger Dadaab refugee camp. She is outside in a makeshift kitchen made out of old, torn sacks bearing the UNHCR logo. She holds her daughter on her lap as she struggles to blow the cooking stove to light amid the choking smoke produced by the firewood. Her school going siblings are about to arrive home from school and they need to find lunch ready.

In Dadaab, it is not unusual to come across girls who get children before they reach the age of 18. The sad part is that most of these cases are as a result of forced marriages and defilement.

Samira is just 17 years old. When she was only thirteen years old, she bore her first child having being married off despite the fact that she was still a child. The man later divorced her and left her and she was left to fend for the children. She would later flee to Kenya following the protracted armed conflict in Somalia.

In Dadaab, it is not unusual to come across girls like Samira who get children before they reach the age of 18. The sad part is that most of these cases are as a result of forced marriages or defilement. For these girls there is the added trauma of stigmatization and discrimination for being unwed mothers. With no income, the situation becomes more desperate.

Save the Children has been working with the girl mothers to empower them with skills that would enable them to live a positive life. They are enrolled into girl mother groups and hold monthly meetings, during which they help each other cope with the challenges faced by individual members. Easter Wadu who is a counselor at Save the Children intimates that

before the establishment of the girl mothers groups, there were a lot of individual cases with protection concerns being reported by the girl mothers. However, as the groups have taken shape, these concerns have become fewer and this can be attributed to the fact that in the groups, the members offer each other emotional support and share solutions to each other's problems.

Other than psychosocial support, there are economic activities that the groups are engaged in. The girls are enrolled in vocational training such as dress making and weaving. In addition, the girl mothers run a village saving and loans scheme where the money collected can be borrowed by members to enable them invest in small business ventures that help them take care of themselves and their little ones.

Through this, the project is positively transforming the lives of the girl mothers one girl at a time. As a result of this intervention, cases of new born babies being thrown away have greatly reduced as the girls now have a forum where they can address their challenges.





Foster Parents

Alternative families for vulnerable and unaccompanied children



The foster parents initiative was launched by Save the Children to provide family based care to children who came into Dadaab unaccompanied and separated from their families as well as other children who lacked parental care due to neglect and/or abandonment.

The story of two week old Mohamedek Abdi is one such case that Save the Children has intervened in and provided alternative family care. On this day we find his foster mother who has wrapped him lovingly in a lesa which leaves only his cute little face visible. He is so adorable and lovable. The love on Fatma his mother's face cannot be hidden. Yet a few days ago, their meeting would have been highly unlikely. For a long time Fatma had been on the list of potential foster mothers hoping

to provide care and protection to a vulnerable child. Mohamedek was born to a mother who threw him away in the dumpsites of Hagadera camp. He was two days old.

The story would later have a happy ending when foster mother and baby were linked thanks to Save the Children's foster parent initiative. Mohamedek is now assured of a safe home where he will be cared for in a family set up. Up to thirty percent of the

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children who arrive in Dadaab refugee camp are categorized as being vulnerable. They are either unaccompanied, have experienced abuse, are at risk of gender based violence, neglect exploitation, or at risk of exposure to harmful cultural and traditional practices that rob them of their childhood.

The foster parent initiative is aimed at linking unaccompanied children and those in vulnerable family setups with foster parents so that they are able to enjoy a family based care albeit in a non-biological relationship. Fatma had waited for some time before becoming a foster parent. The waiting period is necessary to ensure the necessary steps are taken in preparation for any family taking in a vulnerable child. Initially the potential foster parents are taken through a community based

vetting process to ascertain their suitability to become foster parents after which they are taken through a series of trainings ranging from children's rights and most importantly how to instill positive discipline on the children.

Additional support provided by the project involves peer group support and vocational training such as soap making and candle making that enable the foster parents to provide for the additional needs of their families. Monthly meetings with the foster parents ensure that they are able to deal with any challenges faced in the process of supporting the children and providing technical support to the business established after the initial training and provision of input support. This way children like Mohamedek can once again be in a happy family and have a hopeful future.



ABE

Fast tracking education for the refugee children



Refugee children are faced with disruption to their education as they flee their home country to the host country. Furthermore, the education system in the host country is often different; hence absorption in the host schools becomes a challenge.

In Dadaab refugee camp, the children have hope of continuing learning thanks to the accelerated basic education that seeks to orient them to the local education curriculum and fast track their learning to enable them to join the local schools in the camp.

In one of the classes, children without official uniform are following instructions from their teacher who is teaching them numerals in English. The hunger for learning is very evident

in their eyes and voices as they repeat the counting after their teacher. If all goes well they will soon join the local public schools.

The Accelerated Basic Education program has several levels from Early Childhood Development, catchup and accelerated learning classes together with a vocational training unit. The children are then transitioned to the public schools to continue with their education and meet their development goals.

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Children's voices

A children's perspective of their rights



Two little Somali girls had ventured out into the fields around Ifo 2 camp in the larger Dadaab refugee camp to fetch firewood, when a man pounced on them. The older girl managed to break free and run for her life but the younger one was not so lucky, the man defiled her.

They courageously traced the man to a latrine where he was hiding, and reported the same to the authorities. The man was arrested by the police and charged for his crimes. This is a story that is told by Aden Mohamed Ali who is a member of the children's assembly and who played a role in ensuring that the man was arrested. In Dadaab, children are increasingly becoming aware of their rights and are taking

matters into their own hands in ensuring that the same is protected. In Dadaab refugee camp, children are increasingly being taught to be their brother's and sister's keepers. Their voices are amplified to institutions of authority through children's forums through which they raise their voices to articulate ways and means through which they feel their rights can be better protected.

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The same message is then relayed to their parents, care givers, government and non-governmental organizations to act accordingly on the same. The children's assembly has been a key pillar in ensuring that children's voices are amplified far and wide. It is a children's parliament where they discuss issues affecting children, come up with probable solutions and present the same to the authorities for action.

The awareness and enthusiasm in such children's forums has been occasioned by numerous trainings and forums held under the desert flower initiative to empower the

children on their rights. They are not only taught on their rights but are also informed on avenues and channels through which to pursue such rights. "We were taught that we can go to the NGO's around here to pursue our rights and report on cases but as for rape and defilement cases we were instructed to report that directly to the police whenever possible." Aden explains to us.

With this involvement of children in the decision making process on issues affecting them, the future of children's rights in Dadaab looks bright.



Child-child

Reaching out to children through peer leaders and child led radio programs



Hani Abdikadir is a class 8 pupil. Unlike other Somali girls who tend to shy away, she is outspoken and has big dreams, she is a doctor in the making. She is a member of an adolescent youth group who were trained as peer educators to reach out to other children with positive messages that contribute to building resilience among the adolescents in the camp.

The child-to-child approach involves reaching out to children through other children by the use of well-structured and impactful child friendly messages. Slogans such as “safe me safe you” are used in this approach for children to carry as they venture out to talk to their peers on issues that are important to them.

Among the topics that she likes talking about with other children is the importance of education for children and especially the girl child.

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Child led radio programs are avenues used to reach children. In partnership with local radio stations children get studio time to record messages that are then broadcast to the entire Dadaab region.

These programs are made fun and engaging for the children using songs, poems and riddles. A tour of the camp during broadcast days often presents images of children cramped together as they listen to the radio.



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