

Food Security that Protects Children: Managing Risk, Delivering Impact

On 28 May 2026, humanitarian actors, diplomats, representatives of Permanent Missions, UN agencies, NGOs, donors, researchers and academics gathered at FAO Headquarters in Rome for the advocacy event “**Food Security that Protects Children: Managing Risk, Delivering Impact: Integrating Child Protection and Advancing the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action.**”

The event was co-hosted by the **Global Food Security Cluster (gFSC)**, the **Global Protection Cluster (GPC)** and **Plan International**, with support from the **Joining Forces for Food Security and Child Protection in Emergencies (JF-FS&CPiE)** project, funded by the **German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO)**. The event brought together over 50 participants representing Permanent Missions and donor governments, including Switzerland, the United States, Luxemburg, Belgium, Australia, Sweden, Italy, Germany and Denmark as well as UN agencies, academic and research institutions, donors, humanitarian organisations and cluster partners, reflecting growing recognition that food insecurity and child protection risks must be addressed together through coordinated and child-centred humanitarian action.

The event aimed to strengthen advocacy and dialogue around the critical links between food security and child protection and to showcase evidence from humanitarian settings demonstrating how food insecurity exacerbates child protection risks, including child labour, family separation, violence, exploitation and psychosocial distress. The event was chaired by Lindsey Hutchison, Head of Global Humanitarian Policy, Advocacy and Diplomacy at Plan International. Discussions also highlighted how integrating and mainstreaming food security and child protection interventions leads to stronger, safer and more sustainable outcomes for children and families, while strengthening accountability and programme effectiveness.

A central message throughout the event was that **every food security crisis is also a child protection crisis**. As conflict, displacement, climate shocks and economic instability continue to drive record levels of hunger globally, children remain among the most affected. Hunger and economic stress increase exposure to harmful coping mechanisms, undermine children's wellbeing and place them at greater risk of violence, neglect, exploitation, child labour, child marriage and school dropout.

Opening the event, Maxwell Shibensana, Deputy Director of FAO's Office of Emergency and Resilience, highlighted FAO's commitment to protecting children's rights and addressing the protection risks that both drive and result from food insecurity. He noted that **agriculture accounts for approximately 61 per cent of all child labour globally**, underscoring the importance of integrating child protection considerations into food security programming and strengthening collaboration across sectors.

Setting the scene, Joyce Mutiso, Child Protection Lead at the Global Protection Cluster, highlighted evidence linking food insecurity to child protection risks and stressed the

importance of joint action between Child Protection and Food Security actors. Referring to global estimates indicating that **approximately 318 million people in 68 countries experienced acute food insecurity in 2025**, she emphasized that children often represent at least half of affected populations in humanitarian crises. Drawing on the [Child Protection–Food Security evidence review](#) conducted on the linkages between child protection and food security in 2022, she highlighted how food insecurity contributes to psychosocial distress, violence against children and harmful coping mechanisms including child labour, child marriage and family separation. She noted that by working together and better understanding how food insecurity and child protection risks are linked, humanitarian actors will be able to make strategic decisions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to child protection risks; leverage food security programming to enhance children's protection and well-being; and minimize the risk of doing harm.

Drawing on operational experience from Ethiopia, Chad, Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mekdes Ashenafi of World Vision demonstrated how integrating child protection considerations into food security programming can improve outcomes for children and families. She shared evidence showing **higher school attendance, improved concentration in school, reduced family tension and lower risks of child labour** among households receiving integrated support. A notable example from Ethiopia involved adapting Post-Distribution Monitoring tools to include questions on child safety, violence and harmful coping mechanisms, enabling programme teams to identify previously hidden protection concerns and strengthen referrals.

Addressing the links between food insecurity, agriculture and child labour, Ariane Genthon of FAO highlighted how economic hardship often pushes families to rely on children's labour as a coping mechanism. Drawing on experiences from Honduras, she shared examples of integrated approaches combining school gardens, school feeding programmes and Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools to strengthen household food security while supporting children's education and reducing exposure to child labour.

Barbara Schuler of WFP demonstrated how relatively small operational adjustments can significantly improve protection outcomes. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, adapted targeting and referral systems helped identify and support **more than 500 child-headed households** that had previously been excluded from assistance. Examples from Lebanon and Ecuador further illustrated how food assistance can be delivered through systems and partnerships that actively contribute to children's safety and wellbeing. Her intervention reinforced a key message echoed throughout the event: **food security programming that protects children is not more complicated—it is simply more effective.**

Representing the Joining Forces for Food Security and Child Protection in Emergencies project, Silvia Oñate of Plan International shared evidence and lessons learned from integrated programming across Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Ethiopia and South Sudan. She highlighted how food insecurity often acts as an underlying driver of child protection risks and demonstrated how integrating child protection services with food assistance, cash transfers, livelihoods support and community-based interventions can reduce harmful coping mechanisms and strengthen family resilience.

Examples included mother-to-mother support groups linked with kitchen gardening activities in South Sudan, cooking demonstrations connected to Child-Friendly Spaces in the Central African Republic, and strengthened referral pathways in Burkina Faso linking vulnerable families to both protection and food security services. Evidence from programme evaluations showed that **cash assistance was most effective when combined with parenting support, case management and awareness-raising interventions**, contributing to reductions in child labour, child marriage, school dropout and household stress. Preliminary findings from South Sudan showed improvements in child supervision, girls' school attendance and prevention of child marriage, while programme monitoring in Bangladesh documented reductions in child labour and child marriage.

Speakers also highlighted progress achieved through the broader inter-agency Global Child Protection–Food Security initiative, including country-level collaboration, joint advocacy efforts and practical tools to support integration. Particular attention was given to the [**Integrated Child Protection and Food Security Programming in Humanitarian Action Toolbox**](#), which is already being rolled out in several humanitarian contexts and helping humanitarian actors translate commitments into operational practice.

Throughout the discussion, participants repeatedly emphasized that **the challenge is no longer demonstrating why integration matters, but documenting and scaling up what works**. Speakers called for stronger collaboration between sectors, more flexible and integrated funding approaches, greater investment in capacity strengthening and continued efforts to embed child protection considerations within food security policies, coordination mechanisms and programmes.

Looking ahead, Abdul Majid, Global Food Security Cluster Coordinator, reaffirmed the Cluster's commitment to advancing protection-sensitive food security programming and strengthening collaboration with Child Protection actors. He stressed the importance of ensuring that food security responses not only address hunger, but also contribute to protecting children from violence, exploitation and other protection risks.

In her closing remarks, Petra Berner, National Director of Plan International Germany, called for moving beyond isolated examples of good practice towards systemic change. She emphasized that **the evidence, tools and partnerships already exist** and that the priority now is to secure the political commitment, financing and collective action needed to make integrated approaches standard practice rather than exceptions.

As humanitarian needs continue to rise, the event reaffirmed a shared responsibility among governments, donors, UN agencies, clusters, NGOs, academia and affected communities to ensure that humanitarian responses not only address hunger, but also protect children from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. The discussions in Rome demonstrated that **the partnerships, commitment and practical solutions already exist; the priority now is to sustain momentum, strengthen collaboration and scale what works so that children are not only fed, but also safe, protected and able to thrive**.



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Resources and Further Information

- [Event Handout and Key Messages](#)
- [World Vision Video: *One Meal, One Classroom, One Future*](#)
- [Integrated Child Protection and Food Security Programming in Humanitarian Action Toolbox](#)
- [Global Protection Cluster](#) and [Child Protection](#)
- [Global Food Security Cluster](#)
- [Joining Forces for Food Security and Child Protection in Emergencies \(JF-FS&CPiE\)](#)
- [Event Photo Gallery](#)

The organisers extend their sincere appreciation to all speakers, participants and partners for their contributions and continued commitment to advancing food security responses that protect children.