



CHILD FRIENDLY SPACES IN REFUGEE SETTINGS OF EASTERN CHAD

CHAD RED CROSS

CASE STUDY

Photo description: The child-friendly space gets a makeover: in Farchana, children participate in the mural painting, in an explosion of colour and creativity
Photo credit: Red Cross Society of Chad

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Photo description: A volunteer from the Red Cross Society of Chad, in the middle of a group of people who have returned to the Tongori site, conducts an awareness session with families through the mobile strategy of the Child-Friendly Space (EAE), set up to support children affected by the Sudanese crisis.

Photo credit: Red Cross Society of Chad

Background

Since April 2023, eastern Chad has been facing a massive influx of refugees and returnees fleeing the armed conflict in Sudan. More than a million people have found refuge in the Ouaddaï region, already weakened by the effects of climate change, structural poverty, and limited access to basic services such as water, health, education and housing. Children, the first victims of this crisis, face increased risks: family separation, exposure to violence, dropping out of school, exploitation, neglect and psychosocial distress.

In this context, the Chad Red Cross, with the support of UNICEF and the involvement of local authorities, set up an integrated protection programme in eight camps and transit sites in 2023: Ambelia, Arkoum 1 and 2, Farchana, Koufroune, Midjikilta, Mitché, Tongori, as well as Adré and Assoungaha. The intervention aims to protect children affected by the Sudanese crisis, restore family ties, offer appropriate psychosocial support and strengthen access to education.

Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) are at the heart of this approach. Depending on the context, they take the form of tents, semi-durable or fixed structures, and are sometimes deployed in a mobile way to reach remote areas. These spaces are safe, inclusive, participatory and accessible places where children can find stability, learn, play, and receive support tailored to their needs. They integrate three fundamental pillars: child protection, psychosocial support (MHPSS) and non-formal education.

The CFS are designed to accommodate all children, regardless of origin, gender, status or ability. Particular attention is paid to children with disabilities, girls, as well as unaccompanied children, in accordance with the principles of Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI). Each CFS is based on a strong community involvement, aimed at strengthening local ownership, active participation and sustainability of the actions implemented.

Key figures (2023–2024)

Indicator	Result
Children benefiting from CFS	More than 81,709 children (ages 0–17), divided into 4 groups: 0–4, 5–9, 10–14, 15–17
Community Outreach Sessions	106 sessions conducted , reaching more than 70% of adults and 80% of children in targeted communities
Family Reunifications (RFL)	749 cases initiated and finalized
Cases referred to specialized services	418 protection cases (health, legal support, psychological care)
Supported transitional foster families	291 host families identified and supported
Children accompanied in individualized psychosocial support	329 children in care
Easier school re-registrations	372 children reintegrated into the formal education system

Child protection

In a complex crisis context, the protection mechanisms implemented in CFS make it possible to quickly identify children at risk and offer them appropriate care, in conjunction with specialized services and local communities.

Inclusive and non-discriminatory approach

CFS are designed as inclusive and non-discriminatory spaces, aimed at welcoming all children, including those living with disabilities, girls, or from minorities. However, socio-cultural barriers such as stigma, gender norms or language barriers still hinder this inclusion.

To deal with this, the teams rely on strong community mobilization, the promotion of local knowledge and resources, as well as the continuous training of volunteers and staff in participatory approaches.

“My daughter has found her smile again thanks to these activities. It’s a real relief to know that she’s in a safe place during the day.”

- Zara, mother of a child participating in a CFS

Community outreach

To achieve an inclusive approach on the ground, CFS rely on regular community outreach led by culturally sensitive facilitators. These activities are aimed at children, adolescents, parents and community leaders, and address key themes including: Children's rights; prevention of protection risks; the importance of education, including for early childhood; peaceful coexistence; and prevention of gender-based violence (GBV).

106 awareness-raising sessions were organized between January 2023 and June 2025, on a weekly or bimonthly basis depending on the area. They affected more than 70% of adults and 80% of children in the targeted communities.

These sessions have led to a significant increase in protection reports, better inclusion of children in vulnerable situations and observable changes in behaviour. In particular, the sessions strengthened the capacity of communities to recognize signs of distress or abuse in children.

Several cases of exploitation in agricultural work were identified as a result of these awareness-raising activities, with participants learning to spot worrying indicators such as prolonged absences, extreme fatigue, physical injuries, limited access to food or healthcare, or testimonies from children talking about tasks that are not suitable for their age.

These alerts have enabled the CFS teams to intervene, to secure the environment of the children concerned, to implement appropriate psychosocial care and to facilitate their family reunification and return to education.

Testimonial: Madani's* journey

Madani, a 12-year-old girl from a village near the Farchana CFS, had been entrusted to a distant uncle by her parents living in a very precarious situation, in the hope that she would be able to benefit from better living conditions. In reality, Madani was forced to work daily in the fields, under harsh conditions, with restricted access to food and no time for rest or recreation. Her prolonged absence and her state of fatigue alerted his classmates attending the CFS, who shared their concerns with a facilitator from the Red Cross of Chad.

Faced with this report, an intervention was quickly carried out. A protection focal point, accompanied by a community leader, went to the uncle's home to discuss the situation and remind them of the child's fundamental rights. Madani was then welcomed into the CFS, where she received regular psychosocial support and gradually regained her confidence. Fun and educational activities have contributed to her emotional recovery. At the same time, steps were taken to re-establish contact with her parents, which allowed for family reunification. Madani has since been enrolled in an informal school, with the aim of integrating into the formal school system in the medium term. This case illustrates the effectiveness of the protection mechanisms put in place and the concrete impact of a coordinated community response.

*Name changed

Professional, diverse and committed teams

Each CFS is supervised by a mixed team of three to four facilitators. These teams are extensively trained in the PGI approach, the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (PSEAH), as well as humanitarian security and ethics standards. The integration of clear codes of conduct is an essential foundation: these specify prohibited behaviour (abuse, discrimination), the responsibilities of staff, as well as the reporting mechanisms available to ensure a safe environment.

In addition, protection focal points, facilitators, as well as community actors benefit from continuous training on confidentiality, management of sensitive information, and psychological first aid in order to ensure benevolent support adapted to each child.

“We have been trained to recognise the signs of the psychological distress and to refer children to appropriate services. This role makes me proud and makes me feel useful to my community. “

- Mahamat, CFS facilitator, Chad Red Cross, Adré

Identification and support of children in vulnerable situations

Thanks to the vigilance of the teams and community reports, children in vulnerable situations are actively identified and directed to measures adapted to their needs. Between January 2023 and June 2025, at least 539 Unaccompanied or Separated Children were identified.

Reported violence mainly includes neglect, gender-based violence (GBV) such as sexual exploitation and child marriage (mainly affecting girls), physical violence (corporal punishment at home or school, assault), emotional abuse, and economic exploitation.

Referral mechanisms

Volunteers and staff are trained to listen, reassure and direct children who require assistance to the appropriate actors.

“We have learned to listen better to children. Sometimes a simple drawing says a lot. Thanks to the training, I know how to refer sensitive cases.”

- Mr. Abdoulaye, CFS facilitator, Chad Red Cross, trained in PSEAH

Despite significant challenges—including the lack of specialized services (mental health, legal support, emergency housing), geographic distances, transportation problems, a shortage of qualified personnel, language and socio-cultural barriers, as well as limited financial resources—CFS have been able to develop clear mechanisms for identification and referral. Follow-up sheets, a case management protocol and solid coordination with social services or specialised partners ensure individualised support.

Between January 2023 and June 2025, 418 protection cases were referred to specialized services for medical care, legal support, further psychological care, or appropriate placement. Secure spaces are set up for unaccompanied children, with dedicated staff ensuring their personalized follow-up.

On average, a delay of 5 to 10 days is observed between the disclosure of a case and effective care. But the time frame varies considerably depending on the nature and urgency of the case, as well as local capacities. For urgent cases (serious physical violence, GBV), a period of 24 to 72 hours is sought for initial care (medical, security). And for less urgent cases or requiring a more in-depth assessment, the time limit can extend to 1 to 2 weeks for the implementation of a comprehensive care plan (regular psychosocial support, reunification procedures, etc.).

Family Reunification and Transitional Foster Care

Depending on the child's situation, different care pathways are considered, ranging from family reunification to temporary placement in a transitional foster family (TFF).

When possible and in the best interests of the child, and where the child agrees, reunification with the biological family is preferred. Between January 2023 and June 2025, 749 family reunification cases were initiated and finalized, demonstrating the effectiveness of protection mechanisms and community outreach efforts.

“When we were separated from our daughter, they worked tirelessly to find her and reunite us.”

- Fatima, mother of reunited child

In situations where immediate reunification is not an option, the child may be temporarily placed in a TFF. Since January 2023, 291 FATs have been identified and supported. These placements are carried out in coordination with local authorities and social services, and a prior assessment ensures that the host family is able to provide a safe and caring environment.

Once the placement has been made, a multifaceted support is implemented:

- Starter kit: including clothes, hygiene products, food for the child, as well as mattresses, mosquito nets and utensils for the family.
- Financial and in-kind support: cash transfers, WASH kits, essential household items, and food.
- Training: on child protection, the specific needs of children in vulnerable situations (including children who are traumatized, unaccompanied, living with disabilities), stress management, children's rights and the role of TFFs.
- Psychosocial support: individual and collective, for the child and the family.
- Access to services: support to ensure access to health, education and other essential services.
- Income-generating activities (IGAs): to improve the economic autonomy of TFFs, in particular through the development of small businesses (sale of cereals, soap, oil).

Specific follow-up is set up through regular visits and interviews, in order to ensure the well-being of the child, assess the reception conditions and provide long-term support to the family. The children concerned are mainly unaccompanied children, girls, children living with disabilities (physical, sensory, intellectual) and out-of-school children.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)

MHPSS is at the heart of the interventions of the CFS.

Daily Activities and Therapeutic Effects

Daily activities — such as free play, storytelling, dancing, painting, drama or sports — help recreate a sense of security, normalcy and emotional expression. The most popular activities are those that provide an outlet for emotions and promote social interaction. On average, the CFS organise between 3-5 structured psychosocial sessions per week for each group of children. This can include talking circles, thematic workshops, or small group support sessions.

Individualized support and specialized guidance

Children with symptoms of post-traumatic stress, withdrawal or isolation benefit from individualized support or in small groups, sometimes with the support of a local psychologist. To date, 329 children have received individualized psychosocial support.

Central role of facilitators

Facilitators, trained in psychological distress detection, active listening, psychological first aid and confidentiality, play a key role. They provide an attentive presence and constant emotional support. There is a close link with specialised mental health services (through the support of community psychologists) and case management services (case managers, social services), ensuring that affected children are referred quickly and appropriately. A supervision mechanism is also put in place to allow them to benefit from regular support.

Family Involvement and TFFs

Families and TFFs are also involved: they benefit from monthly or bi-monthly awareness and support sessions, focused on active listening, managing family stress, and creating an environment conducive to resilience. They are given practical advice on creating a safe space for emotional expression, validating the child's feelings, establishing stable routines, and using tools to promote well-being within the home.

Disclosure Support

In the event of a disclosure of violence, the Red Cross teams follow a clear protocol:

- Recognize the situation and welcome the child's emotions
- Reassure the child and seek their immediate safety
- Document the facts in a clear way
- Quickly refer the case to the competent services.

Observed results

After participation in CFS, there is a noticeable improvement in children's emotional expression, a reduction in anxiety, an increased ability to interact positively with others, and a gradual return to playful behaviours. Children report regaining a sense of security and belonging.

“In the context of the psychosocial support offered by the CFS, it is essential to understand that the emotional healing of children requires the opportunity to express themselves and listened to. A wound will not heal until the facts are put into words and brought to the attention of a witness.”

- Mariam, CFS Child Welfare Manager, Chad Red Cross, Farchana

“When they arrived at the site, many children expressed their trauma through drawing of weapons, tanks, and war scenes. Gradually, thanks to the psychosocial support and recreational activities, these dark images gave way to smiles and colourful drawings of flowers or portraits of their friends. The CFS help children overcome their traumas, You can see it; here, they take real pleasure in getting together and having fun.”

- Idriss Djédé, CFS volunteer, Chad Red Cross, Assoungha

Education and informal learning

Barriers to schooling

The main barriers to accessing formal education include the lack of school infrastructure in some areas, family poverty, gender or disability discrimination, as well as the lack of administrative documents. To remedy this, the Red Cross Society of Chad facilitates the obtaining of birth certificates, sets up informal schools, and carries out awareness-raising actions among families on the importance of education.

Support for formal schooling

The programme actively supports the transition to formal school structures. To date, 372 school re-registrations have been facilitated. Facilitators play a key role in supporting children and families to overcome obstacles to schooling. This support includes administrative support (including obtaining birth certificates), mediation with schools, and, in some cases, the provision of school kits to help children integrate or re-enter the education system.

This support has enabled many children to take a decisive step in their educational journey, by reducing the obstacles related to the initial procedures and costs.

A transitional mechanism to guarantee the right to education

The CFS offer transitional education, designed to maintain or restore the habit of learning among children affected by the crisis, while waiting for more sustainable solutions. These spaces play a fundamental role in ensuring educational continuity in contexts where access to formal school is compromised.

Educational offer

Adapted modules are provided in literacy, numeracy and oral expression, with the provision of simple educational kits, sometimes supplemented by fun educational material. Learning English is also encouraged, especially for refugee children, as a lever for inclusion and educational continuity. Teaching is provided by trained teachers, with specific teaching materials, and is appreciated by both the children and their families.

A large number of children regularly participate in the educational activities offered in the CFS. Although precise statistics are not available, a significant proportion of the more than 81,709 children who benefited from the CFS took part in the educational modules. On average, several hundred children participate in these sessions each month.

“The CFS are places where refugee and village children can play, learn, and participate in sports. We can also talk about how we feel. It helps us feel happy and safe. I, for example, love drawing flowers because that’s what I like.”

- 12 year-old girl, Sudanese refugee at CFS in Farchana

Kindergartens, a gateway to early learning

In several CFS, informal kindergartens have been set up to provide early access to education for toddlers, especially refugee children who have never been to school. These fun and educational spaces, intended mainly for children aged 3 to 6, allow children to learn about reading, writing and arithmetic in a safe environment. Supervised by trained facilitators, they play an essential role in cognitive stimulation, socialisation and preparation for eventual formal school integration. On average, several hundred children benefit from these kindergartens each month, depending on the capacity of the sites.

They are therefore an essential lever for guaranteeing the right to education from an early age and promoting future academic success.

Child participation and community anchoring

Community Anchoring and Local Mobilization

The program relies heavily on the principles of Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) to ensure the active participation of communities. Feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes and community sessions, allow community members, including children, to express their opinions and suggestions. These tools facilitate the continuous adaptation of activities to local needs.

Community protection committees, made up of parents, community leaders, volunteers and adolescents, are also active at each site. They serve as a relay between communities and CFS teams, participating in risk prevention, raising awareness of children's rights and promoting schooling and inclusion.

Active participation of children

The participation of children in the CFS is a fundamental pillar of their implementation. It is not limited to a symbolic consultation, but involves a real empowerment of the children and a valuation of their ideas, allowing them to exercise their right to speak, to strengthen their autonomy and to contribute actively to community life.

As soon as they arrive at CFS, children are invited to express their preferences through individual interviews and weekly talking circles. This listening allows them to adapt the activities to their interests and emotional needs. They actively participate in the co-construction of the games, in the choice of artistic or sports themes, as well as in the continuous evaluation of the proposed activities. Children's committees are set up in some sites to strengthen their involvement, with children trained in their rights, non-violent communication and solidarity.

In all the sites, children also take on concrete responsibilities in the daily management of the spaces: preparation of mats, organization of play corners, management of towers for group games, and awareness of the proper use of equipment. They welcome newcomers and ensure that activities are inclusive. These responsibilities allow them to develop a sense of purpose and security, while strengthening solidarity and mutual respect.

At the CFS of Koufroune, the experience of an 11 year old girl, perfectly illustrates this dynamic. Isolated when she arrived, she gradually gained confidence thanks to the encouragement of the team. Initially in charge of helping with the storage of books, she then began to assist the youngest in drawing activities. Today, she plays a role of referent: she welcomes new children, shows them the different spaces, and makes sure that everything is tidy at the end of the day. She says:

“Now I am the one who shows the newcomers where the games are, and I make sure that everything is put away at the end of the day. I'm happy to help, and I feel useful. The CFS is a bit like my second home, and we all take care of it together.”

- 11 year-old girl participating in CFS in Koufroune

This daily involvement testifies to the concrete impact of children's participation on their well-being, their psychosocial development and their role in the construction of a caring collective space.

At the Farchana CFS, a discussion circle allowed an 8 year old girl to propose a change in the rules for the organization of activities. By suggesting that the painting sessions could be held outdoors, she gave all children a new creative space outdoors — a decision that was validated and incorporated into the regular operation of the CFS, showing that children's ideas can indeed transform their environment.

Adolescents are not left out: single-sex groups are specifically organised to allow them to share their concerns, discuss topics such as health, social relationships or personal aspirations. These spaces promote their empowerment and involvement in decision-making, while helping to identify and address the specific issues of this often neglected age group.

Intergenerational Community Activities

Cultural events and recreational days are regularly organised to strengthen social cohesion and promote local talent. These initiatives promote intergenerational exchanges and strengthen the sense of community belonging.

“As usual, several cultural activities are carried out. The objective is to identify, supervise and promote the talent of children.”

- Mahamat Saboune, Child Protection Officer, Chad Red Cross

“The CFS has become a pillar of our neighbourhood. Children are protected, and parents are more involved. It’s a positive change for the whole village.”

- Community leader, Mitché

Success

The CFS programming of the Chad Red Cross has resulted in many successes. These include:

- Strong community buy-in, including refugees, returnees, displaced people and host populations, with active participation in protection activities.
- Effective establishment of community committees, including leaders, volunteers and adolescents, playing a central role as relays for prevention, awareness, identification and support of protection cases.
- Functioning of the Working Group for Child Protection, facilitating coordination between actors (NGOs, authorities, partners) at the local level.
- Strengthened collaboration between local NGOs, state authorities (in particular the Ministry of Social Action) and humanitarian actors, creating synergies in the provision of services.
- Rigorous implementation of a Child Safeguarding Policy by the Chad Red Cross, in line with IFRC standards, including zero tolerance for violence and mandatory training for all staff involved.
- Consolidated climate of trust, thanks to the respectful and benevolent posture of the Chad Red Cross teams towards children and communities.

Challenges and Difficulties

While there have been significant successes, there are also a series of challenges in the implementation of the CFS.

- High workload and centralization of requests. The Chad Red Cross is being perceived as the main actor in child protection, leading to overload and a risk of staff burnout.
- Frequent turnover of staff, particularly of facilitators, is affecting the continuity of relationships of trust with the children and the quality of activities.
- Structural shortcomings within the CFS (e.g. lack of water points, insufficient latrines) leads to reduced safety, hygiene, and reception conditions.
- Not enough recreational and educational materials, limiting opportunities for diverse and creative activities.
- Lack of intersectoral coordination, hindering the development of integrated multisectoral responses (e.g. health, education, protection).
- Siloed sectoral approach: difficulties for actors to go beyond their mandates to adopt a holistic response.

Lessons Learned

- 1-** Inclusion strengthens protection: adapting activities to the specific needs of marginalized children (disability, gender, isolation) allows for more equitable participation and reduces stigmatization.
- 2-** Community mobilization is a key to sustainability, promoting early detection, prevention of abuse, and resolution of cases at the local level.
- 3-** The contextual adaptation of activities (according to cultural, safety and environmental realities) is essential to their acceptability and effectiveness.
- 4-** Investing in local human resources, particularly at the provincial level, makes it possible to limit the effects of staff turnover and to strengthen intervention capacities.
- 5-** The flexibility of formats (e.g. mobile EAE, diversity of modules) makes it possible to maintain coverage in unstable contexts and to reach isolated or displaced children.
- 6-** Building bridges between sectors (e.g. protection – education – mental health) is essential to meet the complex and interconnected needs of children affected by crises.