

# Impact Case Study

## Changing lives: An analysis of Plan International's child sponsorship data

### Introduction and background

Tackling global poverty through child sponsorship has been a humanitarian aid strategy since Save the Children was created in 1920. Since then, approaches to child sponsorship have responded to changes in understanding of community development needs. To this end, analysis of child sponsorship data to review its effectiveness and develop more effective strategies is an important tool.

Plan International is one of the world's largest development and humanitarian organisations, working in over 50 countries for children's rights and gender equality. In order to be more effective, Plan International wanted to expand on its previous studies into the influence of child sponsorship.

The RMIT research team, led by Simon Feeny, Alberto Posso and Sefa Awaworyi Churchill, and including Gill Westhorp (Charles Darwin University), responded to Plan International's tender request to undertake a new analysis on the impact of its child sponsorship model.

The team reviewed a dataset of 12 million surveys taken among 2.7 million sponsored children over a ten year period. Their analysis allowed for the study of different groups of children, including comparisons on girls and boys, children living with a disability, and children in rural/urban settings and conflict-affected countries.

Plan International's aims were:

1. To create reliable, objective evidence on the influence of its sponsorship model on development outcomes for sponsored children and communities
2. To fill a gap in a field where rigorous empirical research on the influence of child sponsorship is scarce
3. To test the relevance of its sponsorship-related work to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and highlight gaps in its approach
4. To use its significant sets of child sponsorship data to inform and track its work, and to ensure accountability to sponsored children and communities, and the wider development sector.

### Funding and institutional support

Plan International provided funding and its dataset for the analysis. The research was supported with time from RMIT's School of Economics, Finance and Marketing.

Before the draft report was finalised, the findings were discussed in an RMIT economics seminar in August 2019, and drafts sent to Plan International for comment. The feedback received was applied to the final report.

### Project outcomes

The project findings were published in late 2019 in the Changing Lives: An Analysis of Child Sponsorship Data report. The Plan International launch of the report – which has been distributed globally – identified the positive outcomes for children in sponsorship programs, including:

- Girls and boys are more likely to go to school in communities where Plan International runs sponsorship programs
- In conflict situations, sponsorship helps to keep children in school
- The earlier sponsorship starts, the longer a child will stay in school
- Sponsored girls and boys are more likely to have their birth registered
- Birth registration helps protect girls from child marriage and trafficking and gives children better access to education, health services and legal protection
- Sponsorship improves communities' access to water and the longer Plan International works in a community, the better the access to water and sanitation.

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What's next...

Recommendations included:

- Using its child sponsorship datasets more fully to inform its programs.
- Collecting data on non-sponsored children to provide a fuller picture of the impacts of sponsorship.
- Providing/enhancing programmes aimed at vulnerable teenagers to ensure that wellbeing outcomes are sustained as children transition into adulthood
- Reviewing its letter-writing and gift policies
- Prioritising children with a disability as sponsorship participants, as this group is under-represented in the sponsorship sample.

The report can be downloaded at:

<https://www.plan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Changing-Lives.pdf>

A further research paper using the child sponsorship data analysis is being prepared by the research team and will be submitted to a journal in 2022.

## Overview of the impact

Plan International used the Changing Lives: An Analysis of Child Sponsorship Data report to publicly respond to the research team's recommendations.

*"While some of the findings demonstrate that our sponsorship model has contributed to improved development outcomes, we acknowledge that we are not always as successful as we aim to be. Therefore, we must also use those findings that highlight gaps and shortcomings as a catalyst to inform how we take action to improve our work for all sponsored children, and especially for girls."*

Further research has been delayed due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, which has restricted in-country research. However, Dr Jacqueline Gallinetti, Plan International's Director of Monitoring Evaluation Research & Learning, reports that changes are already being implemented across Plan International's 75+ offices worldwide.

Plan International has reviewed and revised the organisation's Sponsorship Commitments: these have been expanded to become global commitments and country management teams are now responsible for implementing them.

Plan International has also aligned its Sponsorship Promise with the global strategy and the theory of change. Part of the Promise is that the sponsorship data used for the study will inform program development and influence interventions.

The Sponsorship Promise is being further revised to incorporate case studies and feedback from sponsored children that highlight their development. This work is based on the study's findings to underpin and elaborate on the sponsorship promises.

A Global Sponsorship Value Proposition has also been developed, informed by the study, as a Global Sponsorship Vision.

Plan International is also planning to develop a new child data system to ensure it meets its data analysis needs. Five new empowerment questions have been added to the regular questionnaire Plan International uses to evaluate its work in the field while the new system is being developed. Once the new system is deployed, the current questionnaire will be revised.

Plan International is also developing new flagship models, to integrate both sponsorship and community programmes and focus more on adolescents.

## Next steps

The research team continues their strong track record of work in the field of child wellbeing and an additional report using this research is due for journal submission in 2022.