

ChildFund to protect children from violence, neglect, abuse, and exploitation in the Southern Province with support from UNICEF



Children are facing more incidents of violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation as a result of the current economic crisis in the country. ChildFund with funding from UNICEF launched recently, a project to protect 'Children Impacted by the Economic Crisis in the Southern Province'. The project will ensure 3,750 children have access to health, psychosocial support and economic resilience support in selected divisions in the Southern province.

ChildFund's approach to keeping children safe and protected envisions children and their environment as a series of rings of protection with the child at the centre. The family is the first ring, surrounded by the community and then local institutions, which are encompassed by national and then international structures. Child protection is at the centre of ChildFund's emergency response programs. Although our emergency responses often include providing food and non-food items to those in need, ChildFund also focuses on providing psychosocial support for children and their families, who are often distressed in the aftermath of a disaster.

A local civil society organization, Sahana Social Development Alliance (SSDA) based in Matara, will partner with ChildFund to implement this project. SSDA will bring in the required community strengths including its in-depth and local knowledge of issues, strong network of local resources and deep engagement with local communities.

The project's inauguration was attended by stakeholders and representatives including Mr. Y. Wickramasinghe, District Secretary Matara, Divisional Secretaries of the six divisions where the project is being implemented, along with the District Child Right Promoting Officer (DCRPO), District/Divisional Child protection Officer (DCPO) National Child Protection Authority, Probation and Childcare Officer (PO), Assistant Commissioner of Probation and Childcare services - Southern Province, Representatives from UNICEF, ChildFund, Sahana Social Development, Provincial and Local Government officials.

Vital elements of the project include **providing emergency case management support for children and their families comprising 750 families**, reaching out to those with high-risk protection concerns or protection incident victims, the project will provide health and specialized mental health support and case referral services.

Provide child development and psychosocial support for 2400 children. The intervention will provide psychosocial support for vulnerable children and adolescents through child friendly spaces especially children and youth living in communities and children's homes will be supported through a range of psychosocial activities.

Strengthen child protection services for children in the selected six divisional secretariats areas including engaging in refresher training to strengthen capacity of frontline child protection and case management workers and networks in the target area.

Strengthening community-based child protection systems across 36 Grama Niladari divisions. The project will reactivate or remobilize community-based child protections systems raising awareness among children and adults on concerns such as violence, sexual abuse and exploitation both in physical and online spaces, child labour and child neglect.

The project will also promote the National Child Protection Hotline '1929' across the Southern region through use of various communication mediums and tools to strengthen child protection reporting mechanisms.

Commenting on the project, Mr. Y. Wickramasinghe, District Secretary, Matara stated, "Today, many children and families are faced with child protection issues which are hidden from society. There is an urgent need to advocate and empower the community to ensure they are reported. Given society challenges, mental health support is crucial for families and children to build a friendly environment within the family nexus to manage stress and the depressive situation caused by the current economic crisis. Additionally, due to online education, children are further affected and re-socialization through interventions are necessary to ensure children's development is not hindered. We are willing to work together towards this worthy cause to create a safe environment for children."

Explaining the main sensitive issues reported in police stations related to child protection Mrs. Waruni Behawatha, Chief Inspector of Police, Officer in Charge, Women and Child Desk, Matara, noted the increase in trafficking children, sexual abuse by closed relatives, increase in child prostitution due lack of food and also as a result of family separation as a parent could be employed overseas.

She added, "I firmly believe there should be a mechanism to collectively work together with relevant officials including the Police and Women Bureau, Child Rights Protection Officers, National Child Protection Officers, Probation Officers etc. Working in an effective manner will help ensure the protection of children in families as well as communities through close follow-ups and awareness together with training."

ChildFund is a child development and protection organization working in Sri Lanka for more than 35 years operating in 14 districts. At the end of the project, ChildFund anticipates a series of positive measures including the enhanced psychosocial wellbeing and protection of children, and the revamping of Child Protection systems and structures to benefit vulnerable children.