

# Annual Global Programs and Policy Report

August 2021

FY21

April 2020 - March 2021



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express our deepest appreciation to the children, youth, families and communities who offered us opportunities to work with and accompany them during the difficult COVID-19 pandemic to create positive futures.

We are grateful to our staff, partners, collaborators and donors who contributed to our efforts to fulfill the rights of children to survive, develop and reach their full potential. Thank you to our generous supporters, including Global Affairs Canada, the European Union, ChildFund Korea, ChildFund Taiwan, the German Embassy in Nicaragua, Taiwan Alliance in International Development (Taiwan AID) and UNICEF. As successful partnerships have furthered our impact, our gratitude goes to ChildFund Alliance, ChildFund International and EDUCO, as well as our international and regional not-for-profit strategic partners: Africa Child Policy Forum, Canada World Youth (CWY), Centro Empresarial Pellas (CEP), Graça Machel Trust and Heifer Project International. Our implementing partners are deeply appreciated for their front-line work, often carried out under difficult circumstances.

This report is the result of collaborations among many individuals. We acknowledge the contributions of all the country directors, our program and communications managers, MELKS officers from our six country offices, partner program staff and staff from the Program Effectiveness and Resources Management group. Our executive board members, volunteers and sponsors, who have given us their support in the course of the planning and implementation of all our work, are appreciated. We are indebted to our executive leadership team for their relentless efforts and strategic guidance in navigating the implementation of our initiatives in FY21.

Special acknowledgement goes to Feleke Tadele, PhD., director of program effectiveness and resource management, for his technical direction, coordination and writing of the global report and to Dr. Belinda Bennet, chief international programs officer, for her insights and contributions during the draft stages of the report. Sincere appreciation is extended to Khodeza Hossain, MELKS manager, for her country data coordination. Thanks also to Sandra Upeslakis, director of strategic communications, and Crystal Lee, editorial manager, for report editing and Dave Stell, communications manager, for design support.

## **Children Believe, 2021**

Front cover image: A youth group in Paraguay celebrating the successful completion of the youth talent show they organized and hosted. The event was recorded and streamed virtually in 2020 as part of our efforts to engage communities and help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>ANC</b>	Antenatal Care
<b>CBO</b>	Community-Based Organization
<b>COE</b>	Centre of Excellence
<b>CFAM</b>	Child-Friendly Accountability Methodology
<b>CLC</b>	Creative Learning Centre
<b>ECCD</b>	Early Childhood Care and Development
<b>FGM</b>	Female Genital Mutilation
<b>FY</b>	Fiscal Year
<b>PNC</b>	Postnatal Care
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>VSLA</b>	Village Savings and Loans Association



# FOREWORD

Children Believe works to break barriers to education, often across many fragile contexts, and helps children achieve their full potential. The 2021 fiscal year (April 2020 to March 2021) was unique and can be marked as one of the most challenging years since our establishment. The global COVID-19 pandemic brought unparalleled disruptions in the lives and livelihoods of millions of children, women and vulnerable families from communities in our countries of operation. It perpetuated chronic poverty and deepened systematic inequalities, making the needs of the vulnerable children whom Children Believe and our partners serve more complex and urgent.

The global pandemic has changed us as an organization. We shifted to working remotely due to stay-at-home orders, compelling us to find new ways of working to achieve our mission. We capitalized on our well-grounded local partners and grassroots community groups to sustain our operation with minimal disruption. We also utilized various digital technologies to overcome our restrictive contexts, engaging staff and partners to bolster collaboration and connecting with children, women and community members in ways we have never before.

Children Believe is pleased to release our Annual Global Program and Policy Report for FY21. During the year, despite the strains the pandemic placed on the scope of our programming and policy work, we reached more than 1,034,000 children, their families and members of their communities. We continued to provide programs that improved access to inclusive and quality education, improved maternal and child health, prevented malnutrition, addressed child rights and protection needs, promoted gender equality, prevented violence against children and strengthened initiatives led by children and youth. The results in this annual report clearly demonstrate Children Believe's resilience and strong capacity to help children and youth survive and thrive. Also evident is the expanse of our reach, which stretches across more than 10 countries and 161 communities, achieved through our partnerships with over 26 national and six regional and international non-government organizations (NGOs), and national governments.

The extensive kindness and generous support of our executive board members, individual sponsors and institutional donors have been deeply inspiring. They enabled us to overcome many hurdles and attain critical achievements for children over the past year. While we celebrate these achievements, we are also motivated by our refreshed FY22-24 strategy. The strategy is instrumental in helping us navigate the terrain of post-COVID-19 responses, adapt our programs to fit our "new normal" context and assure our unparalleled commitment to serve the best interests of children.

We are very proud of the commitment and dedication of our executive and global leadership teams, our staff, partners as well as the children and community members who drove our work in FY21. We are confident that, with increased integrity, transparency and innovation, we will continue to deliver on our promises to support children, youth and women, and effect change that will improve their futures.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred Witteveen", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

**FRED WITTEVEEN**  
Chief Executive Officer, Children Believe

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2020-2021 fiscal year (FY21) has been marred with the challenges of COVID-19. The global pandemic triggered a crisis of enormous proportions, with devastating long-term consequences on people's lives and livelihoods, as well as on Children Believe's efforts to realize our mission. In 2020, 119- to 124-million people were pushed back into extreme poverty because of the pandemic, threatening decades of global development gains. The pandemic exacerbated world hunger and most likely induced about 83- to 132-million additional people to experience hunger and starvation.

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**COVID-19 also wiped out 20 years of education gains in which an additional 101-million, or nine percent, of children in grades one through eight fell below minimum reading proficiency levels in 2020.**

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In addition to the 100-million girls who were projected to become child brides before the pandemic, up to 10 million were put at risk of child marriage due to the effects of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the year was a dizzying period of struggle and uncertainty for us at Children Believe, as Canada and our six countries of operation also faced disruptions and consequences. The harmful effects of the pandemic did not impact people equally. Our own field experiences showed that those most vulnerable, notably youth and women, faced the worst consequences, such as a rise in gender-based violence. The pandemic created noticeable gaps in meeting our annual target related to increasing access to inclusive and quality education for girls and boys.

The disruption or closure of schools due to COVID-19 could prevent over 68,700 children from our operational communities alone from having access to learning opportunities or from continuing their education. We also learned that the pandemic caused disruptions in the

delivery of essential health services in our operational areas. The safety of health workers was a critical concern as the health services in and around our communities were overburdened, their budgets were overstretched and numerous health workers lacked personal protective equipment (PPE) and other basic supplies.

Over the course of FY21, Children Believe worked to confront the impact of the pandemic while continuing to dismantle the systemic barriers that have made the impact worse for vulnerable people.

Informed by rapid, participatory situational assessments, we began the year by effectively responding to COVID-19 and helping children and young people adapt to the new environment. We also repurposed our programs and reprioritized our budget allocations for FY21. We undertook a thorough needs assessment and an audit of the current state of school conditions across our operational areas and explored opportunities to work with education departments to improve facilities, making them safer for reopening.

We aligned our COVID-19 program responses with the priorities of ChildFund Alliance and focused our interventions on:

1. Saving lives;
2. Protecting livelihoods;
3. Preventing violence; and
4. Ensuring the continuity of learning.

Critical to overcoming the challenges we faced, we worked with 26 like-minded local partner organizations on innovative and digitally-supported learning activities, especially in remote villages. We bolstered support to local health facilities to protect their health workers and increase COVID-19 awareness and prevention efforts at the community level. We also leveraged innovative mechanisms that strengthened child protection systems and reduced violence against girls and women.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*. New York, 2021.



Additionally, we explored opportunities for new and diversified funding to increase employment opportunities and protect the livelihoods and food security of the most vulnerable children, families and community members.

Accordingly, in FY21, we proudly served over 1,034,400 children, youth and other community members through programming that focused on COVID-19 responses, education, health, child rights, child protection, gender equality and empowering youth for change across our six countries of operation and four other grant-implementing countries.<sup>2</sup>



Hygiene supplies provided to a school in Ghana. With our partners, Children Believe supported schools in creating safe spaces so children could continue learning while remaining protected from COVID-19.

Children Believe collaborated with 26 local partners and 383 fragile, vulnerable and marginalized community groups to give 397,230 boys, girls and youth increased access to inclusive and quality education.

Of these young people supported, 44,588 were sponsored children. We built or upgraded more than 245 classrooms in pre-primary and primary schools across our six countries and equipped these facilities with more than 375,430

teaching aids, computers, furniture and play materials. We also supported the establishment or the facility upgrading of 483 early childhood development centres, which created new opportunities for learning for more than 23,000 children. In addition to this, training in the Learning-Through-Play method was provided for more than 46,080 teachers, parents and caregivers.

In the area of youth economic empowerment, we collaborated with 26 local organizations, five like-minded international organizations<sup>3</sup> and government departments to support 135,800 young people aged 15 to 24 develop the skills they need to gain stable employment. These young people are primarily from low-income and indigenous families, and the support provided has helped set them on the course for success in the future.

More than 302,170 mothers, children and other community members were directly reached through our efforts to reduce child and maternal mortality. This included improving the use and delivery of essential services at 141 primary health centres and addressing nutritional deficiencies by increasing the consumption of nutritious food and supplements by 115,000 pregnant women, mothers and children under the age of five years.

Additionally, we empowered 202,440 children, youth, parents and other duty-bearers across 383 community groups in our six operational countries to learn about child rights and protection, and take action against child abuse, exploitation and early marriage.

A total of 52,015 men, women, girls and boys engaged in our efforts to dismantle discriminatory norms, laws and practices that perpetuate gender inequality.

Besides educating themselves and their peers, a gender-aware cross-section of community members organized dialogues in their respective communities. They also created grassroots platforms to encourage a critical

<sup>2</sup> The latter includes El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> Canada World Youth (CWY), Centro Empresarial Pellas (CEP), ChildFund International (CFI), EDUCO and Heifer International.

reflection on these issues. These spaces enabled them to discuss the steps needed to end domestic violence and sexual harassment in schools and bring perpetrators of early marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting to justice.

We worked with 80,540 children (aged 13 to 17 years old) and youth (18 to 24 years old) to create child/youth-friendly spaces that engage their participation, dialogue and critical thinking skills. We also facilitated platforms that enabled young people to participate in child-oriented programs and helped them form children- and youth-led agencies.

Over 747,170 people benefitted from the various forms of COVID-19 program responses we provided. Of these, 310,940 were children (52 percent girls) and 436,230 were adults (54 percent women).

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**Despite the challenges, we closed FY21 with a great sense of accomplishment and a renewed commitment to set a new course with our refreshed FY22-24 strategy.**

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We will continue to explore and invest in technology that can address the digital divide in education and improve learning outcomes. Additionally, we will reach out to more numbers of vulnerable children and youth who experienced learning losses due to the pandemic, exert effort to return them back to their schools and support their families to become more resilient and adoptive to our “new normal” situation.

Further to this, we will enhance the functionality of our Centre of Excellence initiatives to maximize program impact and increase policy influence. We will invest in our humanitarian response capacity and promote a nexus approach to address a post-pandemic response, recovery and sustainable development. We will also strengthen our impact reporting to contribute to new knowledge and practices that advance the issues we work on and highlight Children Believe’s capabilities to accelerate revenue growth potential with thought leadership in our major program priority areas.

In addition, we plan to launch a new digital data management system that will further enhance our monitoring, evaluation, learning and knowledge sharing capacity.



Young children learn through play at a Creative Learning Centre in Burkina Faso (photo taken prior to COVID-19).

# I—DISMANTLING BARRIERS TO EDUCATION IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

Like in many parts of the world, 2020-2021 was a very difficult year for the education of children and youth across our operational countries. Our efforts to dismantle systematic barriers to education were greatly challenged by COVID-19. The pandemic caused an unparalleled disruption of education systems, magnifying poverty and deepening systematic inequalities experienced by millions of children.

Committed to advancing inclusive, quality education, we are deeply concerned by the global education crisis that has impacted over 1.6-billion learners in more than 190 countries.<sup>4</sup>

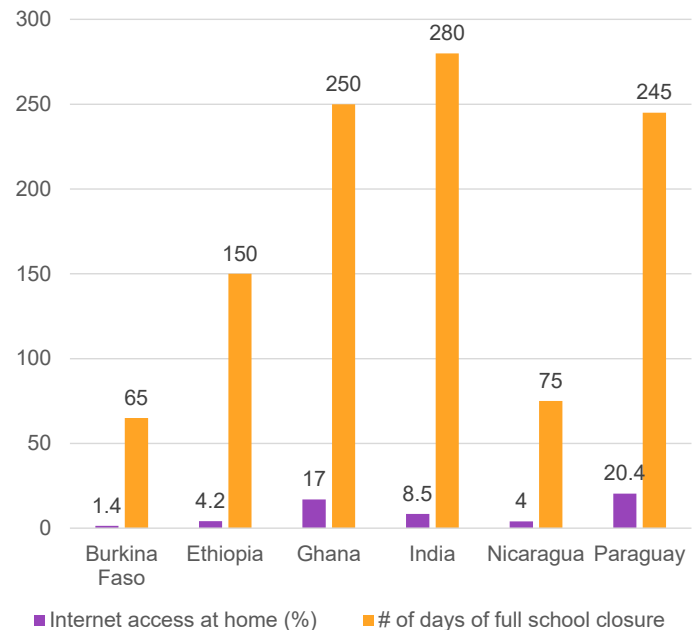
We recognize that the impact of any education disruption does not fade away instantly. The continuity of education for over 200-million children by 2030 will, therefore, remain a challenge as the obstacles have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. The disproportionate impact of the disruption also means that there will be millions of more girls globally who will be at risk of not returning to school.

COVID-19 has disrupted the formal education system across many communities where we work.

**During FY21, over 68,700 children and youth were unable to attend to their education in our communities.**

Chart 1 presents the total number of days during the 2020-2021 academic year that schools in our operational countries were fully closed, in comparison to the percentage of students who have internet access at home. The chart shows that, across the board, schools were closed for a significant amount of time.

**CHART 1: SCHOOL CLOSURES IN 2020-2021 AND INTERNET ACCESS AT HOME IN CHILDREN BELIEVE'S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION**



The shortest duration was in Burkina Faso at 65 days and the longest was in India at 280 days. The disruption of education has been exacerbated by the limited access to internet at home. Only 1.4 percent of school-aged children have internet access at home in Burkina Faso. The greatest proportion of children who have internet access is in Paraguay, but this is still only 20.4 percent.

This means that a vast majority of students in our countries of operation have missed out on both in-person classroom instruction and virtual learning opportunities for extensive periods of time, putting them at severe risk of falling behind in their age-appropriate learning outcomes.

The learning disruption in these countries has also had substantial effects beyond education. The closure of

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO. "One year into COVID-19 education disruption: Where do we stand?" March 19, 2021. <https://en.unesco.org/news/one-year-covid-19-education-disruption-where-do-we-stand>.



schools has consequently impeded the provision of essential services to children and communities, including access to school feeding and immunization programs. Children who rely on these programs, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized who are impoverished or live in fragile/conflict situations, have faced difficulties meeting their daily nutritional and health requirements.

Violence against children and women have also increased as a result of the pandemic lockdowns. The disruptions also mean that thousands of children in our operational countries have missed out on early childhood education during the critical preschool years.

In order to overcome these challenges, Children Believe has remained steadfast in our commitment to achieve inclusive and equitable access to education. We were resilient when it mattered most for the continuity of children's education.

We adapted our program priorities, responded to emerging needs and made sustained efforts to address systemic barriers to education by collaborating with others.

We worked on a plan that accelerates, invests and strengthens systems that make it possible for girls and boys to access education. This included investing in the improvement of school infrastructures and facilities so school environments would be less vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission.

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To address the issue of the digital divide, we improved access to technology for digital learning to take place during the COVID-19 lockdowns in our communities.

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Additionally, we promoted actions such as regular family

follow-ups as well as awareness-creation education to mitigate the potential risk of girls dropping out of school post-COVID-19.

The following sections elaborate on the key educational achievements of Children Believe and our implementing partners from April 2020 to March 2021.

## FY21 program achievements

### Access to quality and inclusive education

Prior to COVID-19, the right to access inclusive, quality education was already an issue for millions of children in our countries of operation. On a combined average, over one-fifth of children between ages six and 11 and one-third of youth between ages 12 and 14 lacked access to education as a result of several interrelated and reinforcing factors.<sup>5</sup> The factors include poverty, harmful cultural practices, geographic location and mothers' level of education.

In Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nicaragua and Paraguay, countries where we operate, the poorest children—particularly orphans and other vulnerable groups—had fewer opportunities to attend school than did children from families that were more financially secure. Children from rural areas, socially excluded communities, pastoralist groups, urban slums as well as those raised by single mothers, were found to have the most limited opportunities.

Where schools are accessible in these communities, boys are much more likely to be enrolled—and remain in school—than are girls. This divide has worsened during the lockdown as the interruption of the school year has had a disproportionately negative impact on girls, and especially those with a limited ability to continue their education at home.

Responding to this, Children Believe worked harder to prioritize access to education in the most inaccessible and remote communities in each of our six countries of operation in FY21.

<sup>5</sup> Children Believe. *Baseline Survey, 2019*.



A young student at a school Children Believe helped build in her rural community in Burkina Faso. PHOTO BY PHILIP MAHER

Our strategies for increasing access to education have continued to emphasize the improvement of infrastructure, enabling schools to have safer environments and increase educational opportunities for girls and children with disabilities, those from ethnic minorities or indigenous communities, and poor households.

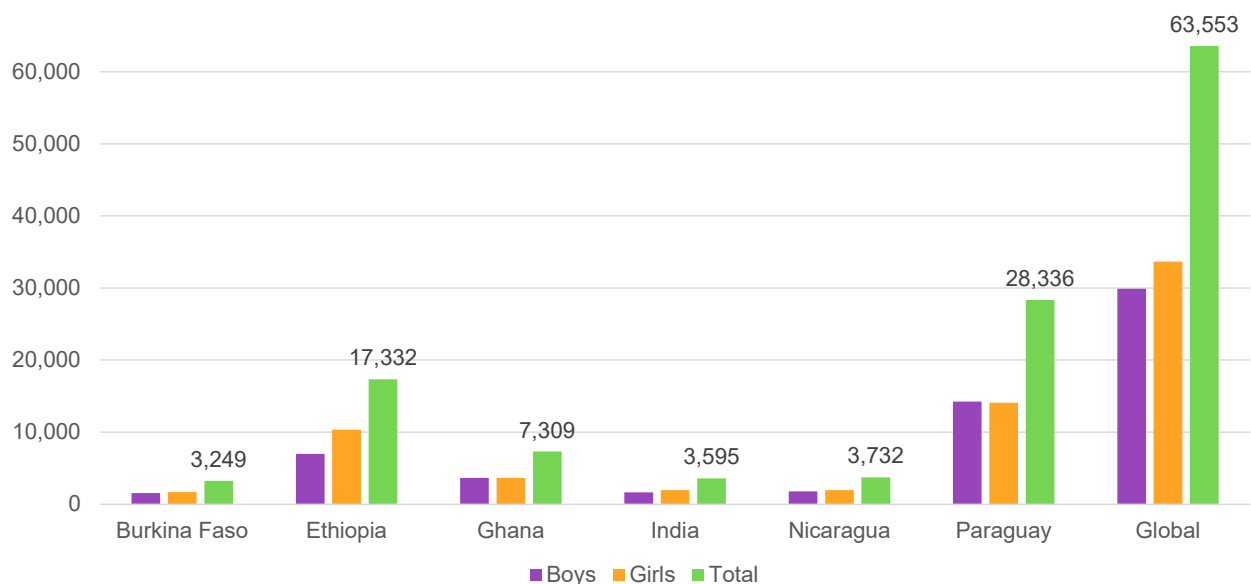
**Access to virtual educational platforms**

Children Believe collaborated with ministries of education to help primary school children access alternative virtual educational platforms to ensure the continuity of their learning. We used various methods to support this effort during lockdowns, including radio and TV spots, flash-drives and printed materials.

As well, we partnered with education actors on alternative or innovative learning methods to sustain educational gains. In particular, we arranged special supports for adolescent girls to motivate and sustain their education and protect them from risks such as child labour, early marriage and teen pregnancy, which threatened their school attendance.

Chart 2 shows the number of children we reached with kits we provided to help them continue learning during the pandemic. In total, 63,553 students (33,659 girls) were given creative aids (arts and crafts materials) and learning aids (books, printed materials and notebooks).

**CHART 2: DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN WITH ACCESS TO VIRTUAL LEARNING IN CHILDREN BELIEVE'S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION**



Source: Children Believe- COVID-19 Monitoring Report, May 2021

We established Creative Learning Centres (CLCs) in communities in our operational countries and supplied them with educational materials to offer additional opportunities to continue learning.

We also used these spaces to provide education and training about COVID-19 prevention.

For example, at the CLCs in India, children were organized into small groups and taught about COVID-19-appropriate behaviors. Go-Care applications were used to load specific education modules for the targeted children. They were also provided with activity-based learning, guidance, psychosocial counselling and engaged in challenge tests to encourage them to hone their talents and skills.

The CLCs, therefore, were safe spaces that helped sustain children's interest in education and cultivate their hope for a better future.

### Box 1: Continuity of education during the pandemic – Kiroshini's story, India

Kiroshini is an 8th grade student from Chinnaerwadi village, India. When COVID-19 reached Kiroshini's village, her village went into lockdown and closed her school. With both of Kiroshini's parents being illiterate, they were unable to provide her with educational support at home. Kiroshini felt as if the whole world around her came to an abrupt halt.

It was during this depressing period that she was informed about one of the Creative Learning Centres (CLCs) established by PAD, Children Believe's program implementing partner. Excited to have an alternative space to continue her education, Kiroshini became a regular attendant and an active learner at the CLC.

She stated that the CLC was like her second school. She engaged in classes through a televised program and developed her arts and crafts skills using local materials and guided by YouTube videos. Kiroshini even participated in an online drawing competition and won an award for her work. Additionally, she wrote poems and sang COVID-19-awareness songs, which were aired on local TV stations.

Although the pandemic and the closure of schools have been a challenging experience for children like Kiroshini, local CLCs have helped fill the void, allowing young people to continue learning and thriving.

### Increased access to safer schools, educational facilities and supplies

In FY21, Children Believe and our implementing partners renovated or supplied materials to learning facilities across our countries of operation to strengthen the safety of the spaces. More than 245 classrooms and libraries were equipped to help maintain the good health of all children attending pre-primary and primary schools.

We also equipped these facilities with more than 375,430 teaching aids, computers, furniture and play materials. Based on feedback from focus group discussions with children and youth, the increased availability of educational facilities and supplies has improved the learning environment. These efforts directly benefited 397,230 boys and girls, as well as their parents or caregivers.

In Nicaragua, Children Believe and our partners have been working to improve equal access to quality primary education by building the skills of primary teachers. Through a special project in the program area of Estelí, 303 teachers (272 female) from 10 primary schools were trained on the use of digital tools to conduct virtual lessons.

Community educators and facilitators of community school-reinforcement groups have also developed their capacity to use learning-at-home methods to promote home education during school closures and mitigate the number of school dropouts.



**Increased access to quality and inclusive early childhood care and development**

Pre-primary education provides the highest return on investment of all education sub-sectors. For every dollar spent on early childhood care and development (ECCD) interventions, the return on investment can be as high as \$13.<sup>6</sup>

ECCD is also key to upholding the right of every child to survive and thrive (UNICEF, 2020). Yet, it is given the smallest share of government expenditure compared to primary, secondary and tertiary education across most of the countries where we operate, notably in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and Ghana. Children Believe has continued to invest in ECCD based on our conviction that creating a solid foundation for children at an early age (36 to 59 months) gives them the best advantage to succeed in life.

Access to quality care and education at an early age contributes significantly to social competency and

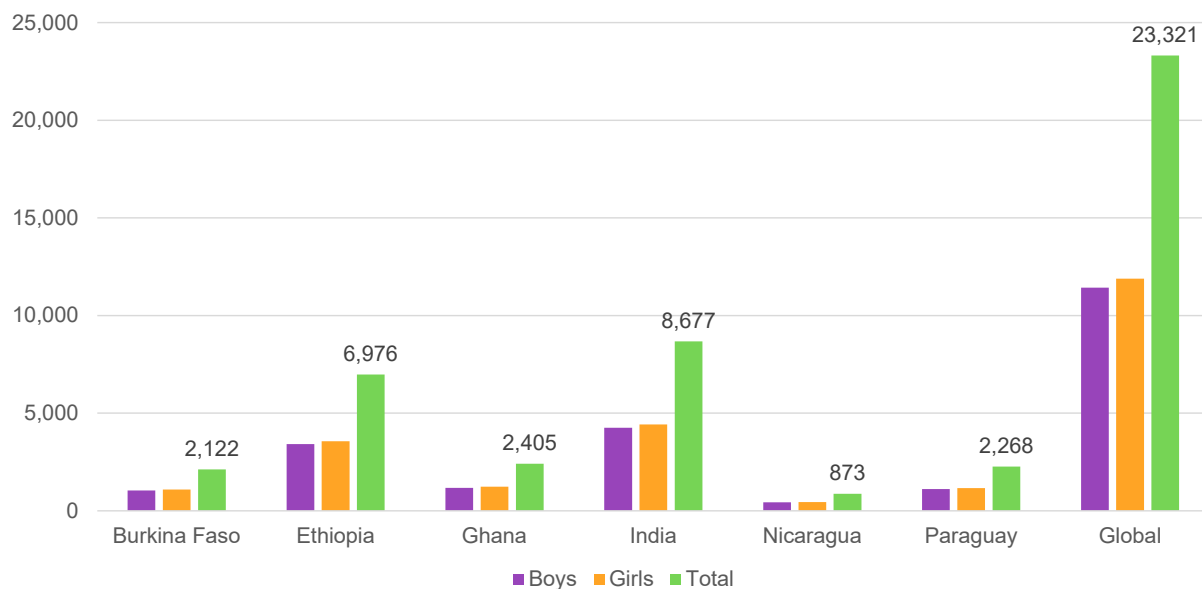
emotional development at a later age, and increases children’s desire to continue their education. This investment is especially critical in our operating countries, since only one in four children in sub-Saharan Africa and around six in ten in Asia have access to ECCD.

Children Believe collaborated with host governments, particularly education departments, in our six countries of operation to develop relevant curriculums and persuade government departments to increase their budgetary allocations for ECCD.

We also worked with 26 local and strategic partners, such as UNICEF in Burkina Faso and Ethiopia, to improve the public’s understanding about the importance of ECCD.

In FY21, Children Believe supported 483 ECCD centres and Chart 3 illustrates the number of children under age five that we reached in each of our countries through this initiative. Globally, we helped create new learning opportunities for more than 23,321 children (11,894 girls).

**CHART 3: DISTRIBUTION OF BOYS AND GIRLS UNDER FIVE YEARS OF AGE WHO HAVE ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN BELIEVE’S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION**



Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization, United Nations Children’s Fund, World Bank Group. *Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential.* World Health Organization. Geneva, 2018.

Of the 23,321 children who had access to ECCD centres supported by Children Believe, Table 1 identifies that 99 percent were found to be on track in their physical development, 97 percent were on track in their socio-emotional and cognitive development, and 92 percent were on track in their literacy and numeracy outcomes.

**TABLE 1: PERFORMANCE OF CHILDREN UNDER FIVE YEARS OF AGE WHO ATTENDED EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRES SUPPORTED BY CHILDREN BELIEVE**

Performance area	On track in their development
Physical	99%
Socio-emotional	97%
Cognition	97%
Literacy and numeracy	92%

Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

**Increased access to inclusive, equitable and quality primary education**

In the countries where we work, many children were facing exclusion from attending school even prior to the pandemic because of their sex, social caste, physical or intellectual disability, or socio-economic status. In order to promote

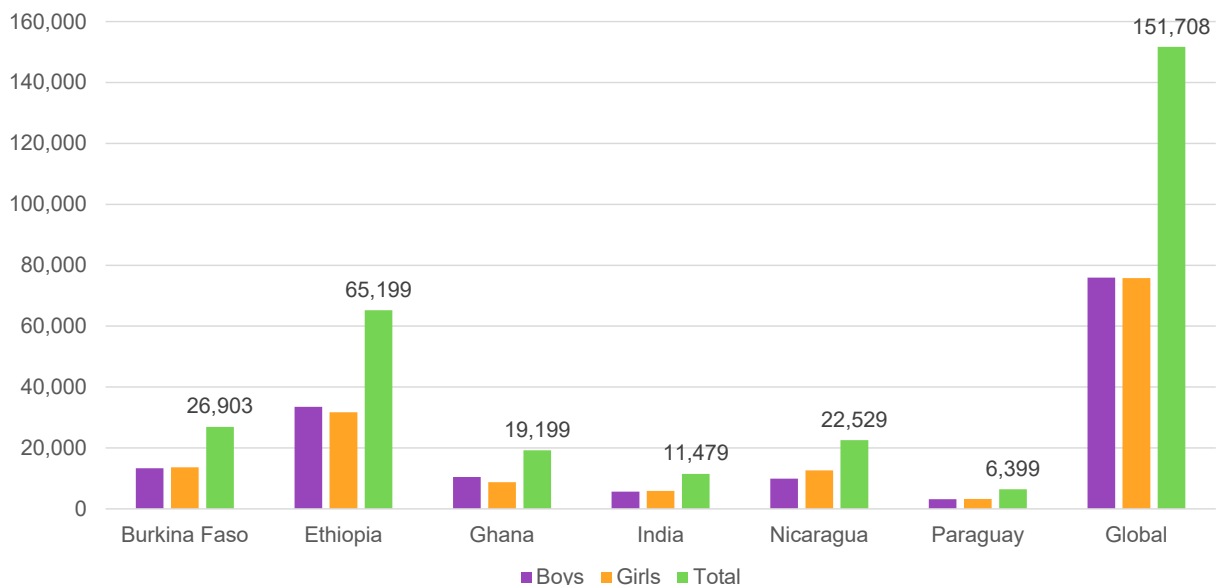
broader inclusion, Children Believe and our partners have continued to apply an “inclusion lens” to identify and then dismantle exclusionary barriers. Our approach is based on equity—recognizing that each child is different and may need different types of support and resources to realize his or her education rights.

Once educational establishments began re-opening after the COVID-19 lockdown, we took a variety of actions to address barriers to education. These included working with education departments, building the capacity of teachers, promoting gender and social inclusion in schools, integrating child safeguarding into teacher training and supporting children and their communities to engage in common platforms to demand and advocate for their rights.

Children Believe also worked to promote inclusive education systems for all children (boys and girls) by empowering schools. The schools we worked have become instrumental in creating school environments that promote equality through transforming the way children think, learn and act with fairness and justice.

In FY21, 757 primary schools were supported in providing inclusive, equitable and quality primary education in our operational areas. The number of students enrolled in primary level education during the 2020-2021 academic year reached 151,712 pupils (75,771 girls), as illustrated in Chart 4.

**CHART 4: ENROLMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION ACROSS CHILDREN BELIEVE’S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION, DISAGGREGATED BY GENDER**



Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

Chart 4 further depicts that the contribution of our primary education interventions has resulted in an overall gender parity in school enrolment at the primary level. Comparing the enrolment results of our operational countries, the gender disparity in Ethiopia and Ghana is shrinking, although it is slightly in favour of boys. In Nicaragua and Paraguay, the enrolment is in favour of girls.

In the context of COVID-19, Children Believe made sure to improve the quality of the learning environment. This involved providing educational establishments with basic facilities to support learning and create safe spaces to mitigate COVID-19 transmission.

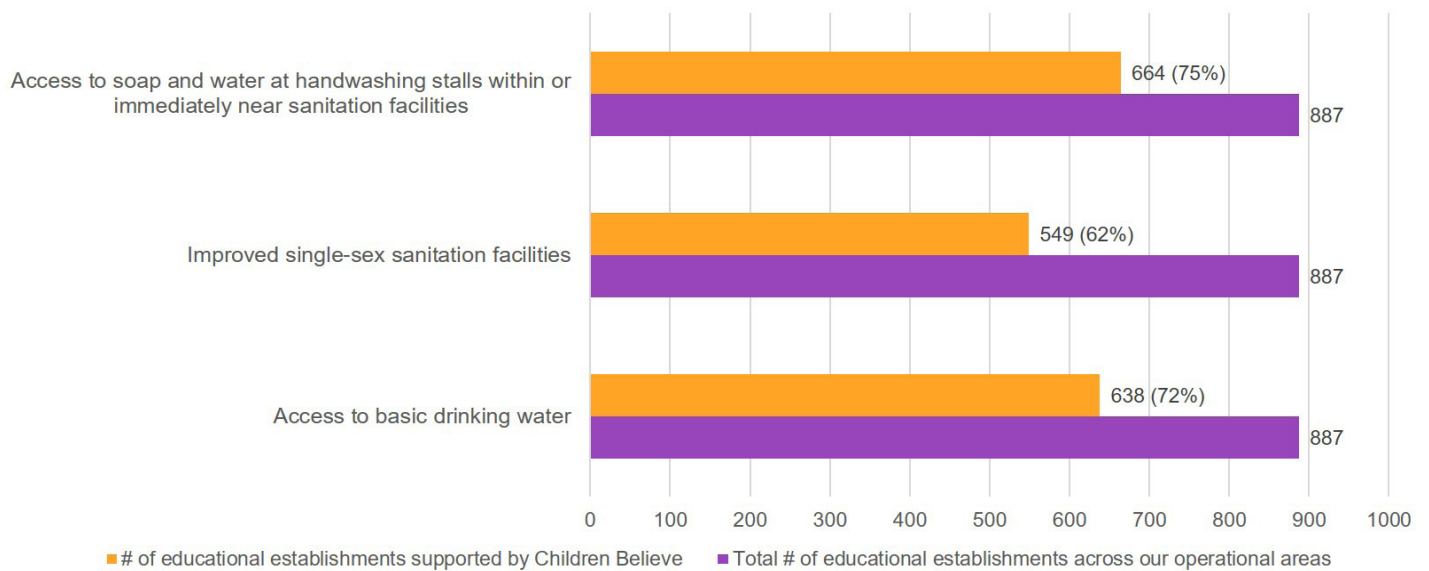
Chart 5 shows that of the 887 educational establishments supported by Children Believe, 72 percent now have access to basic drinking water, 62 percent have improved sanitation

facilities and 75 percent have access to soap and water at handwashing stalls within or immediately near sanitation facilities.



A clean water source provided to a rural school in Ethiopia in support of WASH. PHOTO BY PHILIP MAHER

**CHART 5: BASIC FACILITIES IN EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS SUPPORTED BY CHILDREN BELIEVE**



Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

Children Believe is committed to supporting vulnerable children who are often deprived of education due to poverty and their disability. In addition to creating favourable school environments for girls, Children Believe and our partners

provided material and financial support to children with special needs or persons with disabilities. The critical supports helped remove barriers for these children so they could access education.

### Box 2: Supporting inclusive education – Ismael’s story, Ethiopia

Ismael Omar is a 14-year-old boy from Ethiopia in grade 7. Due to his hearing impairment, he struggled to communicate, learn and actively play with his peers at school. Looking for guidance, Ismael and his mother attended a free medical check-up at a nearby hospital. The doctor prescribed a hearing aid, however, the device was not something Ismael’s mother could afford.

Without a solution, Ismael lost hope that he could gain an education and was forced to withdraw from school for some time. His mother was very worried about her son. Not only was he vulnerable due to the loss of his education, but she was also concerned he was at risk of accidents due to his hearing impairment.

Learning about Ismael’s situation, Children Believe, through our partner Emmanuel Development Association (EDA), intervened and purchased the hearing aid Ismael needed. The hearing aid was life changing. As soon as Ismael began using it, his sense of hope for a positive future was completely restored.

He rejoined school and became one of the high performers in his class. He was also able to participate in a wide variety of his school’s extra-curricular activities.

With newfound confidence and motivation, Ismael is planning to become an engineer after he completes his studies.

### Increased access to affordable, quality and inclusive technical, vocational and higher education

To help deter adolescents and young adults (aged 15 to 24) from delinquency, addiction, unemployment, irregular migration and violence, Children Believe recognizes the importance of increasing access to technical and vocational skills training. However, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged these types of initiatives and highlighted their flaws due to low levels of digitalization and long-standing structural weaknesses. Disruptions in workplaces made it difficult to implement apprenticeships and work-based learning modes, which are key elements of a market-responsive technical and vocational system.

To overcome these challenges, Children Believe worked with key stakeholders, notably government offices and vocational and technical centres, to establish better facilities and technical capacities to host online vocational and soft skills development.

In Nicaragua, we equipped the National Institute of Technology (INATEC) with Information and Technology materials to increase the capacity of four of their technical centres. The support helped them improve access so more young people could participate in vocational and life skills courses. Accordingly, 118 youth (72 young women) in Nicaragua received training in areas including accounting, marketing, customer support, culinary arts, hairstyling and microcomputer operating systems. Moreover, 1,304 youth

were able to benefit from life skills courses focusing on the topics of gender equality, conflict resolution, creativity, innovation, resilience, emotional intelligence and leadership.

Children Believe in Nicaragua also designed an online employment and training platform called KREZCO<sup>7</sup> to improve access to employment, training and business networks. About 100 companies, including multinational companies, expressed their initial interest in participating in the project through offering internships, employment and business opportunities. In addition to this, Children Believe continued to apply its Youth Employability Model to nurture an entrepreneurship culture, further facilitating employment for youth.

Across our countries of operation, we provided young people with virtual and on-the-spot vocational training, access to financial services and other business supports to help them develop small businesses and promote self-employment. We also collaborated with 20 local organizations, four like-minded international organizations and host governments to support 135,801 young people (77,724 girls and young women), primarily from low-income and indigenous families, in developing the skills they need to secure jobs.

Overall, while simultaneously pursuing efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Children Believe has continued to make progress in increasing access to employment and ensuring the economic empowerment of youth.

<sup>7</sup> KREZCO is Spanish for GROWTH.

## II—IMPROVING MATERNAL, NEWBORN AND CHILD HEALTH, AND PROTECTING THRIVING COMMUNITIES FROM COVID-19

Children Believe promotes maternal and child health programming that is informed by human rights approaches and principles. We are committed to reducing maternal and child mortality through the application of a holistic approach focused on strengthening health systems, reducing the burden of diseases and improving nutrition.

We work with regional- and district-level departments of health and local government administrative bodies to promote integrated and holistic health care approaches, primarily targeting mothers, pregnant women, newborns and children under five years of age.



**A doctor in a health facility supported by Children Believe in Ethiopia providing nutritional guidance to a new mother (photo taken prior to COVID-19). PHOTO BY PHILIP MAHER**

Despite previous years of praise-worthy achievements, the health sector in FY21 was shattered by the pandemic.

The pandemic created serious threats to the well-being of children, families and other community members across our six countries of operation. COVID-19 has caused an unprecedented crisis, straining already overburdened health service delivery systems, triggering a humanitarian, socio-economic and human/child rights crisis, and

worsening the inequalities and vulnerabilities of children and families. It also highlighted the fragility of the public health system, which provides treatment for many, including the impoverished, in our operating countries.

The unexpected surge in COVID-19 cases caused the diversion of human and budgetary resources in the health sector to the pandemic and, to some extent, reduced the confidence of mothers, women and other community members in using the improved health infrastructure and facilities that were developed prior to this global crisis.

Our program interventions in FY21 focused on achieving three key results:

1. Increased safety and protection of children, women and other vulnerable community members from COVID-19;
2. Improved delivery and use of essential maternal and child health services; and
3. Increased provision of nutritious food for malnourished children and delivery of food relief for COVID-19-affected people.

Our efforts were committed to preventing or minimizing the pandemic-induced disruption of health care services primarily to children and mothers. We supported our local partners, including local government health offices, to improve their technical capacity through training and equipping their health workers with the necessary skills and materials to deal with the new challenges.

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**We also supported the ongoing delivering of child and maternal health services. In addition to this, we provided targeted families with knowledge and resources to keep them safe from the virus.**

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In the following sections, we present the key program achievements.



## FY21 program achievements

### Protecting children, women and other vulnerable social groups from COVID-19

Children Believe worked with 26 local partners to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the communities where we work. This involved ensuring children, women and vulnerable families received relevant, rapid and adequate lifesaving as well as preventive supports. It also included carrying out COVID-19 awareness-creation and prevention interventions such as installing community handwashing stands, providing PPE and distributing various behaviour-change-focused communication materials.

Children Believe also supported health care services and preventive health practices by equipping local health facilities with basic materials and supplies. Further, we extended training and incentives to local health care staff to maintain their services, especially in remote areas. Table 2 shows the scope of resources, supplies and materials delivered to improve health and hygiene.

**TABLE 2: TYPES OF AWARENESS-CREATION RESOURCES, PREVENTION SUPPLIES AND MATERIALS DELIVERED BY CHILDREN BELIEVE**

Activity type	Amount
# of child-friendly information education materials distributed (posters, handouts, etc.)	63,742
# of virtual awareness campaign sessions carried out (through radio, TV, social media, etc.)	2,935
# of health facilities provided with disinfectant and other prevention supplies	161
# of health workers who participated in health or hygiene training	498

Source: Children Believe COVID-19 Monitoring Report, May 2021

We distributed over 63,700 child-friendly, COVID-19-focused educational materials and conducted over 2,930 community awareness sessions in local languages through FM/community radio, TV spots, automobile loudspeakers, WhatsApp, text messages, Zoom meetings, mobile phone audio messages, flyers and posters across our six operational countries.

Furthermore, we provided 161 health facilities with PPE and sanitary kits. The PPE kits included masks, gloves and body covers, while the sanitary kits had soap, hand sanitizer and rubbing alcohol. As well, our staff teams along with our local partners trained 498 health care workers (308 females) on World

Health Organization (WHO) protocols and on conducting tests for COVID-19.

### Improved delivery and utilization of essential maternal and child health services

During FY21, health facilities became overburdened by the pandemic as it overstretched their budgets and staff. This had a domino effect, challenging the delivery of other essential health services, like maternal and newborn care, and threatening the gains we made in improving these services in our operational areas. In countries such as Burkina Faso and Ethiopia, the outbreak of COVID-19 created fear about the safe use of services at health facilities as a number of health workers, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, became infected with the virus. This contributed to the low use of essential health services (91 percent of the target) such as antenatal care (ANC), skilled delivery and postnatal care (PNC).

In order to mitigate or minimize the effects of the disruption, Children Believe and our partners supported 74 health facilities in our program communities with the provision of PPE.

This included disposable nose masks, examination gloves, doctor’s scrubs and overalls/coveralls. Other items supplied were infrared thermometers, liquid soap, sanitizers and handwashing facilities.

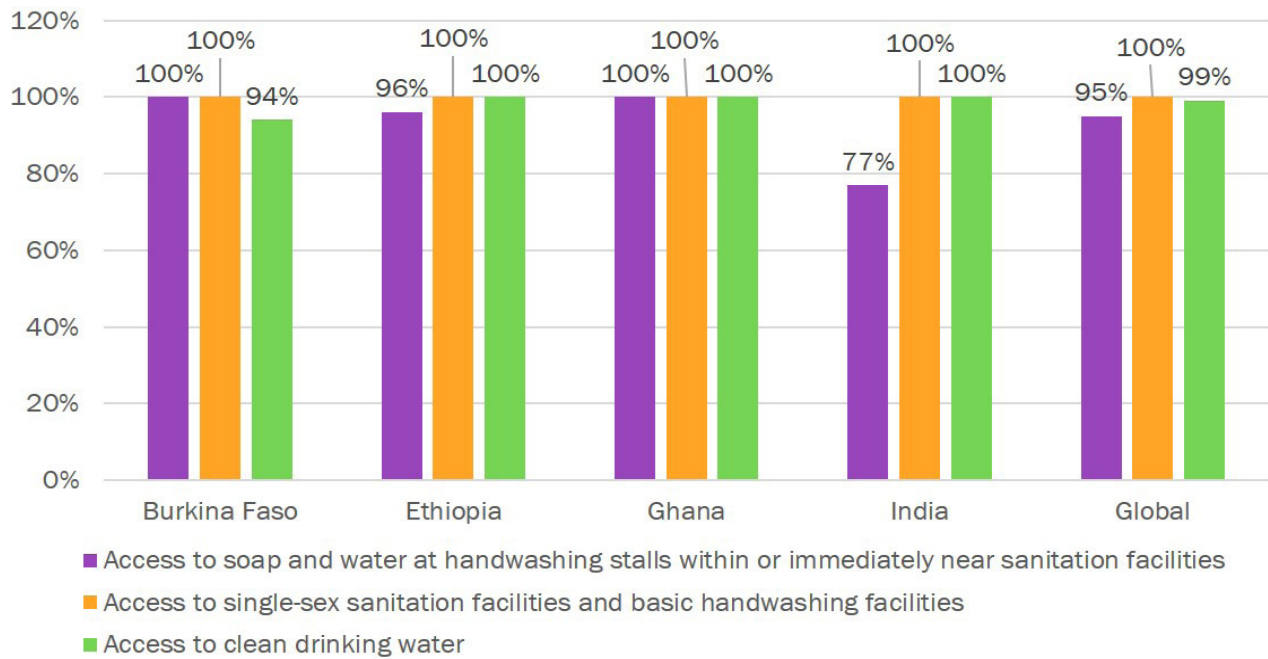
Children Believe with our partners also built sanitation facilities and carried out community-awareness education to rebuild the trust of community members in the safe provision of essential health services.

The basic facilities provided to health establishments supported by Children Believe in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana and India, are presented in Chart 6.<sup>8</sup> Across these countries, Children Believe helped ensure all the health establishments had unisex sanitation facilities. We were also able to ensure 99 percent of

<sup>8</sup> Nicaragua and Paraguay provide similar facilities to educational establishments.



CHART 6: BASIC FACILITIES IN HEALTH ESTABLISHMENTS SUPPORTED BY CHILDREN BELIEVE



Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

the establishments had access to clean drinking water and 95 percent had access to soap and water within or immediately near sanitation facilities.

To improve the delivery of essential health services to pregnant women, newborns and children under age five, our program focused on building and/or upgrading health facilities, especially in underserved areas, and increasing the knowledge and skills of health personnel to deliver gender-responsive and child-friendly services. This year, while we were able to renovate two health facilities, we concentrated on equipping existing ones (74, which were renovated in previous years with the support of Children Believe) with medicine and essential equipment to offset the disruption caused by the pandemic on the delivery of regular services. With the support of our partners, we also provided practical training and technical assistance to 537 front-line workers (301 female) serving in these health facilities.

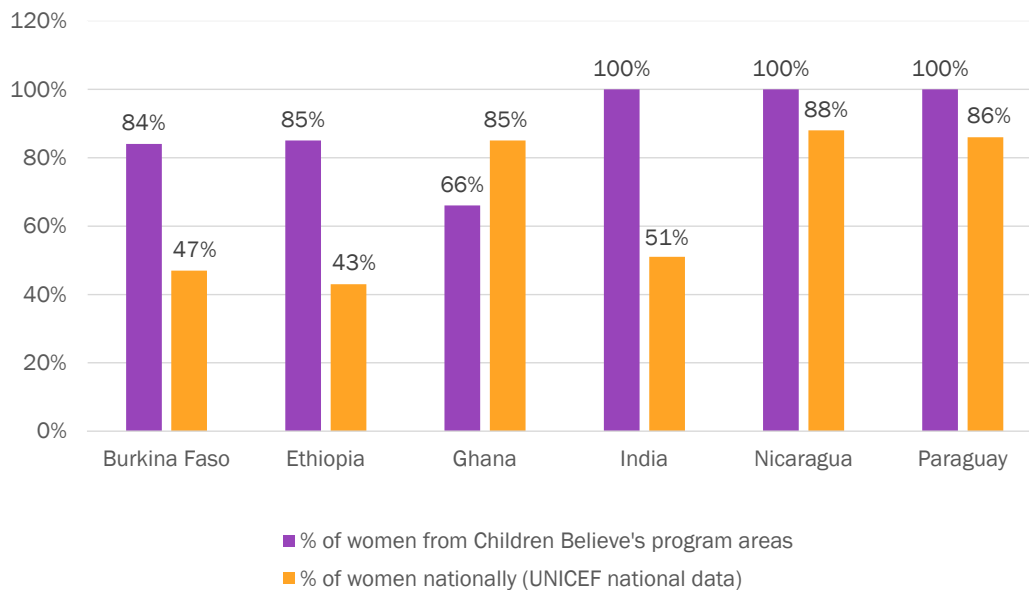
The support we provided improved the overall operation of our targeted health facilities. It reduced unnecessary obstetric appointments while improving timely emergency referrals. The improved health facilities were able to continue delivering important ANC or PNC services to women, advise their male partners and provide family planning education.

To assist in reducing the burden on health facilities and mitigating the physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by staff, we also supported the training of 124 community health extension workers to enhance their skills in maternal and child health care.

They were trained in self-care, mental health, emotional recovery and psychosocial care to help mothers and children cope with the effects of the pandemic.

Despite the difficulties created by COVID-19, it was critical that Children Believe and our local partners continued to work on improving the use of essential maternal and child health services to ensure the good health of women and children in our program areas. Activities involved raising awareness on appropriate ANC and maternal health care, complications of pregnancy and delivery, newborn care and childhood diseases. Chart 7 illustrates the outcomes we achieved from our efforts promoting ANC, in comparison to the national average.

**CHART 7: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN AGED 15 TO 49 WHO HAD LIVE BIRTHS IN THE LAST YEAR AND RECEIVED FOUR OR MORE ANTENATAL CARE VISITS DURING THEIR PREGNANCY, DISAGGREGATED BY COUNTRY**



Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

The chart demonstrates that the continuous follow-up and support given by the trained and empowered community groups in Children Believe’s operational areas have made a positive impact. The percentage of women aged 15 to 49 in our areas who had a live birth in the last year and received four or more ANC visits during their pregnancy, was generally much higher than the national average.

In India, Children Believe encouraged community-based organizations and locally-trained volunteers to actively engage with local government institutions to pay specific attention to the pregnant women and ANC mothers in their communities. Their efforts paid off and the programs established developed strong connections with 134 mother’s clubs, involving 2,577 women in their neighbourhoods.

Despite the lockdown, travel restrictions and inadequate access to hospitals and health care, the women in the mother’s clubs provided support to each other in ANC, PNC and newborn care with the knowledge they gained from various trainings and their own lived experiences.

As a result, the percentage of women aged 15 to 49 in Children Believe communities in India who had a live birth in the last year and received four or more ANC visits during their pregnancy, has

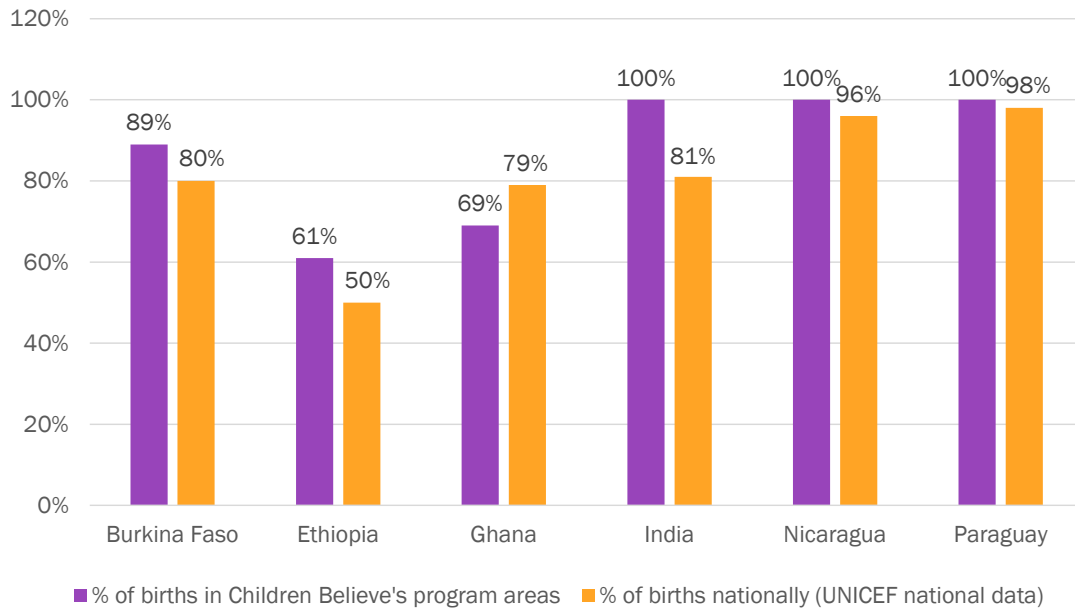
reached 100 percent. This is significantly greater than the national average of 51 percent.

The drastically different outcomes are similarly reflected in the results for Ethiopia (85 percent versus the national average of 43 percent) and Burkina Faso (84 percent versus 47 percent).

Chart 8 presents the percentage of births attended to by skilled health professionals across our operational communities in comparison to the national average. We achieved 100 percent results in India, Nicaragua and Paraguay, with the greatest difference from the national average being in India with a 19 percent difference.

In Burkina Faso and Ethiopia, although we achieved lower results at 89 and 61 percent, respectively, this achievement was still higher than the national averages of 80 and 50 percent. The result for Ghana was lower than the national average, implying that more investment is needed to improve the outcome in this area of work.

**CHART 8: PERCENTAGE OF BIRTHS ATTENDED TO BY SKILLED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS, DISAGGREGATED BY COUNTRY**



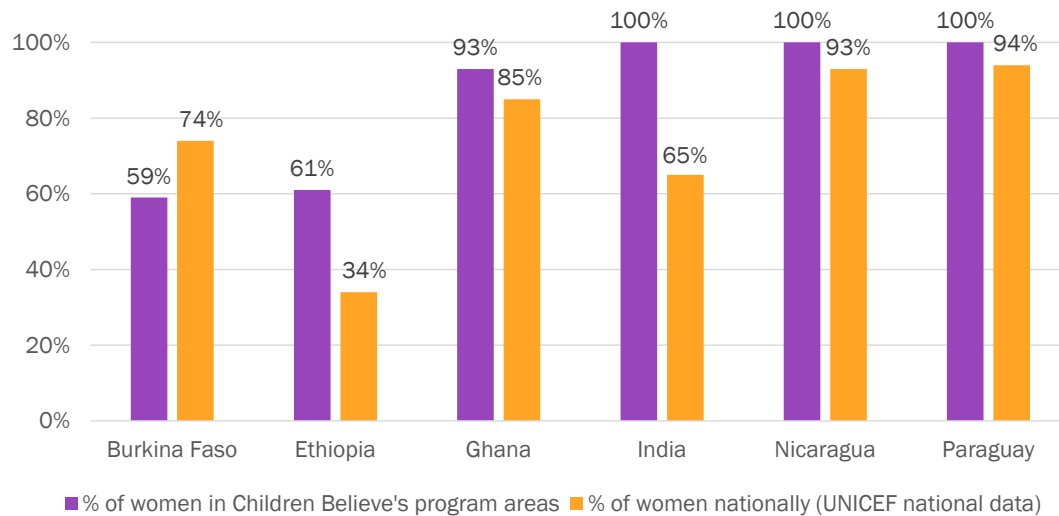
Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

Chart 9 shows the outcomes achieved in women aged 15 to 49 receiving postpartum care within the first six weeks after giving birth. Again, Children Believe had 100 percent results in India, Nicaragua and Paraguay. India had the greatest difference from the national average, surpassing it by a staggering 35 percent.

Our result in Ghana followed closely behind at 93 percent, eight

percent high than the national average. Ethiopia and Burkina Faso were lower at 61 and 59 percent, respectively. As the outcome for Burkina Faso is lower than the national average, and with limited access to maternal and child health services due to the country's highly fragile and conflict-ridden context, a greater investment will need to be made to improve reproductive, maternal and child health care in the country.

**CHART 9: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO RECEIVED POSTPARTUM CARE WITHIN THE FIRST SIX WEEKS AFTER GIVING BIRTH, DISAGGREGATED BY COUNTRY**



Source: Children Believe Global Programs and Policy Report FY21

During our program review assessments, the pregnant women and mothers who participated also reflected the knowledge gains they had made. They were able to cite specific information they had acquired about ANC, health-related warning signs for pregnant women, hospital care, hygiene, infant and child health, and disease prevention.

They were also able to explain how they put this knowledge into action. For example, by adopting good hygiene practices, attending ANC services, going to hospitals for delivery and sharing parenting responsibilities between themselves and their male partners. Additionally, the women noted that the community health committees established by our program provided a useful platform to help and guide pregnant women.

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**Overall, in FY21, Children Believe supported health facilities across our six countries of operation reach more than 35,080 women aged 15 to 49 and enabled them to receive four or more ANC visits during their pregnancy. In addition, about 35,000 women received postpartum care within the first six weeks after birth, helping to ensure the good health of mothers and children in our supported areas.**

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#### **Increased consumption of nutritious food and supplements**

Prior to COVID-19, our operational countries were already facing high rates of inter-generational malnutrition. This was most notable in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and India where the prevalence of undernourishment, which accounts for stunting among children, preventable childhood diseases and maternal and child mortality, was recorded by The World Bank as being 19.2, 19.7 and 14 percent, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

In India, for instance, government reports indicate that 38 percent of children under the age five are stunted (short for their age), 21 percent are wasted (underweight for their height) and 36 percent are underweight for their age. These are signs of chronic undernutrition. Frequently, children born to uneducated mothers

and from families at the bottom of the wealth ladder are the most likely to be undernourished.<sup>10</sup>

Case in point, the timely initiation of breastfeeding is particularly low for women who lack schooling and have had home deliveries. Breast milk is critical for the healthy development of children. However, in the impoverished communities where we work in India, that have large populations of uneducated mothers, only 42 percent of children born in the last five years were breastfed within the first hour of birth. Further, only 55 percent of children under six months in age were exclusively breastfed. The outcome of this trend has resulted in 58 percent of children aged six to 59 months having anaemia.

With the COVID-19 lockdowns, earnings have been reduced and jobs have been lost. Employment-creation opportunities for young people have been fractured and disruptions have been experienced in markets and food supplies. These effects have threatened the food security and nutrition of mothers, children and communities at large and weakened social protection systems at an unprecedented rate.

In Ethiopia, according to the Ethiopia Disaster Risk Management Commission, the pandemic has doubled the number of people facing acute food insecurity by the end of 2020. In India, the National Scheme for Holistic Nutrition (POSHAN) called Anganwadis (Rural Child Care Centres), was created to reduce the prevalence of stunting, undernutrition and low birth weight by two percent and anaemia by three percent by 2022.

Unfortunately, the efforts made towards this goal did not see much progress. With the closure of Anganwadi services and Mid-Day Meal (MDM) services due to the pandemic, a large number of children did not have access to regular nutritious meals and pre-primary and early childhood development services.

**To increase the consumption of nutritious food and supplements by pregnant women, newborns and children under age five during this challenging time, Children Believe provided emergency food supplies and trained health personnel in nutritional screening and addressing malnutrition.**

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank. *Prevalence of undernourishment*. 2018. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SN.ITK.DEFC.ZS?end=2018&start=2001&view=chart>.

<sup>10</sup> Children Believe India. *FY21 Annual Program and Policy Report*. July 2021.



**To aid families struggling with food insecurity because of the pandemic, Children Believe and our partners distributed emergency food supplies.**

As well, we promoted kitchen gardens and gave cooking demonstrations for low-cost, nutritious meals made from locally-available ingredients. We also worked with our local partners to train health service providers, disseminate educational materials, produce radio programs and facilitate community dialogues/home visits to raise awareness

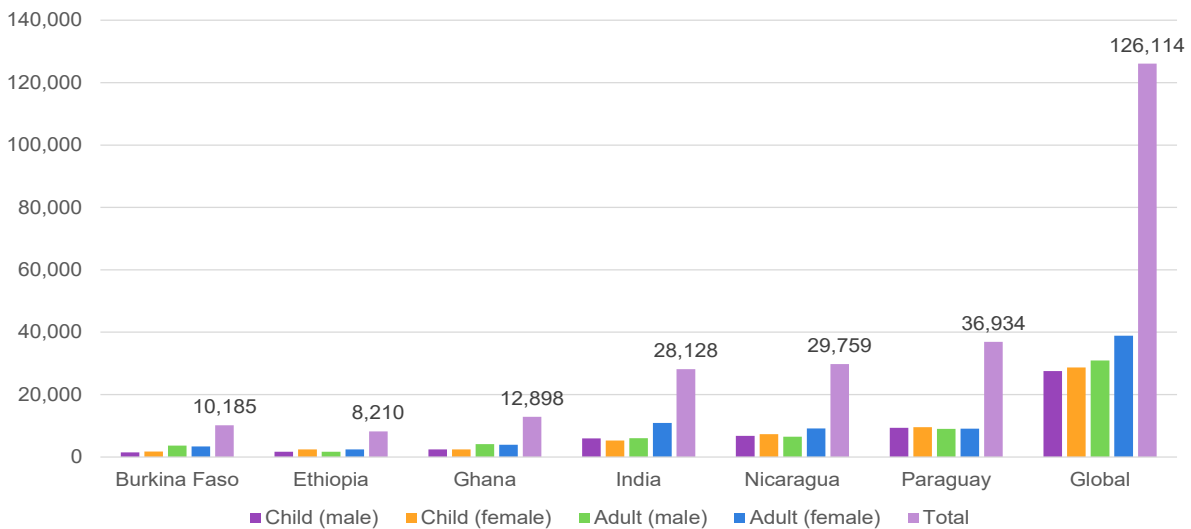
about adequate nutrition for children and pregnant women. Additionally, our partners provided de-worming treatments to prevent iron deficiency and anaemia in children under age five and adolescents, especially girls. We also promoted exclusive breastfeeding for infants up to five months old.

Over the course of the year, our interventions improved the consumption of nutritious food and supplements among women and children under age five, particularly within the child’s first 1,000 days of life. Children Believe worked with local partners, as well, to increase availability of and access to immediate relief assistance and essential items. While all our country programs supplied food and other basic supplies directly to families, Burkina Faso and Ethiopia also provided cash relief to the most vulnerable, further aiding them to buy food and overcome hunger.

In Paraguay, Children Believe and our partners delivered food kits containing a variety of non-perishable items such as rice, beans, flour, sugar and cooking oil. We also ran community kitchens in a traditional Paraguayan-style community event, delivering hot meals for the most vulnerable children and their families, and hosted 100 to 300 people at each event.

Chart 10 illustrates the number of people we reached in FY21 through food support in our six countries of operation. In total, Children Believe helped 126,114 people (51 percent female) through the provision of monthly dry food rations (rice, wheat flour, oil, pasta and other supplementary food) that were urgently needed.

**CHART 10: NUMBER OF PEOPLE REACHED WITH FOOD SUPPORT IN CHILDREN BELIEVE’S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION**



Source: Children Believe COVID-19 Monitoring Report, May 2021



# III—PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Children are among the most vulnerable groups in society because they depend on others for their physical and emotional well-being. In the context of the countries where we work, the vulnerability of children to violence, abuse and neglect is heightened by chronic poverty, conflict and crisis, harmful traditional practices and weak local protection mechanisms. The situation has worsened because of the pandemic. Girls, orphans and other disadvantaged children are particularly vulnerable demographics among those at risk of violence, neglect and exploitation.

Children Believe works to prevent all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children. We place an emphasis on protecting children from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV),<sup>11</sup> which has been on the rise globally due to the pandemic.

SGBV often manifests as sexual abuse and harassment, verbal abuse, deprivation of resources, human trafficking and harmful traditional practices, such as early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). Our approach focuses on listening to and working with boys and girls to understand their situations and improve their safety.

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**Our sponsorship program helps provide orphans and other vulnerable children with resources and support so they can attend school, have nutritious meals and receive health care, which helps reduce their risk to experiences of violence and exploitation.**

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We work with schools systems to make school environments safe and free of violence, and collaborate

with governments and community partners to implement progressive laws and policies, increase public awareness and strengthen the capacity of child protection systems in the community. Additionally, we lead a consortium to mitigate irregular migration, child trafficking and youth displacement in Latin America (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Mexico), with funding from Global Affairs Canada.

During the pandemic, Children Believe worked to reduce and mitigate potential negative impacts of COVID-19 on children and women. The work involved collaborating with local governments to strengthen community-based child protection programs that reduce the vulnerabilities of children facing discrimination such as caste, gender, ethnic identity, disability, forced migration, displacement or difficult circumstances like homelessness. Our efforts also sought to reduce stigmatization and discrimination against children diagnosed with COVID-19 and/or children whose caregivers suffered or died from COVID-19.

## FY21 program achievements

Over the past year, our work addressed four key issues: (i) protecting children and women from violence in the COVID-19 context, (ii) preventing irregular child migration, (iii) ending child marriage and FGM, and (iv) sponsoring and supporting orphaned and vulnerable children. In FY21, our programs benefitted a total of 325,270 children, youth, parents and other duty-bearers across 383 community groups in our six implementing countries and four additional grant implementing countries. We supported them in improving their awareness on child rights and protection, and enabled them to take action against child abuse, exploitation, irregular migration and child marriage. In addition, we had more than 44,500 children from our six countries enrolled in our sponsorship program and benefit from the interventions we offered.

<sup>11</sup> *Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) refers to any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. Gender-based violence is considered to be any harmful act directed against individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of their gender. It may include sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced/early marriage and harmful traditional practices. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion. It can be physical, emotional, psychological or sexual in nature, and can take the form of a denial of resources or access to services. It inflicts harm on women, girls, men and boys (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. October 2014. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/OnePagere/Sexual\\_and\\_gender-based\\_violence.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/OnePagere/Sexual_and_gender-based_violence.pdf)).*



**Protecting children and women from violence in the COVID-19 context**

Children Believe worked to reduce and mitigate the rise in violence against women and children that occurred during the pandemic. Whether the risk stemmed from the loss or separation from primary caregivers, disruption to family income, social isolation, fear or anxiety, we activated and enhanced the capacities of local protection mechanisms to protect children and women. The majority of violence reported was related to early marriage, early pregnancy and sexual and labour exploitation, and was most frequently committed by persons with close relationships to the families.

To address these forms of violence, Children Believe and our partners collaborated with local governments to strengthen community-based child protection programs that reduce the vulnerabilities of children facing discrimination. Our efforts also sought to reduce stigmatization and discrimination against children diagnosed with COVID-19 and/or children whose caregivers suffered or died from COVID-19.

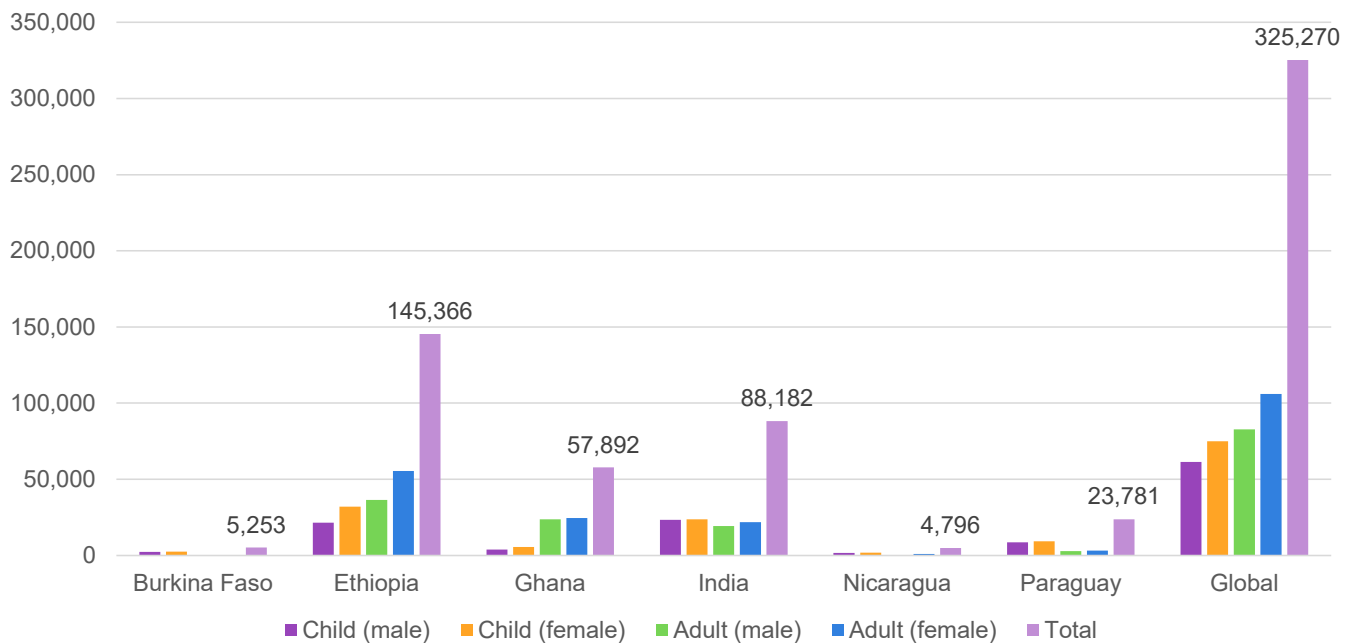
We worked with partners to design and implement programs and services in the context of the growing risk of violence and exploitation. We carried out community awareness and education programs encompassing SGBV-prevention messages and advised on how community leaders, caregivers and children should be equipped to prevent and report SGBV.

Along with our implementing partners, our country teams engaged local law enforcement bodies to bring abusers to justice, while supporting the availability of psychosocial counselling services for victims.

We closely monitored our sponsored children and their families to ensure their safety and well-being.

Overall, Children Believe’s protection programs reached more than 325,270 children and women, enabling them to prevent or be protected from various forms of violence and seek support when required (Chart 11).

**CHART 11: NUMBER OF PEOPLE REACHED THROUGH VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND PROTECTION INITIATIVES IN CHILDREN BELIEVE’S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION**



Source: Children Believe COVID-19 Monitoring Report, May 2021

### Preventing irregular child migration

Child migration refers to the movement of young people between the ages of three and 18 to another country or region, with or without their parents or a legal guardian. Irregular migration happens outside governing laws, regulations or international agreements and pursues illegal or informal routes and mechanisms for movement to another country or region.

Over FY21, Children Believe continued to follow up on the increasing outflow of young migrants from Central America and Mexico. Even with the additional threat of becoming infected with COVID-19, thousands of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 were desperate to escape the violence, deprivation, disasters and poverty in their home countries, and faced the risks of irregular migration to seek better futures elsewhere. The pandemic's detrimental impact on domestic employment opportunities reportedly added further pressure on young women and men, inducing a new wave of irregular migration.

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To prevent the irregular migration of youth and children, we continued to lead and implement activities aimed at improving the living conditions of at-risk girls, boys, adolescents, their families and communities across El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Mexico.<sup>12</sup>

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In these countries, our interventions over the past year included strengthening partnerships and improving the capacity of policymakers and practitioners to design and implement effective child protection systems and promote actions to end violence. We increased young people's employment prospects by giving them skills training so they could find jobs or start small businesses.

We also adopted digital technology platforms/services, offered online skill- and entrepreneurship-development programs and promoted the use of an e-learning infrastructure for the continuity of education during lockdowns. Further, we developed local relationships to create new opportunities for employment.



**A young man, supported by Children Believe, who secured a job as a chef in his community in Nicaragua.**

**PHOTO BY JURIS KORNETS**

Providing education about the issue of irregular migration was an important area of work. Working with youth associations, we equipped them with information about the negative consequences of irregular migration and the risk of child trafficking. Further contributing to the reduction of irregular migration, we also worked to improve the knowledge and skills of duty-bearers at multiple levels, including government, public institutions, municipalities and local organizations.

### Ending child marriage

Children Believe is deeply concerned about the increasing practice of child marriage in countries where we work as a result of the pandemic. Child marriage, which can take the form of a formal or informal union between girls and boys under the age of 18, is a harmful practice and a human rights violation disproportionately affecting girls. It prematurely ends a girl's education and robs her of her agency to make decisions about her education, health and other aspects of her life. The long-term impact is a limitation on a girl's economic, social and political participation, and with it, an increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health and early death.

<sup>12</sup> *Preventing Irregular Child and Youth Migration in Central America (PICMCA)* is implemented by a consortium led by Children Believe, and includes ChildFund International, a US-based affiliate, and EDUCO, a global NGO based in Spain.

Countries where we work, such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and India, have the highest rates of child marriage globally. Our experiences working in these countries have shown that multiple, interrelated factors drive the practice of child marriage. They include poverty and financial considerations, concern for chastity and preserving family honour, tradition, customs or religious laws that condone the practice, an inadequate legislative framework and weak law enforcement.

Our interventions in FY21 involved preventing early marriages induced by COVID-19 and supporting adolescent girls and boys, parents, community leaders and governments to implement actions against child marriage. Additionally, we collaborated with local and national partners to raise public awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage and the benefits of empowering girls, emphasizing the importance of completing their education.

In India, despite COVID-19 lockdowns, Children Believe made significant progress in reducing child marriage by increasing awareness among all stakeholders and helping girls remain in school.



**A young girl in India reading her school textbook. Children Believe is committed to breaking barriers that prevent girls from accessing education and thriving. PHOTO BY LIPI C. JOBSON**

Along with our partners, we continued to work with community-based organizations and child-friendly

accountability clubs to empower these groups to prevent child marriage. They were active in identifying situations of high risk for child marriage and bringing families before the appropriate bodies if violations occurred. Accordingly, 10 child marriages were prevented out of the 15 cases reported.

In Burkina Faso, where 52 percent of girls are married before their 18th birthday (UNICEF, 2020) and with the fifth highest rate for child marriage globally, Children Believe is deeply engaged in addressing child marriage as the worst form of gender-based violence and violation of girls' rights.

In the past year, we focused on mitigating the risk factors that drive this harmful practice and other forms of gender-based violence. In partnership with UNICEF, we helped 123,785 people (74,498 women and girls) increase their awareness about the consequences of child marriage and supported them in exercising their rights to prevent it. We trained more than 21,830 youth (10,872 girls), equipping them with knowledge about legal rights that protect children from such violations.

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**It is encouraging to note that 137 villages within our operational areas publicly declared an abandonment of practicing child marriage.**

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This has been further strengthened by formal institutions and cross sections of community members who have worked towards zero tolerance of early and forced marriage.

In Nicaragua, Children Believe collaborated with local partners to help improve institutional child safeguarding standards by updating protection policies.

Due to the increasing trend of teen pregnancy during the pandemic, we created initiatives to empower young people, especially young women, with knowledge to strengthen local child protection capacities and enhance preventive measures that mitigate sexual violence and violence related to teen dating.

**Box 3: Protecting children and ending child marriage – Ragavi’s Story, India**

Ragavi, a 17-year-old girl, was brought up by a single mother in India. Lacking educational support at home, she struggled in school and failed her grade 12 exams. Her mother lost hope for her daughter’s future and pressured Ragavi to withdraw from school and prepare for marriage.

Members of Ragavi’s local Child-Friendly Accountability Monitoring Committee came to know about the situation and reported the case to the appropriate institutions, including Children Believe’s program partner. The committee members worked with Children Believe’s partner to address the matter through

consultative dialogues with Ragavi and her mother, offering advice and support. Ragavi’s mother eventually became convinced of her daughter’s right to education and provided her with the encouragement to return to and complete her schooling.

Ragavi was freed from entering an early marriage. This allowed her to resume her education and eventually led to an acceptance at a nursing school. Today, Ragavi is completing an internship at a government hospital, gaining valuable experience and working towards her graduation in the near future.

**Sponsoring and supporting orphans and vulnerable children**

Education and health services are free in most of the rural villages where Children Believe works. However, schools are not always nearby to where families live and they don’t always offer quality education.

An additional challenge is that families cannot afford the cost of books and uniforms, which excludes thousands of poor and socially marginalized children from attending school. Some children go to school hungry and are gradually forced to drop out in order to help earn money to sustain the family or help around the house or farm. Girls face greater barriers that limit their attendance, such as the lack of separate sanitation facilities in schools for girls, poor menstrual hygiene and family expectations related to domestic chores.

Children Believe’s well-designed sponsorship program

identifies orphans and other vulnerable children and provides support so they can attend and stay in school. This support occurs simultaneously as the challenges, stated above, are being addressed.

Our program brings together individual Canadian donors with children in need, and we also work in partnership with local civil society organizations, school administrations and community leaders to help achieve our goals.

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**With the involvement of 26 local civil society organizations across 383 communities in our six countries, our sponsorship program in FY21 enrolled and benefited 44,588 sponsored children (Table 3) and families in greatest need.**

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**TABLE 3: NUMBER OF ENROLLED SPONSORED CHILDREN IN CHILDREN BELIEVE’S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION WHO BENEFIT FROM OUR FAMILY-FOCUSED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS<sup>13</sup>**

	BFASO	ETH	GHA	IND	NIC	PAR	GLOBAL
<b>Enrolled sponsored children</b>	6,688	8,580	8,976	5,086	7,624	7,634	44,588

<sup>13</sup> Enrolled children are children who are screened on the basis of their vulnerability to participate in and benefit from Children Believe programs. A child qualifies as a ‘paid’ sponsored child when he/she gets an individual sponsor who is committed to extend financial support and establishes a one-to-one relationship with them through a supporter number assigned by Children Believe.



Children from our child sponsorship programs indicated that they were able to cover the basic cost of school attendance with the support they received from the program. In addition to the benefit of gaining an education, the sponsorship offered children the opportunity to enjoy improved school and health facilities, adequate water and sanitation facilities, and income generation opportunities for their families.

Most of the sponsored children also reported that they were able to receive regular health check-ups, participate in after-school activities, attend Creative Learning Centres and receive assisted study time in the evening to finish their homework or prepare for exams. The after-school program helps sponsored children develop life skills and also gives them the space and opportunity to play, which is important for a child's development.



A teacher conducts a lesson at a Creative Learning Centre in India (photo taken prior to COVID-19).



# IV—GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equality is an integral part of all our strategic pathways to change as girls and women are at the nerve centre of the economic and social lives of the communities where we are work. They produce most of the food, make up a third of the labour force and care for families and homes. Yet they tend to have fewer rights, resources and opportunities than boys and men to make life-shaping decisions.

**Gender remains the most persistent predictor of poverty and social injustice. Children Believe, therefore, works to ensure that women, men, girls and boys enjoy the same rights, protections and access to resources and opportunities.**

Our programs identify and respond to the different needs, abilities and situations of all stakeholders, particularly young girls and boys. When women’s rights are respected, women are healthier, better educated and better paid. This also has a broader impact. When women are elevated, children thrive and so do communities, organizations and societies, creating lasting benefits for generations to come.

Our programs are designed to address gender inequalities that create barriers to girls’ education and prevent girls and women from contributing to and benefiting from sustainable development activities in their communities and countries. Some of the inequalities we tackle include cultural preference for boys, stereotypes about gender roles and access to productive resources.

Children Believe strives for gender transformative change, working with key stakeholders to identify and transform the root causes of gender inequality. We address social norms and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender inequalities, and undertake innovative policy-influence work to challenge the status quo and ensure the implementation of legislation and policies promoting gender equality are enforced.

As we integrate gender equality strategies across all our programming, our programs contribute to Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. In particular, our work focuses on Target 5.3 (eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation) and Target 5.5 (ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life).

During FY21, the spread of COVID-19 threatened the gains we had made in previous years. The pandemic deepened pre-existing gender gaps and inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems. Economic shocks significantly impacted women and girls who were already earning less, saving less, holding insecure jobs or living in abject poverty. It was observed that GBV also increased as a consequence of the lockdowns, while the available local protection services active before the COVID-19 pandemic were facing disruption.

Table 4 presents the 2021 Global Gender Gap scores and rankings for our six operating countries.<sup>14</sup> Published by the World Economic Forum, the measures for gender inequality are based on data from the following overarching areas: 1) economic participation and opportunities, 2) education attainment, 3) health and survival, and 4) political leadership.

**TABLE 4: 2021 GENDER GAP RANK AND SCORE FOR CHILDREN BELIEVE’S COUNTRIES OF OPERATION**

Country	2021 Global Rank	2021 Global Score
NIC	12	0.796
PAR	86	0.702
ETH	97	0.691
GHA	117	0.666
BFASO	124	0.651
IND	140	0.625

Source: World Economic Forum, 2021 Global Gender Gap Index Report

<sup>14</sup> The lower the GII score, the greater the disparity between females and males, and loss to economic and social growth.

As indicated in the table, the national gender gaps in our countries of operation confirm the persistence of gender imbalances. Comparatively, Nicaragua emerged as a better performing country for gender parity (ranking 12th globally), followed by Paraguay, which scored slightly lower than the regional average, but ranked 86th globally. In both countries, national gender gaps have shown more imbalances in the areas of political empowerment and economic opportunities.

Nationally, Ethiopia has closed 69 percent of its gender gap and ranks 97th globally in 2021. Although the overall gender gap has widened slightly since last year, Ethiopia has made significant progress in the area of health and survival. Women's political empowerment has improved greatly since the change in government in 2018, but a declining trend has been seen over the previous years. The economic participation of women remains very low in the country.

India has closed 62.5 percent of its gender gap to-date, but is ranked 140th globally. This gap is a bit wider than previous years. Most of the decline is attributed to the lack of political empowerment for women, notably in the share of senior political leadership positions both in executive and legislative bodies. India also showed a decline in equal economic opportunities due to a decrease in the labour force participation rate for women. In addition, the number of women in professional and technical roles, as well as senior and managerial positions, also remained low.

There is evidence of strong discrimination against women in the health and survival sphere, as wide gaps in the sex of babies at birth were observed due to high incidences of gender-selective illegal practices. Further to this, more than one in four women in India have reportedly faced violence from their intimate partner at some point in their relationship.

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**We recognized that our response during the COVID-19 pandemic must not be limited to rectifying long-standing gender inequalities that were further exacerbated. Therefore, we worked hard to build resilient communities, keeping every woman and girl at the centre of our recovery and resilience-building plans.**

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The following section provides a summary of our program results in FY21 and highlights the efforts and achievements we made in the area of gender equality.

### FY21 program achievements

#### **Creating opportunities to advance women and build their capacities**

Children Believe's programs in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nicaragua and Paraguay have laid a strong foundation for women and young girls by supporting and facilitating women's collectives and organizations dedicated to their advancement. Examples include self-help groups and women's savings and credit cooperatives. The participation of women in these community-based organizations (CBOs), both as members and leaders, has created much-needed spaces for women to exercise their social, economic and political rights.



**A woman selling grain at her local market in Ethiopia. With access to loans and financial services from savings and credit cooperatives facilitated by Children Believe, impoverished women can expand their income-generating activities and better support their families.**

Our programs in India, for instance, have helped women become politically active and participate in local elections, as seen in Andhra Pradesh. Women's groups have motivated and trained their female members to not only exercise their voting rights, but to also inspire other women, particularly from Dalit, tribal and marginalized communities,

to become active politically. As a result, 13 women have succeeded in winning seats in Panchayats elections (village governance) and an additional 78 women were posted as ward members in their Panchayats constituencies.

With our partners in Paraguay, we provided training for women to develop their skills, confidence and motivation to pursue leadership positions. We saw great outcomes from this effort.

Of the 17 CBOs supported by our programs, 14 were led by women. Similarly, out of 15 child- and youth-led organizations supported, 13 were led by girls and young women, and all 18 financial saving groups had female leaders.

Having women in leadership positions made significant contributions to advancing the mandate of the CBOs. Among other things, the CBOs made progress working with schools, government institutions and with other key community leaders to advocate for child rights and ensure the allocation of greater resources for basic services that promote women's economic empowerment.

In Nicaragua, Children Believe promoted women's economic empowerment through the creation of four women's Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs).

**These associations have been instrumental in improving women's access to loans and other financial services at low-interest rates. In turn, the support allowed many women to start small business ventures and pursue other income-generating activities, enabling them to take care of themselves and their families.**

VSLAs were also established in Ghana and Burkina Faso. Currently in Ghana, women hold four out of the five leadership positions across all the VSLAs. To strengthen the leadership of women in the country, 445 community/group leaders (223 females) were educated about gender inequality and the value of having women in leadership

roles. In some communities, the aspiring women leaders secured endorsements from traditional women chiefs who are influential in community decision-making. This helped legitimize the capacity of the women and bring their leadership to fruition with various associations.

In Burkina Faso, a total of 4,283 women and girls were supported in forming 170 new VSLAs across 110 communities. The participation of women and girls in these groups increased their abilities to express themselves and demonstrate their influence at the community level. This has led to 124 women from the VSLA groups being elected as municipal counsellors and presidents of local CBOs.

**Overall, Children Believe's programs created opportunities for 6,401 young women and mothers to become empowered, attain leadership roles and ensure that the voices of women and girls are heard in societal decision-making processes.**

**Improved adoption and enforcement of gender-sensitive policies, legislation and strategies to give women equal access to resources and opportunities**

Children Believe worked with partners to design and implement programs and services in the context of the growing risks arising from COVID-19 and the surge in SGBV.

All of our community-awareness programs are geared towards addressing SGBV and advising community leaders, caregivers and children on how to prevent and/or report occurrences. Our local implementing partners collaborated with grassroots organizations focused on human rights. These organizations work closely with local law enforcement bodies to bring abusers to justice, while making psychosocial counselling services available for victims.

Through this collaborative effort, Children Believe reached over 54,330 girls and women in FY21, and helped prevent or protect them from various forms of violence.



On top of the COVID-19 program responses that address gender inequality and violence, Children Believe and our program partners in Ethiopia worked on the enforcement of legislation and strategies to promote equal access to economic opportunities for women.

For this initiative, we worked closely with the local government, trade and industry institutions, small-scale enterprise institutions, financial institutions, women and children affairs bureaus, social security affairs offices, justice departments and administration offices. Women champions and CBOs created platforms to track and enforce the implementation of existing affirmative action legislation towards women's economic empowerment. The effort resulted in a total of 7,800 women in Ethiopia benefitting from having access to temporary and small employment-creation and livelihood-support opportunities in FY21.

Children Believe also worked to create equitable access to gender-responsive vocational training for youth, especially

young women in Nicaragua. In collaboration with the Nicaraguan government's National Institute of Technology (INATEC), 33 vocational training courses were revised to be gender-responsive in their orientation, objectives, scope of training, delivery modalities and assessment of training outcomes.

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**Across our programs, a total of 52,015 women and young girls benefited from the improved adoption and enforcement of gender-sensitive policies, legislations and strategies, including post-COVID-19 adaptation plans.**

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The impact of these initiatives will support equal access to economic and natural resources, financial services and opportunities for more women and girls in the future.



**A female farmer gathering straw in Ethiopia. She was able to expand her income-generating activities through support from her local savings and credit cooperative. PHOTO BY PHILIP MAHER**

# V—PARTNERING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH FOR CHANGE

One of Children Believe's strategic pathways for change is to enhance the inclusion and meaningful participation of all children and youth across our programs and policy work. It aligns with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates the Right to Participation.

Children Believe aims to activate the agency of children and youth by empowering them to be partners and drivers of change in their own settings. We work directly with children and youth through every stage in our program management cycle, so they can have a say in the programs and services that serve their best interests.

Children Believe's programs strive to break down social barriers to reach all children, regardless of their social identities. For this reason, we give special consideration to children and youth from vulnerable social groups, including ethnic minorities, social caste groups, destitute living situations and children/youth with special needs, to support their meaningful participation and contribution. Additionally, with our partners, we support agencies committed to the well-being of children and youth so they can have the necessary institutional, technical and financial capacity to bring about the change they want to see.

In FY21, the pandemic and lockdowns disrupted the full participation of young people and threatened the work of their agencies. However, Children Believe, local partners and youth groups managed to continue carrying out our activities through the use of digital technology, while following required COVID-19 protocols.

In the following section, we present the results of our work in child and youth participation and empowerment. This includes the implementation of the Child-Friendly Accountability Methodology (CFAM) in promoting the meaningful

participation of children and youth to facilitate sustainable change. We also highlight key achievements from our youth economic empowerment programs.

## FY21 program achievements

### Strengthening child-friendly accountability mechanisms for stronger child rights and youth empowerment programming

Children Believe and our partners adopted and implemented the Child-Friendly Accountability Methodology (CFAM) to ensure stakeholders and duty-bearers uphold the rights of children.

The CFAM has been an effective mechanism to mobilize and promote child-friendly accountability across formal and informal child protection systems in our program communities.

Clear examples of duty-bearers fulfilling their responsibilities to protect children from violence have been on the rise. An example of this is the discarding of harmful social norms and practices even during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In communities where we have implemented CFAM, we have also achieved meaningful participation from children and youth in holding duty-bearers accountable.

In India, over the course of FY21, Children Believe supported the mobilization of 6,126 children (3,125 girls) between the ages of 13 and 17, and the formation of over 160 child/youth groups. Encouraging to note, almost 57 percent of the representation in these groups came from children and young people from the most oppressed populations in society, such as Dalits and tribal groups. Child and youth group leaders indicated that their participation in key community decision-making platforms enabled them to raise and address their primary concerns with their respective child rights protection committees. As a result, community leaders and local administrators in 20 *Panchayats*<sup>15</sup> passed resolutions to reform existing customary laws and practices in their respective

<sup>15</sup> Small administrative units equivalent to parishes



communities, including the prevention of child marriages. The reforms contributed to the reduction of girls dropping out of secondary school and increased their aspirations for and participation in higher education.

Similarly, the introduction and implementation of the CFAM in Paraguay saw an increase in the participation of children and youth in standing up for their rights and speaking about decisions that shape their future. It also led to stronger collaborative actions in our operational communities. Local government workers and community advisors, who used to operate out of provisional capitals far from semi-urban/remote communities, have now begun to make weekly visits to work alongside the child and youth groups in our areas to address their issues of concern. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, about 27 networks of child and youth groups continued to meet with their peers through virtual means and address child protection concerns in consultation with municipal and other local governing bodies.



**Young girls in Paraguay creating content to promote child rights in their communities.**

In Ethiopia, Children Believe and our local partners worked to ensure the enactment of child-friendly legislative and policy measures through extending institutional support to the Federal Ministry for Women, Children and Youth Affairs. The ministry developed a stronger national action plan and enacted a national guideline for child and youth participation. This required the formation of multiple child- and youth-led platforms, such as Children's Parliaments and child and youth wings across key government departments at the

regional, zonal and district levels. Children Believe supported the formation of these platforms with our local partners. For example, our local partner Ratson, helped established Children's Parliaments and Schoolchild Right Clubs at the district level to work closely work with school principals and local government officers to address child rights issues.

Furthermore, the child and youth groups have been active in educating their respective community members about child rights using child-interface technology, community radio programs and telephone hotlines.

They were also able to address their concerns about textbook shortages and teacher absenteeism in consultation with district education officials. Voicing these concerns and implementing solutions have helped improve the quality of education at their schools.

Children Believe and our partners in Nicaragua have facilitated the establishment of four local youth committees composed of about equal portions of young women and men (52 percent women). The committees were active in leading consultations and influencing the decisions of community leaders to mitigate child irregular migration. Part of this included being involved in the design and implementation of new employment and business development opportunities for unemployed youth, ensuring equal access for young women.

The youth also conducted a national media campaign to prevent irregular child and youth migration under the motto "My Heart is in my Nation". They shared over 3,200 radio messages, dispatched 68 posts using various social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and installed four billboards, reaching over 194,000 people through their efforts.

### **Youth skills development and economic empowerment**

Youth are more likely to be safe, healthy and to thrive when they have the skills and capability to transition to safe and decent work, and secure livelihoods. Recognizing this, Children Believe and our partners have continued to operate our youth economic empowerment programs in FY21, adopting them to our COVID-19 context. Our employment programs in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nicaragua and Paraguay have all continued to build the skills of young women and men in

leadership and advocacy, technical vocational fields, financial literacy, self-employment and entrepreneurship.

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**We facilitated business linkages among young people, communities, markets and governments, and created equitable, inclusive and safe work opportunities where young people have the power to make economic decisions for themselves and lead change.**

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We implemented actions to build youth economic participation, voice and decision-making power, especially through facilitating the creation of supportive environments

like young women business champions and youth-led market assessments.

Our programs in the pacific and central zone of Nicaragua, for example, provided life skills, professional and vocational training for about 12,000 youth (7,200 women) and created strong linkages with 15 publicly- and privately-owned technical centres.

To accommodate the restrictions due to the pandemic, Children Believe and our partners conducted our entrepreneurship and business development initiatives by adopting numerous online training courses, business mentorships and internship opportunities. Additionally, we provided tablets, free Wi-Fi facilities and seed capital to youth entrepreneur groups to build their businesses and tap into emerging opportunities, such as food delivery, online shopping, home beauty salons and small cash crop agriculture.

#### **Box 4: Economic empowerment and gender equality – Maria del Carmen’s story, Nicaragua**

Maria del Carmen grew up in a patriarchal society where many women are often subjected to various forms of violence, including domestic, verbal, emotional and economic.

Women in her community are marginalized and, as a result, have not been able to enjoy equal access to resources and opportunities or meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

Maria del Carmen said, “Sometimes we need someone who believes in what we can do and in what we are able to accomplish, but it is rare to get such recognition and support in our community. That is why we appreciate Children Believe’s youth economic opportunities initiative as it is proof of their trust in our ability and capacity to change our families and communities.”

Maria del Carmen pointed out that about 50 young women from her community were able to get support from Children Believe to improve their economic livelihoods and earn income to raise their families and support their communities.

Of these young women, 19 were able to start new business ventures using the seed capital provided by Children Believe. Maria del Carmen further highlighted that through the young women’s economic-support program, women have developed higher self-esteem, better self-management skills and improved their entrepreneurship capacity.

Maria del Carmen is optimistic that this will have a broader impact and will strengthen more women and her society in the long-term.

In FY21, we helped over 80,540 adolescents and youth across our six countries of operation build their skills, knowledge and aspirations, and foster agency and resilience to navigate the employment sphere. We also worked with youth groups to

become active in policy environments and decision-making that will support a smooth transition into stable livelihoods and work and business opportunities for young people.

## VI—CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE INITIATIVES

During FY21, Children Believe finalized and launched our Centre of Excellence (COE) initiatives. Each serves as a hub to leverage innovation, share knowledge, promote networking and advance thought leadership in order to maximize our impact in the key areas of our strategic priorities. Our COE initiatives are:

1. Child protection and participation (led by Paraguay);
2. Early childhood education, care and development (co-led by Burkina Faso and Ghana);
3. Child protection in disaster risk reduction/emergencies (led by Ethiopia);
4. Gender and social inclusion (led by India); and
5. Gender equality and economic empowerment of women and girls (led by Nicaragua).

In Ghana and Burkina Faso, our COE initiative focused on early childhood care and development (ECCD), and implementing the Learning-Through-Play (LTP) method.<sup>16</sup> LTP has been an effective tool to promote maternal well-being, nutrition and early brain development in children, enhancing their social interactions, emotional well-being and cognitive development.



**Children playing at an early childhood care and development centre supported by Children Believe in Burkina Faso (photo taken prior to COVID-19). PHOTO BY JURIS KORNETS**

The Initiative involved awareness-raising activities with parents and caregivers through community conversations and campaigns about the importance of ECCD and LTP. In addition, practical training focused on early stimulation and parental interactions, including the participation of fathers in the care and nurturing of their children, was undertaken.

At the institutional level, the ECCD-LTP Initiative involved working closely with the respective country's government, local partners and parent committees to enhance the efficacy of preschool and health care systems, and improve learning and health outcomes for children. Accordingly, through the Initiative we trained over 800 early childhood education facilitators and lower-primary school teachers as well as over 1,600 parents and caregivers in the LTP method. The effectiveness of LTP was subsequently endorsed by the Government of Ghana's Education and Health Departments, eventually leading to an investment in enhancing the capacity of their technical and administrative staff. This included over 550 teacher-training college students, over 60 community health agents and over 35 education supervisors.

Similarly, the Education Department from the government of Burkina Faso closely collaborated with us to train over 2,300 primary/preschool teachers, 560 teacher-training college students, 65 community health agents and 35 education supervisors.

These activities have now laid the groundwork for transforming the way ECCD education is designed and delivered by education and health institutions in both countries.

In Ethiopia, our COE focus on child protection in emergencies and disaster risk reduction was enhanced in FY21. We amplified the need to address issues related to children's vulnerability in national risk management strategies, guidelines

<sup>16</sup> *Learning-Through-Play (LTP) is an innovative method first developed by the SickKids Centre for Community Mental Health (formerly The Hincks-Dellcrest Treatment Centre) and the City of Toronto Public Health Department, and then piloted by Children Believe. Since 2014, Children Believe and our partners have been implementing LTP to deliver quality early childhood care, education and cognitive development, which are instrumental for the development of healthy children and lay a solid foundation for children to thrive in their later years.*

and systems. Children Believe sits on the technical working group within the Ethiopian Disaster Risk Management Commission, which is in charge of disaster risk assessment, risk mapping, early warning and planning, as well as disaster response and prevention across the country.

In India, under the COE initiative of gender and social inclusion, Children Believe spearheaded the process for transformative gender analysis and social inclusion in social development spheres. We developed a toolkit for gender analysis and inclusion to guide the work of young leaders, taking into account the specific conditions of marginalized tribes and castes.

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**Our efforts focused on fostering positive new gender norms to end the practice of child marriage, providing inclusive education and securing the safety, security and dignity of girls and women in schools and industries.**

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During the course of the year, several sessions of capacity-building training, support visits and workshops on child marriage were conducted to enhance the knowledge and capacity of local partners and government staff, and boost their commitment to address the marginalization of women, especially from socially discriminated groups.

Children Believe in Nicaragua embarked on its bold COE initiative to enhance gender equality and the economic empowerment of young women and girls in FY21. Advancing

our initiative, we conducted a study on reducing gender gaps in the economic development sector. The findings from our study helped define the priorities and reveal strategies to promote the creation of youth employment opportunities, notably for young women.

In Paraguay, Children Believe made great strides in promoting government accountability for child rights and youth participation through creating a child-friendly collaborative environment at the national, regional and global levels.

Supporting our COE further, we also promoted community actions and facilitated the proactive engagement of CBOs to ensure the collective accountability to protect children and youth from abuse, neglect, exploitation, trafficking and other forms of violence. Such initiatives led to a joint action with the Ministry of Children and Adolescents, resulting in the creation of the National Policy and Strategy for Child Participation. The draft policy, which is expected to be completed in September 2021, will shape the direction and set the priorities for promoting child and youth participation in the country.

**Each of our COE initiatives are critical operations for our overall mission to create a future of hope for children, families and communities.**

Further, they have generated knowledge, influenced thought, promoted best practices, strengthened sectoral expertise and influenced key stakeholders in multiple areas. Our achievements in FY21 have put us in a good position to make further advancements in FY22.



# VII—STRENGTHENING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND HARNESSING POLICY INFLUENCE

Over the past year, Children Believe strengthened our strategic collaborations and partnerships with national, continental and global organizations. This effort helped enhance our reach, augment our skills and expertise, increase our impact and broaden our spheres of policy influence.

In FY21, Children Believe continued our collaboration with Graça Machel Trust. We jointly hosted the “Canada-Africa panel on overcoming barriers to education for girls in sub-Saharan Africa in a COVID-19 world” in February 2021, aligning with Canada’s International Development Week (IDW).

Children Believe joined with peer organizations, governments, partners and our supporters to highlight the plight of girls in sub-Saharan Africa in accessing quality and inclusive education.

The panel was composed of young women from African youth groups and representatives from Children Believe, Graça Machel Trust, the United Nations Women and Global Affairs Canada. Panelists provided their insights on how girls are facing early marriage, violence at home, child labour and pregnancy, and the negative impact of the pandemic on their education. What was underlined in the discussion was the need to bridge the digital divide in education, adopt holistic education policies and, most importantly, the importance of listening to the voices of girls and young women. The event also highlighted the need for greater sector collaboration and increased funding to improve access to education and innovation in order to overcome the systemic barriers girls in sub-Saharan Africa face.

Bolstering our relationship with Graça Machel Trust, we have also worked together to strengthen our policy influence in numerous areas of mutual interest that have been

detrimentally impacted by the pandemic. These include addressing girls’ education and overcoming the deepening digital divide in the COVID-19 context, mitigating the rise in violence against children and women, overcoming the challenges of vaccine equity and promoting COVID-19 vaccine rollouts in Africa, notably among refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDP).

Another key strategic partnership in helping us amplify the voices of those we serve is with the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF). Children Believe supported the Forum’s joint Pan-Africa level policy initiative by placing a Senior Technical Officer - Advocacy and Communications with their team to strengthen their Pan-African Child Rights Advocacy, Communication and Program influence capacity.

Similarly, Children Believe in Burkina Faso broadened the scope of its national policy influence by assuming the role of Chair with the Permanent Secretariat of Non-Governmental Organizations (SPONG).<sup>17</sup>

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We also continued to engage with the government of Burkina Faso and the European Union in the launch of a bold government accountability and reporting initiative to track the government’s commitment to fulfil its targets for the global SDGs.

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The goals are related to the issues of social protection, child protection, food security as well as water and sanitation services. Furthermore, with funding support from ChildFund Korea and in collaboration with UNICEF, we engaged the country’s Ministry of Health to promote the inclusion of ECCD education through popularizing the innovate LTP method.

<sup>17</sup> Formed in 1974, SPONG has a membership of 250 civil-society organizations.



## VII—STRENGTHENING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND HARNESSING POLICY INFLUENCE

In Ethiopia, Children Believe continued to participate in and contribute to three key national technical working groups, namely the National Child Rights Advisory Group, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Technical Working Group and the Early Childhood Development Technical Working Group.

**Children Believe has been working closely to provide technical support to these groups and help shape their agendas.**

We have particularly been involved during the review of technical proposals and business plans, and the development of policies and implementation guidelines. We have also been active in the design of monitoring and evaluation systems, which are instrumental to increase the capacity of diverse stakeholders and effectively uphold and address child-, youth- and gender-sensitive laws, policies and strategies in the country.

On a similar front, Children Believe in Ghana reactivated its membership with the Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition.

**We worked with other members assiduously towards empowering children and youth advocating for their rights, protection and participation at various levels of decision-making.**

Children Believe also participated in the Technical Review Committee, established by the government of Ghana's Department of Children, and contributed to the review of the first draft of the National Early Childhood Care and Development Policy.

Children Believe in India collaborated with Campaign Against Child Labour to conduct a study, funded by the Government of Taiwan, on the impact of COVID-19 on the status of child labour in selected communities of Tamil Nadu. While there were many unverified news reports on the impact of COVID-19

on children, the study was groundbreaking in terms of providing evidence-based information on child labour and the rise of labour exploitation by 280 percent due to COVID-19. We also supported in disseminating the report and sharing the new information widely among various relevant stakeholders, including government officials, human rights organizations and media outlets.

In Nicaragua, Children Believe signed an agreement with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to promote the empowerment of adolescents and prevent teen pregnancy, early unions and sexual violence.

**This partnership is critical to maximize the impact of our gender equality initiatives in our program areas in Nicaragua, where the highest levels of teenage pregnancy in Latin America are recorded.**



**An interactive activity organized in Nicaragua to raise the awareness of communities about teenage pregnancy and child rights and protection (photo taken prior to COVID-19). PHOTO BY JURIS KORNETS**

We have also forged new partnerships with leading corporations in Nicaragua's private sector, including Nestlé, Tigo (a global telecommunications and media company) and Sinsa (the largest hardware company in the country).

These relationships will help us broaden our youth employment programs, especially to increase and diversify employment opportunities for young women.

Furthermore, we have maintained strong relationships with four public sector institutions (the Ministry of the Family, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Interior and the National Institute of Technology) that are mandated to advance child education, rights and protection. During FY21, the collaborations focused on the provision of emergency assistance to children and women who were seriously affected by the pandemic and hurricane emergencies. Through these collaborations, we also worked to improve the knowledge and skills of front-line staff working to prevent violence against children and women, and improve understanding about international and national legislation for the protection of children and promotion of gender equality.

In Paraguay, Children Believe collaborated with the national government, the National Network of Childhood and Adolescents, and the Association for the Defence of Children's Rights. We provided our technical support to review the National Policy and Strategy for Child Participation and helped prepare the annual scorecard on the government's 20 commitments to address child rights issues. We also worked closely with UNICEF, Plan International and SOS Children's Villages to organize a national campaign on child protection against sexual abuse.

Over the course of the 2020-2021 fiscal year, Children Believe was able to maintain and further develop successful strategic collaborations with diverse organizations across varying contexts. These actions and relationships have enabled us to maximize our program impact and have greater policy influence at various levels that will help us fulfill our mission.

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## VIII—LOOKING FORWARD

FY21 was a very challenging year, but there are numerous achievements and advancements that we can feel proud of. However, more work lies ahead. Guided by our refreshed global FY22-24 strategy, we will deepen our program impact and increase our policy influence.

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**We believe providing access to education is the best way to tackle child poverty, inequality and injustice. For this reason, we will continue to address the critical barriers for girls and boys, and support them so they have sustained access to inclusive and quality education.**

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Lending to this, paying attention to closing the digital divide in education and improving learning outcomes are essential and we will explore new technologies and private sector partnerships to propel this work forward.

For the well-being of children and women, we will continue to work to improve health outcomes for children, young women and mothers. This will involve empowering parents and caregivers to respond to violence, neglect and the exploitation of children and promoting the rights of girls and women to avoid child marriage and other forms of gender discrimination.

In addition, we will ensure the meaningful participation of children and youth to amplify their voices and influence actions that affect their futures. We will serve as a catalyst among like-minded, child-focused organizations and will review and strengthen the humanitarian-response capacity of local development partners working in disaster-prone, fragile areas to improve program agility in times of crisis.

The combination of these initiatives are critical and will help us reach a greater number of vulnerable children, families and communities, creating lasting change that will benefit generations to come.

## ANNEX I: CHILDREN BELIEVE'S IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Country of Operation	Full Name /Abbreviations
Burkina Faso	Christian Organization for Relief and Development (formerly AOG)
	Christian Relief and Development Organization (CREDO)
	Evangelical Church of the International Missionary Society (EE/SIM)
	Catholic Organization for Development and Solidarity (OCADES) – FADA, East Region
	Catholic Organization for Development and Solidarity (OCADES) – KOUPELA, Centre-East Region
Ethiopia	Alem Children Support Organization (ACSO)
	Arat Kilo Child Care and Community Development Organization
	Bole Bible Baptist Church Child Care and Community Development (BBBC)
	Emmanuel Development Association (EDA)
	Ratson – Women, Youth and Children Development Program
	WKHC – Terepeza Development Association (TDA)
Ghana	AG Care
	Baptist Child Development Program
	Markaz Al Bishara
	Participatory Action for Rural Development Alternatives (PARDA)
India	Integrated Rural Community Development Society
	People's Action for Development
	Rural Organization For Poverty Eradication Services
	Society for People's Education and Economic Change
Nicaragua	Instituto de Promoción Humana Managua (INPRHU Managua) – Spanish for Institute for Human Promotion Managua; and Instituto de Promoción Humana Estelí (INPRHU Estelí) – Spanish for Institute for Human Promotion Masaya
	Centro de Apoyo a Programas y Proyectos (CAPRI) – Spanish for Program and Project Support Centre
	Movimiento infantil "Luis Alfonso Velásquez Flores" (MILAVF) – Spanish for Children's Movement "Luis Alfonso Velásquez Flores"
	Instituto de Formación Permanente (INSFOP) – Spanish for Institute of Permanent Training
Paraguay	Fundación Alda – Spanish for Alda Foundation
	Organizacion No Gubernamental Crecer – Spanish for Non-Governmental Organization, Crecer
	Global Infancia – Spanish for Global Childhood



Children Believe works globally to empower children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in — and be heard. For 60+ years, we've brought together brave young dreamers, caring supporters and partners, and unabashed idealists. Together, we're driven by a common belief: creating access to education — inside and outside of classrooms — is the most powerful tool children can use to change their world.

Children Believe is a member of ChildFund Alliance, a global network of 12 child-focused development organizations working to create opportunities for children and youth, their families and communities. ChildFund helps nearly 23-million children and their families in more than 70 countries overcome poverty and underlying conditions that prevent children from achieving their full potential. We work to end violence against children; provide expertise in emergencies and disasters to ease the harmful impact on children and their communities; and engage children and youth to create lasting change and elevate their voices in decisions that affect their lives.

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