



**COLLECTIVE
ACTION** End Child Sexual
Exploitation
and Abuse

The
Americas

REGIONAL WORKSHOP

3-7 June 2024 - San José, Costa Rica



FUNDACIÓN
paniamor

Down to Zero
Fighting sexual exploitation of children

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The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the participating organisations and do not necessarily reflect the views of ECPAT International.

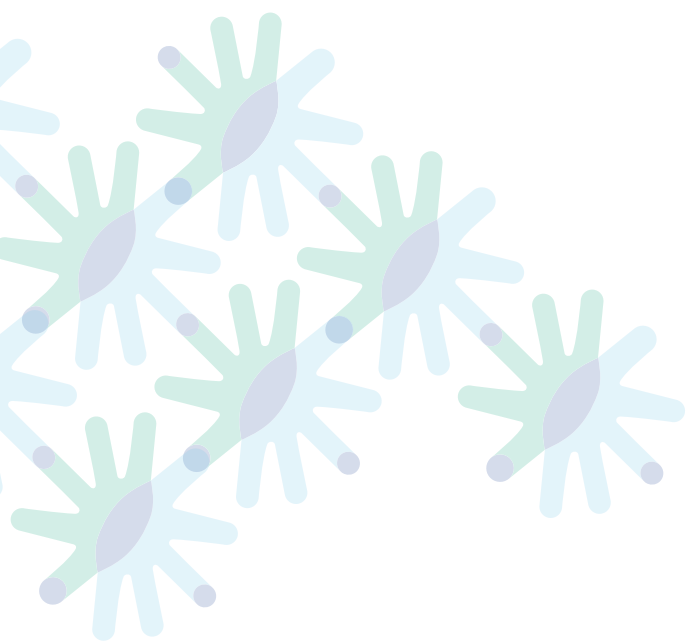
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INTRODUCTION

From June 3-7, 2024, ECPAT International hosted the San José Dialogue – Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation in the Americas workshop convening 116 participants from 20 countries of the Americas in San José, Costa Rica. Bringing together ECPAT members, government representatives, non-governmental organisations, Down to Zero Alliance partners, as well as experts, advocates, practitioners, international organisations, travel and tourism companies, and philanthropic entities from across the Americas, **the workshop marked a significant milestone in the ongoing movement to address the sexual exploitation of children.** Serving as a convening space, the workshop allowed participants to discuss current and emerging trends, internal and cross-border challenges, and identify joint actions needed to prevent and respond to the sexual exploitation of children in the Americas.

The Americas' region hosts immense diversity in ethnicity, history, languages, and traditions and is home to numerous indigenous populations and languages which mirror the cultural, geopolitical, and religious complexities that shape the region, influencing both the risks of child sexual exploitation and the

strategies to create protective environments.

The San José Dialogue – Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation in the Americas workshop exemplified how the diversity of the Americas can be leveraged to tackle significant challenges that increase children's exposure to risks of sexual abuse and exploitation. Participants raised the importance of involving indigenous communities, as they are taking active part in different interventions to address child sexual abuse and exploitation in their territories, where children face specific risks and rights violations associated with their ethnicity.

While the issue of supporting the participation and empowerment of children and survivors of child sexual exploitation was a prominent topic of discussion, it is essential to note that there were no children in the room. The voices and needs of children, including young survivors, were central to the discussion based on evidence collected with them and informed the various sessions.



This report, synthesising the workshop's outcomes, serves as a blueprint for ongoing efforts against the sexual exploitation of children in the Americas. It calls for continued innovation, the necessity to ensure collaboration and collective action within and across countries, and a unified call to protect

every child from sexual exploitation. The San José Dialogue - Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Americas workshop marks a critical step in our collective journey, reinforcing our commitment to making a tangible, lasting impact in the lives of children worldwide.



KEY TRENDS IN THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN: THE AMERICAS

The **increase in transnational and internal migration**—particularly from rural to urban areas—exposes children to even great risks. Children on the move often encounter insufficient and non-inclusive protection systems along migration routes, exacerbated by a lack of proper registration, non-existent or ineffective cross-border collaboration, and fears related to immigration status. These environments leave them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Despite ongoing efforts to strengthen legislative frameworks, the region continues to face significant challenges in preventing, protecting, and supporting children on the move. In terms of sexual exploitation and trafficking, **transnational criminal networks have taken advantage of the increasing flow of families and unaccompanied children**. These networks, already controlling drug and migrant smuggling routes, have expanded into the sex trade, exploiting migrant children along key points of migration routes.

This situation is further compounded by structural factors such as systemic urban violence, political instability, and widespread corruption. The infiltration of organised crime into various sectors of society has made the work of public institutions and civil society organisations more difficult, limiting the already scarce resources and spaces available to provide support and assist child victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The **region's high levels of labour informality** heighten the risk of child labour and associated sexual exploitation. This complicates efforts to safeguard children, as the informal economy often lies beyond the reach of business regulations and children's rights frameworks. Protecting children in formal and informal sectors requires innovative strategies, greater involvement from national authorities, and stronger collaboration with businesses to implement effective safeguards.

The shrinking space for civil society in the region is worsening the situation. In many countries, civil society organisations are the primary providers of specialised support for victims of child sexual exploitation. However, some organisations in the region are increasingly under threat due to imposed limits on participation in policymaking processes and the ongoing criminalisation of civil society movements—despite their focus on children's rights. The rise of conservative and extremist groups aligned with some ruling parties has pushed a regressive agenda, rolling back progress in human rights. This, coupled with reduced international cooperation and private funding, has significantly weakened the capacities and opportunities for non-governmental organisations to operate safely and effectively.

The region faces new **challenges in addressing child sexual abuse and exploitation online within the travel and tourism industry.** As seen worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of digital tools and virtual interactions. While the Internet presents opportunities, it also exposes children to new risks. A similar dynamic exists in the travel and tourism industry, through the digitalisation of their services. For years, tourism companies and authorities have worked to prevent child sexual exploitation within their operations and supply chains; however, the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened decades of progress, leaving communities, including children, more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

AT A GLANCE - TOP 12 EMERGING TRENDS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION IN THE AMERICAS:

- 1. Contexts of Vulnerability for Children on the Move and Unaccompanied Minors:** Children who migrate without an accompanying adult caregiver are at heightened risks of being caught in exploitative situations and networks. Targeted prevention and protection efforts are needed.
- 2. Organised Crime Takes Advantage of Irregular Migration flows and Displaced Populations:** Organised crime groups are increasingly exploiting the vulnerabilities created by irregular migration, leading to increased cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- 3. Gaps in Services for Migrant Boys and LGBTQI+ Children:** Migration flows have brought attention to the needs of adolescent boys and children facing intersectional vulnerabilities, including children of different gender identities or sexual orientations, highlighting significant gaps in services and understanding of their specific needs.
- 4. Challenges in Protecting Children Exploited in Informal Sectors:** The informal economy accounts for over half of all jobs in Latin America, while the efforts for the engagement of the informal business across supply chains to protect children are limited.
- 5. Parental Disconnection and Technology-facilitated Risks:** There is growing concern about parents' disconnection from their children's lives online, leaving children without guidance and adequate support to understand the risks of online child sexual abuse and exploitation.
- 6. Child Exploitation in Economically Fragile Tourism Areas:** The fragile social and economic conditions in some tourist destinations allow exploitative practices to flourish, as communities face financial hardship and lack awareness of child sexual abuse and exploitation risks.
- 7. Limited Impact of Gender Equality Efforts:** Efforts to address gender issues remain concentrated in urban areas and primarily target older women, leaving children behind.
- 8. Legal Framework Gaps:** Many countries in the Americas lack adequate legal frameworks for addressing child sexual abuse and exploitation, with gaps such as lack or outdated legal definitions of criminal trends, such as those associated with the digital environment. This poses an obstacle to efficient prosecution and support services.
- 9. Shrinking Space for Civil Society Organisations:** Some governments have reduced collaboration with or increased scrutiny and imposed limitations on civil society organisations, particularly those not aligned with national political positions.
- 10. Public Distrust on Civil Society Organisations:** Politicising children's rights agendas has created public distrust in civil society organisations, undermining their advocacy efforts and creating disinformation on parallel public debates, negatively affecting decision-making on child protection.
- 11. Pushback on Human Rights Advocacy:** Governments in the region increasingly dismiss recommendations from human rights bodies, knowing non-compliance has no consequences. The increasing influence of groups promoting a regressive human rights agenda gives significant challenges to advancing gender equality, access to accurate sexual and reproductive health programmes and comprehensive sexuality education, especially in rural areas and schools.
- 12. Decline in Post-Pandemic Donor Support:** The temporary surge in funding for civil society organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic has dried up, affecting the operational and sustainability capacity of organisations.

IN DETAIL:

1. THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT, AND ORGANISED CRIME

Migration and displacement situations have heightened the risks of child sexual abuse and exploitation, with unaccompanied migrant children being vulnerable to trafficking as they move through the Americas. The integration of these children into new communities is often poorly managed; governments and civil society organisations remain unable to provide adequate support. In addition, some of their needs – particularly those related to cultural and gender backgrounds – are frequently overlooked, complicating their path to safety and protection and exposing them to various risks and forms of sexual exploitation during migration and after they settle in host communities. Migration has revealed a particular lack of adequate support for boys and LGBTQI children for whom services are not tailored to their needs.

The expansion of organised crime, relative poverty, and displacement further exacerbate these issues. Organised crime is now also emerging in countries like Bolivia, Peru, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, where these activities – especially narco-trafficking – were previously less prominent, leading to increased cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation in the region.

TRINIDAD Y TOBAGO: Migrant children are more exposed to the risks of trafficking and sexual exploitation in the host communities.

URUGUAY: Children on the move who are part of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) groups face multiple layers of discrimination. These, in turn, increase their exposure to risks of sexual abuse and exploitation with a significant impact on their protection and mental health. Only few organisations are equipped to provide them with the necessary support.

EL SALVADOR: The rise in drug trafficking correlates with increased child sexual abuse and exploitation. Civil society organisations face significant risks in these contexts and must take measures to protect themselves while addressing sexual exploitation issues.

THE CARIBBEANS: Gender stereotypes such as the eroticization of exotic femininity contribute to the sexualization of young girls. This trend often pressures children into exploitative situations, especially in the adult entertainment industry.



2. COMPLEX NATIONAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Civil society organisations face growing challenges in advocating to governments in the region to ensure children's rights are protected, particularly in countries with oppressive leadership where they are often excluded from key discussion and resource allocation. In addition, many countries in the region face significant economic inequalities and social challenges, which leads to issues like child sexual exploitation being deprioritised. The weakening of the influence of key regional and international mechanisms, such as MERCOSUR, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the United Nations (UN), complicates the situation.

ARGENTINA AND VENEZUELA: Economic policies aimed at stabilising markets and addressing debt crises have consistently taken precedence over social issues and human and children's rights violations.

ECUADOR: Facing the ineffectiveness of national government collaboration, civil society organisations have shifted their focus to local governments with some increased success. Working at the local level mitigates the limitations posed by lengthy and ineffective national processes.

3. FUNDING HURDLES

Organisations in the region face several funding challenges, mainly linked to the de-prioritisation of children's rights themes for funding under the current donors' programmes. Many countries have struggled with inconsistent and insufficient funding, particularly for long-term projects, to address structural inequalities and drivers to child sexual abuse and exploitation. Inadequate resource allocations and competing agendas result in major gaps in services for children exposed to or victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. Child protection civil society organisations remain some of the sole providers of these essential services, making the lack of support even more harmful to children and society.

MEXICO: Civil society organisations tried to engage with the private sector for child protection initiatives but faced significant challenges in securing sustainable project funding.

BOLIVIA: Some civil society organisations participate in or have created local and international coalitions that successfully secure funding for joint projects with national and international

CANADA: Bilingualism in Canada (English and French) causes disparities in representation within regional mechanisms, favouring English-speaking civil society organisations and excluding French-speaking ones, which particularly affects Francophone children's access to justice and resources.



institutions. Some also launched income-generating activities, such as cookie sales, to raise funds.

COLOMBIA: Organisations utilise individual donors to support projects and campaigns, however this approach does not allow for long-term strategies.

“
The main difficulty is sustainability.
When the funded project ends, how
do we continue? ”

(The Child Development Foundation - Belize)

4. PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THE TRAVEL AND TOURISM SECTOR INCLUDING IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

Recent trends indicate that the travel and tourism sector in the Americas is increasingly engaging in child protection efforts, with more companies endorsing the Principles on Business and Human Rights that extends beyond environmental concerns. However, the commitment to child protection varies widely across countries. For instance, some companies struggling to fully recover from the pandemic in the travel and tourism industry have been prioritising immediate financial recovery over sustainability plans and the implementation of child protection measures.

In tourism-dependent areas, economic disparities between locals and tourists can heighten the risks of exploitation, particularly when families facing financial difficulties view tourism as their only financial resource and are not aware or able to identify and mitigate the risks posed to their children. Additionally, the informal tourism sector—such as unregulated rentals and informal tour operators—often lacks adequate capacity, tools, and mechanisms to protect children within their operations and services. Limited engagement of local business across the supply chains can lead to exploitative practices to persist, unreported.

HONDURAS AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: There is a surge in economic activity linked to tourism. It's common practice for socio-economically fragile families to let their children be involved in informal tourism activities for economic reasons, unaware that these activities may expose children to risks of exploitation, including sexual exploitation.

MEXICO: A relatively new trend identified in the country is the rise of “turismo vivencial”. This form of tourism offers tourists the opportunity to experience life within local communities, creating a new range of risks for children who meet strangers without proper safeguards, especially in Indigenous communities.



5. A SLOW PROGRESS ON GENDER EQUALITY

Patriarchal and machismo cultures continue to exacerbate the sexual exploitation of children in the region. In recent years, civil society organisations have successfully brought gender issues to the forefront, advocating for governments to do more research and to disaggregate data. Women's organisations have played a crucial role in this progress. Still, the focus is limited on recognising and addressing gender disparities of adult women living in urban areas, often overlooking the specific needs and experiences of women in rural areas, girls, boys, LGBTQI children, and indigenous communities.

This narrow approach and limited consideration for intersectional drivers of sexual abuse and exploitation risks limits the potential for meaningful change. Ongoing resistance from conservative groups is further impeding progress and opportunities to inform children about their rights, as these groups oppose sexuality education in schools and universities.

THE CARIBBEANS: Gender education is predominantly aimed at women and girls, leaving boys less informed and more vulnerable to the risks of child sexual abuse and exploitation, especially since there are few support services for teens aged 14 to 18.

ECUADOR: The gap between urban and rural gender advancements remains high, with rural communities remaining behind in gender equality measures.

BOLIVIA: The practice of older men taking younger girls as brides or marriage partners as a means of economic support for the girls' families remains a common practice.

PERU: Changes in victim profiles—such as an increase in older adolescents and migrants—are not well understood, and the state's protection decreases as children age.



“ We need to include men and boys in the discussion, acknowledging that without their inclusion, the solution is moving further and further away. ”

(Child Link - Guyana)

“ Awareness of gender issues has increased among the population, but extreme conservatism has also risen. Positions have become more rigid, and there has been a noticeable increase in this trend. ”

(ONG Raíces - Chile)



6. ADULTISM AND CONSULTATIVE CHILD PARTICIPATION

Children in the region are increasingly aware of their rights and are demanding active participation. Although Latin America has a rich legacy of child participation, current political and social dynamics are undermining this progress. The patriarchal system, government control, and religious conservatism present barriers, fostering expectations that children submit to authority figures and comply with rules—without question or critical engagement. A further obstacle is the lack of resources and sustainability for facilitating and enabling child participation initiatives, as funding is often insufficient.

Challenging and overcoming adult-centrism and creating safe, empowering spaces for children to express themselves are essential steps to promote meaningful participation. Technology and the internet have created spaces for children to participate and have their voices heard compared to the past, broadening the scope of their engagement beyond traditional physical settings. Promising practices exist in the region which should be replicated.

COSTA RICA: The government institutionalised processes of child participation in the form of ‘consejos participativos’ established in each local government unit. The National Council (Consejo Nacional de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) engaged with these structures to develop its national policy on children (Política Nacional de la Niñez y la Adolescencia 2024-2036) through an inclusive process, involving contributions from diverse institutions and approximately 2,000 children.

ECUADOR: Red de Organizaciones por la Defensa de Derechos de la Niñez y Adolescencia (RODDNA) is a child-led movement that advocates for child rights in the country. RODDNA has recently collaborated with Fundación Quito Raymi, ECPAT’s member in Ecuador, to collect the voices of adolescents from emerging tourism destinations, and bring them to decision-makers.

CHILE: Children receiving care in centres for victims of violence or abuse are actively involved in the development of their therapeutic plans. These plans are discussed with the children to ensure that their needs, preferences, and views are reflected, fostering a sense of ownership over their recovery process.

BELIZE: UNICEF’s U-Report initiative in Belize facilitates a platform for children to express their views on various issues through mobile technology. This tool allows them to engage in national discussions and share feedback on policies and programmes that affect them.

GUYANA: Reporting of abuse, particularly by boys, has increased, which indicates that children are becoming more involved in speaking up about their exploitation. The country’s system has become more responsive, helping to facilitate this engagement.

“
(Adults) don’t need to know
everything, we need to learn
with the children”

(Asociacion Civil Gurises Unidos - Uruguay)



7. EMERGING RISKS ONLINE

In the last few years, in the region, organisations reported an increase in the grooming of children online, often leading to further in-person sexual exploitation and abuse. In countries like Paraguay and the Dominican Republic, online grooming and child sexual exploitation and abuse continue to rise with regulations and law enforcement capabilities struggling to keep pace with the evolving digital threats. In Chile and Uruguay, the emergence of new, unregulated dating sites and gaming platforms has facilitated easier access to children by offenders, highlighting the need for an update in community awareness and intervention strategies.

Parental disconnection, exacerbated by excessive technology use, has become a significant factor in the increased vulnerability of children to sexual exploitation. In many regions, parents are increasingly disengaged from their children's online activities due to their overuse of technology, leaving children unsupervised. There is an urgent need for improved digital literacy and proactive parenting strategies.

PANAMA: The increased prevalence of online crimes, combined with new modalities for child sexual abuse, highlights growing risks for children, especially in the context of a legal system that lacks sufficient online child protection measures.

VENEZUELA: The collapse of the child protection system, alongside a massive increase in online abuse, including anonymous chat and gaming platforms, has exacerbated the risks of sexual abuse and exploitation for children.

BRAZIL AND MEXICO: Reports indicate that in Brazil and Mexico the proliferation of digital devices among children and adolescents, combined with parental disengagement, has been linked to rising cases of online grooming and sexual exploitation. Parents often lack awareness of the digital risks their children face, leaving them unprotected from potential offenders.

“Adults are always late when it comes to technology...we need to look back, learn from what we didn't do, and see the future, like with artificial intelligence.”

(Fundación Munasim Kullakita - Bolivia)



8. CHANGING DEFINITIONS AND DYNAMICS OF COMMUNITIES

The concept of “community” has evolved due to technological advancements, migration, and the rise of families migrating and spreading across various countries, leading to a redefinition of how communities can be engaged for child protection. Effective community engagement practices require inclusive strategies. For example, in indigenous rural areas, where child sexual exploitation is particularly complex, local leaders are becoming increasingly involved in prevention and awareness efforts.

A notable trend in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse is the engagement with church communities. Churches, often influential within local communities, have become critical partners in promoting children's rights and preventive measures. However, this partnership must be carefully managed to ensure that religious predicaments and approaches do not compromise civil society mission and evidence-based approaches to child protection. Balancing these elements is key to effectively preventing and addressing sexual exploitation and abuse while respecting diverse community beliefs.

HONDURAS: There is a trend of partnering with faith-based organisations to tackle child sexual exploitation. Churches and religious groups are actively involved in community outreach and education efforts, leveraging their local influence to promote child protection.

COLOMBIA: There has been a notable trend towards integrating indigenous perspectives in community engagement efforts. This shift includes collaborating with indigenous leaders to tailor child protection programmes to local cultural practices and needs.

GUATEMALA: Youth-led groups are increasingly addressing issues such as gender-based violence and child exploitation by organising local awareness campaigns and peer education programmes.

ARGENTINA: Community organisations are engaging local businesses to support child protection initiatives. Enterprises are increasingly involved in funding and participating in community programmes, creating a network of support that extends beyond traditional NGO efforts.

BOLIVIA: Community-based monitoring systems have been developed to track and report instances of child sexual exploitation. Local committees are trained to recognise signs of abuse and to collaborate with authorities to address these issues more effectively.



THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

The thematic discussions at the San José Dialogue – Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation in the Americas workshop offered a deep dive into the complexities of combatting the sexual exploitation of children in today's rapidly evolving society. In this chapter, we explore the main themes, including the risks in travel and tourism, technological risks, the challenges in access to justice, and the dangers in humanitarian crises, alongside strategic recommendations.

CHILD PROTECTION IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM

The sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism reveals critical challenges and opportunities. Technology and globalisation have expanded travel and tourism, increasing vulnerabilities and exploitation risks to children in sectors like voluntourism and ecotourism in local communities or humanitarian missions. Sustainable tourism efforts with child protection at the core must be integrated into national development strategies.

Recommendations from participants

Integrate Child Protection in Tourism Promotion:

Governments should focus on promoting types of tourism that align with child protection goals by ensuring that tourism development plans are sustainable and prioritise the safety of children. Engaging children to inform these developments is critical. Read the ECPAT Toolkit: [Engaging with children to strengthen sustainable tourism strategies that prevent child sexual exploitation in English and Spanish](#).

Strengthen the Child Protection System: Invest in and enhance the inter-sectoral collaborations within the child protection system by improving social protection, health, education, and other critical sectors.

Promote a Culture of Reporting: Encourage communities to report child sexual exploitation and ensure legal and judicial systems are equipped to handle and prosecute both domestic and foreign offenders effectively. This includes improved cooperation with law enforcement in cases when offenders are no longer in the country where the crime took place.

Regulate and Collaborate with Online Platforms: Enforce regulations for online platforms linked with travel and tourism activities, ensuring they implement child protection measures through their operations, including hosts and services, as well as inform tourists about relevant laws and regulations related to child protection from sexual abuse and exploitation.

Anticipate and Respond to Risks generated by New Tourism Trends:

Regulate emerging forms of tourism, such as experiential and volunteer tourism (voluntourism), which are often unregulated and pose risks to children.

Form Public–Public and Public–Private Partnerships:

Foster collaborations between municipalities, tourism authorities, companies, civil society organisations, and community groups, including children, to tackle child sexual exploitation effectively.

Increase Tourism Authorities' Participation:

Encourage tourism authorities to be actively involved in national and local anti-human trafficking and child sexual exploitation commissions to strengthen policy and enforcement efforts.



RISKS OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION FACILITATED BY TECHNOLOGY

The rapid advancement of technology and its widespread use has introduced new risks for child sexual exploitation and abuse in digital environments. The legal and justice systems often downplay technology-facilitated sexual violence, leading to challenges for children in accessing justice and receiving adequate responses.

Recommendations from participants

- 1. Promote Technology-Facilitated Solutions:** Support the creation and implementation of technological tools to detect and prevent online abuse, including collaborations with tech companies to monitor harmful content.
- 2. Foster Multi-Sectoral Collaboration:** Establish partnerships between governments, tech companies, NGOs, and educational institutions and children to create integrated approaches for online safety and response.
- 3. Empower Children, Caregivers and Educators:** Provide educational programmes for children and educators to enhance digital literacy, self-protection skills, and reporting mechanisms. **Develop and distribute resources** and training for parents and caregivers on online safety, including using parental controls and understanding online risks.
- 4. Address Rural and Underserved Areas:** Ensure that initiatives and resources reach rural and underserved areas where children may be more vulnerable and have less access to protective measures.
- 5. Involve Children in Solutions:** Engage children in discussions about their online experiences and involve them in developing practical solutions and preventive measures.
- 6. Strengthen Legal Frameworks:** Advocate for comprehensive legal reforms to address online sexual exploitation and ensure effective penalties and enforcement mechanisms.
- 7. Update and Expand Regulations:** Regularly update regulations to keep pace with technological changes and emerging threats, ensuring that regulatory bodies have the capacity and tools to enforce compliance.



THE CHALLENGES OF ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Access to justice for child victims across the Americas faces several systemic and structural challenges. Key issues include the over-reliance on victim-provided evidence, inadequate psychological and legal support, and lengthy legal processes. In many cases, justice systems are hindered by corruption, insufficient resources, and disparities between urban and rural areas. The traditional focus on penal justice often neglects the need for therapeutic approaches that emphasise victim support and reparation. Additionally, legal frameworks and practices vary widely, impacting the effectiveness of justice systems in addressing and resolving cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

GUATEMALA: Boys, including those who are part of LGBTQI communities, often have less protection from harm. In remote Amazon places, communities rely on their own traditional systems to solve problems, which can make authorities overlook boys' needs and experiences to support only those children who are perceived as being at risk.

THE CARIBBEANS: Juries often lack experience with sexual exploitation cases, especially of boys, making them more dismissive of such cases. The lengthy and complicated court process adds to the boys' challenges, making it hard for them to seek justice.

ECUADOR AND VENEZUELA: Corruption and impunity are significant problems, with few cases reaching court and fewer resulting in convictions.

Recommendations from participants

- 1. Provide Adequate Victim Support Services:** Expand psychological and legal support services for child victims, ensuring that they are not re-victimised during legal processes. This can be done by establishing dedicated centres for integrated victim support, including health, legal, and psychological care.
- 2. Reform Penal Justice:** Update legal frameworks to focus on restorative justice, emphasising victim reparation and support. Eliminate legal gaps that impede the reporting and prosecution cases involving family members.
- 3. Combat Corruption:** Strengthen anti-corruption measures within the judicial system to ensure fair and impartial handling of cases.

- 4. Address Legal Frameworks:** Reform laws that protect offenders due to their family relationships status and ensure that legislation adequately addresses emerging issues like online exploitation and grooming.
- 5. Enhance Training and Resources:** Provide specialised training for judicial and law enforcement staff on child rights and child protection and increase resources for effective implementation of laws and support services.
- 6. Improve Access to Justice in Rural and Indigenous Areas:** Develop strategies to address disparities in access to justice between urban and rural areas, as well as between States and indigenous justice systems.
- 7. Strengthen Cross-Border Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between countries to address trafficking and sexual exploitation beyond borders.



THE IMPACT OF THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE REGION

In humanitarian contexts, sexual exploitation of children poses an increased risk, exacerbated by the inadequate protection mechanisms during crises such as migration and armed conflicts. Common issues include the involvement of children on the move into exploitative activities, the impact of corruption and inadequacies in local and international responses to the humanitarian crises (that are often less attentive to the [various forms of sexual exploitation of children](#)), and the lack of robust preventative and protective measures.

COLOMBIA: The migration crisis from Venezuela has led to increased risks of child sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly as children are forced into precarious situations and exploitation along migratory routes.

ECUADOR: Migration, particularly from countries like Guatemala, is growing, and Ecuador needs more robust regional responses to ensure children on the move are protected. This includes, for example, establishing formal agreements with UNICEF and UNHCR to highlight and address child sexual abuse and exploitation within migration contexts.

GUYANA: Corruption and political instability affect the protection of children on the move. Institutional changes and increased focus on local communities are needed to address and prevent exploitation effectively.

Recommendations from participants

- 1. Strengthen Regional Cooperation:** Develop and implement regional strategies to address child sexual abuse and exploitation, focusing on coordinated responses across borders. This should involve all relevant actors, including governments, international organisations, local communities, and children.
- 2. Enhance Protective Mechanisms:** Establish and enforce protocols for safeguarding children in humanitarian contexts, including those in temporary accommodations and transit points. Ensure that all actors, including UN staff and local services, adhere to these protocols.
- 3. Strengthen Crisis Response Frameworks:** Adapt frameworks to address child sexual abuse and exploitation within migration and crisis contexts. This includes securing routes, providing immediate and comprehensive support services, and implementing preventative measures.

- 4. Increase Awareness and Training:** Conduct ongoing training for those working with children on the move, including in shelters and humanitarian settings, to recognise and address child sexual abuse and exploitation. Develop awareness campaigns to inform migrant populations and local communities about available support.
- 5. Support Legal and Policy Reforms:** Advocate for legal reforms that address child sexual abuse and exploitation comprehensively, including in contexts of migration and crisis. Ensure that policies support the protection and rights of all children, regardless of their migration status.
- 6. Develop Specialised Services:** Establish specialised services for child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation including psychological support, legal aid, and safe spaces. Ensure that these services are accessible and adapted to girls and boys and children of different gender identities regardless of the child's migration status.
- 7. Monitor and Evaluate:** Implement mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation, including tracking the effectiveness of interventions and identifying gaps in protection. Use this data to inform ongoing and future strategies.



THE ROLE OF SAFEGUARDING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The discussions at the San José Dialogue – Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation in the Americas workshop highlighted the critical importance of implementing and strengthening safeguarding policies across the region to effectively combat the sexual exploitation of children in all contexts, including within organisations. In this chapter, we delve into the significance of inclusive safeguarding measures that prioritise child participation and enhance collaboration among all involved. We examine how robust safeguarding policies can lead to improved services for children and foster public awareness, ensuring a comprehensive response to the challenges they face. Strategic recommendations are presented to guide the implementation of effective safeguarding frameworks that protect children and promote their well-being in diverse contexts.

FOR EFFECTIVENESS

Organisations should prioritise developing, adapting, and regularly updating their safeguarding policies. To meet high child protection standards, they must implement rigorous staff recruitment protocols, including background checks and psychological evaluations, ensuring alignment with the organisation's values and suitability for working with children. Continuous safeguarding training for all staff, including those from governmental bodies, is crucial to build capacity, strengthen a child protection culture, and equip staff with effective skills. Regular assessments of safeguarding practices and feedback mechanisms—particularly including children's input—are essential for responsive, impactful policy development.

FOR INCLUSIVITY

Organisations should ensure their safeguarding practices align with the cultural and ethical frameworks of the communities they serve, recognising and carefully navigating any tensions with local norms. Safeguarding policies should be linked to gender and anti-corruption policies. For instance, safeguarding policies should be designed with sensitivity to the unique cultural backgrounds of Indigenous and marginalised communities, involving these groups directly in the policy-making process. This approach aims to create inclusive and effective policies that consider the distinct challenges these communities face.

FOR STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

To strengthen child protection, civil society organisations, government bodies, and international agencies must actively collaborate to build a unified safeguarding strategy. Governments should partner with NGOs and international organisations to implement and enforce safeguarding policies across sectors, including education, healthcare, and law enforcement, ensuring comprehensive child protection that meets diverse needs. In migration crises, developing joint strategies with neighbouring countries becomes essential to ensure child safety.

FOR LEGAL AND POLICIES REFORM

Integrating safeguarding policies into national legal frameworks is key to achieving comprehensive child protection. By linking these policies with wider initiatives on gender equality, anti-corruption, and human rights, governments can establish a cohesive approach. Legal reforms specifically targeting sexual exploitation and abuse, including online threats, must be actively pursued, with robust enforcement to protect children and ensure accountability for perpetrators. To secure the safety of children on the move, governments should implement protective legal and policy measures, including mechanisms to regularise their status. This approach enables access to critical services like education, healthcare, and legal support, ensuring their well-being and protection.

FOR ENHANCED PUBLIC AWARENESS

Public awareness campaigns play a crucial role in educating communities, families, and children about the risks of sexual exploitation and the need for safeguarding. These campaigns should utilise culturally appropriate materials and methods to effectively engage diverse populations, including Indigenous and remote communities. Equipping children with knowledge and tools to recognise risks and understanding their rights and knowing where to seek help is essential to ensure their safety and overall well-being.

FOR IMPROVED SERVICES FOR CHILDREN

Building comprehensive support systems for victims of sexual exploitation is vital for their recovery and reintegration. These systems should provide psychological support, legal assistance, and services that aid reintegration while ensuring child victims can access safe reporting options. Safeguarding policies must

also protect and support the staff and caregivers working with children by ensuring access to mental health services and legal protection against threats or violence. In addition, recognising how factors like gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography shape vulnerabilities helps ensure inclusive policies that protect all children without discrimination.

FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION

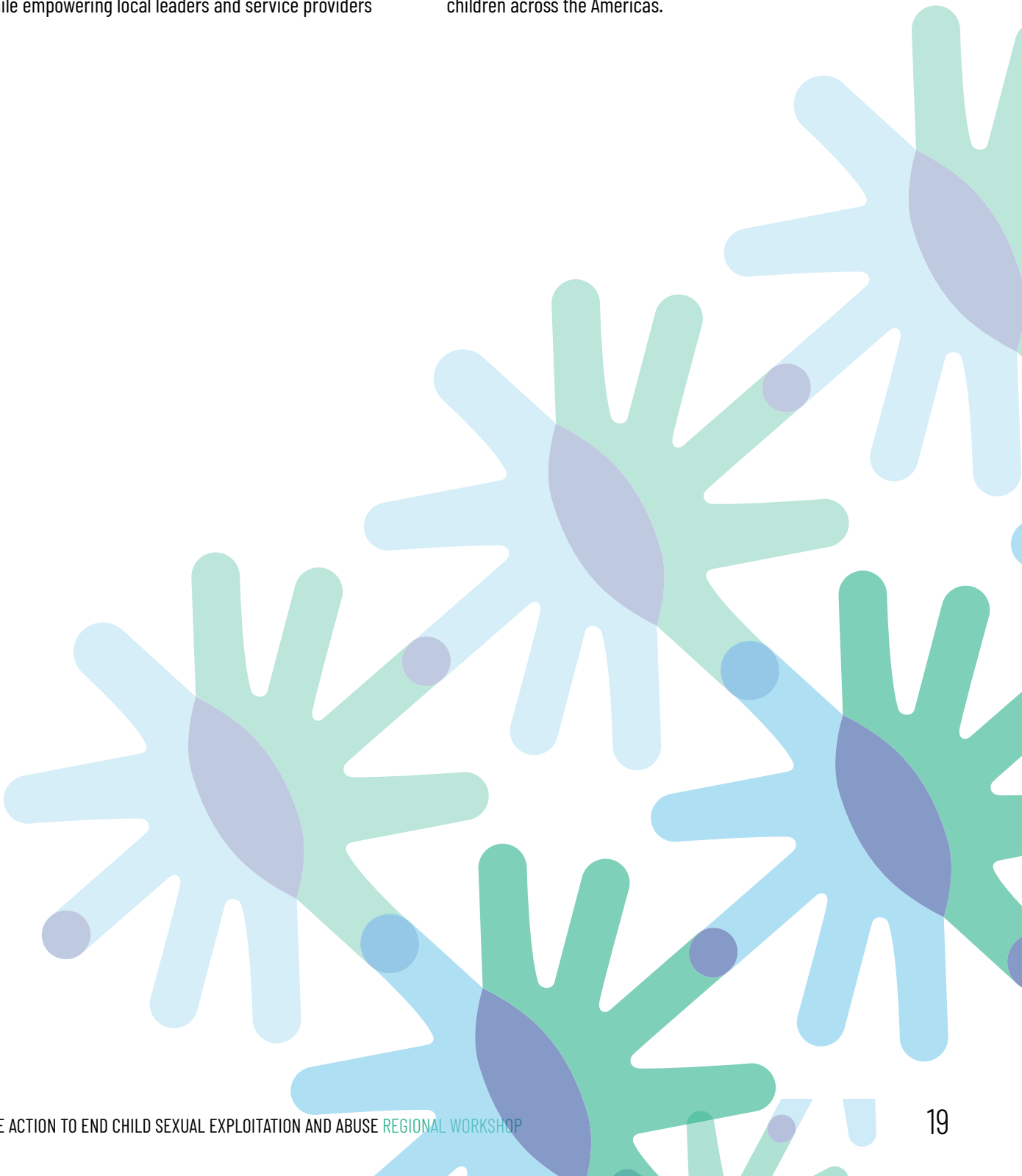
Safeguarding and child protection policies must be developed and improved with direct input from children to create effective, child-centred approaches that meet their needs and experiences. Educational programmes should teach children and adults about children's rights, available resources, and self-protection methods. For instance, implementing peer education programmes allows children to train and support each other on safety, rights, and protection against exploitation. Additionally, encouraging the formation of child advocacy groups empowers children to participate in decision-making processes at community, national, and international levels, representing their interests and influencing policies that affect their well-being.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The evolving landscape of child protection requires intersectional and inclusive approaches that must recognise the diverse identities of children and the situations in which they live, such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and migration status, to create effective interventions. Including men and boys in discussions on gender equality is essential, particularly in conservative and underserved communities, to challenge harmful gender and social norms. Community-level engagement must be culturally sensitive, respecting local beliefs while empowering local leaders and service providers

to recognise and address child sexual exploitation. Meaningful participation in decisions, rather than mere consultation, must be central to developing and evaluating protection strategies, with programmes aimed at educating children and ensuring that they can speak up and advocate for themselves. Finally, child protection strategies must adapt to emerging threats, including new forms of child sexual exploitation facilitated by technology, while also addressing systemic issues such as corruption and impunity to create sustainable protective environments for children across the Americas.



ABOUT ECPAT INTERNATIONAL

ECPAT International stands as a united front of 126 civil society organisations spread across over 100 nations, each passionately committed to the shared vision of eradicating the sexual exploitation of children. Harnessing the power of over three decades of experience in multi-stakeholder engagement and partnership management, our expansive network operates on national, regional, and global levels. We relentlessly drive forward, fuelled by the conviction that every child deserves a world free from sexual exploitation.

ABOUT FUNDACIÓN PANIAMOR

FUNDACIÓN PANIAMOR is a non-profit civil society organization, without political-party affiliation, of a technical nature and preventive in scope, working to incorporate the culture of children's and adolescents' rights into political and social action. To this end, it builds visionary alliances with the state, private enterprises, and other national and international organizations, thereby enhancing the joint efforts of various sectors of society.

ABOUT DOWN TO ZERO ALLIANCE

Down to Zero implements the programme Step Up the Fight Against Sexual Exploitation of Children (SUFASEC), that enables children and young people to defend their own rights, support communities to become safer and protective of their children against sexual exploitation, and helps governments to improve and implement related policies, laws and regulations. The Alliance also collaborates with the private sector, for example in the tourist industry. Under the SUFASEC programme, two initiatives specifically focus on child and youth participation: Youth Voices for Change and the VOICE project.



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Fighting sexual exploitation of children