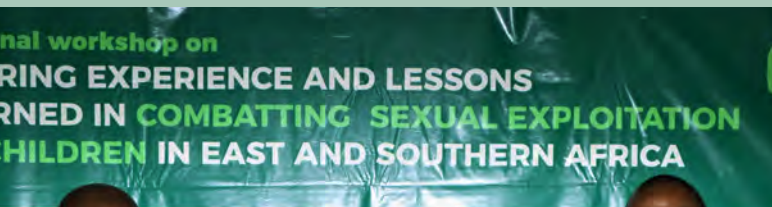


ECPAT Regional Workshop: Sharing Experiences and Lessons Learned in Combatting Sexual Exploitation of Children in East and Southern Africa

May 8-11, 2023 | Nairobi, Kenya



IN-DEPTH EVENT REVIEW



The ECPAT Regional Workshop



From May 8-11, 2023, an unprecedented opportunity for cross-collaboration among civil society organisations (CSOs) at the regional level took place at the ECPAT Regional Workshop on addressing the sexual exploitation of children (SEC) in East and Southern Africa. Gathering at the Safari Park Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, 84 participants and organisations from 32 countries came together to exchange knowledge, experiences, and best practices to end SEC, including ECPAT members from Eastern and Southern Africa, government officials, academics, civil society representatives, and selected experts.

What made this gathering truly special was its unique ability to bridge geographic and informational gaps in a context where due to COVID-19 in-person collaboration on the subject had recently been difficult to undertake. The workshop supplied the first opportunity for many actors in the field to engage face-to-face, fostering an environment of knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and enlightenment on a scale hitherto unseen in the region regarding the fight against SEC.

The very nature of the event's organisation was a meaningful change. Accelerated by travel restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, we pivoted from the approach of engaging international consultants to instead engaging local, on-the-ground actors to conduct the crucial research on Disrupting Harm (DH) in the East and Southern African region. This had a profound effect on the flow of actionable intelligence. Rather than just producing reports and moving on, these actors were able to translate the research into local implementation work, truly embracing

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programmatic relevance. Their expertise and authority on SEC issues in their regions have been enhanced, providing them with a unique perspective and greater capability to monitor the follow-up implementation of each report's recommendations.

The result of this unique shift has had ramifications beyond just the production of quality, locally relevant research. It has empowered the CSOs involved in the process to play an enhanced role - one that combines the functions of a watchdog with that of a contributor. This has enabled the creation of a dynamic in which CSOs can be an independent voice while also actively contributing to finding solutions. The potential impact of this cannot be overstated, and as we look forward to further work under the DH project in 12 new countries, we need to ensure this involvement is not lost but rather cherished as a core process that is invaluable for the changes this research aims at producing.

Another significant outcome of the event was the universal acceptance and acknowledgement of the issues at hand. The conversations moved beyond debating the existence or extent of the problem of SEC. Instead, the focus shifted to proactive discussions on effective solutions. There was recognition from state-level stakeholder that the problem needed addressing, with many considering high-level changes such as police and legal reforms, budget

commitments, capacity building and training. However, an important lesson was the need to engage proportionally more at community and family levels, to effect changes in the child protection systems close to the children, the families, and the communities. The consensus was that more needs to be done in the circle of trust, and the direct protective environments closer to children for lasting changes to occur.

Finally, another unique aspect of the event was the involvement of the civil society movement and technical agencies from neighbouring countries not included in the first Disrupting Harm research work. Their participation in this workshop has paved a clear pathway to translate the research findings into actionable steps relevant to their regions, not just those where the research has been piloted. There is a clear signal that the sector can engage much more on the available evidence and challenge the way we attempt to prevent and respond to the sexual exploitation of children particularly online. The meeting served to challenge our hypothesis and revisit our approach for greater impact and accountability.

In sum, this event was unique in its approach, its outcomes, and its potential for meaningful impact. As we look back at it, we can all agree that it has indeed been a meaningful change, and an enlightening and transformative journey for all of us involved.



Key Outcomes

Disrupting Harm Findings:

The Disrupting Harm findings underscore the critical importance of research as the foundation for our strategies in combatting SEC. However, it was recognised that the translation of such research into actionable solutions is still a challenging endeavour. It is a multifaceted task that requires not just acknowledgment of the issues at hand, but also the development of a responsive framework for implementation. Many of our members showed great initiative in adapting the DH recommendations, yet we acknowledged that these efforts were, in some instances, yet to percolate down to the programmatic level. This is not an obstacle, but a steppingstone. It points us toward the areas where we need to refine our approach and strengthens our resolve.

The formation of Ethiopia's first-ever working group on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) exemplifies how we can use the insights provided by our research. This proactive move places Ethiopia at the vanguard of the fight against OCSEA, setting a commendable example for other countries in our region. Similarly, the integration of the National DH Reports' findings into strategic plans in Nairobi and upcoming plans in Namibia is a testament to our collective commitment and resolve. These success stories inspire us to keep pushing forward, turning our research into a powerful tool for change.

Access to Justice for Child Victims of SEC:

The dedicated team of justice professionals from Kenya and Uganda laid bare the structural shortfalls within our justice systems. Their insights illuminated the roadblocks that currently impede the path to justice for victims of SEC. But more importantly, the analysis provided by taking part in civil society organisations inspired by their direct work on the ground, provided us with a roadmap to overcome these obstacles. The potential establishment of a regional working group is an incredibly promising development in this regard. This would allow us to turn our shared knowledge and insights into concrete, regionally specific actions – a significant step toward ensuring that all victims of SEC have access to the justice they deserve.

Their passion and dedication towards justice underscored the importance of having allies within the judicial system. Having individuals who understand the specific intricacies and challenges of SEC cases is vital in ensuring fair representation and justice for victims. It is our shared commitment to continue these conversations, foster these relationships, and work towards creating justice systems that are truly accessible for all children affected by SEC.

Safeguarding Culture:

Our conversations on safeguarding culture brought forth the realisation that a shift in perspective is necessary. Child safeguarding policies are more than just an administrative requirement. They are an essential part of creating a safe environment for all children, a journey that must ensure outcomes rather than an aim which can be reached and left aside afterwards. We recognised the existence of strong safeguarding practices within our network, but also acknowledged that further efforts will constantly be needed to view these policies as dynamic tools for awareness and action. To this end, enhancing training and supplying resources for members was identified as a crucial next step.

As we move forward, we must remember the shared responsibility we hold in promoting a strong safeguarding culture. From Central African Republic to South Africa, every individual in every member of our network has a role to play. By using our individual and collective strengths, we can ensure that these policies are routinely incorporated into our efforts. This will lead to a robust safeguarding culture, one where child protection and well-being is not just an administrative box to check, but a lived reality.

Overall Learnings:

The workshop served as a powerful testament to the potential of collaboration. We are a diverse group of organisations and individuals, each with unique insights and experiences. The richness of this diversity was evident in the robust discussions and the wealth of localised knowledge shared. However, this also brought to light the urgency of further collaboration across CSOs. We have so much to learn from each other, and this mutual learning can be the catalyst for lasting systemic change.

Our collective commitment to challenging the status quo was palpable. We acknowledged the power of advocacy at a national level yet recognised that local levels and localised solutions often receive too little attention. We understood that the social and gender norms fuelling SEC can only be fully addressed through a balanced approach – one that incorporates high-level policies and grassroots actions. As we move forward, let us harness the momentum from this workshop, forging a future where every child is protected from sexual exploitation.

Day 1:

An overview of Child Sexual Exploitation in East and Southern Africa

The ECPAT Regional Workshop commenced with a dissection of the size, dimensions, and patterns of sexual exploitation of children in East and Southern Africa. This crucial dialogue witnessed the active participation of ECPAT members who, with their pooled wisdom and experience, sculpted a regional understanding of current trends, recurring challenges, emerging opportunities, and invaluable lessons acquired in confronting child sexual exploitation within the region.

Our members also actively engaged in dynamic group dialogues, creating a rich platform for the interchange of best practices across diverse programmatic areas of work. These vibrant exchanges, guided by our shared passion and commitment, laid a solid foundation for our collaborative future - one where we are better equipped to navigate the complex terrain of child protection.

Working Group: Sharing best practices in the programmatic areas

During this session, participants engaged in small rotational groups to discuss best practices across six key thematic areas. The aim was to facilitate sharing and learning of programmatic best practices that could be applied by other ECPAT members. Some of the best practices found are summarised below:



Programmatic Area	Best Practices
Research and Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve local researchers and communities for grounded and efficient data collection, recognising the influence of peer pressure on children entering SEC. • Consider the impact of socio-economic developments, such as the growth of extractive industries, on the demand for SEC. • Explore the extent of SEC in areas typically outside national authorities' jurisdiction, such as cruise ships. • Understand the scale of the problem of child sexual exploitation, with newer areas of focus such as the effect on displaced children and the presence of perpetrators among humanitarian personnel.
Fundraising and Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore social enterprise approaches, including cost recovery and consultancy services, recognising that technological changes may necessitate adaptation for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to remain credible and relevant. • Support and leverage the roles of CSOs in combating child sexual exploitation, navigating the increasingly stringent governmental controls on NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations). • Acknowledge the dramatic increase in children's use of technology post-pandemic and understand its implications for SEC. • Recognise the resiliency of the CSO movement in the face of resource challenges and continue to make a difference in combatting SEC.
Communication and Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure information is tailored to the specific needs for each stakeholder group, including considerations of post-pandemic technological habits of children. • Celebrate and continue to encourage the increased receptiveness to the views of child victims and survivors in forming strategies. • Identify and engage with influential members in local communities, including institutions such as care homes and religious establishments, where SEC is reported. • Utilise CSOs to reach out and engage with affected communities, ensuring approaches remain agile, victim-centred, and relevant in the changing technological landscape.
Advocacy with the African Union and the United Nations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain an observer status to be able to directly share, comment, and report on matters related to child sexual exploitation. • Encourage cross-functional efforts, such as technical working groups on OCSEA, and promote the redesign of justice systems to be more child-sensitive. • Promote accountability at both the community and governmental levels, addressing the gap between policy formulation and its implementation. • Highlight new SEC contexts, such as the role of transport workers in facilitating child movement for exploitation and the increasing instances of trafficking of child housekeepers to Gulf states.

Day 2:

Disrupting Harm

The second day of the Regional Workshop witnessed an unwavering commitment by ECPAT members, government representatives, and child rights advocates to implement the Disrupting Harm (DH) studies' recommendations. The day was characterised by insightful discussions steered by a panel of judiciary and law enforcement authority (LEA) experts who elucidated the access to justice nuances from a child's perspective.

The deliberations moved beyond the justice framework, emphasising the need for adopting a more holistic approach to child protection. This multifaceted strategy encompasses legal reforms, policy revisions, curriculum changes, and the institutionalisation of child-centric services. A resounding agreement echoed throughout the room on the critical role of survivor experiences and children's perspectives in shaping judicial reporting systems.

Despite the strong commitment shown, the panel discussions also illuminated several daunting challenges. There was a shared concern over the weak technology regulation across the region, the heightened vulnerability of rural areas to online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), and the pressing need for service providers to innovate and adapt to the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Countries like Tanzania, South Africa, and Namibia received commendation for their considerable progress in establishing parallel child protection structures. Yet, it was clear that the pace of policy and legal reforms needs to accelerate.

The day culminated with a call to action that underscored the need for ongoing dialogue, greater community involvement, and the bold challenge of societal norms surrounding child sexuality education. All these elements are crucial in the fight against child sexual exploitation.



Working Group: Disrupting Harm — A Roadmap for Advocacy

This session aimed at identifying actions and advocacy opportunities for the implementation of Disrupting Harm recommendations in countries where no research was conducted.

Participants were divided into working groups, and presented the following opportunity areas:

Category	Opportunity Area
Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivate a culture of discussing sexual development more openly with children to address the issue of sexual education without fear or shame. This is in response to the severe lack of sex education that children are asking for, which results in misconceptions, ignorance and higher risky situations. • Boys as affected as girls: This influences our approach, mobilisation, training, and fight against stereotypes and gender and social norms. • The prevalence is astonishing, leading to a need for prioritisation, serious bold action, and reforms beyond just localised awareness raising.
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include caregivers as part of the solution to address the issue, particularly since perpetrators often exist within the child's circle of trust. • Review the vulnerability concept, adapt prevention strategies, integrate the realities of children and their difficulties confronted to various harmful survival strategies. • Develop rehabilitation programmes for offenders to prevent relapses and enhance safety for children.
Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the disclosure process for children by creating safe physical and emotional spaces to report cases of sexual exploitation or abuse, focusing on making reporting more child-friendly. • Remedies and justice are not limited to formal procedures and services – explore how to mobilise families, communities, informal actors in a restorative approach to justice. • Focus capacity building on skills and attitudes, with proximity services as opposed to only specialised services.
Legal and Policy Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop laws that align with the African context, considering the child's experiences and vulnerabilities and their environments. • Introduce well-defined offences and legal frameworks, for child victims and considering children who enter conflict with the law in this context, while recognising their status as children. • Hold industry players in online spaces accountable to prevent and respond to issues of OSCEA and explore 'safety by design' and child-friendly spaces for support and action. • Ensure justice processes are child-friendly and systems for compensation to child survivors are in place and implemented

Day 3:

Access to Justice (A2J) Initiative

On the third day of the Regional Workshop, our assembly of ECPAT members, government officials, and child rights advocates focused their collective wisdom on a regional analysis to highlight shared trends, hurdles, opportunities, and lessons learned from the A2J Initiative. The initiative, a collaborative venture involving ECPAT Network members from nine countries and the International Secretariat, is designed to overcome the challenges obstructing justice and rightful remedies for child survivors of sexual exploitation in the wake of the COVID era.

The day was auspiciously inaugurated by Hon Charity Aluoch, Chief Magistrate and Head of Children’s Court, Republic of Kenya. In her opening address, delivered on behalf of Lady Justice Hon Martha Koome, the Chief Justice and President of the Supreme Court of Kenya, she emphasised the need for a concerted and coordinated response from all stakeholders to address the issue of child sexual exploitation:

“ Sexual exploitation of children is a transnational problem that requires a transnational solution. We need to work together with our counterparts in the region to share our experiences and lessons learned, to identify gaps and opportunities for collaboration, and to produce concrete recommendations and action plans for the way forward. ”



In reflecting upon the day’s discourse, several pertinent points emerged. Firstly, it was emphasised that access to justice for child victims of sexual exploitation commences at the grassroots level - the community, the police station. The goal in access to justice is to ensure a positive outcome for every child who steps into the judicial system. Secondly, the need to progress beyond law reforms and achieve cost-effective implementation of the judicial system was highlighted. In this context, the potential outsourcing of counselling to children’s helplines in East and Southern African countries was cited as an example. Thirdly, a need for more robust monitoring and sharing of best practices was recognised. This includes areas like litigation, counselling, child participation. Lastly, the importance of children’s involvement in the judicial process was stressed, leading to the call for transforming the judiciary into a child-friendly space.

Group Discussion: A2J in East and Southern Africa — Setting the Regional Advocacy Agenda for Africa

Participants were divided into four working groups and engaged in discussions to formulate a document applicable across different legal systems while setting minimum standards for children’s access to justice.

The group discussions resulted in several suggested recommendations to enhance access to justice for children and victims of child sexual exploitation. These recommendations will contribute to the formulation of a document that sets the regional advocacy agenda for Africa, promoting improved access to justice and the protection of children and young survivors of child sexual exploitation.

Some of the recommendations included:

Category	Recommendations
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement electronic case management systems within institutions for a more efficient response. • Make better use of technologies to provide accessible, real-time assistance for children navigating the justice system.
Child-Friendly Justice Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance child safety before, during, and after reporting incidents, ensuring victim protection at all stages. • Incorporate mental health considerations throughout the justice journey, reflecting its importance in the child’s recovery. • Increase accessibility of the justice system in remote areas, such as through mobile courts. • Create agency and dedicated spaces for children within the justice process. • Ensure children’s voices are heard throughout the justice process, adapting the system to children rather than the other way around. • Integrate a lens for children with special needs within services and institutions. • Speed up the justice process, ensuring cases involving children are given priority. • Integrate formal and informal justice systems, making both more connected and child-friendly.

Category	Recommendations
Workforce and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance knowledge sharing by identifying and disseminating good practices. • Integrate social workers into the justice process to ensure holistic support. • Ensure availability of counsellors for child survivors through the justice process. • Reexamine the existing workforce, addressing the disconnect between training and realities, fostering passion, trust, and commitment.
Policies and Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redefine justice outcomes with a victim-centred approach, considering the resilience and welfare of children as key measures of success. • Integrate child protection and justice for children systems for a more coordinated approach. • Encourage multistakeholder collaboration, with clear accountability measures. • Invest in institutions entirely focused on children. • Encourage feedback to communities on the outcomes of the justice system, fostering transparency and trust. • Ensure stakeholders in child protection are living up to their responsibilities, with mechanisms to hold them accountable.

Day 4:

Safeguarding

The ECPAT Regional Workshop’s culminating day brought together ECPAT members for an intensive, reflective half-day session, centred around fostering a nurturing safeguarding culture. This pivotal session empowered participants to reassess and reinvigorate their services, methodologies, team synergies, and interventions, all with the resolute purpose of mitigating any latent risks and enhancing the futures of children entrusted in our care.

This day reminded us that safeguarding is not simply about reactive measures, but proactively establishing systems that preserve and champion the welfare of children. We aimed to construct a path of continuous advancement, one that adapts and evolves, consistently aspiring to deliver the best support for children. Our collective insights on this day sowed the seeds of enhanced future collaborations, ensuring a focus on children remains central to our strategies.

Group Discussion: Safeguarding exercises

“Safeguarding is not something that you do once and check a box; it is a constant journey.”

—Sendrine Constant,
Head of Research, Learning, and Communication,
ECPAT International



The session on safeguarding exercises focused on the importance of clear codes of conduct and expected behaviour within organisations to ensure the safety of both children and colleagues. While it is impossible to list every acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, understanding the values of the organisation is crucial.

Safe programming was highlighted as another important aspect, involving proactive planning to address potential risks in activities involving children. Sharing information with children, caregivers, and communities and supplying opportunities for questions were emphasised. Consent was identified as a key factor that should be clearly articulated, not only from children but also from caregivers.

The session also addressed communication risks, such as media outlets portraying children through stereotypes and harmful images. Participants recognised the importance of knowing and adhering to safeguarding policies and emphasised that policies alone are not sufficient. Sensitisation, regular training, and periodic policy updates were highlighted as crucial for effective implementation.

Additionally, it was stressed that contracted consultants, guests, visitors, and stakeholders working closely with the organisation should understand and respect safeguarding policies. The session concluded by highlighting the importance of discussing identified risks with business partners to ensure alignment and commitment to safeguarding practices.

Our Vision for the Future

Drawing upon the enlightening outcomes of our recent gathering, a renewed sense of resolve has ignited within us, illuminating the path to a future where SEC is decisively dismantled by our collective action. This vision is a tangible reality that we, as an alliance of dedicated CSOs, are unwavering in bringing to fruition.

In this envisioned future, the voices of the children we strive to safeguard and the survivors we endeavour to support are amplified and respected. Their narratives and experiences will shape the justice systems of tomorrow, guiding them towards broader reparative measures. We see justice institutions transformed into child-friendly spaces, where every child feels included, heard, and protected.

We aspire to redefine the very essence of justice, aiming to create mechanisms that truly uphold justice for children, even in settings burdened by overcrowding and lack of resources. Child safeguarding policies, in this vision, transition from mere administrative necessities to become vibrant tools of awareness and intervention. Coupled with grassroots advocacy, these policies will enable us to forge ahead with locally resonant, tangible solutions.

Key Actions Moving Forward

To bring this ambitious vision to life, several immediate priorities and concrete steps have emerged from our collective insights:

- Establish a sub-regional call: Discuss follow-up actions and potential collaborations based on the DH findings at a regional or multi-country level.
- Foster an integrated approach: Encourage a multi-sectoral response to contemporary trends of SEC, implementation of DH study recommendations, improvement of justice access for child victims, and bolstering of safeguarding practices.
- Learn from evidence: Intensify the process of transforming research findings into actionable insights.
- Develop scalable approaches: Create robust, ground-up strategies that can be effectively upscaled for maximum reach and impact.
- Engage children and survivors: Systematise and strengthen our engagement with children and survivors to ensure their voices continue to shape our actions.
- Collaborate with the private sector: Learn how to effectively collaborate with various sectors of the private industry to boost our collective impact.

With this in mind, we are reminded of the urgency in our task, clear in the participants' call for holistic reforms, budget reallocations, policy adjustments, and institutionalised services - all in the best interest of the child. The experiences of survivors must inform our approach, catalysing the transformation of our institutions into truly child-friendly spaces.

As we look ahead, we envision a future filled with hope, unity, and decisive action against SEC. Our collective narrative is not just a call to sustain our discussions and share best practices, but a pledge to relentless collaboration in formal and informal settings alike. As a unified force against SEC, we have the power to make our vision a reality. This hope fuels our commitment, inspiring us to continue our work with unwavering dedication, to create a future where every child is protected, heard, and empowered. Together, we will write a new chapter for our world - one of safety, respect, and justice for every child.



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