



Until we are all equal



RMIT
UNIVERSITY

Changing Lives 2024

**The impact of Plan
International's child
sponsorship programmes
in Bangladesh, Ecuador
and Uganda**



Contents

Introduction	1
Sponsored children and their communities: A global snapshot	5
Countries in focus: Bangladesh, Ecuador & Uganda	7
Findings for Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda	10
Conclusions	31
Recommendations	33
Annex: Methodology for the study	37



COVER PHOTO:

A young girl attends a festival
in the Bolivar province of Ecuador.

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A 21-year-old from Bangladesh is an advocate
against early marriage.
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Introduction



An 8-year-old from Ecuador helps her family look after their sheep.

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Plan International's child sponsorship programmes benefit children and communities in 44 countries around the world. Many of these children live in places affected by social and political instability, poverty, food insecurity, environmental pressures – and often, a combination of these factors.

Sponsorship programming helps to create meaningful, lasting change for children and for their communities. Plan International strives continuously to learn more about how sponsorship programming impacts the lives of children and those around them. This programming benefits not only children but everyone in the communities involved.

This study *Changing Lives 2024: The impact of Plan International's child sponsorship programmes in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda*, is part of that learning endeavour. It builds on a body of research that Plan International has undertaken over several years into the impact of the child sponsorship model.¹ The study findings – summarised in this report – will help to enhance the effectiveness of sponsorship programming, for Plan International and for other organisations working with the sponsorship development approach.

Sponsorship as a development approach

Sponsorship is widely used in the development and humanitarian sectors as a means to provide direct, long-term support to communities. Various forms of sponsorship exist. One of these is child sponsorship, where the wellbeing and development of individual children are the starting point for wider positive change across a community.

As part of charting progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, certain aspects of sponsorship are coming to the fore: using more data to improve programming, ensuring local contexts are central to programme-planning, and championing a community-lead approach. These criteria are shaping how Plan International designs, implements and assesses its programming.

1. The forerunner of this report is: *Changing Lives. An Analysis of Plan International's Child Sponsorship Data* (2019). Hereafter referred to in the report as the "2019 *Changing Lives* report".

Plan International's child sponsorship model

Sponsorship has been part of Plan International's work to improve the lives of children and their communities since the organisation began in 1937. Sponsoring a child in Plan International is about contributing to making positive changes in children's lives and their communities. Child sponsorship is associated with more children enrolling and staying in school and enjoying good health, more births being registered, and better water, sanitation, and facilities for communities.²

Plan International takes a community-based approach to child sponsorship. A long-term relationship is built up with sponsored children and their families, so that changes in their communities are tailored to local needs and are durable and sustainable in the future. All children in sponsored communities where Plan International works benefit from this programming, whether or not they have an individual sponsor. This programming aims to improve access to essential services such as education and health facilities for all, including children and their communities. Vulnerable and marginalised communities are prioritised – as are girls.

Creating an environment where girls can thrive is paramount. Sponsorship initiatives promote education for girls, as well as awareness of and protection from risks like early pregnancy and sexual abuse. By engaging both girls and boys in discussions on gender equality and rights, Plan International helps communities to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

An evidence-based approach to sponsorship

Despite being a widely used model in the development sector, there has been a relative lack of research into the influence of sponsorship programmes on children's lives and their communities. In 2018 Plan International began a research series, known as *Changing Lives*, with the remit to build evidence on the impact of sponsorship on children's developmental outcomes and the cohesion of communities.

Underscoring this research is a commitment to accountability and to continuously improve the work with children and communities, based on evidence. Accordingly, at each key stage in the *Changing Lives* series, Plan International has taken stock of the lessons learned and explored how best to implement these. The current study is built upon the recommendations provided by the *Changing Lives. An Analysis of Plan International's Child Sponsorship Data* (2019) report. Prompted by these recommendations, Plan International has refined its research efforts on sponsorship impact – resulting in the study reported here.

Changing Lives 2024: The impact of Plan International's child sponsorship programmes in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda

While this study is important as a follow-up to previous research, it also marks a significant and exciting change to how Plan International has previously assessed the impact of sponsorship.³

This change concerns the way in which data was collected for this study. Primary data was gathered specifically for the study, instead of relying chiefly on public data sources and the Plan International sponsorship database as with earlier *Changing Lives* research. Two types of primary data were collected for the study:

01 First, data was collected in **communities with Plan International programmes and in comparable places where it does not run programmes**. This enables a comparison of differences for children (such as for education and health) from places with and without sponsorship programmes.

02 Second, data was collected from **children who are sponsored and from children who are not sponsored**, in communities with Plan International programmes. This allows a focus on potential differences arising from being sponsored or not, for children within the same community.

2. See "A global snapshot", this report, page 6, for more details. Also see for reference the 2019 *Changing Lives* report.

3. See Annex of this report for an explanation of the methodology behind the study.

Overall, this methodology offers a country-level analysis that reflects diverse variations within countries, rather than relying on average associations as previous research did. It also widens the scope for tailoring programming to the unique contexts of each country.

As with the earlier research for *Changing Lives*, this study was conducted by RMIT University⁴ in Melbourne, Australia. The aim of the current study was to use a primary data, country-level analysis to build up evidence on how Plan International's sponsorship model is affecting the lives of children and communities concerned.

Three countries were selected for the primary data-gathering – Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda. Plan International has had long-term community programmes in these countries, stretching back several decades.

Key findings and recommendations from the primary data analysis are presented here. The study also drew on existing secondary data from external sources and from the Plan International sponsorship database. Aspects of the analysis from those other elements are also included here, to shed more light on some contexts.

The primary data findings focus on **outcomes for adolescents (aged 12 to 17)**. Previous research found that adolescence was a turning point when positive development outcomes begin to change.⁵ Due to ethical considerations, this was also considered the most appropriate minimum age group to discuss some of the themes surveyed.

A note on terminology and concepts used in the findings

The findings use specific terms to describe the children and communities:

- **Alumni** are young people who were sponsored when they were children or adolescents (“alum” is given for an individual, “alumni” for a group).
- **Assigned** children/adolescents have a sponsor with whom they can communicate through letters that are monitored by Plan International, and they live in a community where Plan International has sponsorship programmes.
- **Non-assigned** children/adolescents do not yet have a sponsor but they also live in a community with Plan International sponsorship programming. This differentiation is used because the research sought to study the effects of having a sponsor and communicating with sponsors.
- **Sponsored** children/adolescents can refer to both assigned and non-assigned children within a community where Plan International runs sponsorship programmes.
- **Sponsorship communications** chiefly involve exchanges of letters between the child/adolescent and their sponsor.
- **Sponsorship sites** refers to locations where there are Plan International sponsorship-related programmes and projects. Places where Plan International is not present are referred to in the findings as “comparison sites”.

How does Plan International's sponsorship approach work?

Children and their families living in sponsorship communities benefit from programming. Community leaders nominate the children who will become sponsored. Those children can then become “ambassadors” of Plan International's programme in the locality. A child is typically sponsored until the age of 18. Through interactions with sponsors and Plan International, the children and their communities access a package of projects, communications and development interventions. Plan International staff visit the sponsored children to engage with the child and their family regarding their wellbeing. Children with sponsors sometimes receive education bursaries, exchange letters with their sponsor, and take part in activities such as children's clubs. The approach emphasizes self-sufficiency and empowerment. Central to this is education and the protection of girls and boys, ensuring they have equal access to schooling and opportunities for a self-determined future.

4. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

5. Plan International (2019) [Changing Lives. An Analysis of Plan International's Child Sponsorship Data](#).

Sponsored children and their communities: A global snapshot



Children eat porridge at an ECD centre
in a refugee camp in Uganda.

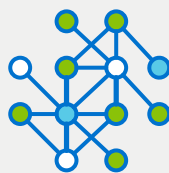
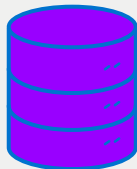
© Plan International

Plan International's sponsorship model in numbers



Plan International **interviews all sponsored children at the start of the sponsorship** and then annually after that.

Their **data is stored in a centralised system** where it is coded to ensure their and their family's anonymity.



16.6 million observations were recorded that **form the vast database** of Plan International's sponsorship work.

This database was the source for producing a **"global snapshot"** of sponsorship for the study.

SNAPSHOT HIGHLIGHTS ⁶

1,257,063

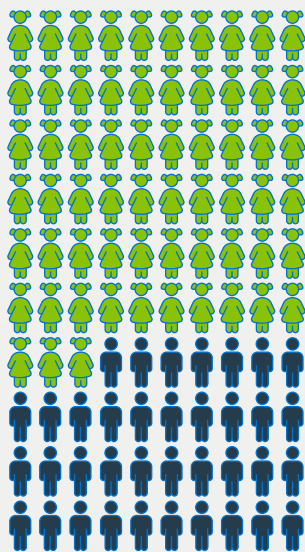
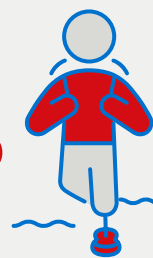
sponsored children
aged **0 to 18**
across **50 countries**



Less than

1% or
9,705

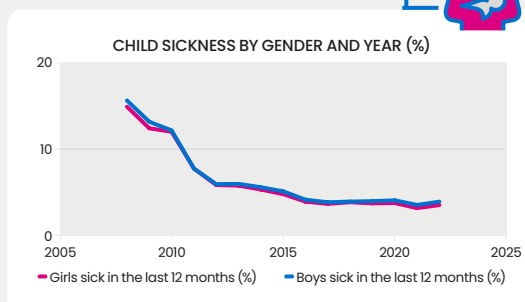
children
report a
disability



63% are **girls**

3.35% or **40,365**

children had **serious health problems** in the past 12 months



91.5% have had their
birth registered

94% regularly go
to school



66%
can access
improved
drinking
water



61%
can access
improved
sanitation



COVID-19 DATA For sponsored children, school attendance and health trends did not change greatly on average due to the pandemic. But country-level results did vary and may not be due to COVID-19:

GUINEA, MYANMAR

School attendance for girls rose post-pandemic more than for boys.

BANGLADESH, PHILIPPINES

School attendance rose more for boys than girls.

RWANDA

Secondary school attendance rose from **50% to 65%**, post-pandemic

THAILAND

Secondary school attendance fell from **75% to 65%**

NIGER

Post-pandemic, a **7% fall** in proportion of sponsored children reported as being ill

MALAWI

A **>10% rise** in the proportion of sponsored children reported as ill, post-pandemic

6. The data shown here is all from 2021 for consistency of availability. The most recent figure for the total number of sponsored children (both assigned and non-assigned) is 1.3 million as at 2023. More recent data for the other indicators above is not yet available.

Countries in focus: Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda



A mother reads to her
six-year-old son (Bangladesh).

© Plan International

This study set out to gain deeper insights into the impacts of child sponsorship by focusing on three countries. Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda were chosen because they fulfilled certain selection criteria for the research.⁷ The countries span different continents – Asia, South America, Africa – and differ in terms of geography, income levels, religion and gender equality.

Bangladesh

A predominantly Islamic country, Bangladesh is in South-East Asia and has a population of more than 171 million (2022).⁸ With one of the fastest-growing economies, Bangladesh is considered a lower-middle income country. Levels of poverty have been cut dramatically in recent decades and other human development outcomes have improved. However, Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to climate change, especially flooding.⁹

The study research took place in three urban slum communities in the capital Dhaka. Plan International has run programmes in two of the sites since 2008, while the third was a comparison site with no programming. Characteristics of the sites include high-density living, limited drainage and regular flooding, shared sanitation for families, and some cooking outside the home, with wood and gas as cooking fuels. Occupations include factory workers, drivers, labourers, cooks and garment workers.

Plan International has worked in Bangladesh since 1992

- A key focus: improving gender equality and inclusion.
- Core interventions: prevention of child marriage, education, sexual and reproductive health rights, child protection and girls' economic empowerment.
- Areas of operation: sub-districts (upazilas) in the north, south and centre, including Dhaka.

Ecuador

Ecuador is a multi-ethnic society situated in the north-west of South America. Its indigenous, mestizo, white and black populations are located in the mountainous Andes, the Amazon jungle and along the Pacific coast. Several coups and economic crises have troubled the country in the past 50 years, causing chronic political and economic instability. A quarter of the population were living below the poverty line in 2019.¹⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic worsened an already deep recession and increased insecurity in many places, particularly urban areas.¹¹

Security concerns were such that data for the study could only be safely gathered in rural areas. Two rural areas were chosen in the central Sierra region, which is relatively poor. The population of the villages visited is predominantly indigenous and livelihoods are chiefly agriculture-based. Households supplement incomes by producing artisanal goods to sell at markets in regional cities.

Plan International has worked in Ecuador since 1962

- Various development/aid models adopted over the past 60 years.
- Current approach to child sponsorship and community development: holistic, child-centric focus – children encouraged to take leadership roles in their localities in collaboration with teachers, community leaders and parents.
- Community-level projects include the teenage pregnancy-free zone, the Safe Zones and Activate Equality – working on, respectively, prevention of adolescent pregnancy, child protection and risk prevention, and leadership.

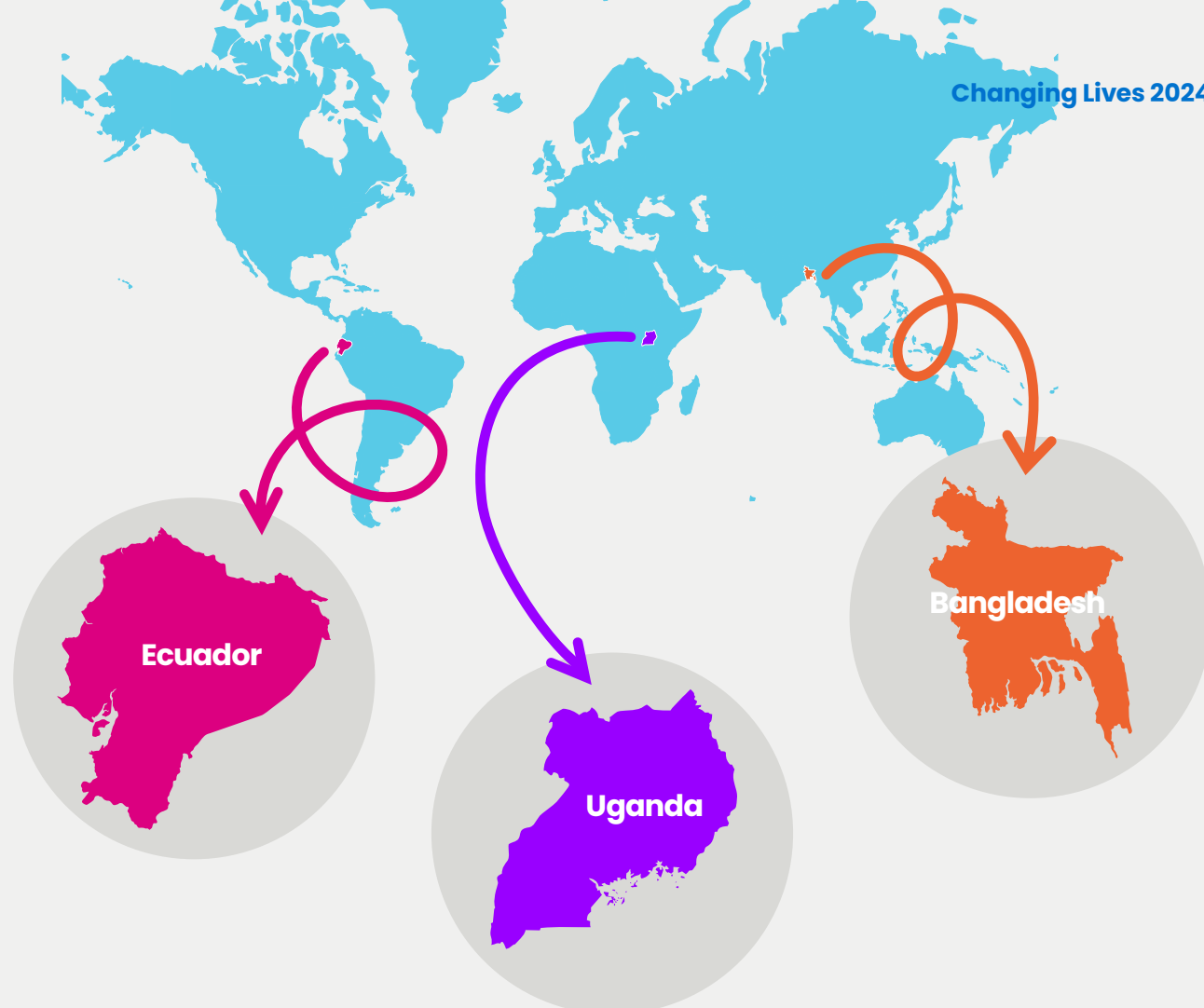
7. Details of Plan International's work in the three countries were provided by the Country Offices to the RMIT research team. See Annex for a list of the country selection criteria.

8. World Bank data site (2022) Bangladesh, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/BD> [accessed 15 February 2024]

9. World Bank (2022), World Development Indicators Online Database, [accessed 21 March 2023]; World Bank (2022), 'The World Bank in Bangladesh', <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/overview> [accessed 28 March 2023]

10. Borgen Project (2020), '5 facts about poverty in Ecuador', <https://borgenproject.org/poverty-in-ecuador/> [accessed 1 November 2022]

11. World Bank (2022), 'The World Bank in Ecuador', <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ecuador/overview> [accessed 3 November 2022]; El Pais (2022), 'La inseguridad en Ecuador encierra en casa a los ciudadanos y saca a los militares a las calles', <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-02-08/la-inseguridad-en-ecuador-encierra-en-casa-a-los-ciudadanos-y-saca-a-los-militares-a-las-calles.html> [accessed 3 October 2022]



Uganda

A landlocked country in East Africa, Uganda has a high level of ethnic diversity with two major ethnic groups – the Nilotic North and the Bantu South. It hosts the highest number of refugees in Africa – 1.5 million, among a total (2022) population of 47 million.¹² Uganda's economy is predominantly agricultural and it is classed as low-income.¹³ Extreme weather events experienced include flooding and prolonged dry periods.¹⁴ Climate change impacts affect Uganda severely, given its dependence on agriculture.

Study research locations were chosen to give a mix of urban and rural sites for comparison. All are in Kamuli District in the east of Uganda. The district is multi-ethnic, with livelihoods centred on fishing, farming, quarrying and retail. Three sub-counties with similar socio-economic characteristics within Kamuli were selected. Plan International has worked in two of these since 2000, but not in the third which served as a comparison site.

Plan International has worked in Uganda since 1992

- Began operating in response to the needs of children affected by guerrilla war.
- Current priorities and focus: skills development and empowerment; early childhood care and primary education; maternal, neonatal and child health; sexual and reproductive health of young people.
- Responds to disasters and the influx of refugees.

12. World Bank data site (2022) Uganda, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/uganda> [accessed 15 February 2024]

13. World Bank (2023), 'The World Bank in Uganda', <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uganda/overview> [accessed 15 February 2024]

14. World Bank (2023), 'The World Bank in Uganda', <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uganda/overview> [accessed 15 February 2024]

Findings for Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda



A 9-year-old from Ecuador enjoys playing with her friends at school.

© Plan International

This section summarises the findings from the primary data analyses of the impact of sponsorship on children and their communities in the three focus countries.

Understanding the findings

These findings are organised according to the main development outcomes for children – education, health, empowerment and child protection that Plan International gathers data on from sponsored children and their families. Findings related to communities explore levels of trust and cohesion in a locality, and the extent of poverty.

Key general findings about the results are given at the start of each indicator section. More detailed findings then follow. For each country, two types of survey-based analysis took place:

- (i) a **“comparison site analysis”** comparing Plan International communities (“sponsorship sites”) to nearby communities where Plan International is not active (“comparison sites”); and
- (ii) a **“deep-dive analysis”** within Plan International communities to consider various facets of sponsorship-related activities and development outcomes for different groups of adolescents.

The deep-dive analysis reveals various thematic threads. These themes are presented under different sub-headings for ease of reading. They are complemented with interview-based findings. The interviews help to explore the nuances behind – and occasionally contrasts with – the results of the survey-based analysis. The interviewees’ real names are not used to protect their identities.¹⁵



Children play at child friendly space in a refugee camp in northern Uganda.

© Plan International

15. The summarised findings are described in a non-technical way to enhance accessibility. The comparison and deep-dive analyses were quantitative and drew on surveys of adolescents, parents and carers, and community leaders. The interviews were qualitative and took place with community leaders, parents, assigned and non-assigned adolescents and formerly sponsored adolescents (“alumni/alum”). For more details, see Annex for the methodology of the study.

Overall trends



Education

Most development organisations prioritise providing access to quality education and children's engagement in education. Plan International stands out for focusing on gender equality and holistic support for children's wellbeing within education programming, while following a community-centred, long-term approach.

Key findings

- School enrolment and attendance rates are generally high in all sites – although some rates were lower in sponsorship sites in Bangladesh and Uganda.
- Taking part in Plan International programmes and receiving sponsor letters are linked to higher schooling rates.
- Indirect financial assistance helps adolescents to stay in school.
- Sponsorship can play a key role in narrowing gender gaps in schooling rates.

Comparison site analysis

High rates generally – although less in Bangladesh

When comparing sponsorship sites to comparison sites, educational outcomes were measured in all three countries in terms of rates of school enrolment and attendance among adolescents. For all three countries, these rates were generally high.

In Uganda, the data showed school enrolment rates for adolescents were significantly lower in sponsorship sites, at 94.6 per cent, compared to 100 per cent in the comparison site. Attendance rates, however, were higher in the sponsorship sites. Uganda's Universal Primary Education policy, whereby primary education is compulsory and free for all Ugandan children aged 6 to 13, may have influenced these results. There were no differences in any of the education indicators to report for Ecuador.



A young girl from Bangladesh says she has big dreams and wants to become a cricketer.

© Plan International

In Bangladesh, school enrolment rates were 69 per cent in sponsorship sites compared to 79 per cent in the comparison site. School attendance rates were 61 per cent for sponsorship sites compared to 74 per cent in the comparison site. It is likely that these results reflect the higher multi-dimensional poverty in sponsorship sites than in the comparison site. Around 48 per cent of sampled households in sponsorship sites are poor according to the index, compared to 29 per cent in the comparison site.

"I know someone who didn't get a sponsor from Plan. They didn't continue their studies due to poverty. There is no change in their life. I could go to school, but they couldn't because they didn't get the opportunity like me."

Kazi, male, 17, Dhaka Match Colony, Bangladesh, alum

Deep-dive analysis

Sponsorship and sponsor letters boost schooling rates

The analysis within sponsorship sites showed that having an individual sponsor and receiving letters from them were associated with better educational outcomes in terms of higher rates of enrolment and more regular attendance.

Within sponsorship sites in Bangladesh, assigned adolescents (those with a sponsor) were 10 per cent more likely to be enrolled at school and 14 per cent more likely to attend school regularly than non-assigned adolescents (those without a sponsor). Various reasons may explain this. Adolescents with sponsors may be encouraged to attend school by Plan International, their parents or their sponsor. Their expectations of what they should do may be raised as a result. Additionally, some households of assigned adolescents received indirect financial support to cope with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, removing some economic barriers to education.

Assigned adolescents in Bangladesh »

14% more likely to attend school regularly



The Bangladesh findings show sponsorship is linked to better educational outcomes:

- Adolescents joining at least one Plan International programme are 9.5 per cent more likely to be enrolled in school.
- They are also 15 per cent more likely to attend school regularly.
- Adolescents who received a letter from a sponsor are 17 per cent more likely to attend school regularly.

Similar patterns were seen in Uganda. Assigned adolescents who participated in a Plan International programme were 6.9 per cent more likely to be enrolled at school and 7 per cent more likely to regularly attend school than adolescents not in sponsorship programmes. Adolescents who received a letter from a sponsor were 5.8 per cent more likely to be enrolled at school, but no influence was seen on regular school attendance.

Adolescents in Bangladesh who received a sponsor letter »

17% more likely to attend school regularly



Indirect financial aid helps to keep children in school

In some cases, Plan International has provided indirect financial assistance in the form of credits for food or fuel, or has paid school fees. This assistance enabled families of sponsored children to offset other costs and use the money for other basic expenses. Inability to afford school fees is a major barrier to education for families.

“My life wouldn’t be the same if I didn’t participate in Plan’s programme because I wouldn’t go to school if it was not for Plan. My father never had money to pay for me and my siblings. I wouldn’t reach where I am now today if Plan didn’t come to our community.”

Dembe, female, 22, Balawoli village, Uganda, alum

Qualitative findings from all three countries showed that such indirect assistance was effective at keeping adolescents in school. This had a transformative effect on adolescents’ lives.

“The payment of school fees stands out for me the most. It stands out because it represents the essentials for my education. I was never sent away from school to go and get fees because Plan International had already paid for me. Some of the children had to go back home while we were studying. They would spend days and some, weeks absent from school ... if it was not [for] Plan, I would have stopped in those low primary classes.”

Joana, female, 16, Buwalo, Uganda, alum



Smiling health club members at school in Uganda.

© Plan International

Sponsored children's families also benefited, with the assistance freeing up income to be spent on other needs.

However, households may become dependent on indirect financial assistance, according to some Bangladeshi and Ugandan interviewees. Once it ends, adolescents may no longer be able to stay in education. Assistance may end because it was ring-fenced to give support during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, or because the individual sponsorship and associated benefits end.

"Life at home changed because Plan gave us some little support financially and life at home improved."

Achilles, male, 22,
Uganda, alum

"After the sponsorship ended, I lost the opportunity to continue my studies. I feel bad. Education is important for leading a proper life with family. I got the chance to study well but the poverty of my family could not allow me to study well. Bad luck for me. I was 13 years old at that time. I could understand that I should help my father with extra income."

Omar, male, 18, Dhaka Match
Colony, Bangladesh, alum



Mother and child from project
community in Ecuador.

©Plan International

Within some sponsorship sites in Ecuador, the assistance received by assigned adolescents created a clear disparity in opportunities compared to non-assigned adolescents.

"Yes, they [the children] had wanted to study, but ... we have low economic resources and we have not been able to make them study. After leaving school they have gone out to work, and some have already married. I have another young girl who is still working because there is no other thing to do."

Tiago, male, 50, Tranca San Luis
Community, Ecuador, parent of non-
assigned adolescent

Education for all: gender and disability

Within sponsorship sites in Bangladesh, the deep-dive analysis showed that adolescent girls have better schooling rates than boys – 12 per cent more girls enrol, and 14 per cent more girls attend.

Sponsorship activities are particularly benefiting girls' schooling. Girls participating in Plan International programmes were 18 per cent more likely than boys to be enrolled in school. Girls who receive sponsor letters were 15 per cent more likely than boys to be enrolled. This could suggest that Plan Bangladesh's focus on improving development outcomes for girls has been successful.



14% more

adolescent girls attend school in
sponsorship sites in Bangladesh

In Uganda, no gender differences were found in enrolment and attendance rates using the same quantitative analyses. This could be because intervention efforts in sponsorship sites are helping to narrow the gender gap. But girls who receive sponsor letters were found to be 13 percentage points less likely to attend school regularly than boys who do so.

67% of indigenous girls
go to secondary school in
sponsorship sites in Ecuador





A young girl helps her aunt collect water from the pond (Bangladesh).

© Plan International

In Ecuador, no gender differences were seen using the same analysis. However, the secondary data component offered interesting findings about indigenous adolescent girls in Ecuador. It showed that indigenous girls in sponsorship sites – especially older girls – were more likely to go to school than indigenous girls elsewhere in the country. Comparing average secondary school attendance rates for indigenous girls, 67 per cent attend in sponsorship sites versus 61 per cent in the comparison site.

Regarding disability, findings suggest that programme efforts to encourage vulnerable children into education are working in Bangladesh. Adolescents reporting a disability there are at least 10 per cent more likely to be enrolled in school and at least 19 per cent more likely to attend regularly than adolescents without a disability. A similar although smaller trend (of at least 2.2 per cent) was also seen in Uganda for enrolment. No statistically significant differences regarding disability and education were found in Ecuador.



Adolescents with a disability »

19% more likely to be in school in sponsorship sites in Bangladesh

Investment in education: bringing wider benefits

According to community leaders in Ecuador, Plan International's investment in education and educational sponsorships has boosted interest in schooling and education in the community. During the interviews, community leaders suggested that assigned adolescents take their education and their commitment to school more seriously than they did previously.

As well as school-based support in Ecuador, there have been projects and seminars on social issues, such as equal rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, disability, health, nutrition, sanitation, and social cohesion. Other seminars in these communities have taught sponsored children income-generating skills. What adolescents learn through these projects has ripple effects for the family – which ultimately benefits the community.

“Well, before let’s say that I did not have knowledge of so many things that Plan has given me now ... Many opportunities in workshops to understand adolescence, about the changes I have had ... if it had not been for Plan, I wouldn’t know anything. I didn’t know about girls’ rights, about sexuality. All that has helped me a lot to learn many things and know what I feel and what I want to do... I have had the opportunity to talk with most of my family to tell them what I learnt from the Plan workshops and sometimes they have been useful to my brothers, to my dad, and to my mom.”

Maria, female, 18, Pimbalo Community, Ecuador, sponsored adolescent

While discussing educational outcomes, formerly sponsored adolescents described how they have better job prospects than children who were not sponsored.

“For us, it’s been good because before there was not much interest in education in the community like there is now. Young people have changed their attitude towards education and learning ...”

Mauricio, male, 26, Pull Quishuar Community, Ecuador, community leader

“These children didn’t get the support that’s why they lag behind. Presently, sponsored children get priority for any job. That’s why it is easier for us to get jobs than them.”

Farah, female, 18, Dhaka Match Colony, Bangladesh, alum



Health

Plan International integrates interventions to improve children's – especially girls' – health within the broader goals of advancing children's rights and gender equality. Sexual and reproductive health, nutrition and health are frequently key programme areas. Youth participation, community empowerment, integration of health and rights, and a focus on marginalised populations all help to shape this approach to health.

Key findings

- Adolescents are reporting generally good health across all sites.
- In Uganda – where child illness rates are high – adolescents in sponsorship sites and those who receive letters from sponsors, report better health.
- Plan International's interventions are improving girls' health, making primary healthcare more accessible and helping communities to prevent disease.

Comparison site analysis

Most adolescents report good health

Adolescents in the three countries were asked to rate their general health ranging from "very poor" to "very good".¹⁶ Encouragingly, the comparison site analysis revealed generally good levels of health for adolescents across most sites.

Uganda was the only country where differences were seen between the sponsorship sites and the comparison sites. Adolescents in the sponsorship sites reported health levels that were 19 per cent higher than adolescents in comparison sites. This suggests that Plan International interventions on health are likely to have been effective.

Adolescents in sponsorship sites in Uganda »

19% report higher levels of health



No differences in health levels were observed between sites in Bangladesh or Ecuador. In Bangladesh, a reason for this could be the overall pattern of good self-reported health for adolescents surveyed. More than 77 per cent of the sample report their health as "good" or "very good", and just 3 per cent as "poor" or "very poor".



Surveyed adolescents in Bangladesh »

77% report good health

To put this in context, it is worth looking at trends on illness among sponsored children in the three countries seen in the secondary data sources.¹⁷ Child illness has been close to zero in recent years in Bangladesh and Ecuador, having trended down since 2008. But Uganda has had higher rates of illness, fluctuating at between 10 and 33 per cent during the same period. To compare, just 3.4 per cent of all sponsored children worldwide had reported a serious illness in the past 12 months.

Deep-dive analysis

Sponsors' letters influence health

Within sponsorship sites, no differences in health were evident when comparing assigned and non-assigned adolescents in the three countries, or regarding participation in Plan International programmes. Where differences did appear was in relation to receiving letters from sponsors.

Ugandan adolescents who receive letters from sponsors had higher levels of self-reported health. Levels of self-reported health were 0.58 points higher, on the five-point scale, for those who receive a letter from a sponsor than for those who do not receive letters.



16. As part of the quantitative analysis, adolescents were asked to grade their general health from "very poor" to "very good". A five-point scale was then used to calibrate these responses. Qualitative interviews invited participants to describe the last time they were unwell and various circumstances around that.

17. The secondary data sources included the Plan International sponsorship database, which was analysed in terms of main development indicators for the three countries, as well as global trends.

In Ecuador a difference between genders emerged. Girls who receive letters have significantly lower levels of self-reported health – 0.2 points lower – compared to boys who receive letters. This finding may reflect that, compared to other groups, girls with less good health are more likely to communicate or are more likely to be assigned to a sponsor. No differences were found in relation to receiving sponsor letters in Bangladesh, and no gender differences were found in Bangladesh or Uganda.

Adolescents with a disability reported less good health in all three countries. Children with disabilities were approximately 10 percentage points less likely in Ecuador, 25 percentage points less likely in Uganda, and 77 percentage points less likely in Bangladesh to say they have good health compared to children in the sample without disabilities.

Girls' health benefits: menstrual health and nutrition

Qualitative interviews in Uganda and Bangladesh described the positive contribution from sponsorship programming to improving girls' health. Managing menstrual health was mentioned by formerly sponsored adolescent girls in Uganda and in Bangladesh.

“Through the sponsorship of our community, they taught us how to practise better menstrual hygiene including making sanitary pads out of local materials.”

Joana, female, 16, Buwalo, Uganda, alum

Girls also learned about nutrition and remarked on the long-term benefit of acquiring this knowledge.

“They taught us about the importance of nutritious food and how to take care of myself during my period and they taught us to use pads instead of cloth since it can be unhygienic. I have also learned which foods contain high protein. Now, I maintain this knowledge.”

Anika, female, 20, Jurain Railway Colony, Bangladesh, alum



A young mother helps her son wash his hands.

© Plan International

Community health benefits: healthcare access and sanitation

In all three countries, communities have benefited from Plan International interventions to improve or create infrastructure that is important for good health. Interviewees described being able to access primary healthcare facilities, with reliable supplies of medicines and regular check-ups following these interventions.

In Ecuador and Uganda, investments in better sanitation, toilet facilities and safe drinking water were hailed as factors contributing to improved community health, particularly for controlling and reducing disease outbreaks.

“The sensitisation by Plan to build toilets and educating people on washing hands has reduced disease outbreaks. Open defecation is no longer here since each household has a toilet of its own. We are even not sharing with the neighbours since everyone has got their own toilet.”

Stanley, male, 36, Kamuli District, Uganda, parent of sponsored adolescent

“Before Plan, the community did not have, for example, bathrooms. There were no sanitary bathrooms. Thanks to Plan we accessed a water heater to shower with hot water and everything. The whole community has learned maintenance and sanitation of drinking water.”

Jose, male, 37, Shuar Community, Ecuador, parent of sponsored adolescent

Interviewees in all three countries highlighted how community members of all ages have been equipped with knowledge on preventive healthcare such as first aid and hygienic practices, nutrition and procedures for accessing emergency care. This is helping to improve local health outcomes.

“They give first aid lessons, they teach lessons on how to preserve one’s health, and they teach us how to better feed the family, so little by little people start knowing and improving gradually.”

Lionel, male, 70, Chanchan Tiocajas Community, Ecuador, community leader

These accounts from community members substantiate trends seen in the secondary data sources. Child access to safe water and sanitation in Bangladesh and Ecuador greatly improved up to 2022. By contrast, in Uganda, in sponsorship areas, children’s access to safe water and sanitation fell dramatically during the 2010–2022 period – a factor that could be affecting some of the health findings.¹⁸

“I learnt many things from health service training and still I follow those protocols. I learnt what happens when someone calls 999 and taught my parents too.”

Imran, male, 20, Jurain Railway Colony, Bangladesh, alum



A 15-year-old is breaking gender stereotypes through karate.

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Empowerment

Plan International's approach to empowerment differs from other organisations in that it works to influence policies and systems that perpetuate gender inequality and hinder girls' empowerment. It combines direct support for girls in particular with broader advocacy efforts to empower all children, covering education, healthcare and economic empowerment.

Key findings

- Levels of empowerment were clearly higher in sponsorship sites in Bangladesh, less high in Uganda – but lower in Ecuador.
- Plan International activities help to boost girls' and women's empowerment.
- Receiving sponsor letters had a positive impact on empowerment.

18. Secondary data report, pp 7-8

MEASURING EMPOWERMENT

How empowered a child or adolescent feels is rarely measured in research in this field. This study used primary data to explore the extent to which sponsorship affects adolescents' feelings of empowerment. Participants were asked if they agreed with various statements on empowerment, such as feeling equal to others, being able to take action if something was wrong, and feeling proud of themselves in some way.¹⁹ The qualitative interviews probed empowerment more indirectly.

"The most effective matter for me is, I became independent. I learnt to make my decision. Before that, I accepted what my parents said but now it is different."

Divya, female, 19, Jurain Railway Colony, Bangladesh, alum

Comparison site analysis

Sponsorship influences empowerment levels

Results from two of the countries – Bangladesh and Uganda – indicated that adolescents in sponsorship sites had higher levels of empowerment than adolescents in comparison sites.

For Bangladesh, adolescents in sponsorship sites scored 1.08 points more on the empowerment index compared to adolescents in the comparison site. In Uganda, adolescents in sponsorship sites reported feeling slightly more empowered than those in the comparison site. However, at just 0.27 points, the difference was not statistically significant.

For Ecuador the effect was reversed: adolescents in the comparison sites scored higher on the empowerment index than those in sponsorship sites. However, the difference was small at 0.57 points.

Average empowerment levels among survey participants in the three countries were relatively similar: in Bangladesh the average score was 21.23 points; in Uganda it was 19.68 points; and in Ecuador, it was 18.5 points.

Deep-dive analysis

Sponsors' letters boost empowerment

Receiving letters from sponsors positively affects empowerment levels for adolescents in all three countries, according to the deep-dive analysis results. The suggestion is that receiving a letter from a sponsor could boost an adolescent's feeling of self-worth.

In Bangladesh, assigned adolescents who received letters from their sponsors reported slightly higher levels of empowerment – 1.7 points more – than those who did not receive letters. For Uganda, adolescents receiving letters were 0.90 points higher than those who did not receive letters. For Ecuador, those receiving letters were 0.74 points higher on the index than those who did not receive a letter. The qualitative findings offer more details on the effects associated with sponsors' letters.

There was no evidence to show that participation in Plan International programmes in Uganda or in Ecuador helped to boost empowerment levels. But in Bangladesh a difference was seen of 1.72 points more if participating in these programmes.

Adolescents living with a disability in sponsorship sites in Uganda reported feeling less empowered than adolescents without a disability. Neither Bangladesh nor Ecuador had differences on this that were statistically significant.

Sponsorship helps girls' and women's empowerment

Adolescent girls in sponsorship sites in Uganda reported feeling more empowered than boys did, scoring 1.64 points more on average on the empowerment index. This positive finding could stem from Plan International programming with a focus on female empowerment in the sites analysed. No quantitative gender differences were reported for Bangladesh or Ecuador.

Empowerment »

Girls in Uganda score
1.64 points
more than boys



19. The survey used the following empowerment index: an aggregate score of responses to seven questions using a four-point Likert scale (1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, 4-Strongly agree): (i) I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least equal with others; (ii) I feel that I have a number of good qualities; (iii) I feel I do not have much to be proud of (reverse coded); (iv) I am equal to my peers (e.g., sisters, friends, colleagues, etc.); (v) I take action when I think there is something wrong in school or the community; (vi) My parents listen to me when I see something wrong at home and tell them about it; (vii) I am an active member of at least one group or club in my local area or at school. Please reach out to research@plan-international.org for more information on the methodology or findings.

The qualitative interviews from all three countries offer a rich picture of ways in which girls and women are feeling more empowered through sponsorship.

Girls in Bangladesh described acquiring skills for decision-making, speaking and leadership, noting how this has changed their lives. Being sponsored empowered the girls to stay in school and avoid child, early and forced marriages, and subsequent early pregnancy – as Anika explains:

“If I didn’t get involved with the sponsorship programme of Plan, today I would have two children. They would have married me off a long time ago. They wouldn’t let me go to school much either. My family’s mentality wouldn’t have changed. They used to have the same mindset as those who marry off girls early. My life would have been completely different ... Thanks to Plan, positive things have happened. I have been able to pursue education because child marriage has stopped. I couldn’t speak before. Brothers used to come, and I used to sit behind rows. Now I can say a lot in front of people. Even if they asked my name, I couldn’t say it before, I felt embarrassed. Now this shyness is decreasing from what it was before.”

**Anika, female, 20,
Jurain Railway Colony,
Bangladesh, alum**

Women’s economic empowerment in Bangladesh is improving through Plan International investment in childcare facilities, which enables mothers to pursue their own livelihoods.

“My wife couldn’t go outside and work because of our baby but Plan has opened a daycare where we can take the child. Now she can do work outside without any worries ... We can fulfil our fundamental needs. We are solvent now.”

**Arif, male, 44, Dhaka
Match Colony, Bangladesh,
community leader**



A young woman sows barley seeds on farmland in Ecuador.

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Traditional norms and ways of thinking about women’s roles are changing in sponsorship sites in Ecuador.

“Thanks to Plan, we have been made aware that women also have the same value as men. Today there are already some women professionals, and women are also studying. On the other hand, before, from birth, little importance was given to women because it was said that women are only to have children and take care of animals, nothing more. They had no other importance. It was not believed that they could assume other things, that they had the capacity to assume leadership and authority as well. Now, that has changed.”

**Iker, male, 55, Pimbalo
Community, Ecuador,
community leader**

Sponsorship boosts empowerment through skills and letters

Gaining key skills for life thanks to sponsorship was mentioned by sponsored and formerly sponsored adolescents in all three countries in relation to empowerment. Developing the courage to take part in programmes and community activities, speaking up in front of others including family members, writing and analysis skills, and leading others were the main skillsets described.

“Speaking and leadership. Plan’s experiences helped me in my personal life, family life, and professional life as well.”

**Farah, female, 18, Dhaka Match
Colony, Bangladesh, alum**

“Before I didn’t know how to participate or speak. Now I speak and participate. In analysing and writing, I feel very proud to participate in things and I’m not afraid to participate in things when I grow up ... So, being part of Plan’s activities helps a lot because it takes away your fear of participating in social activities.”

**Alexis, male, age not given,
Pull Chico Community, Ecuador,
sponsored adolescent**

“Plan International would take us to radios to do some programmes which really benefited us with confidence as we grew up. I obtained leadership skills because after I finished school, I could mobilise people and tell them the benefits of Plan.”

**Dembe, female, 22,
Balawoli village, Uganda, alum**

Several of the qualitative interviews endorsed the quantitative findings that sponsors’ letters in particular can positively influence empowerment. Ugandan alumni spoke of how the letters incentivised them to do well to make their sponsors proud, and as a result, they raised their own expectations of life.

Adolescents in Bangladesh and Ecuador warmly described building a relationship with a sponsor who lives overseas and expresses interest in them through letters.

“The relationship was as sweet as a friendship is supposed to be. There was a mutual exchange, and he knew about me and my wellbeing, which made me feel really good that a friend from far away would inquire about me or want to know if something was bothering me ...”

**Anika, female, 20,
Jurain Railway Colony,
Bangladesh, alum**

Not receiving sponsors’ letters could be disempowering

Expecting to get a letter from a sponsor and then not receiving anything could be disempowering emotionally. In Uganda and Bangladesh, some adolescents said they had never received a letter despite taking the initiative to write. Some expressed disappointment, anger and envy at those who did have meaningful relationships with their sponsors.

“The interaction I had with him impacted my life because those words could encourage me when I was growing up and during my studies. My sponsor was happy because I used to love God so much, I did a theology course and bible study, and my sponsor was super proud of me.”

**Chris, male, 34, Kamuli
District, Uganda, alum**

“Most of my friends got letters from their sponsors but I never got any letter from my sponsor. As I did not get any letter from my sponsor, I had no feelings about the letters. I was upset. Once I sent a drawing of a landscape to my sponsor and I asked my sponsor how he/she was. I hoped that I would get a reply to my letter.”

**Hasan, male, 15, Dhaka Match Colony,
Bangladesh, sponsored adolescent**

Others in Uganda felt dismay at the abrupt stop to the letter-writing once the sponsorship formally ended. None of the alumni reported an ongoing relationship with a sponsor. The findings highlight the possibility that suddenly losing this valuable relationship – and any benefits that go with it – could have psychological effects for some sponsored adolescents.



Children play with building blocks at a refugee settlement in Uganda.
© Plan International



Child protection

Child-centred programming with community engagement is a guiding part of Plan International's approach to child protection, and distinguishes it from that of others. It places a strong emphasis on equipping children and adults with skills to recognise and respond to child protection issues, and to continuous monitoring and evaluation to maintain each intervention's effectiveness.

"I no longer hear from my sponsor ... I miss my sponsor so very much just like I was when still in the programme. The relationship with my sponsor was very important to me."

Nakimera, female, 17, Kamuli District, Uganda, alum

Key findings

- Adolescents in all three countries show high levels of awareness about how to protect themselves and report harm.
- Girls who receive sponsor letters are especially likely to know about the need to report harm to children and where to do so.
- Sponsors' letters and community-led approaches can work well to promote child protection.

Comparison site analysis

High awareness about child protection

Adolescent awareness about child protection was generally high in the three countries. Knowledge of child protection was explored in terms of whether adolescents understand that harm to children should be reported and whether they know where to do that.²⁰



95% of adolescents in Bangladesh sponsorship sites know harm should be reported



In Bangladesh, levels of awareness were higher in sponsorship sites than in comparison sites – although awareness was high in both places. In sponsorship sites, more than 95 per cent of adolescents agreed or strongly agreed that harm should be reported, compared to 91 per cent in the comparison site.

More than 91 per cent of adolescents in sponsorship communities stated that they knew where to report harm to children, compared to 82 per cent in the comparison site.

It is worth noting the context in the Bangladesh sponsorship communities that were analysed in the study. Schooling rates in those sites are lower compared to the comparison site. However, this does not appear to have affected adolescents' ability to acquire knowledge of child protection.

Differences between the sites were not statistically significant for Uganda or Ecuador. However, the mean scores for both countries were generally high, at around 3 points, (3.075 for Ecuador and 3.25 for Uganda).²¹

Deep-dive analysis

Sponsorship and girls' awareness of child protection

Various facets of sponsorship appeared to affect girls' awareness of child protection. Sponsors' letters are an important mechanism for promoting this awareness, according to analysis within sponsorship sites in the three countries. In two of the countries, girls particularly benefit from this mechanism.

20. Child protection awareness was measured in the quantitative surveys by asking adolescents if they agreed with two statements: (i) "If a child gets harmed, it should be reported"; and (ii) "If a child gets harmed, I would know where to report it". Responses were scored: 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, 4-Strongly agree.

21. Points in these scores relate to the responses scoring; see footnote 19.

Girls with sponsor letters in Uganda »

41% more likely
to know where to report harm than boys

Girls in sponsorship sites in Ecuador who receive sponsors' letters were 31 per cent more likely to know about harm and where to report it, compared to boys. Girls could be acquiring this knowledge through communication with sponsors, according to Plan International staff in Ecuador. Similarly in Uganda, girls who receive letters were 41 percentage points more likely to know where to report harm, compared to boys who get letters. Contrary to Ecuador and Uganda, there were no significant differences between girls and boys in Bangladesh.

However, testimony from the qualitative interview²² in Bangladesh revealed how girls are benefiting from child protection training provided by Plan International. Anika, a formerly sponsored adolescent, described protection benefits for girls thanks to changing family views of child marriage (see findings spotlight on child marriage). She also alluded to skills she had gained for her own protection through engagement in these activities.

"Before, I used to say 'yes' to everything. I would feel ashamed to say 'no'. We are taught what is good and what is not. Now I can say 'no'. I don't feel ashamed. Previously, I used to think how they would react if I said no. Now, I prioritise my own safety first."

Anika, female, 20,
Jurain Railway Colony,
Bangladesh, alum

On disability, some evidence pointed to adolescents with disabilities being more likely to know about the need to report harm and where to do so. In Bangladesh, they were more likely to agree with where to report harm, and in Uganda, with both statements. For adolescents with a disability in Ecuador, no significant differences were found on child protection.

Assigned adolescents in Bangladesh were more likely to agree (by 0.13 points) than non-assigned adolescents about the need to report harm. No significant differences were found between assigned and non-assigned adolescents in Uganda or in Ecuador.

Community-led awareness on child protection

The qualitative interviews highlighted two other channels through which local contexts are being strengthened in terms of child protection – training that families received through sponsorship and Plan International's wider involvement in services in communities.

Wider involvement in Uganda included engagement with law enforcement and support for schooling. Both have boosted protection and prospects for girls in the communities, according to an adolescent boy in Uganda.

"Mostly the biggest change Plan International has brought is that they have helped the girl child to be at school because if it wasn't for Plan International, some girls would've gotten pregnant earlier. But since Plan came in, they would teach girls to stay in schools and keep themselves which is a big change ... Right now, if you impregnate a young girl, Plan can work with Uganda police to arrest you because you are the one who is stopping the girl child from being in school."

Batte, male, 17, Nabwigulu,
Uganda, alum

Parents in Uganda noted that training on children's rights had made them better parents. "Since Plan came, it has taken the fog off our eyes and has taught us about children's rights, and also our responsibilities as parents" according to Martin, a (male) parent of a sponsored adolescent, 45, from the Kamuli District, Uganda.

These descriptions contrasted with some of the quantitative results for Uganda, which found no association between child protection awareness and participation in Plan International programmes. No association was reported for either Bangladesh or Ecuador.

22. In all the qualitative interviews, child protection was not explored via a specific question. The subject arose relatedly when interviewees discussed Plan International activities on empowerment, education and community-led training.



FINDINGS SPOTLIGHT:

Child marriage and teen pregnancy

Sponsorship activities are associated with preventing child, early and forced marriages and teenage pregnancy, according to the qualitative findings. These effects are chiefly mentioned in conjunction with responses about activities that support education and empowerment, and they intersect with findings on child protection.

In Bangladesh, Divya explains how supporting education affects a girl's life:

“Our life has changed due to Plan coming here. Previously, my elder sister couldn't study. My sister was married to someone when she was 12. My sisters were confined at home; they couldn't participate in any activities. On the other hand, I got all these services. Without Plan, I couldn't get all these services; like education and drawing. I would have gotten married early if they hadn't come to our community. But now, we can go to school, participate in drawing, go to picnics and participate in different events. Without them, that wouldn't be possible.”

**Divya, female, 18,
Jurain Railway Colony,
Bangladesh, alum**

Adolescents perceive the immediate protective function of being in school. An alum in Uganda described education as helping to keep them safe.

“My life safe as a teenager from engaging in unnecessary sexual activities when still young”

**Participant 16,
gender unspecified, 18,
Nabwigulu**

Abdul in Bangladesh explains the consequences of early marriage and parenthood for boys, in terms of poorer economic prospects:



A 19-year-old mother with her young daughter outside her home in Ecuador.

© Plan International

“My friend's condition was worse than mine. He is married now. He has a baby. I help them as much as I can. His life is worse than mine. He works as a labourer.”

Abdul, male, 18, Jurain Railway Colony, Bangladesh, alum

Community-wide Plan International efforts steer adolescents clear of early marriage and pregnancy.

“Plan used to really put in effort so that we don't get involved in certain things especially early marriages, and teenage pregnancies. If it was not for Plan, I would maybe be a dropout with many children.”

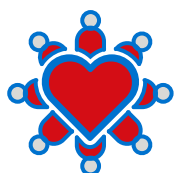
**Amaru, male, 28,
Kamuli District, Uganda, alum**

Working with families and households, bespoke activities help them to envisage different futures for girls – as Anika's testimony shows:

“We have learned from Plan and Plan has taught them. Now they understand a lot. Parents in our community, including my family, now understand the problems that arise from marrying girls at a young age ...

“I have been able to pursue education because child marriage has stopped.”

Anika, female, 20, Jurain Railway Colony, Bangladesh, alum



COMMUNITY RESULTS:

Trust and cohesion

Plan International's sponsorship programming contributes to building trust and cohesion within communities by fostering local engagement, empowering marginalised groups, promoting community-led development, and demonstrating accountability through transparent monitoring and evaluation. These programmes lay the foundation for sustainable change and collective prosperity.

Key findings

- Trust levels in sponsorship sites vary across the countries.
- Investments by Plan International in infrastructure and social spaces are helping to build social cohesion in communities.
- Positive community changes include addressing gender-based violence, increased collaboration and more initiative-taking.

Comparison site analysis

Mixed findings on trust levels

Among the three countries, Bangladesh had the clearest results on trust and cohesion. Sponsorship sites there had noticeably higher levels of trust and cohesion – scoring 16.5 versus 15.5 in comparison sites.²³ Plan International's long-term, community-led approach to development in these areas could explain this result.

Another long-term Plan International presence – in Ecuador – yielded a different result, however. People in sponsorship sites there were significantly less likely to agree with statements about trusting others in their community. The actual difference with comparison sites was small – a score of 3.98 in sponsorship sites versus 3.79 in comparison sites – which suggests that feelings on this were similar in all sites.



Young mothers take part in a community meeting in the Kamuli district in Uganda.

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Further analysis on Ecuador showed that people in those sponsorship sites are 10 per cent less likely to strongly agree with the statement that “people in the community can be trusted”. The finding is interesting in that it is strongly significant, but it is not considered causal. No difference was seen across sites in Uganda.

Changes to community attitudes improve cohesion

Notwithstanding the quantitative results on trust in Ecuador, people in sponsored communities spoke positively about Plan International efforts to educate local people on collaboration, mutuality and communalism, according to the qualitative findings.

“Just in doing things collaboratively ... that is how they have brought change ... So, by helping others, we learn. At least, how to live with our relatives and neighbours, how to manage our leadership roles, and how to treat the community members.”

Lucia, female, 39, location not provided, Ecuador, parent of sponsored adolescent

23. To measure trust and cohesion, the study used an aggregate score of responses to five questions using a five-point Likert scale (1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neither agree nor disagree, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly agree). The questions were: (i) People around here are willing to help their neighbours; (ii) This is a close-knit community; (iii) People in this community can be trusted; (iv) People in this community generally don't get along with each other (reverse coded); (v) People in the community do not share the same values (reverse coded). (RMIT used the scale found in Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W. and Earls, F. (1997). “Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy”. Science, 277(5328), 918-924.) Qualitative interviews asked about changes in the community since Plan International's involvement.

The parent of a sponsored adolescent in Ecuador described projects that teach children to treat others with respect, including girls and those with disabilities, and to avoid early pregnancy. The changes in social attitudes are helping social cohesion.

“The children have received workshops on pregnancy prevention. They have also been taught about gender equality, that there should be no discrimination among peers who are different, for example, because maybe the child cannot or does not walk ... or has some difficulty, that there should be no bullying between them ... All that has reflected a little more in their attitudes.”

Ana, female, 47,
Reten Ichubamba Parish Cebadas
Community, Ecuador, parent. of
sponsored adolescent

In Uganda, a community leader explained how *“sensitizing the communities and creating awareness on amicable settlement and resolution of disputes rather than resorting to violence”* was improving cohesion in communities and was helping to reduce gender-based violence against women (Elizabeth, female, 36, Kitayunjwa Parish, community leader).

Infrastructure investments “make life easier”

In all three countries, Plan International investment in local infrastructure was described as having “made life easier” in communities. Interviewees listed improved roads, electrification, schools, health centres, portable water systems, toilets – all of which are improving social cohesion. Early childhood development (ECD) centres were mentioned in Uganda as enabling women to earn a living, which is improving household incomes and wellbeing.

“... ECDs have relieved women of the burden of care and enabled them to engage in other activities including farming and other businesses.”

Elizabeth, female, 36,
Kitayunjwa Parish, Uganda,
community leader

In Bangladesh, a community leader noted how Plan International’s intervention was spurring people to take action. Formerly sponsored adolescents spoke with pride about joining community activities like tree-planting and waste management programmes.

“People now don’t sit idly, rather they now interact with different kinds of people. They are acquiring knowledge by listening to what Plan and other NGOs say.”

Aarna, female, 37,
Dhaka Match Colony, Bangladesh,
community leader



A young girl hands out leaflets containing flood awareness messages in Bangladesh.

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COMMUNITY RESULTS:

Multi-dimensional poverty

Plan International's approach to multi-dimensional poverty sets itself apart through a holistic focus on children's rights and gender equality. It recognises the intersection of poverty with education, healthcare and livelihoods, addressing these simultaneously and actively involving local people in decision-making. Its aim is to alleviate poverty while promoting long-term social justice and equality.

Key findings

- In Bangladesh poverty levels were higher in sponsorship sites than in the comparison site.
- Sponsorship programmes help to alleviate poverty in the three countries.
- Project-based training widens the opportunities to earn an income.

Comparison site analysis

Bangladesh sponsorship sites are poorer

For all three countries, multi-dimensional poverty was measured in sponsorship sites and comparison sites in terms of indicators such as levels of schooling, types of cooking fuel used and access to sanitation and clean water.

.....

In Bangladesh, sponsorship sites had a much higher poverty rate than the comparison site – 48 per cent compared to 29 per cent. Sponsorship communities had higher levels of deprivation in terms of school attendance (which is poorer), cooking fuel (use of wood) and sanitation (toilets are commonly shared) than the comparison site.

.....

In Ecuador, sponsorship sites reported similar poverty rates to the comparison site – 24 per cent compared to 23 per cent.

.....

Similarly, in Uganda, there were no statistically significant differences in multi-dimensional poverty between the site types – 77 per cent for sponsorship sites and 67 per cent for comparison sites.

.....

Interviewees on sponsorship and boosting incomes

Sponsorship programmes have improved families' incomes, according to people interviewed in all three countries. In some cases, this was via indirect financial assistance such as credits or, more rarely, sponsorship-related funding for education, which helped to free up family income for other purposes. In other situations, programmes enabled participants to gain income-generating skills.

In Bangladesh sponsorship sites have benefited from a continuous development approach whereby sponsored children's families receive credits for educational materials and nutritious food. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they received cash support to cope with the drop in incomes. Through these various means, families have been able to afford other costs such as medical care, clothing and accommodation.

“My family was running out of money, and I could not afford my daughter's education expenses. Now, this sponsorship has made my daughter's education easy. Now we do have good meals. The money that was spent on her education is now spent in other sectors of my family and also, we can save some money from this. As my daughter's education is being continued by this sponsorship, I can invest this money for further income in other sectors and I can increase my property and buy agricultural land.”

**Fatima, female, 45,
Dhaka Match Colony, Bangladesh,
parent of sponsored adolescent**

Ugandan interviewees explained how sponsorship funding frees up household income for other needs. Many people in the communities rely on farming, so Plan International ran projects and training on animal farming and provided households with animals to get started.

Similarly in Ecuador, adolescents and families spoke of learning crafts for personal use or for income. Households were taught fish farming and animal farming, including guinea pig, cattle and sheep rearing. Families received animals to establish their farming work. Revenue from these activities

“Due to Plan’s workshops, community members including myself were able to learn about piggery farming and this has motivated most of us to do piggery farming as a business, and I am benefiting from it since it’s one of the projects I do.”

**Samuel, male, 38, Kamuli District, Uganda,
parent of sponsored adolescent**



A farmer from a rural community
in Uganda walks through his crop field.

©Plan International



FINDINGS SPOTLIGHT:

Rural and urban development outcomes

Key findings

- The impact of location type on development outcomes for sponsored children varies depending on the indicators and methodologies.
- Nuanced differences seen in the impact of sponsorship programmes on developmental outcomes may go beyond an urban–rural divide.
- Other factors may be more important in determining sponsored children’s outcomes than their geographic context.

How the impact of sponsorship differs in rural locations relative to urban ones was another aspect considered in the research. Due to limitations on where primary data could be gathered, it was only possible to observe contrasts between location types – rural and peri-urban – for Uganda. The research using secondary data sources provided more rural–urban comparisons. Using the Plan International child sponsorship database, findings on sponsored children in sponsorship sites were accessed in urban and rural locations in Uganda and Bangladesh, for the period between 2008 and 2022.

Overview of the secondary data comparisons

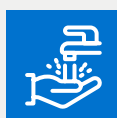
Bangladesh



Education » School attendance has been rising for the last eight years, and the urban–rural gap has significantly narrowed. Rural secondary school attendance has almost reached 100 per cent, whereas urban has only reached 84 per cent.



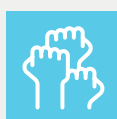
Health » The gap in child illness rates across rural and urban areas significantly narrowed over time. By 2011 child illness in both areas had trended downwards to around 5 per cent for both locations.



Access to safe water » There has been almost universal access to safe water for sponsored children in urban and rural areas since 2015.



Sanitation » In 2008, a considerable gap existed in sponsored children’s access to sanitation, with rural areas reporting 90 per cent access but urban areas reporting just 20 per cent. By 2014, parity was reached at 90 per cent. Most recently, both locations have reported 99 per cent access.



Empowerment » Levels have been and still are slightly higher in rural areas relative to urban areas.

Overview of the secondary data comparisons (continued)

Uganda



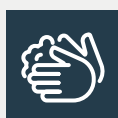
Education » Since 2008, primary and secondary school attendance has been almost universal for sponsored children in urban and rural areas. However, between 2012 and 2017, the gap between locations increased, with rural areas seeing a considerable decline in attendance. More recently, rural areas have seen higher attendance of secondary school than urban areas.



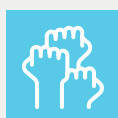
Health » Illnesses reported by sponsored children in urban areas have decreased steadily from 20 per cent in 2008 to 5 per cent in 2022. Sponsored children in rural areas saw a sharp increase in reported illnesses from 2 per cent in 2010 to 82 per cent in 2014, declining to 20 per cent by 2022.



Access to safe water » Rural children's access to safe water fell from 90 per cent in 2008 to 25 per cent in 2022. In urban areas, the trend also declined from 80 per cent to 35 per cent in 2022.



Sanitation » Access to safe sanitation has been declining with a large gap between rural and urban areas. Rural access rates fell from 80 per cent in 2008 to 18 per cent in 2022, while urban rates fell from 64 to 50 per cent.



Empowerment » Levels were higher for children in urban areas (21 per cent) than in rural areas (20 per cent) between 2018 and 2022.

Generally, rural areas in Bangladesh seem to be doing better than urban areas. In contrast, Uganda faces persistent challenges in rural areas, with ongoing disparities in empowerment, health and sanitation outcomes.



One of the young women taking part
in a project to produce barley flour (Ecuador).
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Conclusions



A smiling girl with her hygiene kit from Plan International (Bangladesh).

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This study has made a valuable contribution to Plan International's drive to understand more fully the effects of child sponsorship on development outcomes for both children and their communities. It has also brought Plan International nearer to determining future ways to measure these effects.

Sponsorship and outcomes: the picture in more detail

Going some way to answer the key research question, the study found that Plan International's sponsorship programmes and interventions have succeeded in improving development outcomes for children and communities. There is variation across the three countries. But the impact of sponsorship could be seen in these ways:

- **Participation in sponsorship programmes** – whether as an assigned adolescent, a non-assigned adolescent, a household, or a community member – contributes to better development outcomes. Education, health, child protection and poverty are areas that have improved through Plan International programmes.
- **Sponsors' letters** clearly benefit the assigned adolescents who receive and exchange them in terms of their development outcomes. This is notable in education, health, empowerment and child protection outcomes.
- **Sponsorship-related investment and indirect financial assistance** – whether community- or household-level – work directly and indirectly to improve health and education outcomes, as well as to ease poverty. Infrastructure investment included better sanitation and clean water, health-related facilities, school rebuilding. Households are helped via assistance for education, which frees up family incomes for other basic needs, or via income-generating programmes and support.
- **Narrowing the gender gap on outcomes** through sponsorship interventions. This is seen in improving outcomes for girls in education, health particularly menstrual health management, child protection notably prevention of child, early and forced marriages, and empowerment, including women's economic empowerment.



Young mothers at a community meeting
in the Kamuli district (Uganda).
©Plan International

Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed by Plan International's staff after reviewing those offered by the researchers from RMIT. These offer practical changes within the development sector and within Plan International, with the view to enhance further the impact of sponsorship interventions.

Considering these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the impact of sponsorship programmes across the development sector. The recommendations are offered to all organisations involved in this type of programming.

Inclusion

Child sponsorship approaches and models across the sector should be based on principles of inclusivity and should be mindful of the intersectional needs of children in all their diversity, including but not limited to gender, disability, ethnicity and age.

Plan International action point »

Improve outcomes for sponsored children with a **disability** through efforts to build staff capacity and data visibility of sponsored children with disabilities. Continue efforts to roll out **anti-racist and anti-colonial** principles and approaches across the organisation as part of the Next Gen Sponsorship initiative.



A 16-year old who has been able to stay in school for longer than her sister due to Plan International's sponsorship programme (Bangladesh).

©Plan International

Next Gen Sponsorship

Sponsorship lies at the heart of Plan International – it's a key component of how we reach and impact girls and young people. As the world continues to change, it is clear we need to reframe how we think about and implement our sponsorship work, so that we can be in the best possible position to achieve our ambition to reach 200 million girls.

Next Gen Sponsorship was launched in 2024 to revitalise Plan's sponsorship by keeping the best of what we have and building and expanding on it to appeal to new sponsors in new ways. Modernising our sponsorship model will help us explore new avenues for fundraising, make frontline work more efficient, and create more impact for girls and young people worldwide.

Education

Sponsorship organisations should increase advocacy for government support for children's education and financing for gender transformative education, as well as efforts to improve girls' health education, especially in relation to menstrual health and nutrition.

Plan International action point »

Work closely with programme and influencing units to improve government partnerships on **education** and explore ways of addressing menstrual health and nutrition education in programmes.

Sustainability

Organisations should focus on making sponsorship and programming approaches more sustainable, including strengthening partnerships with local governments and communities to reduce community reliance on child sponsorship programmes.

Plan International action point »

Increase efforts to ensure **sustainability** of sponsorship programming through strengthening coordination with local governments as well as alignment with Plan's Global Policy on Programme Influencing Quality.

Research

Child sponsorship organisations should continue to assess the impact of child sponsorship programmes on developmental outcomes, and explore the option of a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) to prove the causal impact of child sponsorship on key development outcomes.

Plan International action point »

Continue the **learning journey** as part of the Changing Lives Sponsorship Research Series to demonstrate impact and improve outcomes for children and their communities.

A 21-year-old is one of the first indigenous woman to study architecture at her university in Ecuador.

©Plan International



Country-specific recommendations

Bangladesh

In general, getting more adolescents to attend school should be encouraged, particularly in areas where no aid organisations are present.

Organisations should support families to continue their children's education after sponsorship ends.

Community-led approaches that are part of sponsorship programmes should focus on local partnerships.

Ecuador

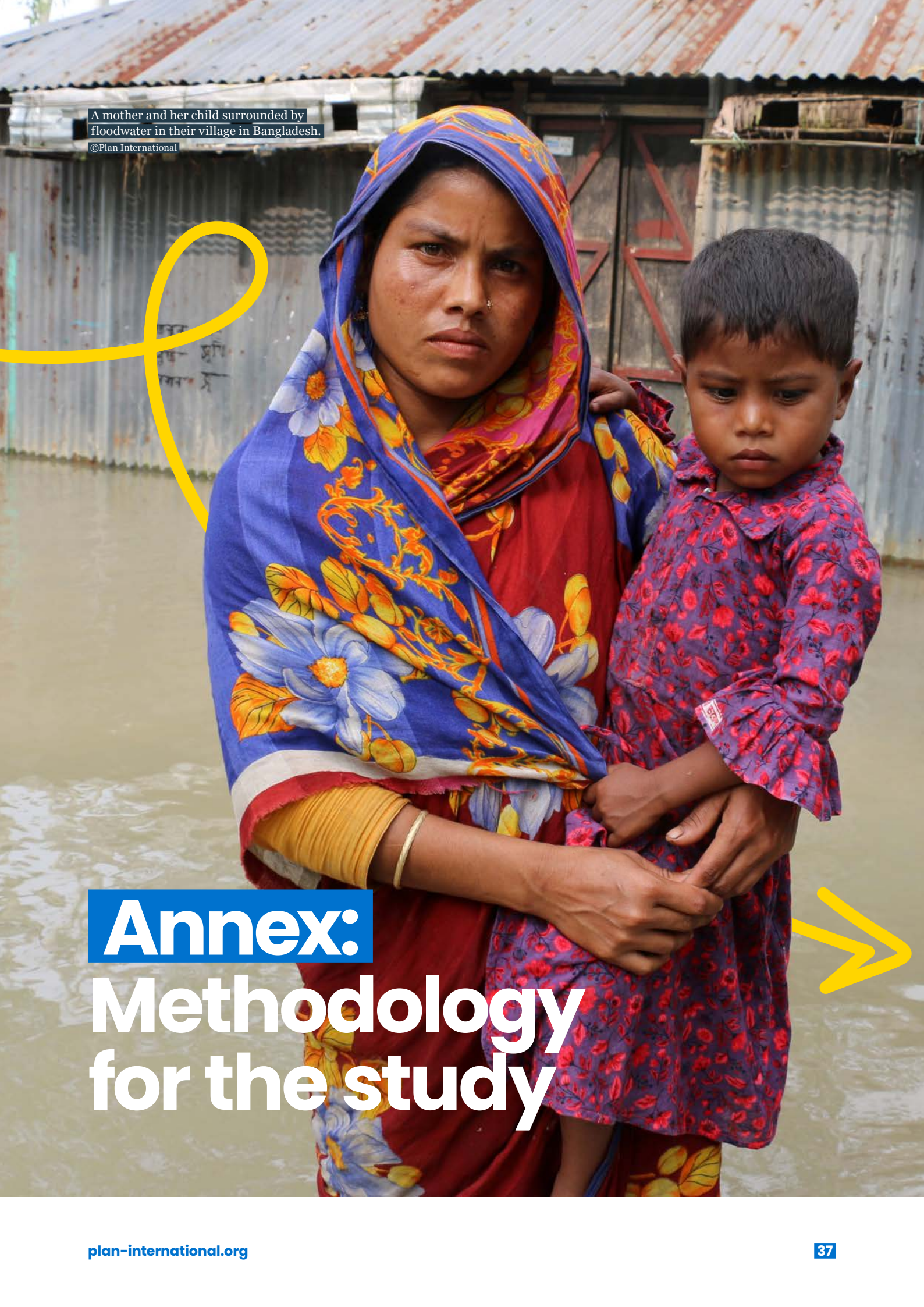
Interventions should be developed that work on children's understanding of harm and of where to report harm, with a focus on how different genders are affected.

Programmes should increase interventions that build trust and cohesion within communities.

Uganda

Programmes should include interventions that enhance opportunities for sponsored children and their families to become self-reliant (such as training to farm animals).

Interventions should promote empowerment among sponsored children and should facilitate their active participation in community development initiatives.



A mother and her child surrounded by floodwater in their village in Bangladesh.
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Annex: Methodology for the study

Plan International has been exploring the best ways to understand the influence of the child sponsorship model on development outcomes for a number of years. This study is part of that broader endeavour. It was commissioned in June 2022 and ended in 2023.

The study builds on the 2019 *Changing Lives* report which presented findings from a quantitative study of the Plan International child sponsorship global database. Recommendations and conclusions arising from the 2019 report have helped to shape the remit for this study, particularly its focus on adolescent outcomes and improved methodology.

Where the 2019 *Changing Lives* report took a broad look at sponsorship data for 50 countries where Plan International operates, this study uses a country-level analysis to deepen the understanding of sponsorship influence.

Three focus countries were selected: Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda, according to certain criteria:

- The countries span different continents – Asia, South America, Africa – and differ in terms of geography, income levels, religion and gender equality.
- Plan International staff in the country were willing and able to assist the research.
- The safety of any staff involved in collecting data could be assured.
- Sites and structures arising from Plan International interventions could be geo-located.
- Plan International programming in the countries is long-standing and comprehensive.
- Credible comparison sites could be located close to the Plan International sites and share similar characteristics.
- Secondary data on the countries (from Plan International's sponsorship database and nationally representative household surveys) was easily available.

Research components of the study

The study has three components that sequentially have helped to establish optimal ways to pursue research into the impact of sponsorship on children's development outcomes.

Snapshot analysis

The Plan International child sponsorship global database was used to determine which countries have enough data to allow subsequent country-level research. This entailed conducting a "snapshot" analysis of the sponsorship database, to give an overview of the numbers of sponsored girls and boys in the three focus countries, as well as key development indicators related to the sponsored children. These indicators included school attendance; access to improved water and sanitation; birth registrations; and illness in the past 12 months. The data was disaggregated by gender, age and year. The analysis also considered data on the effects of COVID-19 on sponsored children around the world.

Secondary data analyses

The second component of the research involved looking at secondary data sources to assess development outcomes associated with Plan International's interventions in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda.

Two approaches were used:

First approach: an analysis of Plan International's global sponsorship data, focusing on development outcomes for children who are assigned to a sponsor and those who are not yet assigned a sponsor. It examines various development indicators (school attendance, health status, water and sanitation access, and empowerment) at country and project unit levels. It considers trends over time and disaggregates by age, gender, location (rural/urban), and by being assigned or non-assigned.

Second approach: a comparative analysis of average development outcomes of individuals and households in areas where Plan International is active with those in areas where it is absent. Secondary data sources are used to investigate if development outcomes differ for the following groups: children and households within a community where Plan International works versus children and households in comparable communities; boys and girls; urban and rural locations. Sources for longitudinal data are: the International Food Policy Research Institute's Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS), Ecuadorian Census data (1962–2010), and the Uganda National Panel Survey (UNPS, 2009/10–2018/2019).

Primary data gathering and analysis

The third component was primary data gathered from adolescents,²⁴ parents and carers, and community leaders in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda, using a mixed methods approach. The aim was to compare outcomes in communities where Plan International is active (“sponsorship sites”) with similar communities where it is absent (“comparison sites”), for each country. The primary data analysis then drills down within sponsorship sites in each country to find out more about the ways in which aspects of sponsorship may influence development outcomes for different adolescents. It also considers potential community-wide effects.

Quantitative data: survey analyses

Quantitative primary data was collected in the three countries through surveys for adolescents and parents/carers. For each country, approximately 400 surveys were conducted in sponsorship sites and a further 200 in comparison sites. Households and adolescents were selected at random using maps of the communities provided by local Plan International staff. The surveys of adolescents explored enrolment in school, regular school attendance, self-reported health, child protection knowledge and empowerment – using question-based scoring indexes. The household surveys covered community cohesion and trust, and poverty, using a multi-dimensional poverty index.

The quantitative method uses two standard types of tests:

- **t-tests** to compare average differences – this was used to compare outcomes in communities where Plan International is active with those where it is absent;
- **regression analysis** to compare averages between groups taking into account factors that may also influence those averages – this was used to look at differences in outcomes between adolescents living within sponsorship sites. Influencing factors considered were gender, participation in Plan International programmes, being assigned a sponsor, and receiving sponsor communications.

The analyses produce results that may be either **statistically significant or not statistically significant**. Statistical significance is when the researcher is certain of the direction of a relationship between the variables analysed.



A secondary school student in Uganda likes to read books from the school library.
©Plan International

Statistically significant results can be reported, interpreted and discussed. When the relationship between variables is not statistically significant, these results are not interpreted as they could reflect the effects of other variables involved or arise due to the lack of large enough samples.

Qualitative data: interviews with participants

A total of 145 participants were interviewed in sponsorship sites across the three countries. Community leaders, parents, assigned and non-assigned adolescents as well as formerly sponsored adolescents who are now adult (“alumni”) were all interviewed.²⁵

Interview participants were all from sponsorship sites and were a different group from the quantitative survey participants. The interview questions explored aspects of schooling, health, personal ambitions, community and family circumstances. The qualitative approach also aimed to generate insights on three lines of inquiry:

- Does child sponsorship have a lasting impact on the lives of sponsored children?
- How do formerly sponsored children perceive child sponsorship as being meaningful to them?
- What (if any) role did their sponsor play in their lives?

The qualitative interviews are the source for all the quotations presented here. No real names are used to protect interviewees’ identities.

24. Ethical considerations meant that only adolescents (aged 12 to 17) participated in the primary data research. Younger children were considered in the secondary data component.

25. Note: it was not possible to find alumni in the Ecuadorian communities.



Limitations to the research findings

Secondary data analyses

This type of analyses had a key limitation in that the national databases did not allow for a fair comparison to be made across the groups. Nor did the data available sufficiently capture insights and nuances regarding Plan International's work in the communities.

Primary data analyses

The study established treatment and control groups by comparing outcomes in sponsorship sites with those in comparison sites. But the data was only collected at sites once and no observations were made before Plan International's intervention in each case.

Differences between groups compared were kept to a minimum as far as possible, but groups could not be described as identical. Plan International's activities therefore cannot be assumed to be the sole cause of any significant changes observed. The findings are therefore interpreted as correlations rather than causal effects.

Future studies

The most reliable way to determine the effectiveness of Plan International's activities would be a randomised controlled trial (RCT). In an RCT, participants in a treatment group are observed before and after an intervention, then compared to similar participants in a control group where no intervention occurs. The findings from this study will be contribute to Plan's constant evolution to make sure sponsorship is fit for the modern world.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all current and former sponsored children and their families for their participation in the annual interviews, without which this research would not have been feasible. Sincere thanks are also due to the Plan International staff and volunteers who conducted interviews, as well as collected supplementary questionnaire data, further enriching the study.

Special thanks to Plan International Germany and Plan International's Urban Hub for their financial support, which was a crucial contribution to the successful completion of this research.

Thanks to the authors of the full research study: at RMIT, Professor Simon Feeny, Professor Alberto Posso, and Dr Sefa Awaworyi Churchill; to Samuelson Appau, Associate Professor of Marketing at the Melbourne Business School; and at Plan International, to Dr Karin Diaconu and Dr Martha Lucia Borrás Guevara.

This condensed sponsorship study report has been written by Anna Brown, summarising findings from the series of three study components.

Dr Karin Diaconu and Dr Martha Lucia Borrás Guevara, in their roles as Research Managers at Plan International Global Hub, managed the study, with support from Dr Lucia Rost (Head of Research at Plan International Global Hub), Dr Jacqueline Gallinetti (Director of MERL at Plan International Global Hub), and Isobel Fergus (Senior Research Manager).

Appreciation is due to Plan International colleagues who offered feedback and input for the condensed sponsorship study report: Frank Schaettiger – Sponsorship Manager, Plan International Germany; Danny Plunkett – Head of Content and Creative, Plan International Global Hub; Magdalena Bastidas – Sponsorship Director; Kathleen Sherwin – Chief Strategy and Engagement Officer; Jennifer Delgado – Sponsorship Development Project Manager; Ming Viado – Head of Sponsorship Operations; Dana Kabbani – Head of Marketing, Plan International Germany; Louise Meincke – Global lead for the Urban Hub; Marianne Sondergaard – Head of Sponsorship Product Development; Carla Jones – Director of Communications; Morten Lynge – Head of Urban and Impact Documentation Research; Damien Queally – Director of Global Programme & Operations; and Juliana Pierossi – Global Portfolio Director, Child Sponsorship Revitalization.

Further thanks to everyone in the Country Offices in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Uganda who were involved directly in this project.

Plan International Ecuador: Gladys Rivera – Programs Unit Manager, Marcos Nunez – Sponsorship National Leader, and Patricio Tobar – Monitoring and Evaluation Manager.

Plan International Uganda: Judith Nakanda – Sponsorship Manager.

Plan International Bangladesh: Nova Schams – Head of Sponsorship Communications, Tariq Ul Hassan Khan – Head of MERL and Programmes.



Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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