The five main sectors
- Health
- Education
- Nutrition
- Water, sanitation, & hygiene (WASH)
- Child protection

Sector profiles (child protection)
Sudan is a tough place to be a child. Conflict, chronic underdevelopment and even the climate can exact a toll on the country’s youngest. Moreover, the notion of children as right-holders and an important target group for development policies and programmes is very limited. This is particularly evident in the country’s weak protection systems and mechanisms, resulting in many children being abused, exploited, abandoned or institutionalized. The situation is exacerbated by the country’s multiple and prolonged humanitarian crises and armed conflict.

In a recent year an estimated 247,000 South Sudanese children lived in refugee camps here, and of the 2 million displaced in Darfur 1.2 million were children. These large numbers are hard to digest, but they are clearly terrible for the individual children behind the statistics.

Conflict uproots and can separate families in their desperate search for sanctuary. The decades of civil war and the war in Darfur has also seen boys and girls recruited into the violence as child soldiers. Although progress has been made in addressing children associated with armed forces and armed groups, this still remains an issue.

Another serious issue is child birth registration. The failure of this relatively simple act at birth can complicate the life of a growing child. If a newborn is not registered with the local civil authority he may find it difficult later in life to obtain health care or education. Nationally the trend for this indicator is positive, now at 67 percent—an eight percent increase over the past five years. These national gains, however, mask disparities and inequities at the state and lower levels. For example, 98 percent of children in Northern State are in the birth registration system; in Central Darfur it’s 31 percent.

Violence against children in Sudan is widespread but often unreported. Physical punishment is frequently viewed as a culturally acceptable form of discipline by parents. Violence and sexual abuse of children, including gender-based violence, is also a concern. Several recent studies reflect the problem of violence against children, in particular child sexual abuse and corporal punishment. According to one survey, 64 percent of children in Sudan aged 1-14 years experience psychosocial aggression or physical punishment.

The biggest threat to children realizing their basic rights in Sudan is poverty. A father may decide, for example, that it’s better to keep his son in school and marry off his daughter. Short-term benefits (dowry,
In Sudan an estimated three million children are in need of protection and humanitarian assistance.

UNICEF supported Family and Child Protection Units have been established in all eighteen states.

For birth registration, 98 percent of children in Northern State are in the system; in Central Darfur it’s 31 percent.

Last year, thanks to support from UNICEF Sudan, 163,155 children received psychosocial services.

One less mouth to feed, cultural pressure) outweigh unfamiliar, long-term ones (keeping a girl in school which can benefit her earning potential, her health and the health and education of her future children). School is free in Sudan, but headmasters often impose fees. If a family cannot afford the fee (typically 200 Sudanese pounds per year, or about USD 34) then pupils are forced to drop out. In Khartoum and other cities children can end up on the street, falling prey to violence, drug abuse, crime and child labor.

Child protection services in Sudan is focused more on response than prevention. The Federal Child Act 2010 includes several provisions on rights—free education, health care, family support—but there is not a clear mechanism of accountability when denial of these rights occurs. A lack of prevention services, together with social inequality and removal of subsidies, has resulted in more children vulnerable and at risk of violence.

The failure to register a child at birth - a relatively simple act - can complicate the life of a growing child. If a newborn is not registered with the local civil authority he may find it difficult later in life to obtain health care or education.

A formal child protection system, including the components of social welfare and justice, is still emerging. It is underfunded and understaffed, and therefore unable to respond to the needs of children. There is a severe shortage of social workers, with many of those in place having limited skills and knowledge to meet the sensitive and complex demands of their work. More needs to be done to enable the government to take its leadership role and build sustainable, inclusive and preventive child protection systems.
What UNICEF Sudan is doing

UNICEF is the lead humanitarian agency for Child Protection in Sudan. We use our voice and our influence to create a better legal and policy environment for children. This includes ensuring there are adequate, reliable and consistent data of the scale and nature of violence against children, and that such evidence regularly reaches policy and decision makers.

To care for abandoned children and place them with alternative permanent families, UNICEF worked with the Government of Sudan to implement Kafala, a system of foster parenting. UNICEF support resulted in securing homes for more than 3,000 abandoned children. Additional assistance is now in place in Khartoum State, providing services for pregnant and single mothers who otherwise might abandon their babies due to stigma, or risk an honour killing.

UNCEF-Sudan worked on legislation reforms including the Child Act and the Sudanese Armed Forces Law. With support from UNICEF, the Sudan Armed Forces established a Child Rights Unit to educate military personnel on the country’s child protection laws. Also with UNICEF support, the National Council for Child Welfare launched the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

We also engage with armed forces and groups for the release of children, and then work with individuals and communities on the child’s reintegration. The Government of Sudan is the last country yet to sign an Action Plan with the United Nations to end recruitment of children into armed forces; UNICEF-Sudan is facilitating negotiation of the plan. Technical committees formed by the Government—representing key ministries, including Ministry of Defense—finalized the action plan. It is awaiting formal signing between the Government and the United Nations.

Systems and Norms to Protect Children

UNICEF supports Community Based Child Protection Networks, a connection of chiefs, community leaders, youth and female representatives who work so that boys and girls receive protection. Communities come together and identify who will be responsible for reporting child violations in a confidential process, and liaise with health and social workers, schools and justice professionals to protect children. Their work can vary, from information-gathering and education to medical referrals and arranging legal advice. School-age street children are the most common issue handled by the networks.

Criminal issues are the domain of the local Family and Child Protection Units, a programme to find community-based solutions to crimes involving children. In a recent year, these units provided services to nearly 17,000 victims, witnesses and offenders of violence and child abuse; most cases involved sexual and gender-based violence. Recently, child victims of trafficking are also supported within these units, especially as Sudan is a country of origin, transit and destination.

We also are active in family tracing, reunifying children with their families. Children are separated from their families when fleeing from conflict, or even when adjusting to life in overcrowded camps that can be home to tens of thousands of fellow Sudanese and refugees. As part of our efforts, UNICEF-Sudan established a national family tracing database. Last year more than 2,000 children were reunified with their families.
Abu Shok, North Darfur

Sa’adiya Mohamed was no stranger to childhood trauma. Working as a hospital assistant, she was used to seeing critical cases of child malnutrition or life-threatening illness.

But there is one patient she will always remember. “The baby was only a few hours old,” said the 50-year-old, who lives in Abu Shok refugee camp in North Darfur. “But it was in a bad sanitary condition. Because I work in the hospital I see many severe cases. But this one was really different.”

The tiny boy, just a few hours old, had been discovered at the bottom of one of the camp’s latrines. Somebody heard him crying and called the police, who then came and pulled him out.

After the boy was taken to hospital, officers contacted the local Child Protection Network (CPN)—one of the UNICEF-supported systems established across Sudan to help safeguard the rights of children.

Protecting children from risk

Child Protection Networks are a nexus of tribal chiefs, community leaders and youth and female representatives who work to ensure boys and girls receive adequate protection from the daily risks around them. Using an integrated system of information sharing and investigation, they liaise with health workers, schools and the police to further the cause of child protection.

In the case of the young boy, the CPN immediately helped launch a search to try and find the mother. “We went to different areas of the camp to try and find out if there were any girls who had recently given birth,” said Sa’adiya, a mother-of-three and chairperson of the Abu Shok CPN.

They eventually found her—a 15-year-old, still a child herself, who had fallen pregnant to a man who had promised her marriage. But as soon as she was due to give birth, the groom-to-be suddenly disappeared.

The girl had committed a crime by abandoning her child, and the CPN initially helped her with legal advice. But because she was only 15 years old, she was soon released from police custody.

The young mother—who was moved to tears when hospital staff showed her the child she had abandoned—was given counselling by the network, whose members have received UNICEF-supported training in the provision of psycho-social support. Child Protection Network staff then sat down and spoke with community leaders.

“The case was an important one,” said Sa’adiya, “because it showed the community what kind of assistance the CPN can provide for children. It was also important for the community to know that not anybody should be giving birth. This girl was still a child.”
Female genital mutilation, or cutting, is a thorny issue, difficult even to talk about. Families often don’t talk about it. It’s what is done, end of discussion—khalas, as they say in Arabic.

UNICEF has an obligation to talk about cutting and we do because the practice can be dangerous for a girl. It can lead to a lifetime of complications during her monthly period. Infections can result in risky childbirth for mother and baby, infertility and problems during sex. It’s estimated that 87 percent of females in Sudan are cut.

Many of those preserving the tradition here, mothers and grandmothers, know that cutting is not healthy or safe for girls. So why does the practice persist?

UNICEF-Sudan realized a new approach was needed to address this difficult topic. But how to protect the rights of a girl and respond to the often intense pressure from the family and the community?

The importance of language

‘Ghalfa’ is a term used in Sudan to describe uncut girls. It’s a nasty term, used to curse someone; it’s often hurled at sex workers. We cannot tell families to keep your girl ghalfa, so what to do?

UNICEF convened a workshop with religious and other community leaders, government, civil society, activists and artists. The diverse participants talked about finding new terminology for an uncut girl. It must be positive. Saying simply ‘You can’t cut’ is really an option because then you are asking for a negative. And no one will say I am proud my daughter is a ghalfa.

Words were proposed, such as Jameela (beautiful), adjectives that describe and evoke. It was decided to use something broad, not just focused on cutting. Eventually
Saleema was decided upon because it’s an adjective that is about being complete, healthy, perfect as created by God. It enjoys a wide spectrum of positive associations in Arabic: a whole, inclusive, undivided. It was also used as a girl’s name a long time ago.

Saleema messages

It’s been said that Saleema messages are not aimed like arrows, straight at targets, rather wafted like perfumes that catch people’s attention unawares. Why? Because the history of messaging on this issue has shown that direct messages saying ‘don’t cut your daughter’ has had little effect on the practice.

The point is not to tell people what to do; the point is to engage and start conversations. People will construct meanings relevant to them based on their own experiences. How then to attach positive values to a new norm?

We began by asking: how does not being cut mean not pure or clean if that is how God created them?

Saleema is a unique and effective approach to female genital cutting because it is not directly about female genital cutting. Instead, the emphasis is on keeping girls perfect in the way God made them. In the new cultural norm, Saleema is associated with good and beautiful; a marriageable condition; God’s intention; integral to our culture; healthy, clean and pure.

The campaign began with the message of a newborn girl, ‘Every girl is born Saleema, let every girl grow up Saleema’. This was the ground message and it’s been kept throughout.

Saleema means fewer complications in childbirth and for the baby; it means less infections. Infections can even lead to fertility problems. Problems can occur each month with her period, including an unpleasant smell. Saleema also means a happier marriage from sexual relations without problems.

Community commitments

In Sudan a firka cloth is used in a variety of female rituals: giving birth, during cutting, during marriage consummation, even as a burial cover if a girl dies before she is married. The firka is made from very colorful material, silk and cotton, and it’s often covered with perfumes and incense. (Grandmothers say the bright, rich colors are used to hide the blood that is part of many of the rituals.)

Because of the firka’s association with rites of passage and tradition the same patterns were chosen as the colors for the branding of Saleema.

As cutting is a rite of passage in a girl’s life there are a number of rituals surrounding it, including going to the sauna, applying henna and so on. Saleema encourages the keeping of these traditions for their importance in relationships and in the culture—but to maintain them without the cutting.

At community gatherings a UNICEF-trained facilitator guides discussions towards the positive values of Saleema. Then peer pressure can be seen in the other direction. At this point the campaign takes advantage of the Sudanese tradition of collective action. This can be in the form of dances and poetry around Saleema, but most of all it is symbolized by a community pledge, a promise, cemented by writing their commitment on large banners which are then displayed in public spaces.

In the past seven years there have been 979 public community declarations, in 16 of Sudan’s 18 states, to stop female genital cutting, to keep our girls Saleema.

“When I look at my daughters I feel happy because they are part of a new generation that will not suffer as we mothers have suffered, I am not afraid of the way God made them. They are perfect the way they are.”
Sudan by the numbers: child protection

Percentage of children under age 5 whose birth is registered with civil authorities (%) MICS 2014

A child registered at birth is more likely to have access to health care, education and other basic services.