PROMISING GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS ADDRESSING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

ECPAT

About the *Data Insights* series from *Disrupting Harm*

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by the End Violence Fund through its Safe Online Initiative. The project is implemented by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF and generates national evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response.

So far, new evidence about online child sexual exploitation and abuse has been collected through *Disrupting Harm* in thirteen countries: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Viet Nam). Up to nine primary research activities were undertaken in each country including surveys and interviews with more than 13,000 children, as well as caregivers, and other professionals with child protection mandates. Thirteen country reports were published in 2022, presenting the consolidated findings of all activities conducted within each country, along with targeted recommendations developed together with national stakeholders. Country reports can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF are used as the basis for the *Disrupting Harm* Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organisation(s) that produced each brief. While the *Disrupting Harm* project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organisations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

- **Existing child protection systems can accommodate the fast-changing characteristics of online child sexual exploitation and abuse when dedicated and sustained training for people involved is provided.**
- **Effective coordination amongst those supporting children is greatly beneficial as it puts children at the centre of attention and motivates services to coordinate 'around' them.**
- **Public campaigns and the provision of accurate, age-appropriate information about sex generates opportunities for children's awareness of risks and can facilitate disclosures of abuse.**

The insights presented here showcase effective actions undertaken to address online child sexual exploitation and abuse by governments in the 13 countries where Disrupting Harm was conducted. Examples were identified and examined during interviews with 119 senior government representatives, 101 criminal justice professionals, and with 104 children and caregivers seeking justice for online child sexual exploitation and abuse as well as via extensive documentary and legal analysis undertaken for the project. *Disrupting Harm* data has been triangulated with other sources through national validation processes and other consultation in each country to scrutinise the impact and effectiveness of identified actions. The insights offer some practical examples to help governments chart promising ways forward as they act to address the complex global threat of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Disrupting Harm provides a detailed picture of how 13 countries are acting to prevent and respond to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. In the majority of countries, government representatives perceived the issue as 'emerging' or 'new', and recognised that it required urgent action.

Defining online child sexual exploitation and abuse

Situations involving *digital*, *internet* and *communication technologies* at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

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Different countries were at different stages of action – several years of interventions was noted in some countries (e.g., the Philippines) while others were only recently coming to terms with the threat (e.g., Ethiopia).

Respondents noted that there had been limited useful data and evidence available that could inform tailored interventions and strategies.

The wealth of *Disrupting Harm* data serves as part of the solution to such challenges, with comprehensive evidence in the 13 countries now available, along with specific, nationally focused, evidence-based recommendations provided in each country report.

Use existing child protection systems to avoid siloed responses

> **We already have a child protection system, through which we can incorporate the online element.**
>
> **Child Protection Specialist** Tanzania

Across the 13 countries, *Disrupting Harm* data suggests that, from a systemic perspective, online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) is not well understood and has commonly been perceived as requiring new structures within the child protection system in order to respond to it. Disrupting Harm research indicates that sexual abuse and exploitation can, and often does, involve interactions of online technology and multiple forms of abuse.

Responses should not be handled in isolation but instead should be embedded within the broader child protection systems. But critically, this requires stakeholders to actively prepare the systems to deal with the characteristics of online abuse, not just assume they can absorb these issues automatically. An embedded approach immediately enables children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse to universally benefit from the existing support services in a country.

An example of how to prepare support systems to address OCSEA was identified in the **Philippines** where knowledge on the topic was integrated across existing stakeholders. A multi-disciplinary approach to responding to child sexual abuse, including specifically when technology is involved, was embedded within the 2013 Department of Justice Protocol for Case Management of Child Victims of Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation.[1] The Protocol defines the roles and responsibilities of the various government agencies and their partners from when a case of child abuse is referred or reported, up to its closure with concrete guidance.

Widespread training regarding online risks

A notable gap identified by *Disrupting Harm* was that technical understanding of the issues specific to abuse involving technology rarely extended to all levels of people working within the child protection systems. For example, in **Uganda** respondents mentioned that knowledge is visible mainly among professionals at central management at national level, with very few officers at district levels having ever received relevant training. In **Kenya**, similarly limited understanding of OCSEA at lower levels of government was said to result in few conversations on the topic of OCSEA and appropriate responses in the work of Area Advisory Councils – which are an important entry point to social support services for children in communities in the country.

In order to integrate responses to OCSEA into existing systems, frontline social support workers – like police officers, medical staff, social workers and legal professionals – need training about OCSEA risks and appropriate responses.

There are specific considerations in supporting children subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse when it involves technology that can differ from offline abuse – like the need for helpers to be familiar with platforms and take-down processes or an understanding that ongoing and continuous trauma can occur because materials shared online exist and can be shared publicly far beyond the occurrence of the abuse.

Ongoing access to up-to-date knowledge and skills-based training should be available to all frontline workers – particularly those at the entry points for children into the protection systems.

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1. Department of Justice. (2013). Protocol for Case Management of Child Victims of Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation.

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Integrating these topics into pre-service training at police academies and formal diploma and degree courses will also raise the profile of these issues in the workforce and improve sustainability.

> [when a report is filed] how will a police officer or a social worker or a local government official handle that? Because we do not want to re-traumatise the child by mishandling when the child comes to the service providers. So that would be part of the training that is given to those at the different service providers mentioned earlier.
>
> **Representative from the Council for the Welfare of Children** Philippines

In **Thailand**, representatives from the Department of Special Investigations and the Attorney General identified government agencies who – with the support of international partners such as INTERPOL – had organised training regarding investigations of OCSEA cases. As of 2021, 510 police officers had been trained. Officials explained that the officers who received the capacity-building activities will then be expected to pass on the knowledge to police officers on other levels.

Such initiatives, which aim to better equip the existing systems to deal with this form of crime – instead of creating new systems – can result in efficient impact. It is however necessary that the training programmes are driven by the needs of those at the frontline and are tailored to the participants' experience and knowledge levels. Key is also ensuring they are monitored for effectiveness and improved and updated regularly based on that measurement.

Use available financial allocations smartly

Without a dedicated budget, concrete action may never eventuate. *Disrupting Harm* research showed that in the majority of countries, resources are not specifically allocated to address OCSEA. In a few countries, governments allocated funding for child protection in general, but the budget was often insufficient, spent in poorly coordinated ways, or had to be supplemented through fundraising, donor contributions and support from civil society.

In seven of the 13 countries[2] in which *Disrupting Harm* research took place, the operations and activities of the coordination mechanisms regarding OCSEA were initially funded by donors including the Safe Online initiative[3] and in positive examples, these costs were later sustainably integrated into government budgets.

In **Tanzania**, start-up funds were provided for the National Child Online Safety Task Force and the government later took on the costs of some activities and continuing the work of the task force.

Invest in existing systems

Child protection systems exist in all parts of the world and can be adapted and strengthened to prevent and respond to OCSEA, but this will not happen automatically – dedicated and sustained efforts based on quality evidence are needed.

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2. Countries that have established coordination mechanisms for OCSEA at the national level include Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Philippines. Though Malaysia established a Child Online Protection Taskforce in August 2013, it does not exist anymore.

3. The Safe Online initiative funded coordination task force activities in Tanzania, Kenya, Namibia, Uganda and Cambodia.

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Designate responsibilities and strengthen collaboration

> **" We cannot do this effectively alone. We cannot implement our strategy disjointedly. The challenge, at present, is that we are unable to harmonise our action plan yet. Based on my observation, the practice is still very individual. "**
>
> **Representative from the National Committee for Counter Trafficking's Prevention Working Group** Cambodia

It is vital for Governments to recognise that responses to OCSEA require investment and input from numerous stakeholders across ministries and departments. Established national coordination mechanisms lead on responses to OCSEA and bring together and coordinate mandated government agencies, civil society organizations and sometimes private industry partners. Establishing or appointing a lead agency on this topic, assigning responsibilities and tasks, and allocating dedicated resources was found to reduce the duplication of efforts, increase collaboration and lead to greater support amongst agencies.

In **Tanzania**, the National Child Online Safety Task Force develops and implements annual action plans which guide the task force members on national-level activities that address OCSEA. As part of its annual action plan for 2020, the task force jointly developed consistent messages for public awareness-raising on OCSEA, and these were shared with various agencies to use in their campaigns. In **Kenya**, interviewees noted that due to the synergy facilitated by the National Technical Working Group on Child Online Protection, access to justice for victims of OCSEA has improved. It was described that the Department of Children's Services has assigned a children's officer to the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Protection Unit, to ensure OCSEA victims could access support services during the investigation and prosecution of their cases.

In **Namibia**, the establishment of the Namibian National Child Online Protection Taskforce[4] in 2017 brought together critical ministries, non-government organisations, and partners including academic institutions and industry representatives and coordinated effective national awareness campaigns on safer internet use for young people. In the **Philippines** an officer from the Council for the Welfare of Children explained that the Inter-Agency Council Against Child Pornography *"is really providing that coordination platform so that agencies can really talk about the issues and how they can formulate plans and policies on online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Aside from that, actually, [the council] trains multidisciplinary teams."*

Coordination between government agencies regarding responses to OCSEA was identified as weak in countries without such national mechanisms. For example, despite extensive efforts against these crimes in **South Africa** and Thailand, government representatives indicated that without national coordination mechanisms, agencies are not clear about their mandates, duplication occurred, and collaboration was lacking. A criminal justice professional from **Malaysia** pointed out how weak coordination can also impact investigations: *"The government agencies do not communicate between agencies well and do not work together by sharing crucial data in hopes to aid the investigation."*

Coordinate to provide services that centre children

> **" I think I had to say it around 4, 5, 6 times. It was almost the same in each meeting. I think the difference is that each meeting, people came from different agencies. It was when I told them the whole story and they asked me questions like "What did he say?" Sometimes I felt uneasy to repeat the offender's words, but it was necessary to tell them. "**
>
> **Girl survivor** Thailand

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In a number of countries where *Disrupting Harm* research was conducted, children who pursued the justice processes explained in interviews to the researchers that they had to recount abuse they were subjected to several times. This led to feelings of stress and anxiety, and can be a form of re-traumatisation. *Disrupting Harm* research also highlights that when implemented well, so-called 'one-stop' services can reduce re-traumatisation. 'One-stop' facilities are places where the range of professionals involved in investigations and support can collaborate around the child in a single, child-friendly setting. Hence, not only being more child-centered, but also facilitating collaboration and coordination between support services.

The **Thai** government has established multi-disciplinary one-stop crisis centres that offer coordinated medical, legal, and counselling services for child and adult victims of violence, including sexual violence. Although the quality of services and staff capacity was found to vary by location, those centres were described as the most important component of the child protection system. In the Philippines, the Women and Child Protection Centre was named as using a multi-disciplinary approach for gathering information from children – both victims and witnesses. In this context, one judge interviewed in the Philippines explained that *"when the child is in the child protection center, there will be only one person questioning [in the presence of] the police, the social service worker, the doctor and the psychologist. So, they will be there observing the child while the police are asking questions."*

While *Disrupting Harm* findings suggest that current institutional readiness to establish 'one-stop' services remains limited in some countries, there are preliminary steps that can be taken while fledgling services evolve. For example in **Cambodia** – work is underway to train workers in child-centred engagements and strengthen the quality of institutional processes which may later underpin one-stop service.[5]

Collect dissaggregated case data

Systematic recording and classification of child sexual exploitation and abuse that involves online elements helps governments, law enforcement and others to develop and implement evidence-based prevention and response mechanisms for OCSEA.

Disrupting Harm research found that coordinating with local administration offices and signing memoranda of understanding between those involved in investigating or supporting such cases can reduce record-keeping duplication and improve the quality of data.

For example, in **Tanzania**, there is a child protection case management system operated at district level, that could be used to generate data on OCSEA by adding tags and categories related to the involvement of technology in the recorded cases.

Collaborate 'around' the children

While many stakeholders have responsibilities to address online child sexual exploitation and abuse, specifically naming and delegating these responsibilities is essential. Children benefit from explicit efforts to coordinate and collaborate amongst the people and services surrounding children – rather than squeezing the child victim into the different established organisational systems. When the child is centred, and the services coordinate around them, the best possible experience of support is experienced by the child.

> We need to raise awareness to the community, to the children as well so that we can empower them to have the courage to report abuses because this type of crime is unlike any other crime. This is a hidden crime. It's literally in one corner of their house where the neighbours might or might not, but most of them might not be aware of the existence or the occurrence of crime.

Chief of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division
Philippines National Police

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In the majority of countries where *Disrupting Harm* research was conducted, awareness of online child sexual exploitation and abuse was insufficient amongst the general public and children. Government representatives shared that awareness-raising efforts were often hampered by shortages in funding and the lack of skilled and trained staff capable of designing and implementing activities, even if they were planned.

Public campaigns may also stimulate dialogue and create space for children to come forward. In **Namibia**, *Disrupting Harm* research identified that children disclosed abuse as a result of the *#BeFree* campaign that was initiated by the Office of the First Lady. The campaign encouraged a range of conversations with youth about sensitive topics like drugs and sex – and including sexual abuse. As a result of these supported and safe conversations in schools, children felt able to disclose abuse they had previously kept hidden.

This evidence shows that it is crucial to foster safe opportunities for communication with children. We need to encourage positive adult-child interaction and to overcome discomfort in discussing sex and sexuality in age-appropriate terms.

When children do not know about sex, it enables offenders to take advantage.

A selection of countries where *Disrupting Harm* research took place had made efforts to incorporate online safety elements and age-appropriate sex education into national school curricula. As of 2021, in both **Thailand** and **Kenya**, amendments to school curricula were underway and *Disrupting Harm* research found that OCSEA was on the agenda as part of this process. In **Cambodia**, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports has developed a resource for primary and secondary schools on child abuse including online sexual violence against children. **Viet Nam** has made classes on the prevention of sexual abuse mandatory in elementary schools and developed manuals for staff.

Talk openly and ensure all children are reached

Efforts must be at scale, and sustainable so they result in longer-term impact than one-off campaigns and events. When the staff conveying these educative messages are well trained and supported to deliver curricula, high quality information can be provided to most children in a country. Notably, Disrupting Harm research has found that children living in rural areas were least likely to have ever received information on how to stay safe online – yet they were only at negligibly lower risk than urban children in their online engagements.

It is important to ensure that education about child sexual abuse and exploitation has universal reach. Special attention should be given to ensuring that messages also reach vulnerable and harder to reach children – who may be at an increased risk – such as children with disabilities, children engaged in migration, street-connected children, and out of school children. Information should not only focus on the risks involved with digital technology but also explore age-appropriate sex and sexuality, consent, personal boundaries and appropriate adult behaviours, and how to access help.

It is expected that many of the challenges identified through the first set of Disrupting Harm national assessments are present in other parts of the world, but with important differences both in children's experiences, and in each countries' capacity and readiness to prevent and respond effectively.

This reinforces the need for high-quality, comprehensive, national evidence-generation efforts to determine the extent to which children are exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and how prevention and response capabilities can be improved.

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