



PILOTING THE IFRC CHILD SCHOOL TRUST INDEX IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Dominican Republic Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Dominican Republic Red Cross personnel administering a survey to a child
Photo credit: IFRC, Carla Guananga

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Photo description: Dominican Republic Red Cross participants at workshop on Child School Trust Index
Photo credit: IFRC, Carla Guananga

Background

In October 2025, the Dominican Republic Red Cross, with technical accompaniment from the IFRC, conducted the first pilot of the **Child School Trust Index (CSTI)** at *Escuela Esperanza Eterna*, located in Santo Domingo East. The exercise was implemented in close coordination with the educational community, as part of an institutional effort aimed at strengthening safe and meaningful child participation and child protection approaches in educational settings.

CSTI was conceived as an instrument to directly capture children's perceptions of their level of trust in Early Warning Systems (EWS) and protection systems present in their school environment. Before applying a tool of this nature—whose results may inform programmatic or strategic decisions—it was essential to verify not only its analytical usefulness, but also its ethical, operational, and methodological feasibility under real-world conditions.

This case study documents the CSTI piloting process, focusing not on the results of the index (presented in a separate document), but on the design of the exercise, the conditions that enabled ethical application, and the learning derived from a pilot conceived as an exercise in applied social sciences within a humanitarian context

Generating evidence with children in school settings entails specific ethical, emotional, and operational risks. Instruments aimed at measuring children's perceptions must be tested not only for their conceptual soundness, but also for their capacity to do no harm, safeguard the best interests of the child, and ensure voluntary, informed, and meaningful participation.

This pilot is relevant because it allows for analysis, under real conditions, of how the CSTI instruments, facilitation, school context, and child participation dynamics interact. Beyond validating an instrument, the exercise tested an integrated methodological approach combining safe participation, child protection, and accountability towards children.

The case provides useful evidence for National Societies seeking to strengthen child participation in educational contexts, highlighting both what worked and the adjustments required to sustain rigour, ethics, and contextual relevance.

An integrated approach with community engagement and child protection

The CSTI pilot was conceived and implemented through the integration of Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) and Child Protection approaches, understood not as parallel components but as enabling and inseparable conditions for ethical engagement with children.

Child participation was approached as a practice requiring clear protection, safeguarding, and risk management frameworks. At the same time, child protection was actively embedded in the design and implementation of the pilot as a core criterion contributing directly to methodological quality.

The process was guided by key principles, including:

- The best interests of the child,
- Do no harm,
- Informed consent and child assent,
- Confidentiality, and
- Respect for children's dignity and emotional wellbeing.

From a CEA perspective, children were recognised as legitimate actors capable of reflecting on decisions affecting their own school environment. This required deliberate attention to the language used, participation rhythms and pacing, and clear communication regarding the purpose and limits of the exercise.

How the pilot was implemented

Methodological positioning

The CSTI pilot was designed as an applied social research exercise, combining quantitative and qualitative tools within a child-centred, ethics-led framework. Rather than testing CSTI instruments in isolation, the methodology intentionally examined through specialized tools the interaction between facilitation, context, and child participation dynamics.

This approach made it possible to observe how CSTI instruments were understood and experienced in a real school environment, to identify necessary adjustments in real time, and to generate methodological learning beyond the results of the index itself.

Preparation and enabling conditions

The preparation phase was critical in laying the foundations for the pilot. It included coordination with the educational community and relevant institutional actors to ensure a shared understanding of the purpose of the exercise and to avoid interpretations associated with school evaluation or inspection processes.

Complementary pre-field tools were used to capture perceptions, expectations and ethical considerations among the team involved. Team preparation focused on safe child participation, child protection, and the ethical application of data collection tools with children.

Clear differentiation of roles within the team —facilitation, observation, and logistical support— helped mitigate risks, improve the quality of field interaction and strengthen analytical inputs.

Implementation in a real school environment

CSTI was implemented in an active school environment with natural hazard risks and prior experience in school-based risk management. The pilot combined:

- Structured surveys administered to 19 children aged 9–12, and
- Age-appropriate focus group discussions to explore perceptions and nuances in greater depth.

During implementation, real-time observation and evaluation tools were used to assess children's understanding of the CSTI instruments, the adequacy of language, methodological sequencing and the pacing of activities. Non-participant observation conducted by IFRC evaluation staff enabled the identification of moments of confusion, discomfort or fatigue, as well as opportunities for adjustment. Participation was voluntary and conducted under principles of informed consent and child assent, ensuring children's right not to participate or to withdraw at any time.

Ensuring methodological rigour

Methodological rigour was safeguarded through several complementary mechanisms:

- Clear differentiation of roles within the field team,
- Use of reflection tools before, during and after implementation,
- Systematic non-participant observation, and
- Triangulation between children's responses, facilitation dynamics and evaluative observations.

Together, these elements strengthened the reliability of the pilot findings and ensured that the learning generated was grounded in systematic evidence rather than anecdotal impressions.

Post-implementation reflection and institutional learning

Following field implementation, collective reflection spaces were held with the National Society team involved. These spaces integrated technical, ethical, operational and contextual analysis, consolidating the pilot as a process of institutional learning. This approach captured not only adjustments to the instrument itself, but also transferable learning on how to design and facilitate participatory processes with children in school settings.

Findings from the pilot

The pilot confirmed that the CSTI can be applied ethically and safely in a real school environment, provided that minimum child protection standards are met and specific methodological and operational conditions are in place. At the same time, it identified aspects that must be addressed to avoid inconsistencies in application or risks to child participation.

Conditions enabling quality application

CSTI performance was strongly associated with the existence of a deliberately constructed enabling environment. Alignment with the educational community, clarity regarding the purpose of the exercise and differentiated team roles helped build trust, reduce resistance and protect the child participation experience. These elements functioned not as secondary contextual factors, but as necessary conditions for methodological validity.

Tensions observed during implementation

The pilot showed that certain concepts related to early warning, risk and protection require careful translation into child-friendly language. When this translation is insufficiently standardised, variations in facilitation emerge that can affect comparability and children's understanding. Similarly, abrupt transitions between thematic blocks and extended application times increase the risk of fatigue and loss of attention.

Priority adjustments to strengthen the instrument

Based on the evidence generated, the following adjustments would strengthen standardisation without compromising contextual sensitivity or safe child participation:

- Formal incorporation of a pre-alignment phase with the educational community.
- Standardised development of an operational glossary and a child-friendly language guide.
- Consolidation of guided survey administration for children under 12.
- Clear definition of group sizes, duration and sequencing for the qualitative component.

Lessons Learned

1. **Safe child participation as a condition of quality:** The pilot reaffirmed that child protection directly influences the quality of the information collected. When participation is informed, voluntary and safe, comprehension improves and responses gain consistency and depth.
2. **Standardisation begins with shared language:** Beyond instrument format, CSTI consistency depends on shared understanding of key concepts. Investing in common language reduces improvisation in the field and protects comparability across contexts.
3. **Narrative design and timing are decisive:** The sequencing of blocks, the way topics are introduced and respect for children's attention rhythms condition the real-world feasibility of the exercise. Methodological rigour is also expressed through how the experience itself is structured.
4. **Operational architecture strengthens evidence quality:** Role differentiation, non-participant observation and systematic reflection spaces reinforce both child protection and the reliability of the learning generated.
5. **National society leadership is critical** for coordination with the educational environment and cultural adaptation of language;