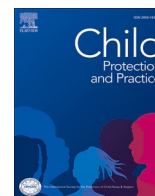




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Co-designing programmes to address child exploitation

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the co-design process employed by Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL) in developing three thematic programmes to address child exploitation for its Listen Up! Strategy (2023–2030). It highlights the integration of diverse knowledge sources, including insights from existing research, children, staff, local partners, and experts, to create effective thematic programmes targeting sexual exploitation, child labour, and exploitation in humanitarian settings. This process begins with a situational analysis, reviewing the literature to establish a global understanding of child exploitation, its prevalence, and effective interventions. After this stage, co-creation sessions were held with 138 children across 12 countries. In these sessions, children engaged with word cloud exercises, storytelling, problem tree analysis, and intervention evaluation. These exercises were also used on co-creation sessions with 166 staff and partners in 14 countries, adding on a stakeholder and power analysis. The culmination of the information gathered was an integration workshop where draft Theories of Change were developed. The paper demonstrates how participatory methods were used to gather insights and shape interventions. This process emphasizes the value of combining academic research with the lived experiences of those directly affected by exploitation, revealing key factors that are often overlooked in conventional research. By documenting and sharing this process, TdH NL provides a framework for future initiatives, ensuring that thematic programs are relevant, comprehensive, and rooted in the realities of affected communities. The article underscores the importance of ongoing collaboration with all stakeholders to develop context-specific strategies for preventing and responding to child exploitation.

1. Introduction

In the field of child exploitation, creating effective thematic programmes requires integrating diverse forms of knowledge, including academic research and expertise as well as insights from children and staff working directly with children. Child exploitation is a complex and multifaceted issue, encompassing various forms, including child labour, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and child marriage (UNICEF, 2022). While academic research provides valuable insights into these issues, it often lacks the depth required to address specific, context-dependent factors (WHO, 2020). Moreover, traditional academic research methods do not always ensure a child's right to be heard on matters affecting them (CRC; UN, 1989). When creating Theories of Change, there is a general effort to involve diverse stakeholders (UNDG, 2017). However, this usually involves staff and experts only (Ghate, 2018). In particular, children, and specifically those who have experienced exploitation or abuse, are sometimes viewed as difficult to engage. For Terre des Hommes, a true co-creation process must involve actors beyond staff and experts, bringing the voices of children and their caregivers into the process.

To address these challenges, TdH NL (TdH NL) has developed three thematic programmes—Sexual Exploitation of Children (SEC), Child

Labour (CL), and Child Exploitation in Humanitarian Contexts (HA: humanitarian action)—to drive systemic change and prevent and respond to child exploitation (TdH NL, 2023). The creation of these programmes involved a co-creation strategy, engaging children, staff and partners in a collaborative process. This approach ensures that programmes are informed by both academic understanding and the lived experiences of those most affected by the problems we aim to respond to and prevent. By integrating diverse knowledge sources, TdH NL aligns with the growing recognition that effective interventions must be based on local realities rather than relying solely on generalised, top-down solutions (Bovarnick et al., 2018).

This article will outline the entire process of designing our thematic programmes, but will place most emphasis on the co-design aspects. By documenting our process, we hope to offer concrete examples of how to engage in co-design processes and child participation in future initiatives. We believe that in the design of TdH NL's thematic programmes, gathering insights from children involved in our projects, local partners who work directly with affected communities, and experts with specialised knowledge allowed for a more holistic understanding of the problem.

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2. Situational analyses

To start, we conducted a comprehensive literature review to establish a global baseline understanding of child exploitation. This review aimed to answer three key questions: what is the current understanding of the nature of child exploitation, including its manifestations, root causes, and risk factors; what evidence exists regarding the prevalence of child exploitation globally; and what interventions have shown promising results in addressing the needs of children affected by exploitation. A total of 720 studies were analysed and critically appraised, covering research on SEC, CL and HA. The findings reinforced the understanding that child exploitation is deeply connected to structural inequalities, economic hardship and harmful social norms. Across all three themes, systemic vulnerabilities such as poverty, gender inequality, displacement, weak legal frameworks and lack of access to education were identified as key risk factors. The review also highlighted the phenomenon of polyvictimization, showing that many children experience multiple forms of exploitation simultaneously, which further compounds their vulnerabilities.

The analysis of prevalence data revealed significant regional disparities. SEC was found to be particularly widespread in Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Latin America, with commercial sexual exploitation, online child sexual abuse, and child trafficking being the most frequently studied topics. CL was most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, with hazardous work, mining, and agriculture emerging as the most common sectors where children were exploited. Data on child exploitation in humanitarian settings was extremely limited, although existing studies highlighted that conflict and displacement significantly increase the risk of child labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation.

The review of interventions found that multi-sectoral approaches combining legal frameworks, social protection measures, community-based interventions and child-centred programming were the most effective. For SEC, survivor-mentor programmes and psychoeducational interventions showed strong positive effects, reducing the likelihood of children re-entering exploitative situations. In CL, economic interventions such as cash transfers had demonstrable success in reducing child labour and increasing school attendance. For HA, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programmes for displaced children and survivors of armed conflict showed promising results, although very few interventions were rigorously evaluated for their effectiveness.

Despite these insights, the literature review revealed critical gaps in research and understanding. The vast majority of studies focused on SEC, with significantly fewer on CL and a severe lack of research on child exploitation in humanitarian settings. Inconsistencies in definitions, measurement methodologies, and sample populations made it difficult to compare prevalence rates across regions. Most prevalence studies were conducted in high-income countries, leaving substantial data gaps in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific Islands, and parts of the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, many studies overlooked the exploitation of boys, LGBTQ + children, and children with disabilities, reflecting broader socio-cultural biases in how vulnerability is perceived and addressed. These findings formed the basis of our understanding of existing published information on child exploitation, and importantly highlighted the need for more inclusive, context-specific research and interventions.

3. National Co-creation sessions with children

The second part of our thematic design process was to capture the voices of children, in our countries of operation. Between August and November 2023, 11 co-creation sessions were conducted by our country offices and local partners in 12 countries. In total, 138 children and young people participated in the sessions (85 girls, 51 boys, and 2 gender diverse) between the ages of 11 and 22. Facilitators, staff from the country officers, engaged children that were or had been involved in



Fig. 1. Word Cloud exercise in the children's session in Madagascar.

one of TdH NL's programmes. The goal was to answer these guiding questions: What does this form of exploitation look like in each context? What are the reasons (root causes) that children in each context might experience this form of exploitation? What types of interventions/activities have been done in the past and should be done in the future to prevent and respond to this form of exploitation?

To facilitate discussions while ensuring a safe space where children did not have to disclose personal experiences, we employed four interactive exercises:

1. A word cloud activity, where children wrote down or drew words/images associated with exploitation.
2. A storytelling exercise in which participants created an avatar at risk of exploitation and developed a narrative around their experiences.
3. A problem tree analysis, where children identified the root causes, consequences, and pathways of exploitation through visual representation.
4. An intervention analysis of existing and potential interventions to combat child exploitation.

The following sections provide a deeper exploration of these exercises and the key findings that emerged from them.

3.1. Word cloud

To introduce the topic and set the stage for discussions, we began each session with a word cloud exercise. Participants were first asked: *What comes to mind when you hear the word “exploitation”?* This activity provided insights into how children define exploitation within their local contexts. The results confirmed that children’s definitions were largely consistent across countries and aligned with existing research. Fig. 1 shows an example of a word cloud in Madagascar.

Following this, facilitators encouraged children to discuss the most prevalent forms of exploitation in their surroundings. A striking finding was that in every country, children identified multiple forms of exploitation, highlighting their interconnected nature and global prevalence. While TdH NL categorises issues such as child labour and sexual exploitation into thematic programs, these findings reinforced that exploitation rarely exists in isolation. Instead, different forms of exploitation intersect and co-exist within the same communities, which means that any direct programme activities require holistic and integrated responses.

Another key insight was that child marriage and trafficking frequently emerged in discussions as forms of exploitation. However, an interesting debate arose among participants regarding whether

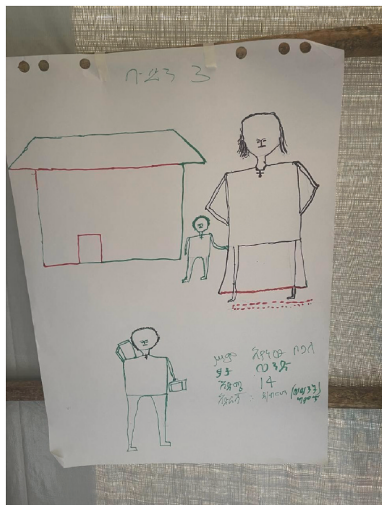


Fig. 2. Illustration of an avatar created by children in an IDP camp in Ethiopia.

trafficking should be considered a form of exploitation itself or a *pathway* to exploitation. This discussion also sparked an internal reflection within TdH NL, prompting efforts to refine the organization’s stance on when and how child marriage constitutes exploitation within different programmatic frameworks (TdH NL, 2024).

Lastly, as intersectionality is a core principle of TdH NL, it is important to know who are the children most at risk of exploitation in each context, so we can understand why they are particularly vulnerable and how we can support them. When asked what characteristics make a child at risk of exploitation, children shared individual factors (e.g., gender, having a disability, being shy, etc.), family and interpersonal factors (e.g., low socio-economic status, limited parental support) and geographical factors (e.g., living in rural or disaster-prone areas). In Uganda and Madagascar, there were interesting discussions about whether boys or girls were more at risk of exploitation. In these discussions, children shared that they think both boys and girls are exploited differently in their context. This debate emphasizes that taking an intersectional lens is not about ‘vulnerabilising’ girls or others but

being aware of how gender and other identities shape the experience of exploitation. In most cases, both boys and girls are exploited, but its causes and manifestations might be different.

3.2. Storytelling

In the second exercise, children were divided into groups and asked to create a story for an avatar (character) who was at risk of exploitation. These stories allowed us to understand how exploitation manifests in each context. For example, a group of children at an internally displaced persons' (IDP) camp in Ethiopia developed this story: *"Ayenew is a 14-year-old boy who lives in an IDP camp. He lives with his mother, his father died when he was very young and his mother doesn't have income to buy food and other necessities. They have not been receiving sufficient food aid and other necessities. Ayenew works as a porter to support his mother and himself, he doesn't go to school."* Fig. 2 shows the children's drawings of Ayenew.

Using storytelling to talk to children about difficult topics such as exploitation proved to be a powerful tool as it allowed them to reflect

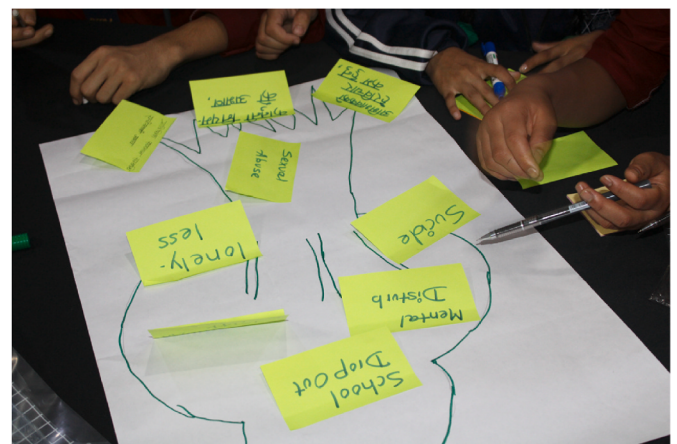


Fig. 4. Problem tree analysis of the children's session in Nepal focusing on sexual exploitation.



Fig. 3. Illustrations by children to depict child exploitation in their contexts.

and share their views on how exploitation manifests in their context without having to share any personal information. Ayenew's story shows how the lack of basic necessities in humanitarian contexts forces children to engage in exploitative work to support themselves and their families (see Fig. 3). Fig. 4 shows a compilation of other avatars created by children.

3.3. Problem tree analysis

In the third exercise, children conducted a problem tree analysis. Children drew a tree where the roots represented the underlying causes of exploitation, the trunk the primary form of exploitation and the branches the consequences of exploitation. By engaging in this visual exercise, children provided critical insights into the interconnected nature of exploitation, illustrating how different factors reinforce each other and create pathways to vulnerability. Below are some programme-specific findings.

3.3.1. Sexual Exploitation of Children (SEC)

Children from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, Thailand and Laos identified several overlapping causes of sexual exploitation:

- Individual causes: Lack of access to education, disability, loneliness, irresponsible internet use, and substance abuse.
- Family and interpersonal causes: Negative peer influence, lack of positive parenting, poverty, family breakdown, and low awareness.
- Systemic causes: Weak legal frameworks, inadequate law enforcement, absence of safe environments, and harmful gender norms.

Children emphasised how family relationships play a crucial role in shaping vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation. They described a chain reaction where family dysfunction leads to neglect, school dropout, economic hardship, and ultimately, exposure to exploitation:

"These root causes are breeding grounds and highways to vulnerability and risk factors. Family dysfunctions lead to neglect, which leads to school dropout, illiteracy, engagement in harmful cultural practices, economic hardships, and substance abuse—all exposing children to exploitation." – Kenya

A recurring theme was the lack of nurturing relationships within families, which affected children's ability to select safe friendships and identify harmful situations:

"Insufficient nurturing relationships within the family contribute to a lack of awareness in selecting friends. Children may struggle to distinguish between healthy and harmful relationships, increasing their risk of exploitation." – Bangladesh

3.3.2. Child Labour

Children from India, Madagascar and Uganda highlighted poverty as a key driver of child labour, reinforcing the well-established link between economic hardship and exploitation. They also identified:

- Individual causes: Psychological trauma and lack of access to education/training.
- Family and interpersonal causes: Poverty, family separation (due to death or migration), lack of positive parenting, and negative peer influence.
- Systemic causes: Gender norms, absence of safe environments, and failures in legal and policy enforcement.

Children in Madagascar highlighted the direct impact of environmental changes on child labour:

"Poverty is linked to the lack of rain, which prevents families from farming. This forces children out of school and into work." – Madagascar

Children also discussed how the absence of a caring parent can have far-reaching consequences, leading to neglect and further exploitation.

"Death of parents, especially mothers, can lead to child maltreatment by stepmothers or neglect by fathers under the influence of new partners. This often drives children into bad peer groups and exploitative situations." – Uganda

3.3.3. Exploitation in humanitarian contexts

Children from Ethiopia, the Philippines and Moldova linked child exploitation to conflict, displacement, and inadequate humanitarian aid. They identified:

- Individual causes: Mental health issues and substance abuse.
- Family and interpersonal causes: Poverty, family separation, and lack of positive parenting.
- Systemic causes: Lack of access to basic services (education, food, healthcare), weak social protection systems, and political instability.

A major concern raised by children in Ethiopia was the lack of humanitarian support for displaced families, which forced children to engage in exploitative labour or risky migration.

"The lack of food aid and support for families in camps makes children vulnerable to different forms of exploitation. The absence of recreational activities and vocational training pushes adolescents into illegal migration." – Ethiopia

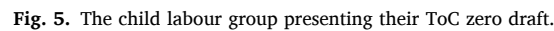
3.3.4. Interconnected causes of exploitation

Across all contexts, children identified strong interlinkages between different risk factors. They emphasised that no single cause operates in isolation—rather, vulnerabilities compound over time. These findings reinforce the need for integrated responses that address multiple vulnerabilities simultaneously. Tackling child exploitation requires not only direct interventions—such as access to education and economic support for families—but also broader systemic changes that create safe environments for children. By understanding the root causes, pathways, and intersections of exploitation, TdH NL and its partners can design more effective and child-centred strategies to prevent and respond to exploitation in different contexts.

3.4. Interventions

The final exercise focused on interventions, where children were asked about their experiences with child protection programs and their ideas on what could be done to prevent and respond to exploitation. Their responses were categorized into nine key clusters:

- Changing norms and values: Awareness-raising initiatives targeting children, parents, and community members to increase understanding of child protection risks and solutions.
- Response and support services for victims: Access to psychosocial support, alternative care, legal assistance, rescue operations, and education for children affected by exploitation.
- Education and life skills: Expanding access to education, improving school curricula, and providing vocational training to reduce children's vulnerability to exploitation.
- Improving the legal and political system: Strengthening reporting mechanisms, advocating for better child protection policies at local and national levels, and building the capacity of law enforcement and government actors.
- Parent and caregiver support: Training programs on positive parenting to help caregivers better support and protect children.
- Children at the centre: Establishing children's rights clubs, peer-to-peer support networks, and child-led advocacy initiatives to empower children to take an active role in their own protection.



- This design process was thoughtfully planned to triangulate multiple forms of data. In particular, the co-creation sessions with children, staff and partners provided valuable contributions to the development of more effective and contextually relevant strategies to combat child exploitation. These sessions deepened our understanding of exploitation by offering insights that were often overlooked in existing literature, particularly in how exploitation manifests in various contexts. Throughout the process, we emphasised transparency and collaboration, integrating the perspectives of various stakeholders—children, local partners and technical experts—into a cohesive strategy. This approach allowed us to design programmes informed by both academic research and the lived experience of those directly affected by exploitation or those working with children and families touched by it. The use of

participatory methods, such as storytelling and problem tree analyses, ensured that children were able to share their insights in a safe and supportive environment, further highlighting the importance of child-friendly practices in programme design.

By documenting and sharing this process, we aimed to offer concrete examples for future initiatives that seek to combine diverse knowledge sources in designing thematic programmes to address child exploitation. As the co-designed thematic programmes are now put into practice, outcomes are yet to be fully determined, but the experience reaffirms the need for continued engagement with all stakeholders. Moving forward, Terre des Hommes Netherlands will continue to refine its programmes, ensuring that the voices of children, staff and partners remain central to the design and implementation of interventions aimed at preventing child exploitation.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Isabella Lanza Turner: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hilde Neels:** Supervision, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Yulidsa Bedoya Zúñiga:** Writing – review & editing. **Jean Elphick:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kimberley Anderson:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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