



NURTURING RESILIENCE: CHILD-FRIENDLY SPACES

in Conflict-Affected Pakistan

CASE STUDY 2024

Title page: From June to August 2022, extreme monsoon rainfall submerged one-third of Pakistan, impacting 33 million people nationwide. The floods ravaged a staggering 2.2 million houses, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Pakistan, 2023. Photo credit: Irem Karakaya, IFRC.

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Families receive free healthcare at a basic health unit in Jacobabad District, Sindh province, Pakistan, 2010. Photo credit: Olivier Matthys, IFRC.

Background

North and South Waziristan, situated within Pakistan's newly merged districts, face persistent challenges stemming from ongoing conflicts and post-military operations, leading to precarious security conditions, restricted mobility, and widespread infrastructure degradation.

In these vulnerable tribal areas, barriers such as security concerns, infrastructure deficits, and gender disparities impede access to basic healthcare and education, with girls disproportionately affected by societal norms. The aftermath of turmoil in the Orakzai region has left educational institutions in ruins, exacerbating illiteracy rates and denying numerous children access to schooling.

Despite the significant youth population, the healthcare needs of vulnerable children, including issues like undernourishment and reproductive health, often go unaddressed. Equally critical is child protection, given the heightened vulnerability of tribal communities to violence and harmful practices. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions addressing healthcare, child protection, and education needs.

In response to these multifaceted challenges, the Pakistan Red Crescent Society, in collaboration with the Norwegian Red Cross, has spearheaded the establishment of Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) within Basic Health Units (BHU) in the Orakzai Tribal District (TD).

This initiative aims to enhance healthcare accessibility, promote preventive measures, and address specific health concerns within the target population. Acknowledging the hurdles faced by women in accessing healthcare and education for their children, the program adopts a proactive stance. Mothers now have the opportunity to visit healthcare facilities with their children, as CFS provide a secure environment for them to engage in wholesome activities while receiving medical assistance. These spaces serve not only as protected environments for children to cultivate resilience amidst crises but also as platforms for educational advancement and school enrollment.

This integrated approach not only nurtures the well-being of children and promotes their education but also facilitates maternal healthcare access, thereby fostering overall family health and resilience in the targeted regions.



Children in the BHU Dran community joyfully play on the seesaw and engage in various sports activities in the outdoor Child-Friendly Spaces, Pakistan, 2024. Photo credit: Rafi Ullah, CFS Facilitator, PRCS.

Child Friendly Spaces

Supported by the Norwegian Red Cross, the Pakistan Red Crescent Society has established seven Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) across Orakzai TD, South Waziristan, and North Waziristan. Nestled within Basic Health Units (BHUs), these spaces serve as safe havens for children who lack access to formal schooling. Offering a blend of indoor and outdoor facilities stocked with educational and recreational resources, these CFSs extend psychosocial support, education, healthcare services and protection to children in need.

Children attending the CFSs represent diverse age groups, with the majority falling within the 4 to 8 years old range. Led by trained Child Facilitators, daily activities cater to the varied interests and needs of the children, spanning both indoor and outdoor settings. These thoughtfully crafted activities aim to foster emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being, nurturing positive behavior change within a nurturing environment.

Each CFS operates under a team of two facilitators, comprising both male and female staff, following a Protection Gender & Inclusion (PGI) approach. Daily group sessions delve into thematic areas outlined in an activity catalogue. Furthermore, robust registration and record-keeping mechanisms ensure the seamless execution of activities, complemented by educational materials focusing on children's rights and protective guidelines.

With both male and female CFSs operational within BHUs, comprehensive indoor and outdoor activities reach out to 1543 families and 5434 children. A dedicated team of 14 facilitators (2 per BHU) has conducted 987 sessions, with the distribution of 4000 CFS Kits, reflecting a holistic and integrated approach.

The program has achieved notable milestones, including increased attendance among vulnerable groups, such as girls and children with disabilities. By addressing protection, education, psychosocial, and health needs, the program has significantly contributed to the overall well-being and development of children in conflict-affected areas. Prioritizing gender inclusivity, the provision of separate spaces for male and female facilitators within the same setting underscores the program's commitment to creating a supportive and inclusive environment for all children.

Successes:

Environmental sustainability was integral to the project's planning and execution. Given the region's susceptibility to severe weather, the project employed cyclone-resistant building techniques and utilized recycled wood scraps to minimize environmental impact.

Alignment of Opening Time

The integration of children attending Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) and those visiting health facilities is strategically managed by aligning CFS operating hours with Basic Health Unit (BHU) opening times. This synchronicity ensures that both local children and those seeking healthcare services can access CFS during the health facilities' operational hours.

Increased Attendance of Particularly Vulnerable Groups

The program has made remarkable strides in boosting attendance among vulnerable demographics, notably girls and children with disabilities. This achievement is underpinned by a steadfast commitment to gender inclusivity, exemplified by the provision of separate spaces for male and female facilitators within the same setting. Such deliberate measures aim to ensure equal access and participation for all children, regardless of gender.

Despite prevailing perceptions surrounding gender-specific spaces, effective communication campaigns emphasize the paramount importance of inclusivity and diversity within Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS). By fostering an environment of acceptance and respect, CFS actively confronts cultural taboos through targeted awareness sessions led by culturally sensitive individuals. These sessions serve as pivotal platforms for dispelling misconceptions and promoting understanding within local communities, ultimately fostering greater participation and engagement among vulnerable groups.

Tailoring Activities to Children's Interests

To ensure meaningful engagement across different age groups, the program employs tailored activities suited to varying interests. For young children, interactive sessions like storytelling and creative arts stimulate imagination and cognitive development. Adolescents, on the other hand, participate in discussions and life skills sessions tailored to their evolving needs and interests.

A cornerstone of the approach is actively soliciting and respecting children's interests upon their arrival at Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS). By prioritizing their preferences, children feel empowered and motivated to participate. For instance, recognizing the allure of coloring activities among many children, color books are readily available, gradually transitioning towards literacy-focused activities.

Children exercise autonomy in selecting activities, fostering a sense of ownership and agency in their learning journey. Under the guidance of CFS officers, structured activities and feedback sessions further empower children, nurturing decision-making skills and enhancing their overall sense of self-efficacy.



Children in BHU Akhunkot thrive in a nurturing environment, learning and playing games in a specially designed child-friendly space. Under the daily guidance of a dedicated PRCS female volunteer focused on their growth and development, Pakistan, 2022. Photo credit: Muhammad Muneer, CFS Facilitator, PRCS.

Transitioning from Informal to Formal Learning

Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) serve as dynamic environments where recreational and educational sessions intertwine to facilitate a seamless transition from informal to formal learning. Activities encompass a spectrum of experiences, ranging from creative arts and games to structured educational sessions.

Children engage in diverse activities tailored to their interests and developmental needs. For instance, they immerse themselves in coloring books, arts and crafts, and games, fostering creativity and fine motor skills. Through these activities, children not only express themselves artistically but also learn valuable lessons on teamwork, sportsmanship, and fair play, instilling important values for their holistic development.

Moreover, CFS sessions include educational classes aimed at familiarizing children with alphabets and basic literacy skills, including Urdu language fundamentals. By providing a foundation in literacy and numeracy, these classes pave the way for formal education, bolstering enrollment drives and increasing literacy rates within tribal districts.

The holistic approach of integrating recreational and educational elements within CFS initiatives has proven instrumental in enhancing the educational prospects of children. Through supplementary education and literacy programs, children are empowered with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate formal educational settings, thereby catalyzing positive educational outcomes within their communities.



A PSS Officer conducts an educational session on dengue and malaria awareness and prevention for community children in a designated child-friendly space in BHU Karghan. This initiative aims to educate young minds on the critical importance of disease prevention, Pakistan, 2023. Photo credit: Junaid, CFS Facilitator, PRCS

Raising Awareness on Child Protection

The program prioritizes empowering children through structured activities and feedback sessions, ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes. Child-friendly information is seamlessly integrated into communication materials, utilizing visual aids, storytelling, and interactive sessions to effectively convey essential messages.

Children receive education on crucial topics, including recognizing the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch, and are equipped with strategies for responding to uncomfortable situations. Moreover, child protection concepts are disseminated through informative booklets crafted in child-friendly language and content. These resources cover vital subjects such as identifying signs of abuse, understanding children's rights, and sensitizing communities to issues like early child marriage.

Addressing the unique psychosocial challenges faced by girls and boys during crises or emergencies, the program offers counseling and activities aimed at helping them cope with stress and trauma.

Booklets containing basic information about child protection and children's rights are distributed, with content gradually introduced during group sessions and through artistic activities in these books, engaging children in the learning process.

Additionally, a diverse range of psychological activities is deployed to aid sexually abused children and offer general support to all children. These activities encompass art therapy sessions, play therapy sessions, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) administered by qualified psychological therapists, mindfulness exercises, narrative therapy group sessions, peer group therapy, outdoor activities, and safety planning. The emphasis on safety planning empowers children with coping strategies to handle triggers and challenging situations, fostering healing and resilience within these communities.

During a field visit, our dedicated Child Facilitator and hygiene promoter conducted an informative session on Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) and Psychosocial Support (PSS). Shortly thereafter, a concerned child and his father approached us, sharing that the boy had discontinued school attendance due to psychological distress. Through our intervention, we discovered that the child had experienced sexual violence at school.

With compassionate care from our Child Facilitator and the PSS team, the child engaged in CFS activities and therapeutic relaxation exercises. Additionally, the family received invaluable parental counseling to address their concerns. Subsequently, with renewed hope, the child successfully enrolled in a new school, bringing profound joy to the entire family.

Grateful for the support received, the family expressed heartfelt appreciation to the Pakistan Red Crescent Society BHU Karghan, particularly acknowledging the pivotal roles played by the CFS and PSS teams in their journey towards healing and education.

Abiding by strong safeguarding mechanisms

Adhering to strong safeguarding mechanisms, the program has implemented a streamlined Referral Pathway/Directory to facilitate seamless access to services, particularly psychological support, in light of the limited availability of psychologists in primary healthcare settings. A proactive approach ensures swift referrals for children encountering various risks, including psychological distress or trauma. The dedicated Psychosocial Support (PSS) team administers Psychological First Aid, and the referral mechanisms guarantee that cases are promptly connected to appropriate child protection services, illustrating a comprehensive and coordinated approach.

These robust child protection measures are further reinforced through extensive training programs, which equip stakeholders with essential skills and knowledge. The framework includes effective referral pathways and reporting mechanisms, complemented by safeguarding measures such as screening processes and a steadfast zero-tolerance policy for misconduct. Collaboration with esteemed external partners, such as the IRC, enhances the impact of the initiatives, reaffirming the unwavering commitment to prioritize the safety and well-being of children.

Increasing School Enrollment

The program also actively promotes children's education by encouraging families to enroll their children in the local school system, resulting in a positive impact on 432 children. Both male and female Child Facilitators play a pivotal role in this endeavor.

Through School Admissions and Registration Drives, CFS initiatives have significantly boosted school admissions and simplified the registration process for children in tribal districts. This comprehensive strategy involves conducting extensive awareness campaigns to enlighten parents and caregivers about the importance of education, emphasizing its long-term benefits. Understanding the challenges encountered

by many tribal communities in obtaining essential documents for school admissions, CFS teams provide assistance in acquiring birth certificates and other necessary paperwork, thereby easing the enrollment process. Additionally, CFS actively advocates for children's rights to education, collaborating closely with local authorities to remove barriers to school access.

Furthermore, regular child registration drives enable CFS to reach children in need and monitor their progress over time. These ongoing efforts play a vital role in maintaining accurate records and identifying service gaps, ensuring that every child has equitable access to education.

Challenges and Lessons Learned:

The program encountered several challenges, including high staff turnover and a shortage of female facilitators, which impacted program continuity and effectiveness. Additionally, limited access to education, cultural sensitivities, and trauma-related issues posed significant obstacles that necessitated innovative approaches and specialized training.

Proactive Measures

Through targeted awareness sessions facilitated by culturally sensitive individuals, the program actively addressed cultural taboos within communities. Integrated child protection measures, including screening processes and a zero-tolerance policy for misconduct, were implemented to safeguard children.

Comprehensive, Multisectoral Approach

The program underscored the importance of a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to address the complex needs of children in crisis-affected areas. Proactive measures, such as hiring technical staff at the provincial level, were identified as enhancing program effectiveness and resilience. The holistic approach of the CFS program, addressing education, psychosocial, health and protection needs, emphasized the importance of a comprehensive strategy in supporting the overall development and well-being of children.

Inclusion of Male and Female Facilitators

The inclusion of male and female Child Facilitators played a vital role in educating children and guiding families through essential paperwork procedures, including obtaining birth certificates and facilitating the enrollment process. Hiring facilitators locally proved beneficial, fostering inclusion, improved access, and the development of a sustainable exit strategy. These facilitators, selected through meticulous processes, ensured the relevance and effectiveness of CFS activities by eliminating language barriers and creating an inclusive environment.

Furthermore, the presence of female staff in Basic Health Units (BHU) played a crucial role in encouraging parents to send their daughters to school. Parents were motivated by examples provided by female staff, illustrating how their daughters could work as nurses or doctors after obtaining the required education. This trust in BHU staff further encouraged female education and enrollment in schools.

Engaging Parents and the Community at Large

Tailored awareness sessions, led by culturally sensitive individuals, emphasized the importance of child protection measures, integrating screening processes and a strict zero-tolerance policy for misconduct. Local facilitators, well-versed in community dynamics, fostered trust and boosted attendance rates in CFSs, bolstering local ownership.

The program prioritized community involvement, seeking input from parents, caregivers, and community leaders, with materials provided in local languages to ensure inclusivity. Securing buy-in and involvement from authorities at various levels was crucial for supporting CFS programs.

Additionally, the Pakistan Red Crescent Society and the Norwegian Red Cross, collaborated with international organizations and government agencies, working with Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Child Protection (CP) clusters to address issues through training, referral mechanisms, and advocacy initiatives, showcasing a unified approach.

Conclusion

The initiative to establish Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) in the conflict-ridden regions of North and South Waziristan and Orakzai within Pakistan has proven to be an essential pillar in nurturing resilience and holistic development among vulnerable children.

By addressing multifaceted challenges such as limited access to healthcare, education, and protection, the program has significantly improved the well-being and prospects of children in crisis-affected areas.

As a testament to its success, the Pakistan Red Crescent Society and the Norwegian Red Cross, are now extending this concept to other areas of Pakistan and replicating the same in Sindh province, underscoring the potential for comprehensive and inclusive interventions to make a lasting impact on the lives of vulnerable children nationwide.

Tips and Tools:

1. **Putting Children at the Center:** Ensure that all interventions and strategies prioritize the well-being and development of children, with their needs and interests guiding programmatic decisions.
2. **Engaging Parents and the Community:** Organize tailored awareness sessions led by culturally sensitive individuals within local communities to navigate cultural taboos and sensitivities effectively.
3. **Community Engagement:** Solicit input from parents, caregivers, and community leaders to ensure inclusivity and non-discrimination, fostering local ownership and continued impact.
4. **Enhancing Gender Inclusivity:** Prioritize gender inclusivity by providing separate spaces for male and female facilitators, promoting equal access and participation for all children.
5. **Tailoring Activities:** Tailor activities to children's interests and developmental needs, fostering engagement and autonomy in their learning journey.
6. **Strengthening Child Protection:** Implement robust safeguarding mechanisms, including streamlined referral pathways and training initiatives, to ensure prompt access to services and uphold a zero-tolerance policy for misconduct.
7. **Facilitating School Enrollment:** Conduct awareness campaigns and simplify enrollment procedures to encourage families to enroll their children in local schools, thereby promoting education and enhancing overall well-being.
8. **Advocacy and Collaboration:** Collaborate with international organizations, government agencies, and local authorities to advocate for children's rights and address systemic challenges, fostering a collective approach to address complex issues.