

# **Effectiveness of providing foster children in Gambia with cell phones as a reporting and feedback mechanism**

**Successes, challenges and recommendations.**

**Save the Children Spain  
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# INTRODUCTION AND FRAMEWORK

Since 2020, Save the Children has been involved in the implementation of the project "*Improving the protection of migrant children and youth in the main migration routes of West Africa*" (PROTEJEM). The PROTEJEM project is financed by the European Union's Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and implemented by Save the Children and Terre des Hommes in Senegal, The Gambia, Ivory Coast and Guinea with a duration of 36 months from 15 January 2020 to 14 January 2023.

The regional study on the profiles of children and youth on the move conducted in 2021 in the framework of the PROTEJEM project<sup>1</sup> with the support of the African Bureau of Studies on the Rights of Children (BADE) reveals that The Gambia is a source, transit, and destination country for child trafficking for sexual purposes, as well as for labour exploitation. It also highlights that a significant number of children and youth on the move are boys who have attended Koranic schools and girls who attempt to escape gender-based violence, including child marriage. Moreover, the study concluded that the number of care services and institutions in The Gambia that could address the needs of children and youth on the move wherever they are is extremely limited and under-resourced. In most cases, the care services are provided informally in the communities and the identified children and/or youth on the move are often handed over to the police. In addition, access to food and housing services also pose significant challenges.

Host families are presented as a solution for the temporary placement of children and youth on the move while a solution for their reintegration in their families and communities of origin is being sought. The PROTEJEM project team has developed together with the Gambian Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare the country's first alternative care protocol which stipulates the care conditions the children and youth on the move in foster care will receive. This protocol is based on a series of key principles such as non-discrimination, confidentiality, responsibility and transparency. The protocol also relies on promoting a meaningful and safe participation of the child at every stage of the care process.

Following the development of the protocol, a thorough assessment of the selected foster families was conducted with the cooperation of the Department of Social Welfare, and the members of the Community Child Protection Committees. The police forces also carried out background checks of the families. Subsequently, the families were registered with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare, that formally recognises them as host families and also monitors them.

Since the beginning, the PROTEJEM project has offered direct assistance to 234 children and youth on the move in The Gambia. 76 of these children and youth were placed in host families and later reintegrated with their families in The Gambia and/or neighbouring countries.

In order to guarantee that children and youth are protected and safeguarded by temporary host families living in the country within the framework of the project, an information and feedback mechanism was developed. It consists of a set of proceedings and tools which were formally established so that the following actions are possible:

1. Request and listen to, collate and analyse complaints and feedback from children and youth in foster care;
2. Request and listen to, collate and analyse feedback and complaints from members of the community in which Save the Children works, about their experience with the intervention implemented by Save the Children and its partners;
3. Request and listen to, collate and analyse feedback and complaints from partners about their experience of working with Save the Children;
4. Trigger actions, have a say in decision-making at the appropriate level of the organisation and/or issue a referral to other stakeholders, if necessary and relevant.

The use of cell phones by children and youth on the move placed in foster families has been one of the tools provided for risk management, in combination with interviews held during monitoring activities, which also include on-the-spot checks as well as suggestion boxes. The phones allowed children and youth on the move to have access to the following:

- An instantaneous channel of communication (with no intermediaries) the with Save the Children team.
- The possibility of remote communication with children and youth on the move, especially during the health crisis and the different waves of COVID-19;
- The possibility of text messaging, which contributes to the transmission of key messages encouraging behavioural changes.

Various features allowed for more efficient communication:

- Case classification based on the contents of the reports.
- Quick responses to concerns raised.
- Service hours were established in which the children and youth on the move could raise their concerns, etc.. They were known by the CYM.
- Anticipate changes in reporting trends and profiles of reported cases.

The various risks involved in using cell phones this way have been identified, as well as the corresponding mitigation measures (Annex I).

Save the Children has developed this learning agenda in order to assess the use of cell phones as an information and feedback mechanisms and determine whether it is effective and secure.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology applied was mainly qualitative. It was based on the implementation of a discussion focus group with children and youth on the move staying in foster homes, as well as on the interviews with the Save the Children team involved in this project and with the host families.

The children and youth on the move focus group was divided into two sub-groups, the first of which had a total of ten participants (five boys and five girls). Each group consisted of both in and out of schoolchildren and a boy and a youth on the move. In the second group there were six children, four of which were boys and two were girls, aged between 12 and 17.

Additionally, two caregivers, members of host families, were interviewed twice. Two people from The Save the Children team was also interviewed on two different moments, namely the project officer in Senegal and a field worker in the North Bank.

In order to analyse the data gathered, a methodology with an advanced text analysis was applied that defines what main feelings were present in the responses of the children and youth on the move focus groups and in the caregivers' interviews. In the analysis of the emotions present in the responses, the most relevant words were classified into eight categories, corresponding to the main feelings. Thus, the importance of these feelings was determined in accordance with the number of words associated to each category.

The categories can be found in detail in Annex II - Tools (children and youth on the move focus groups and interviews with host families and the team).

## RESULTS

Shown below are the main achievements and successes obtained using cell phones as an information and feedback mechanism for children and youth on the move in foster families. They are sorted by the interlocutors involved: Save the Children team, host families and children and youth on the move.

<p><b>Save the Children team</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The use of cell phones by children and youth on the move placed in foster families ensures that the children's rights are not infringed. Should any issue with the foster family arise, the children and youth may make a direct call to the team. The team then submits comments and recommendations to the host family, which in turn generates greater protection and better attention for the children and youth placed at their care. The team also analyses the calls, observing the children's behaviour, attitude, and well-being, and then drafts reports in order to prevent any problems affecting the children and youth on the move and to ensure they are being protected. It must be noted that the children and youth on the move can immediately change foster family if a problem is detected.</li> <li>✓ This tool leads to an increased participation of the children and youth on the move in their own protection, which helps in raising awareness on the importance of protecting their rights. In fact, when children and youth on the move call the project team, they share their own experiences and the relationship they have with their host family. At the same time, the project team takes the opportunity to explain them their rights and the principles of child protection.</li> <li>✓ The advantage of children and youth on the move using a cell phone is that they can inform whenever they feel they are in danger or need help. So, the main strength of the project lies in the fact that it is easier to make a call and be assisted urgently in cases of abuse. The cell phone also allows them to stay in contact with their family.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Caregiver s/Host families</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The caregivers use the cell phone to speak with the project team and to report any problem affecting the children under their care. In addition, the cell phones are used as entertainment for the children as well as a channel to keep them in touch with their parents. For that matter, cell phones help connect children and youth on the move (CYM) with their family of origin and friends. This strengthens the communications between host families, children and youth on the move placed under their care and the project team, giving to the children a sense of stability and security.</li> <li>✓ The main strength of using cell phones lies in the fact that it establishes contact between the host families and the Child-Friendly Space located in Farafenni, where there are social workers, who help monitoring the CYM. Moreover, the social workers of the Child-Friendly Space in Farafenni visit the host families in order to ensure that children and youth on the move are well and live in a safe environment.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Children and youth on the move</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Children and youth on the move are comfortable using the cell phone as a means to report any problem and to communicate with their families. It must be taken into consideration that cell phones allow children to speak with the project team at any time, as well as with their families.</li> <li>✓ What children and youth on the move like the most about using their phones is to listen to music, to dance and talk with their families and friends,</li> </ul>

	<p>which helps them feeling closer to them. They also mention as a positive aspect the possibility to play and listen to music and to the radio. Another positive aspect is that they are simple and user-friendly.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Credit is used as a means to connect the children and youth on the move to their families and friends. The phone is also used to talk with other host families and to support members of organizations such as CEDAG, in order to arrange and monitor reunification with their family of origin. They also communicate with the PROTEJEM team to inform on the status of those children and youth on the move who were reunited.</li> <li>✓ It is worth noting that the communications with CEDAG make it easier to start the reunification process with the families of origin. This is arranged with the support of CEDAG and the Department of Social Affairs of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare, who are tasked with finding the child and/or youth's biological family so that they can establish communication and, if possible, have the biological parents visit the host family.</li> </ul>
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This is followed by an analysis of emotions, from which the main emotions conveyed in the responses from the children and youth on the move's focus group and the interviews with host families and Save the Children team are explored.

### Analysis of emotions, Children and youth on the move focus group

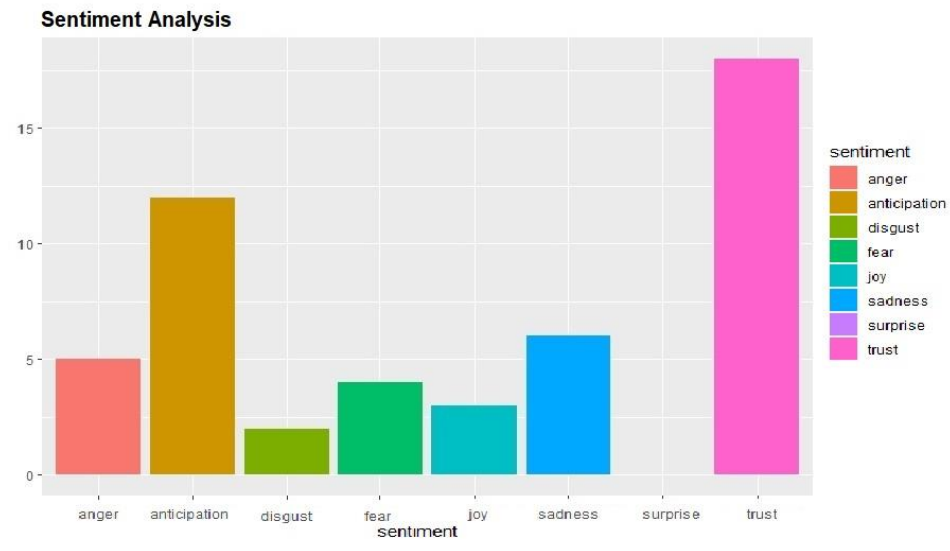


Figure 1: Analysis of emotions in the children and youth on the move focus group

As can be observed in this chart, trust is the most prevalent emotion, which shows a sense of confidence among the focus group members regarding the project.

Other relevant emotions are anger, anticipation or expectation, fear and sadness. Negative feelings associated with the children's vulnerable situation are therefore in display.

## Analysis of emotions, Interviews with host families

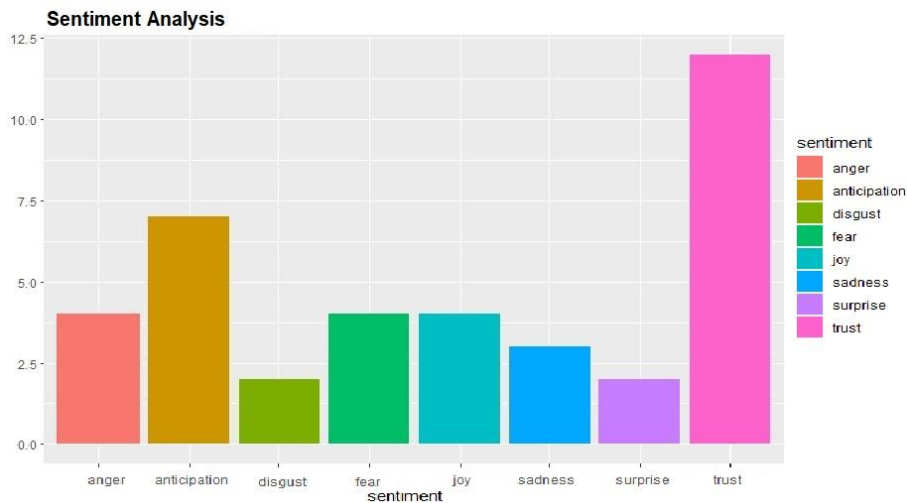


Figure 2: Analysis of emotions in caregivers' responses

The results obtained for the caregivers' responses are similar to those of the children.

The main emotion is still trust, which is observed alongside other prevalent negative emotions such as anger, fear or sadness. However, in this case, the feeling of joy has a prominent relevance that wasn't present in the previous group.

Therefore, the following conclusion can be drawn: There is an important level of confidence placed in the project, but there is a widespread concern about the vulnerable situation of children and youth on the move along the West African routes.

## Analysis of emotions, Interviews with SC Gambia team

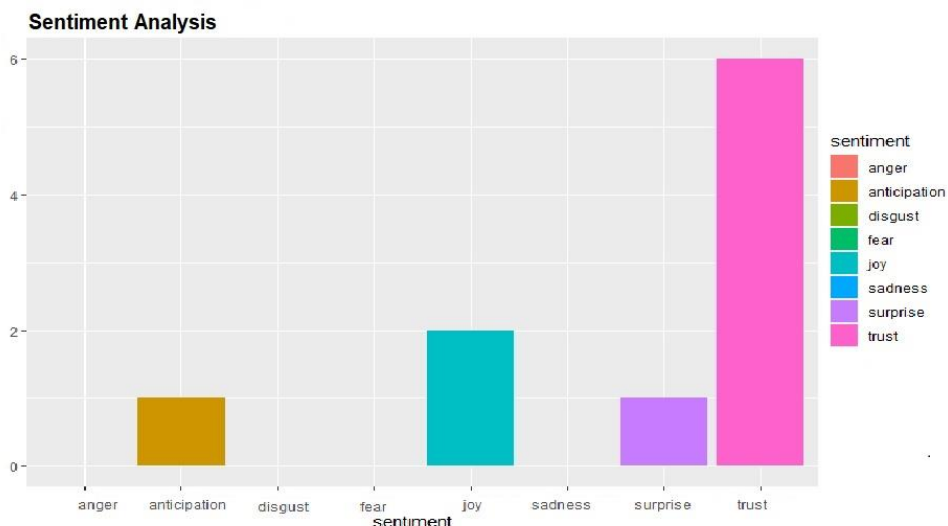


Figure 3: Analysis of emotions of the Save the Children team

In the case of the Save the Children team, the outcome is quite different. It can be observed that trust prevails, followed by happiness and to a lesser extent by anticipation and surprise. However, the rest of

emotions do not appear on the chart. The Save the Children team is therefore clearly confident about the project and its development.

## CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

The obstacles and challenges in providing cell phones to children and youth on the move in foster families can be detailed in three sections:

- ❖ Confidentiality and truthfulness of information provided:
  - ✓ There are situations in which the confidentiality of children and youth on the move calling may be compromised, like when they wish to report something when foster family members are around. Some may be shy and do not feel comfortable making calls from their foster homes.
  - ✓ There have been cases where children and youth on the move use the phone to report false information or to invent stories. This is because when they arrive at their foster homes, they are afraid that they will be returned home. In consequence, they do not provide the correct information thinking this will help them to be able to stay.
  
- ❖ Appropriate use of the phone:
  - ✓ Some of the children and youth on the move just want to listen to music instead of calling their families of origin. This is mainly because there are no problems to report. There have also been cases they have been unable to contact their biological family, which prompts them to listen to music and play with the other children. However, it is also clear that they are aware that the phone should be mainly used to report problems.
  - ✓ Another challenge was that the children and youth on the move have to carry their cell phones at all times and this distracts them from other activities such as housework in their foster homes. Therefore, it is advised that the host families keep an eye on the use of the phone, but making it clear that they can use them at any time they want.
  
- ❖ Credit for cell phone use:
  - ✓ Credits are not sufficient because children and youth on the move come from other countries and international calls are more expensive, which limits the calls
  - ✓ It has also been noted that the reporting process takes time, so there is a challenge to have enough credit to complete it.
  - ✓ Finally, credit is most of the time not enough for them to report and to connect them with their families of origin. They would like to have longer conversations with their parents and are sometimes offended when they are asked to hang up. Increasing the credit has been discussed, but since the host families use sometimes the phones for their personal use, it has been decided to keep providing the established minimum credit and explaining to the children that they have a limited time to talk to their families and friends.

## Overall conclusions

Strengths	Weaknesses
Cell phones are simple, so the children and youth on the move do not find it difficult to use them.	The credit is not enough for the children and youth on the move to talk to their families of origin, friends and the organisations/entities in charge of them.
The host families help the children and youth on the move use their phones and make calls. <b>Moreover, the host families appeared to be more careful in treating the child and/or youth to avoid possible reports.</b>	The children and youth on the move's confidentiality may be compromised when reporting abuse, as other family members may be listening in.
Staying connected with their family of origin and friends gives them a sense of security.	Inappropriate use of the cell phones. For example, some just want to listen to music instead of calling their families of origin or participating in activities at their foster homes.
Children and youth on the move may use the phones whenever they feel at risk or in distress.	Host families making personal use of the phones and credit provided.

## Good practices

The following good practices have been identified:

- **Monitoring by the project team:** The contact numbers the children and youth on the move have called are checked directly when a follow-up is conducted. Cell phones are periodically monitored to verify the numbers that have been called, in order to ensure the children's safety and to avoid that the phones are being used by other family members. In addition, the contact numbers of the Save the Children team, the Child-Friendly Space of Farafenni and CEDAG (West Africa Network for Child Protection Agency) are included. The Save the Children team also assists the children and youth on the move in locating the numbers and calling the people they want to speak with.
- Regarding the methodology of cell phone use in foster homes, it has to be noted that foster parents teach the children and youth on the move how to use it and what they should not do with it. When they arrive at the foster home, the foster parents inform them that they are allowed to use the cell phones and show how to use them and how they work. They are also told that they can call whenever they want to talk about anything that might worry them. The Save the Children team asks the host family to give the children and youth on the move the cell phone whenever they need it and to provide them a safe space where they can talk freely. The cell phone can be used up to thirty-five times a week, approximately five times a day and for a maximum of ten minutes per call.
- **Credit for cell phone use:** The Save the Children team gives the children and youth on the move credit when this is used up and helps them locate and call the contacts they wish to speak with.
- Lastly, regarding access to inappropriate information via phone, it has been agreed that not allowing smartphones constitutes a good practice in order to prevent children and youth on the move from accessing information and content that is unsuitable for them.



## Recommendations

- Children and youth on the move need to be allowed to interact more with cell phones and be able to access them at any time, as they are not always with their caregivers. However, it is also important to monitor the time they spend on their cell phones so that they do not miss their assigned family activities and homework.
- Constant monitoring by the Save the Children team and by the foster families is necessary so that they feel confident about having a cell phone and are aware that it can help them should any problem arise.
- Children and youth on the move, as well as the host families, should be thoroughly aware that the cell phone may not be used to report false or invented stories.
- Cell phones should incorporate educational games and applications for children and youth on the move to enhance their learning skills and knowledge.
- Finally, it is recommended that credit for cell phone use could be increased if appropriate so that they can talk to their families more frequently and for a longer time.

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### ANNEXES

#### I. - Focus groups questionnaires and interviews.

<b>FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS: CHILDREN</b>
<i>Dates of FGD (including month/year):</i>
<i>Place:</i>
<i>Total number of participants:</i>
<i>Total number of boys:</i>
<i>Total number of girls:</i>
<i>Any other relevant information</i>

#### I. General experience of equipping children with cell phones in foster homes.

- Can you explain how do you use the cell phone in your foster home?
- For what activities have you used the cell phone? Can you detail these different activities?
- Of all these activities, do you have any difficulties when you use the cell phone?
  - If so, which ones and why?
- What was your favorite activity for using a cell phone and why?
- How many times per week did you use the cell phone?
  - How long each time?

- What were the principal's barriers you faced?
- In general, how was the experience?
- What did you like and don't like about using a cell phone? Can you give us **three positive** points and three negative points?
- Did you have any difficulties or limitations using the cell phone in your foster home? What were these difficulties?
- What could be improved in the use of cell phones in foster homes? Can you explain?

**2. Specific questions of the experience.**

- How did the host family help you to use the cell phone? Can you explain?
- How did the project staff help you to use the cell phone?
  - Was this support sufficient?
  - If not, how could it have been improved?
- Do you think there was enough support from the project team to the host family during the process of using the cell phone?
- What do you think of using a cell phone as a communication and feedback channel with the project staff?
  - Did you encounter any challenges?
  - If so, which ones?
- What do you think about reporting through the cell phone?
  - Did you encounter any challenges?
  - If so, which ones?
- How did you use the cell phone credit provided by the project?
  - Was the credit enough to communicate and to report with the staff?
  - If not, explain please.
- Do you have any other question for us? Or any recommendation?

**Interviews Foster Homes**

Country:

Municipality:

Date of Interview:

Respondent Name:

**Respondent Job Title:**

No	Question	Answer
1	General thoughts about the practice of using cell phones in foster homes.	
2	What do you find helpful in the practice of the use of cell phones?	
3	Briefly, mention strengths of the experience of using cell phones in foster homes.	
4	Weaknesses and challenges of the experience of using cell phones in foster homes.	

5	The most challenging things about the methodology of using cell phones by children.	
6	Recommendations and suggestions on how to improve the process of using cell phones by children in foster homes.	
7	Are there any differences between the difficulties faced by girls and boys using cell phones?	
8	Changes brought about by using cell phones in children. Please detail children's skills acquired, overall attitude during the experience and overall well-being.	
9	Could you please detail what are the positive and negative impacts of using cell phones by children?	
10	Include any information you consider relevant	

### Interviews SC Staff

Region:

Country Office:

Date of Interview:

Respondent Name:

Respondent Job Title

No	Question	Answer
1	What is your vision of using cell phones by children at foster homes?	
2		

	What do you consider were the main positive results and impacts of using cell phones for feedback and reporting by children?	
3	Briefly, mention strengths of the experience of using cell phones in foster homes.	
4	Weaknesses and challenges of the experience of using cell phones in foster homes.	
5	Mention the methodology of using cell phones. Briefly mention what you think that worked and what did not work in relation to using cell phones for reporting and feedback from children.	
6	Suggestions on how to improve the process of using cell phones by children in foster homes. Details in terms of impact	
7	How did you monitor the use of the cell phones?	
8	What was the role of mothers and fathers in the host families during the process of using cell phones?	
9	Could you please detail what are the positive and negative impacts of using cell phones by children?	
10	Include any relevant information you consider relevant.	

