

# CHILD VOICE

SPRING/SUMMER 2023

## AGENTS OF CHANGE

Youth in Paraguay help to identify danger

### In search of excellence

Children Believe setting high standards for its work around the world

### Overcoming heartbreak

Young woman rebuilds her life amidst violent conflict



**Children Believe**  
childrenbelieve.ca

PM 40065713

# Youth overcoming conflict



Ⓜ Vladik (12) is sometimes forced to do his homework in his kitchen under emergency lighting during blackouts in Vyshgorod. Canadian donations to Children Believe, a member of the ChildFund Alliance, ensures his family receives support for education, food and warm clothing.

## *Children's rights and safety need to be a top priority*

**"During the day there is no electricity for 15 hours, it is dark and cold. It has become almost impossible for us to attend school online," confides David, 11, who was forced from his home in Ukraine.**

David's story is all too familiar as the devastating Ukraine war entered its second year on Feb. 24.

There has been a terrible toll, particularly on children: more than 14 million have been forced from their homes. Thousands of homes and buildings have been destroyed, and according to UNICEF, the education of more than five-million children has been disrupted.

The Ukraine war is a highly publicized example of a much larger, global crisis of children living in conflict zones. Indeed, about 450 million children worldwide – or one-in-six – live in conflict-affected areas. War puts children at risk of violence and exploitation, limits their access to education and impacts their futures. Children living in conflict not only face the immediate threat of violence but also serious human-rights violations like child marriage and child labour.

In other parts of the world, like Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, conflict affects children, such as Efrata. Forced from her home, she then lost her brothers due to the conflict in northern Ethiopia. You will read more about her on page 8 of this edition of ChildVoice. She has received academic and psychosocial support from Children Believe and has re-enrolled in Grade 8.

Children Believe places the highest emphasis on child protection and we believe education not only enables children to reach their full potential, it saves lives. In this edition, you will learn more about this by reading about the incredible Centres of Excellence our teams are implementing in each country where we work.

Thank you for your support so we can continue this important work. All children have the right to be protected and to a safe, inclusive, quality education so that they can dream fearlessly.

Sincerely,



*Fred Witteveen is  
Children Believe's  
chief executive officer.  
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Cover: Jeremias is a Lilac Agent, a member of a youth club in Paraguay dedicated to protecting children against violence and abuse.  
Photo: Juan Lezcano Heynd

# CHILDVOICE

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## OUR VISION

We dream of a world where every child has a voice and the ability to achieve their full potential.

## OUR MISSION

Children Believe creates a future of hope for children, families and communities by helping them develop the skills and resources to overcome poverty and injustice. For 60+ years, we have followed the example of Christ by serving the poor regardless of their faith, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

## OUR VALUES

Across our work, we aim to uphold the values of results, respect, integrity, teamwork and excellence.

Member of  
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## ACCESSIBILITY

We seek to recognize and remove the obstacles faced by persons with disabilities. All communications are available in alternative formats upon request.



# New water source brings wave of change

Access to clean water creating positive ripple effect for women and girls in Ghana

Ⓐ Sibri washes her hands in the new clean water source in her village.

By Melanie Zetazate, Manager, Philanthropy

**T**hey say water is life, and a new water source has had a huge impact on the lives of people in Sukaya, a small community in northern Ghana. Where mothers and daughters once had to walk 8 km carrying heavy containers in the hot sun TWICE every morning and often again at night, they now have abundant, clean water virtually at their doorstep.

It can be hard for many Canadians to imagine a lack of available water for bathing, cleaning and consumption – we use an average of 411 litres of water every day! But the difference between having water virtually at your doorstep instead of hours away is truly game-changing.

Children Believe recognized the repercussions of the situation in Sukaya, which lacked access to basic Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities. And in collaboration with a local partner agency, Markaz, and with the input of community leaders, Children Believe developed a plan to bring clean water to Sukaya. Although the project only reached completion earlier this year, the impact has been immediate, with a renewed sense of hope in the community.

## Thirsty for change

Sparing people from up to six hours a day collecting water has widespread ripple effects, particularly for the women and girls who do most of the heavy lifting to meet the basic needs of their families. In Ghana, where a woman's share of household labour was triple that of men, reducing their workload has gone a long way towards addressing chronic gender inequality.

Time creates opportunities. Instead of those back-breaking hours spent collecting water, girls in Sukaya now have the time and energy to go to school. Attendance at the primary school has shot up to 100 percent in a community that had been plagued by high rates of school absenteeism, tardiness, and even a lack of enrollment. Improved health is another obvious benefit with educational implications. Clean drinking water reduces

### Domestic water use in Canada

10% Drinking and preparing meals

25% Cleaning (including laundry)

30% Toilet flushing

35% Bathing

the risks of contracting and transmitting the diseases that keep children out of school.

"[The borehole has] reduced the tiredness we felt when we had to carry water for such long distances," shares Hannah, a student of the Sukaya primary school.

When students can dedicate themselves to their studies, academic performance improves, and children stay in school longer. This formula protects their lives and their futures on both sides of the equation. Girls forced to travel long distances collecting water face the threat of harassment and sexual assaults. And girls who stay in school past Grade 8 face far fewer risks of teenage pregnancy, child marriage and gender-based violence.

### Project particulars

The Sukaya WASH project broke ground late last year when a borehole with three fetching points was constructed. Two became available in the community, plus another at the primary school, which addressed a significant barrier girls faced to attend school. Among other improvements was the construction of gender-separate latrines and handwashing facilities to improve student hygiene at the primary school.

"We used to have to line up and wait before we could relieve ourselves, but now, with these new toilets, we can rush in without waiting," shares Jennifer, an excited 10-year-old pupil at Sukaya's primary school. "And there's even water to wash our hands after we're done!"

### Wider ripple effects

With the generous support of donors, Children Believe was able to expand the original project scope to provide the primary school with desks to seat children who previously

☺ *Bikes make getting to school faster and reduces absenteeism.*



*Biligmin fetches water at a stream, far from her village.*

spent their days seated on the floor. Bicycles and backpacks were also provided to older students who previously walked seven kilometres to the nearest junior high school.

Junior high school students who used to spend nearly two hours walking to school can now bike there in 30 to 40 minutes. The problem of absenteeism, which used to sit at 40 percent and affect mostly girls, has virtually disappeared. The project has also reopened the door to education for teenage mothers who can now be reintegrated into school.

The simple project of bringing clean water to Sukaya has changed the trajectory of the entire community, enabling children to remain in school and empowering women to get involved economically.

"We have saved a lot of time since we can now embark on economic activities like collecting shea nuts and even processing the shea nuts into shea butter (which we can eat or sell). We are very grateful to Children Believe and Markaz," says Afia Yakubu, a resident of Sukaya.

Accessible, clean water contributes to an accessible, safe education, increases the promise of future high school graduates, and improves lifelong economic outcomes that reduce the cycle of poverty. The future looks brighter indeed for the students and the people of Sukaya.

For the full project wrap-up report, visit [bit.ly/SukayaReport](https://bit.ly/SukayaReport).

# What's **happening**



## Keeping kids safe online

Safer Internet Day, February 7, 2023, was the start of a worldwide movement for Children Believe. Joining with our partners at ChildFund Alliance, the Web Safe and Wise initiative was put into motion to promote better online safety for children.

With one in three Internet users under the age of 18, we're committed to creating a digital space where kids can enjoy the benefits of increased access to information and learning resources without fear of exploitation. Learn more about how we are working together on the initiative at [childrenbelieve.ca/safer-internet-day-keeping-kids-protected-online](https://childrenbelieve.ca/safer-internet-day-keeping-kids-protected-online).

## Meet the people of Children Believe

**Guess who? It's your friends at Children Believe!**

The talented video and marketing team here at your favourite charity has turned the camera around so that our sponsors can get to know a little bit about the people here at Children Believe.

Check out the fun videos featuring different people and their roles to learn what they do to help children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in – and be heard. While you're there, be sure to hit play on all our other feel-good videos sharing the many aspects of our work and the children, families and communities that have been transformed.



🔗 Meet Children Believe staff in our YouTube series, *Guess Who?*



## Get your running shoes on to support Children Believe

There are two ways to participate. First, by being there in person on Oct. 15, or second, if you are not close to Toronto, we'd love to have you join our virtual team. Yes, this year, from Oct. 1 to 31, you can run on your own time and gather pledges to support Children Believe from anywhere across Canada. All participants can choose from three options depending on your preference, with a 5K, half-marathon and marathon to choose from.



➤ Louise Thiel, right, with her youngest sister, Thérèse Dionne.



# Louise Thiel:

*A life dedicated to helping children succeed*

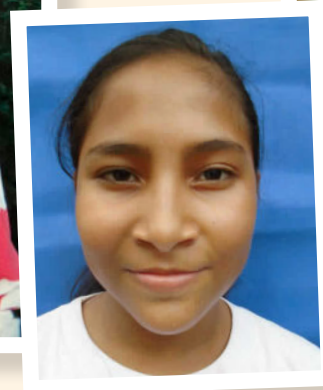
Louise Thiel was a French primary school teacher in Northern Ontario for 35 years. To those who knew her best, it was apparent how much she cared about children, as she kept her young students close to her heart.

Louise passed away on Dec. 19, 2017, at 77. But her legacy lives on today through a generous donation in her will to Children Believe. Her decision to create a future gift for the betterment of children was no surprise to Thérèse, who shares details of her sister's life and how Louise has always been an inspiration.

**"I am very proud of my sister for giving so much to a charity that cares for children," explains Thérèse. "Louise had no kids of her own as she married later in life, but that didn't prevent her from supporting quite a few children through sponsorship for almost 30 years through Children Believe."**

Among her other life passions, Thérèse says Louise loved reading, the outdoors and gardening at her home in Sudbury. When Louise's husband, Albert, passed away a few years before her, Louise took it upon herself to adapt her will to honor their shared wishes. They lived a modest, hard-working and well-managed life and travelling was among the interests they enjoyed together, including a trip to Switzerland and others to Albert's native Germany, to visit his sisters.

"Most importantly for me, Louise also travelled to Botswana, Africa, where I lived from 1972 to 1974," Thérèse says. "What a beautiful surprise visit it was, as I was so happy to see my sister!"



Dayra



Danieal

- Four of the children
- sponsored by Louise Thiel over 30 years with Children Believe.

Looking back at other ways her sister was important in her life, Thérèse points to the impact Louise and Albert had on her education and career choice.

**"I lived with them from 1969 to 1971 while I was completing my teaching studies," Thérèse adds. "I'm thankful to Louise for encouraging me to stay the course in the wonderful world of teaching."**

Louise was one of many supporters that Children Believe could count on contributing to the success of our work for 60-plus years. Her legacy gift is an inspiration to Thérèse.

**"Let's not forget what a legacy gift can do," she explains. "If people choose to include Children Believe as part of their legacy, we know they will achieve great results by funding education and other areas of great need for children in many regions of the world. I hope her story encourages others to take the same action."**



Hanan



Nadieska

**THE CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE** at Children Believe serves to create hubs for leveraging innovation, sharing knowledge, promoting networking, advancing thought, leadership and maximizing strategic impact in key areas of our strategic priorities. Across our six country offices, they are:

**Paraguay**, child protection and participation; **Burkina Faso** and **Ghana**, early childhood education, care, and development; **Ethiopia**, child protection and education in humanitarian actions; **India**, gender, intersectionality, and social inclusion; and **Nicaragua**, gender equality and economic empowerment of women and girls.



# Playing a whole new game

*An innovative way of learning transforms education*

© The children are very enthusiastic in playing with their parents.

By William Anim-Dankwa

It is midday at Chongdema, a sprawling community in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The sun is hot and people sit under trees to find relief. At this time of day one might expect a sleepy silence, but in the home of one family, giggling and singing can be heard as children play happily with their parents.

Not an uncommon scene in Canada, maybe, but in Ghana, parents, particularly fathers playing with their children is not the norm. Cultural influences or traditional thinking label it a show of weakness for dad to “play” with children. The place of young children is with mothers, some say. But this is less the case in communities where Children

Believe has implemented its transformational Learning Through Play (LTP) project. It’s a proud accomplishment for the Ghana team, part of its Centre of Excellence initiative, where they are recognized as leaders in Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in the country.

The family include father and mother, Eric and Ivy, and their five children, Awenayaame, Anambowena, Josiah, Gabriela and Beatrice. The young parents, 35 and 27 respectively, come from much larger families. Eric has eight siblings, while Ivy is one of 23. While she completed high school, Eric could not and became a farmer, cultivating crops and rearing some livestock. While the demands of their farm and family make it difficult, Ivy still dreams of becoming a nurse.

Until she can, her family takes priority, and she has seen great improvement having been part of LTP.

“Initially, I did not understand the idea of learning through play, but as I went through the program, I have





⌚ Eric and Ivy look through the Learning Through Play manual, a resource they found very helpful in creating a positive family dynamic.

become confident in playing with children and caring for my baby,” she explains.

Using the LTP manual is helping them to find new ways of engaging with their children as well as helping their children to learn colours, art, counting, interacting with other children, and singing. The program is finding success in increasing the bond between parents and children.

“I was reluctant to take part in the training, but decided to give it a try. It was at that point I realized my ignorance,” Eric adds. “Now, the children can freely approach me and play with me.”

Like much of Children Believe’s work, it is part of a holistic approach to creating positive change, such as the behavior of men toward parenting roles. But the comprehensive work of this program also incorporates health, nutrition for other interventions as critical components towards child well-being.

Ivy is one of many women across a number of local communities who has been educated in infant care thanks to the implementation of programs run by Children Believe and its partners. The work focuses on the critical first 1,000 days of a child’s life. With diet, nutrition, exercise and general health skills on the curriculum, Ivy says she much better prepared for delivering her second child. And LTP information impacted her husband’s understanding of raising children.

“I now know how important it is for men to support their spouses when they are pregnant,” says Eric.

According to UNICEF, it has been estimated that worldwide, 43 percent of children before age five are not achieving their full potential. The ECCD approach seeks to improve those numbers by promoting the five elements of ‘nurturing care’ for children: health, nutrition,

⌚ Eric, Ivy and their children get set to play a game of ‘ampe’ with their children. The game is similar to the ‘Hokey Pokey’ and can look more like a dance than a game.

early stimulation, learning opportunities, and protection. Without this, children’s cognitive, language and psychosocial skills remain underdeveloped, leading them to perform poorly in school and most often drop out.

Last year, Children Believe’s Ghana team worked with nearly 4,000 children in 45 centers where infrastructure, furniture, school materials and teacher training helped to create new opportunities to achieve better results. Along with Canadian sponsors, partner ChildFund Korea has come alongside Children Believe to fund and champion the Learning Through Play methodology. There has also been a concerted effort to bring government ministries such as health, education, and social protection to work together.

Training teachers to do their best work with current skills and methods is also critical to the process. Speaking to the impact this has had, Samuel Nguma, program officer for Children Believe’s partner agency Participatory Alternative for Rural Development Actions, says he has witnessed great change.

“The children in these communities are learning to be assertive and confident in relating to their peers and teachers at school,” he explains.

The experience of the teachers backs him up.

“I used to spend most of my time writing on the board and shouting at the children, which made them fear me,” says Madam Rahamatu Musa, a teacher in Najupigu. “I now handle the children with ease, and my interaction with them has improved, as the children are now willing to trust me.”

And so, parents and their children now find ways to better relate. The local team at Children Believe will continue to foster a positive learning environment filled with laughter and play for many more children in Ghana, just like what this family enjoys today.



**GHANA AND BURKINA FASO'S CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE INITIATIVES** work with key governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to promote the Learning to Play (LTP) methodology in early childhood education.

Both the Government of Burkina Faso and Ghana Education and Health Departments have endorsed the replication of LTP and revision of their national curriculum for primary/preschool teachers, health agents, and educational supervisors.

## A new school has a big impact

*Students like Balkissa have a new appreciation for education*

By Olivia Bangre

The wide smile and sparkle in Balkissa's eyes after coming home from a great day at school were more than her mother Zoungrana had ever hoped. Here in Burkina Faso, where three million people need humanitarian assistance, access to a safe, quality education has become highly uncertain for many.

But there are feelings of hope in Méguet, a rural community in the central part of the country. This past November, the first students began attending a new, well-equipped early learning education centre.

"The new school is truly a jewel," Zoungrana says. "When my child comes home, she always tells me what she has learned and is always eager to go back the next day. This has brought us much closer together."

Before Children Believe came alongside the community leaders to work toward solutions, the local facilities were extremely outdated and inadequate. Children didn't start school until age seven at the earliest, while teachers had little proper training, and the facilities and equipment were far below standard.

Not so, now, for the 22 girls and 20 boys who attend. And that gender balance is no accident.

"All measures are taken to allow all children, without distinction, to have the same privileges and access to quality education," says the school's director, Sawadogo Souleymane.

Balkissa says she would like to be a nurse one day, adding that she enjoys going to school to learn and play



Ⓞ Balkissa, centre, among her classmates at the new school.

in the school's playground. She is just one example in one community of hundreds of children who have benefitted from new facilities, improved teacher training, and many other educational innovations that make this work a Centre of Excellence for Children Believe in Burkina Faso.

Funds for the work came through a partner agency, ChildFund Korea, while Children Believe provided learning materials and school supplies. The school has three classrooms, desks, chairs, a TV, an office with a computer, and a borehole for water and washrooms. The modern facility offers a playground and is powered by solar energy.

Zoungrana, a fruit seller with a husband and three children, says the school has helped not only her family but many others in the community.

**"We mothers are very pleased that the project has placed a strong emphasis on involving fathers in the care and education of children through early childhood development awareness and training sessions for parents," she says. "We notice a change in the children's behavior. My daughter washes her hands regularly and especially before each meal, takes pleasure in washing herself and wearing clean clothes, and observes the rules of politeness and good manners."**

Something parents in both Canada and Burkina Faso could certainly agree on.



# Real-life superheroes

## Lilac Agents ending violence against children

By Juan Lezcano Heynd and Rosanna Menchaca

**S**uperheroes may be all the rage on movie screens, but in Paraguay, the Lilac Agents have become real-life guardians who are committed to protecting children from violence. These champions for children get an early start, training at an early age to recognize trouble when they see it and take action.

“It feels really good to be a part of this because it gives me hope that someday we can have a world without violence,” explains Jeremias, 13, a member of the Lilac Agents.

The Lilac Agents are an invention of a Children Believe partner in Paraguay, Fundación Alda, which manages child sponsorship programs in the country. Ranging in age from nine to 15 years old, the 145 members of this volunteer program learn how to observe, detect, and communicate incidents of violence or the violation of children’s rights.

“Our main responsibility is to detect and communicate any type of abuse to help prevent violence,” says Jeremias.

“We Lilac Agents are very important to the community because there is a lot of violence around us, and in the news, like bullying at school,” says Andrea, 13, who has participated for three years. “We have learned the best way to end this kind of violence is by working together.”

Working closely with the team at Fundación Alda, agents are part of 11 schools where clubs are active and supported financially with materials and resources from Children Believe. Organizers explain that the youth

Ⓐ As part of International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Paraguay held the First Festival of Lilac Agents on November 25. The youth performed artistic presentations depicting the reality of violence and child rights violations.

truly see themselves as having “superpowers” as agents of change, capable of acting to denounce any violent situation they see and protect other youth.

For these superheroes, justice is its own reward. But members also gain valuable skills in preparing and giving presentations, appearing on radio programs, and participating in community activities promoting a violence-free world. Organizers estimate their work regularly reaches 2,900 students with their child protection message.

This past November 25, to recognize International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Woman, the *First Festival of Lilac Agents* was held in the country’s capital, Asunción. Government, schools, and civil society representatives attended and saw artistic presentations prepared by the children, depicting the reality of violence and violations of child rights through song, poetry and dance.

The Lilac Agents program is just one of many initiatives promoted by Children Believe Paraguay as part of its work as a Center of Excellence in Child Participation and Child Protection. This work includes training and support for teachers and creating safe spaces for families to learn about intervention protocols in cases of rights violations.

**In Paraguay, the Children Believe’s Centre of Excellence promotes government accountability to child rights and youth participation issues. In collaboration with the Ministry of Children and Adolescents, Children Believe was instrumental in the development of a National Policy and Strategy for Child Participation, which is a key element of shaping accountability mechanisms among rights holders in the country and fulfilling the country’s commitment to addressing child rights issues.**

**THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE** in Nicaragua works to enhance the economic empowerment of young women and girls. As part of the Empuje project, Children Believe conducted a study on reducing gender gaps in

the economic development sector. This led to designing a virtual platform “Krezco,” which ensures equal opportunities for young women and men, enabling them to access jobs and develop entrepreneurial skills.



☉ Flor learned about customer service and credits her marketing skills as one of the greatest advantages from the Empuje project.

## Forging her own path

### Entrepreneur Flor sets an example for breaking the cycle of poverty

By Children Believe Nicaragua

**F**lor Avendaño is a shining example of what is possible when young women gain access to opportunities, and her story is a true testament to what can be achieved through hard work, determination and self-belief.

Flor’s health deteriorated after working grueling 12-hour shifts, six days a week, in a factory to fund her dream of graduating from university. She bravely decided to bet on herself and start her own business. Being her own boss has been liberating, but she says she couldn’t have done it without the help of Empuje, a youth employment project spearheaded by Children Believe.

“I was on Facebook and saw information about Empuje,” she explains. “I wanted to know about the project, so I signed up. I participated in many activities, attended all the workshops, and developed all of the life skills and training, including a marketing course for small businesses.”

Through Empuje’s marketing lessons, Flor, now 27, gained the knowledge to launch Calza Cool, her own online

style brand, with the tagline “Leave your mark with style.”

By selling personalized T-shirts through Facebook, she learned from customer trends and then incorporated sports shoe sales into her product mix to help Calza Cool expand and grow. She adds that negotiation skills gained from project training helped her with client and supplier relations.

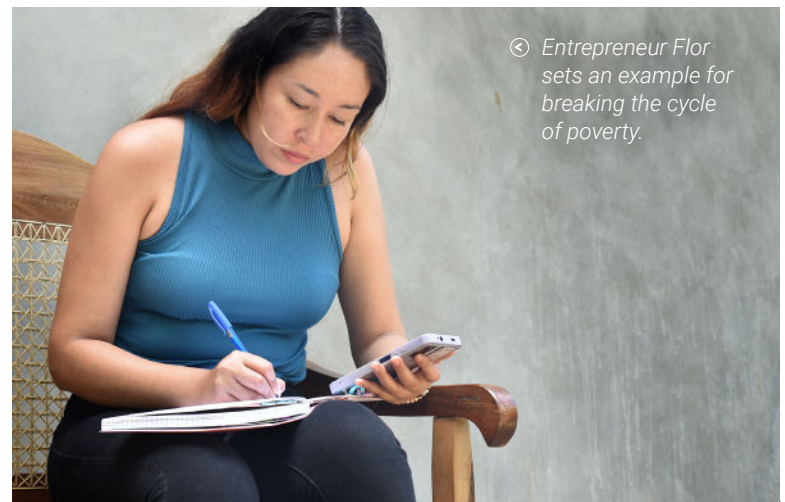
Her successful business launch provided the income to cover her tuition and living costs. Better yet, she also had more time to study, enabling her to fulfill her dream of graduating with a degree in psychology last year.

Empuje, a five-year initiative focused on youth employability, is funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by Children Believe, which works with local partners. The program leverages technology, trades and technical vocational training to equip youth with business and life skills.

The project is part of Children Believe Nicaragua’s efforts to be a Center of Excellence in gender equality and economic empowerment of women and girls. The work helps reduce the gender gap to ensure equal opportunities for young women.

On this issue, Flor points to the continuous criticism that exists in Nicaragua related to societal expectations about the role of women. By dedicating her time to a business career, she said she and others like her face disapproval for prioritizing career over children and family. The training offered through Empuje, which has almost equal participation from males and females, breaks down negative stereotypes.

**“Today, I see myself differently, happy with all the projects that are coming my way and what the Empuje project platform made possible, where the gender gap had previously closed doors of opportunity,”** adds Flor.



☉ Entrepreneur Flor sets an example for breaking the cycle of poverty.

# Finding hope in the face of violence and conflict

*Going back to school helps Efrata overcome tragedies of war*

🕒 Efrata puts in her best effort in class, proud to be able to attend school again after overcoming a family tragedy caused by armed conflict in Ethiopia.

By Gezahegn Gebremariam

Sitting in her classroom, studying diligently and actively engaging with her classmates and teacher, it's hard to imagine the terrible tragedies Efrata has faced in her young life.

Efrata was just 14 years old when she was forced to leave her village in northern Ethiopia because of the growing civil conflict in her community. Her parents thought it would be safer to live with her brothers in another town, but she didn't escape the dangers of war, as her brothers were killed in the conflict.

She was then taken in by her sister, traumatized and unable to go to school because they couldn't afford extra fees such as transportation, registration and uniforms.

"For me, life had no purpose, and I had given up," she says.

But now Efrata has begun to rebuild her life with help from Children Believe and International Rescue Committee (IRC). Her situation had become known to the team at the PlayMatters: Sparking Lifelong Learning – Emergency Response Mechanism (PM ERM) project, the emergency response in Ethiopia for children living through conflict.

Efrata received psychosocial support and academic resources funded in the project by the LEGO Foundation. She has begun a new chapter in her life and has resumed her Grade 8 studies.

"This has restored my hope – my hope to learn, progress, and transform my life," she explains. "Because I've always had a strong interest in learning, (being able to

go back to school) helped me picture my future. I heartily appreciate the project committee for helping me."

Millions of children have been affected by conflict in northern Ethiopia, with seven million needing protection and access to quality education. Along with thousands of deaths and injuries due to the conflict, people often face sexual violence, malnutrition, illness, and the loss of their livelihoods. Working with people in these circumstances is part of Children Believe Ethiopia's work as a Centre of Excellence in child protection and education in humanitarian actions.

In its first four months, as of December, PlayMatters (ERM) assisted nearly 6,000 conflict-affected children with psychosocial support and access to education. The project has also supported 17 schools with repairs to damaged classrooms to provide safe learning spaces and much-needed facilities with clean water. Children have also benefitted from preschool play materials, proper nutrition, and 'dignity kits' for girls for personal hygiene.

The PlayMatters (ERM) project is implemented in partnership with International Rescue Committee, Plan International and Children Believe, with the financial support of the LEGO Foundation.

*\*A pseudonym has been used to protect the young woman's identity in the story.*

**THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE IN ETHIOPIA** works to increase the community's resilience to disasters by promoting education and child protection best practices and family livelihood supports in humanitarian efforts. The principles and practices of safer schools and safer communities in community-based disaster risk management are promoted.

**IN INDIA, THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE** promotes best practices in gender equality, intersectionality, and social inclusion. Children Believe takes the specific conditions of marginalized indigenous and caste groups in the lowest strata of

society into account. The Centre of Excellence's work fosters positive new gender norms to end the practice of child marriage, provide inclusive education, and secure the safety, security, and dignity of girls and women from marginalized social groups in schools.

# Youth planting seeds of change

*How fighting climate change advances gender equality*

By Jins Joseph

"I never realized or understood the impact of climate change on my community, and especially on girls like me."

This was the revelation of Thilothama, a young girl in a village of Dalit and tribal families. Like many in rural India, people are mostly unaware of the harmful effects that climate change poses to their daily lives. But Thilothama's experience in a Youth for Climate and Children Collectives (YCCC) club helped her learn about the issue and how it affects her and those she cares for.

She was one of 6,000 young people who participated in a YCCC club in 2022, as part of the Building Youth Leadership for Climate Action project, which promoted youth leadership and climate literacy. The Children Believe youth-led climate action program was a collaboration of

Prabhavathi is one of the youth participants who were among the teams that planted thousands of trees.

its partner agencies in India (SPEECH, IRCDS and ROPES), funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives.

"Climate change is not just a problem, it's a crisis," says Prabhavathi, a YCCC club member from a different village in southern India. "The impact of climate change, such as extreme weather patterns, droughts, and floods, is a crisis affecting our daily lives."

Girls and women are particularly affected because it's primarily their chore to collect water in the intense heat, Prabhavathi explains, something she learned in her YCCC club. In times of drought or flooding, they must drop out of school because of the much greater time needed to fetch clean water for their families. Not only are girls forced out of school when disasters strike, but

the threat of being harassed or even attacked goes up dramatically as they travel far from home. So the project has empowered girls through an emphasis on equality, to take a leadership role in this area and be advocates for themselves to have access to education.

"I used to miss school during droughts because we didn't have enough water at home. But now, thanks to this climate action initiative, we have access to clean water, and I can continue my education without interruption," Prabhavathi shared.

The YCCC clubs were formed for youth between the ages of 13 and 24, and using video modules these young people were taught about climate science, global warming, environmental pollution, and climate events in their southern area of India, including the impacts on lives and livelihoods. In turn, these young people share their knowledge and actions to create positive change with others in their villages.

"I never thought that I would be able to make a difference in the fight against climate change, but with the climate action club, I know that my actions matter," adds Yuva, a young girl from yet another tribal village. "I am proud to be a part of this movement, and I am grateful for the support and opportunities to contribute to actions addressing climate change."

Another method for providing education on the issue came through access to a mobile phone app that hosts videos on the causes and effects of climate change. The YouCan mobile app was developed by Children Believe as part of the program, to be a tool for raising awareness about climate action and promoting the active participation of marginalized groups.

Sandhya, from another village in the region, lists a

☺ *Sandhya demonstrates what it is like to carry water to her home, a problem for many families due to lack of access.*



☺ *Yuva deposits a bucket of plastic she collected as part of the climate club cleanup efforts.*

number of actions she and her friends in their YCCC club have done to create positive change, including Oxy Parks, where thousands of trees have been planted, an important response to climate change.

"There has been a significant change in the attitudes and actions of the youth, especially the girls in our community," says Sandhya. "We stepped forward and took an active role in strategic actions to reduce the effects of climate change by planting trees on special occasions, collecting plastics and selling them to recycling units, and practicing segregation of wet and dry waste at the community level.

**"We also practiced waste composting and used the manure for kitchen gardening," she adds. "We participated in discussions with local authorities, organized rallies and gatherings, and educated other community members."**

Out of the 6,000 youth, 55 percent were girls and young women. Since the YCCC clubs started, the school dropout rate in the two Indian states where Children Believe works has been reduced, and access to clean water has been improved.

In describing positive changes, Thilothama's responses touch on intersectionality, an area of focus for Children Believe, which involves understanding systems of inequality based on gender, caste, race, ethnicity, class and other forms of discrimination that often have negative impacts on these societal groups. Children Believe India is a centre of excellence for gender and social inclusion, and this thinking has been built into all of their work, including the Building Youth Leadership for Climate Action project.

"I believed that only boys were capable of leading the fight against climate change," she explains. "But now, I know that girls like me have just as much power and potential to make a difference in our community as anyone else."

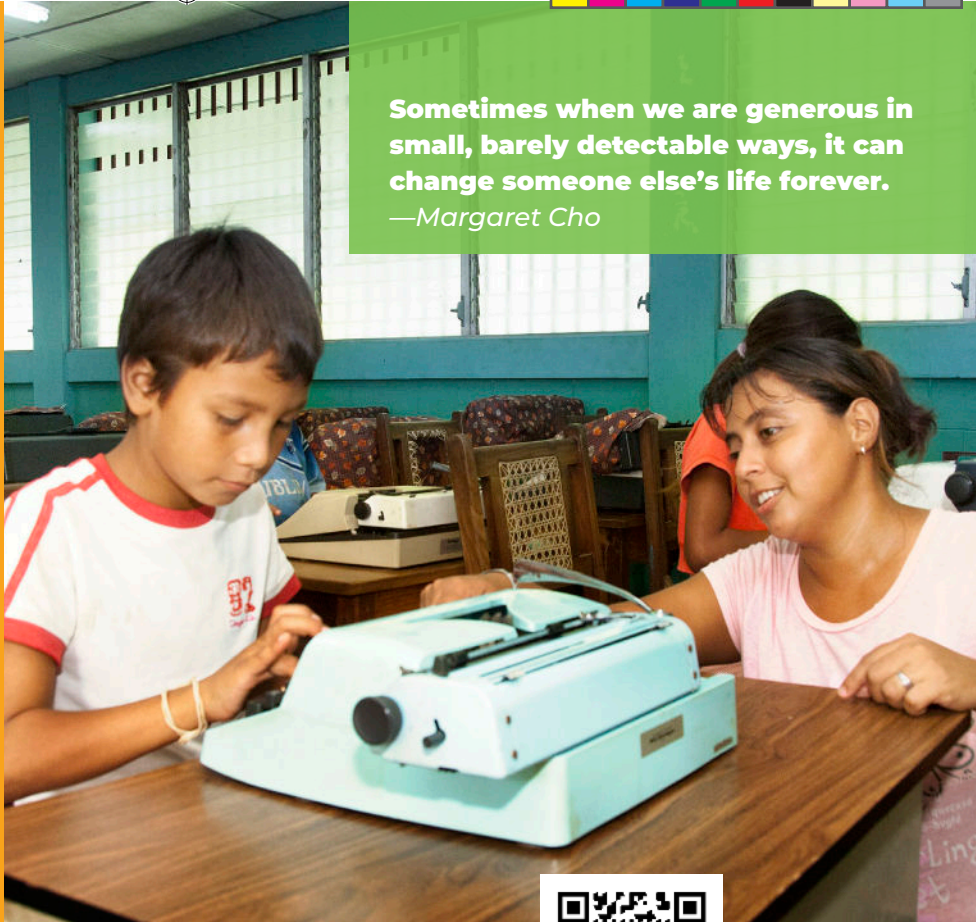
– With contributions from Stephen Paul Cruz, Krishnan Kalirajan and Esther Magdalene.

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