

Briefing Paper:

ENGAGING WITH CHILDREN TO STRENGTHEN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM STRATEGIES THAT PREVENT CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



This toolkit has been developed as part of the project “Building sustainable tourism destinations that protect children from sexual exploitation” implemented with the financial support of Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and technical support of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

ECPAT International acknowledges the core funding support for its overall organisational objectives from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and Oak Foundation. The opinions expressed in this document belong solely to ECPAT International. Support from these donors does not constitute endorsement of the views expressed.

This publication “Engaging with children to strengthen sustainable tourism strategies that prevent child sexual exploitation” was developed as documentation of a pilot project implemented in partnership with Fundación Paniamor in Costa Rica and Fundación Quitu Raymi in Ecuador, under the initiative of ECPAT International’s Programme on Child Protection in Travel and Tourism, ECPAT International.

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Design and layout by: Manida Naebklang

Edited by: Zahra Beg

Suggested citation: ECPAT International. (2023). Toolkit: Engaging with children to strengthen sustainable tourism strategies that prevent child sexual exploitation. Bangkok: ECPAT International. © ECPAT International, 2023.

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Briefing Paper: Why is it important for governments and businesses to engage with children to strengthen sustainable tourism strategies that prevent child sexual exploitation?

Introduction

Sustainable tourism, by definition, must benefit both the tourism industry and the host area and local communities who reside there. This means that tourism must have economic value, but that it must also enhance and protect the people and the environment. There are undeniably many positive benefits associated with tourism. It can strengthen the economy, improve local infrastructure and standards of living, lead to new jobs and preserve and protect traditional arts, crafts and the natural environment. However, over the last few decades, it has become clear that there are also negative impacts associated with increased tourism. A main issue of international concern is the sexual exploitation of children.

What is child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. When a child is exploited, they may be given things like gifts, drugs, money, or acquire a sense of status and/or affection, in exchange for performing sexual activities.

The sexual exploitation of children can happen in a range of contexts and spaces such as: online, through social media; in peer groups; in homes, schools and other institutions; within gangs; when children are working in different sectors and when children travel or move for different purposes.

Perpetrators - both domestic and foreign - of child sexual exploitation misuse travel and tourism facilities and infrastructure (such as hotels and restaurants), means of transportation (such as aircraft, land transport or cruise ships), suppliers (such as companies that provide taxi services) and staff themselves as well as online platforms for shared travel and transport solutions to access, facilitate access to children to sexually exploit them, or tolerate sexual exploitation of children.

Why do I need to think about the protection of children when developing my tourism plans and policies?

Everybody has a responsibility to keep children safe and to protect them from harm which includes those working within the tourism industry.

There are many reasons why all actors developing and working in the travel and tourism industry need to take action and commit to protecting children from sexual exploitation.

For Ministries of Tourism, tourism authorities and related Government departments it:

- Contributes to their obligations to protect the rights of children enshrined in international conventions.
- Supports the implementation of national policies and legislation for the protection of children.
- Helps promote the country as a destination where children are cared for and one that commits to sustainable tourism.
- Gains the trust of responsible tourists who do not tolerate violence against children.

For tourist-related businesses it:

- Helps meet the responsibilities related to business and human rights, including fulfilling Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR).

- Attracts socially conscious customers.
- Increases the reputation of businesses as socially responsible providers as well as employers.
- Contributes to longer-term sustainable tourism development.
- Decreases the likelihood that the image of the destination country is damaged.

What can my business do to help protect children from sexual exploitation?

Children are especially vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation. The travel and tourism industry has enormous power and potential to help make destinations, services and infrastructure safer for children.

You can make your business responsible by assessing and addressing child protection risks and impacts, creating awareness among your staff and suppliers, training staff and implementing policies, procedures and practices, collaborating and consulting with civil society organisations, children and young people; you can also become a member of The Code and receive support in making the travel and tourism industry truly sustainable with child protection at the core.

Where do I start?

Protecting children from child sexual exploitation is everyone's business. However, some professionals and organisations have specialist knowledge, skills and experiences related to the issue. They can help you think more about the impact of your plans and actions on children. These professionals and organisations who have expertise on child rights can help businesses and governments reflect on and develop policies and programmes to keep children safe.

Whilst child rights professionals may have expert knowledge, it is critical that businesses and governments also support opportunities and spaces for children to share their views, experiences and ideas related to tourism in their communities.

Why listen to children?

There are a number of reasons why we need to hear from children about the potential impacts of tourism:

- They have a right to be heard and involved in decisions that affect them.¹

- They are different from adults and often have different points of view, perspectives and concerns. They can also identify risks and protective strategies that adults need to be aware of.
- They have great ideas that can be powerful and impactful on others in the community.

How can I hear more about what children think?

Engaging children in discussions, particularly about sensitive issues like child sexual exploitation, can be challenging and therefore it is important that these discussions are planned and facilitated by individuals who have the knowledge, skills, experience and confidence to support children to safely explore these issues. Civil society organisations often have experience of bringing children together to participate and develop actions on a range of issues.

If you are thinking about learning more from children, then it might be helpful to ask yourself some reflective questions as a starting point:



¹ This right is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Why?

Why do we want to hear from children?

Children have a right to be involved in decisions and activities that affect them and tourism affects children in a multitude of ways. Children also have the right to be protected from harm when they are participating in any discussions or activities and for their engagement to be meaningful. It can be unethical to seek the views of children if their views will not be taken into account, or if they are manipulated or are not fully respected.

Think carefully about why you are asking for their inputs:

- Do you see the value of asking children for their views?
- Are you ready to hear views that may differ or challenge your own?
- How will you ensure their inputs inform and genuinely influence your policies or activities?

Who?

Who do we want to hear from?

Think about which groups of children may be impacted the most from your policies or plans.

There may be existing national mechanisms for child participation, for example children's councils. These groups may be able to provide useful and informed inputs, but you will need to think about whether these children will be the ones who are directly going to be impacted by your plans.

Ask yourself:

- Are there certain communities or groups that are at greater risk of sexual exploitation due to poverty and other factors?

Who?

Who can help me reach the children we need to hear from?

Start by researching local organisations in the area who may be working on child rights issues:

- Do they already have a group of children they work with? If not, do they have experience of facilitating participatory processes with children?
- If there are no specialist organisations working on the issue of sexual exploitation, are there other child rights groups you could speak to?
- Do these organisations have experience of talking to children about sensitive issues?

If you do identify an organisation, there are a number of things you should check before working with them. For example:

- Do they have strong child safeguarding policies and procedures in place?
- Do they have experienced staff who can facilitate discussions about child sexual exploitation sensitively and safely?
- Are they able to provide support to children who take part in the activities if they become upset or do they need specialist support during/after their engagement in any activities?
- Do they have good relationships with families and local communities?
- Do they understand the local context?
- Are they able to commit to help you provide feedback to the children involved to share with them how you have taken on board their inputs?

Who in my organisation/office needs to be involved?

It is important that your organisation or office is fully committed to, and serious about listening to children which often means having support and commitment from leadership.

If you don't have this commitment, it may be harder for children's views to be heard, especially with the due weight that they deserve.

- Does the leadership team support child participation?

When?

When is the best time to speak to children?

Sometimes children are brought in at the end of a project or policy, when decisions have already been made. This is 'rubber stamping', not participation.

Think about when the best time would be to speak with children, often this is near the start of a process rather than at the end.

Participation that is meaningful takes time. Do not expect that you can ask an organisation to bring together a group of children in a week's time to discuss a policy or plan. Ensure you have months rather than weeks to prepare for any activities with children.

- How early can we ask children for their inputs?
- How does the timing work with their schedules (e.g. exam/holiday season)?

What?

What resources do we have to support this?

Not having an adequate budget may be a reason not to engage children, but this is also often used as an excuse not to engage children.

When talking to organisations that are working directly with children, ask about the costs involved in bringing a group of children together.

- How much staff time would it take to coordinate and support children's engagement?
- Would children need to be compensated for their time?
- What costs would need to be covered to support engagement (e.g. transport, childcare costs if any children are parents, refreshments, workshop materials, enabling those with additional needs to engage such as companions, interpreters etc.)?

How?

How committed is my organisation/office to really listening and considering the views of children?

It can be challenging to receive feedback from anyone who offers a different view or perspective, or where a significant change of direction is suggested.

It may be difficult for adults to 'concede power' and trust that children's views should be taken on board.

- How ready are you and your team to hear different views and opinions?
- Do you, and those around you, respect and see the value of children's ideas and suggestions?

How will we thank children and feedback?

A common complaint from children, and the adults that facilitate their engagement, is that often people ask for input but then never feedback to children to tell them how their inputs have changed or informed their work.

It is important to think about this when you start planning engagement.

- What are the ways you can ensure that children receive thanks and feedback?
- When will this realistically happen?

Final messages

- Working with children in a participatory way is a journey! Often starting small and simple is the best approach, learning from others and recognising that it is often not 'perfect' or 'straightforward' is an important part of the process.
- Remember, children have a right to participate but they also have a right to be protected whilst they participate. Finding the right partner or group and taking the time to plan children's engagement will lead to better experiences and results for everyone involved.
- The safety and protection of children in the development of tourism, as essential components of its sustainability, can only be ensured with their broad participation in the formulation, management and evaluation of public policies in this matter. The call from children from Costa Rica and Ecuador who participated in the project is clear – they call for tourism authorities and business to develop better sustainable strategies because “Without safe children and communities, there is no sustainable tourism!”.



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