



Psychosocial Support Project in Ethiopia: What worked, why did it work and what can we learn?

Psychosocial Support Project of VSO in Ethiopia

Ethiopia continues to be one of the countries with the largest numbers of internally displaced people (IDP) in the world with a total estimated number of IDPs being around 2.2m in February 2019, with the majority registered in SNNP, Oromia, Somalia, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. Primary school teachers in schools hosting displaced children have challenges in accommodating these children due to behaviors resulting from fear and anxiety. Children face trauma, fear and hopelessness due to their experiences and lack of support to meet their needs. Teaching personnel have also been affected and have expressed the need for psycho-social support (PSS) for themselves in addition to their students.

In response to the above problems, VSO Ethiopia has been working in partnership with UNICEF since May 2018 in the four regions (SNNP, Oromia, Somalia, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions). The overall objective of the project is to strengthen the inherent resilience and wellbeing of primary school children and teachers affected by internal conflicts. The project trained 2,272 teacher educators from the 9 target teacher education colleges (TECs) and elementary schools set up in the four regions of the country. The training included

training of trainers (ToT) in Psychosocial Support Services, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), alongside the production of training manuals, Education in Emergency (EiE) reference materials and follow up.

In February 2020, VSO commissioned the New Enlightenment Consultancy to undertake research to better understand why and how the project was successful in terms of improved student learning outcomes and emotional state within an improved learning environment.

What are done/What has worked in the VSO Project?

Volunteering for Development

The study found conclusive evidence from the qualitative and quantitative analyses that the project's interventions have improved the skills of teachers and para-social workers. Most of the study participant teachers and social workers confirmed that the PSS project improved the teachers' skills in teaching methods, understanding emotions & feelings, identifying student problems, supporting students, creating a conducive school environment, motivating students, and improving ways of communicating to students.

The pedagogy is more inclusive and child-centric compared to pre-intervention pedagogy. The pedagogy also increased the sense of belongingness among IDPs within the host communities. The project equipped teachers with the skills in identifying victims and holistically addressing their psychological problems. Respondent teachers from all study sites highlighted that the PSS and life skill training helped them to deal with their own emotional and social difficulties, manage their stress, and develop self-confidence in their skills. At all the study sites, teachers were observed demonstrating active listening skills while teaching in class. They also showed initiative in appreciating contributions from all students and encouraging participation and engagement in different activities. Teachers in the study area all agreed that the PSS training had a positive effect on:

- their thinking,
- means of communicating with children,
- participatory teaching approaches,
- understanding or accepting children’s feelings,
- helping children to socialize with others,
- creating a conducive learning environment.

Mobilization skills like bringing back children to school and reintegrating them, facilitating guidance

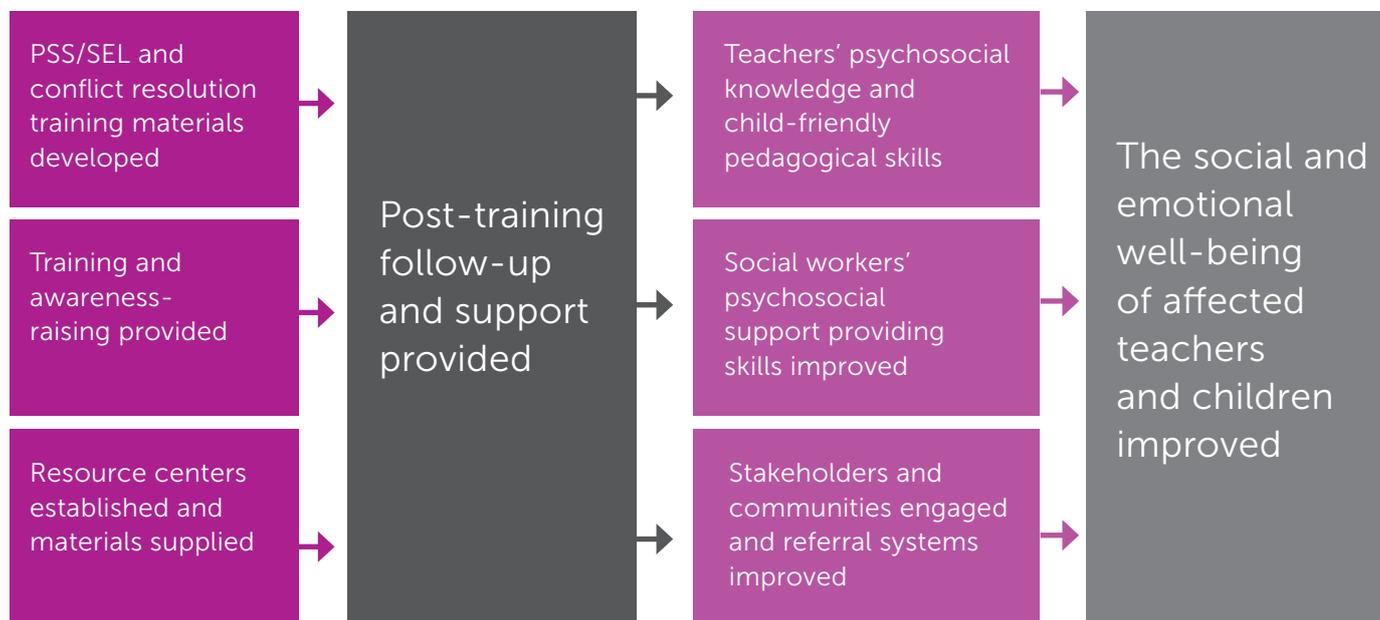
for children with complex problems, and serving as agents in conflict analysis and resolution in school and society are also evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention. Better utilization of the limited school resources like playing space, materials, and time is evidence for the project’s efficiency.

The project also equipped teachers with training on life skills which they believe is even helpful in their day to day life. The training mainly focuses on:

- critical thinking,
- decision making,
- boosting confidence,
- how to live a peaceful life with others,
- how to solve problems by discussing and sharing ideas with friends and elders,
- how to build a good relationship and respect neighbors, teachers, peers and families, and
- how to support each other and share knowledge, with others.

Students also indicated that there were improvements made by teachers in their teaching approaches. For example, trying to engage all students, trying to listen to and respect students, treating all students equally, and motivating and recognizing students’ efforts.

PSS Project Model



Improving the socio-emotional state of students

Teachers confirmed that the PSS and the life skill training helped them to address the socio-emotional problems of students who had lost their family and were traumatized by the ethnic conflict. They also believed that the project enabled them to help children to:

- build and improve their confidence,
- understand themselves and others,
- communicate with others,

- express their feelings, and
- make wise decisions.

Moreover, children in all sites confirmed improved practice by teachers in the areas of listening, helping, and advising students. Similarly, parents who participated in this study revealed that they have observed improvements in the behavior, social interaction, communication, and emotional attachments of their children. Previously the children

were not allowed to play with other children due to ethnic tensions.

All study participants from the four sites including teachers, para-social workers, project staff, parents, and children themselves confirmed that they observed changes in the socio-emotional states of children due to the project intervention. Among those positive changes include increased class attendance, feeling safe, increased interaction or playing with other children, ways of communication with parents and peers, increased confidence, etc. can be considered as evidence of improved behavior or socio-emotional state of children. For instance, 93.3% (n=280), 83.9% (n=250), 63.3% (n=190) and 57.4% (n=170) of study participant students in SNNP, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions, respectively, reported that they feel safe. The lower scores found from Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions may be attributed to the ethnic conflicts that still exist as the mean scores of students in these two regions on emotional competence, social competence, and making a wise decision are lower (and statistically significant) than those of the other two regions in our quantitative study.

One 17-year-old student from Oromia region said that he had learned how to calm himself, and he used the calming methods to reduce the powerful exam pressure he otherwise felt. Numerous students said that because they had become more relaxed, they were in a better position to learn, a view that teachers also confirmed.

Improving students' learning outcomes

The social workers and teachers reported that students' perception of education and school attendance improved after the project intervention. Previously many students used to come late to school and leave classes at any time, but these practices have decreased with the project intervention. All parents, teachers, and social workers also confirmed the improvement of students' motivation and class participation due to the implementation of the PSS. For instance, participants confirmed that their children's motivation to go to school has improved recently and believed the reasons for this outcome to be the playgrounds, interaction with other children, and teachers' positive attitude. The education experts from all the research sites also agreed there is the improvement of students' class participation and their potential to score high due to the PSS training. The study participants also mentioned several pieces of evidence that show changes in learning outcomes due to the project. Among them include an increased number of students returning to school, an increased number of children's coming to school regularly, increased motivation to do homework, improved school performance, and increased active participation in class, among others.

The study found that 81.9 % (n=978) of study participant students are attending their education regularly. Regionally, 97.7% (n=293), 95.6% (n=285), 70% (n=210), 67.6% (n=200) of study participant students in SNNP, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Somali regions, respectively, reported that they are attending their education regularly.



In terms of school performance, 23.8% (n=279) of the students replied that they do their homework 'most of the time' without their parents' request and 40.9% (n=479) 'always' do. Meanwhile, 44.8% (n=531) replied they have improved their school performance 'always' and 22.4% (n=265) replied 'most of the times'. Moreover, 62.9% (n=188) of study participant students in SNNP region and 52.4% (n=153) in Oromia region replied that their school performance is 'always' improved. However, 15% (n=45) of the students from Benishangul-Gumuz region, and 5.4% (n=16) from Somali region replied that they have 'never' improved their performance in school, which are much higher than those from the Oromia and SNNP region at 3.8% (n=11) and 2.7% (n=8) respectively. Again, all the lower scores of positive results found from Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions could be attributed to the ethnic conflicts that still exist in these two regions.

Improving the learning environment

The education experts from all study sites claimed that teachers are equipped with the skills to create a conducive learning environment and always striving to make the environment attractive. Teachers learned the skills of engaging students with different activities and implementing them using the limited resources available. On this issue parents also gave their testimony that the schools are safe now because their children are staying at school playing different games.

Can the Project be sustainable?

The sustainability of the project can be ensured through the embedding of the psychological approach and program activities into the overall education system. Thus, the project has prompted Regional Education Bureaus, Teacher Education Colleges and district education offices to teach teachers and children, integrate PSS curriculum in the In-Service Teachers Training Plan, and build and strengthen schools/Teacher Education Colleges' Self-Learning program and its delivery by teachers, which can help to ensure the project's sustainability.

Are there similarities of Project's interventions with other projects implemented in the world?

The project's model follows several projects elsewhere in the world. Resilience research by the World Bank with Palestine refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan reveals the crucial role teachers in providing care, advice, and emotional support (World Bank 2013). The Qattan Centre for the Child in Gaza, for example, has adopted an integrated pedagogical approach that utilizes music, drama, and cinema to support self-directed learning and encourage students to express themselves (World Bank, 2013).

Likewise, the VSO PSS project implemented child-friendly learner-engagement strategies such as outdoor play games/songs, positive reinforcement, and circle time which makes learning fun.

VSO PSS project also enhanced the school environment (playgrounds and other open spaces) to make it safe and inclusive and play-based learning. Similar to this, an intervention in Israel found when teachers established a safe environment, children's coping skills improved. That is children participating in play activities are more likely to maintain health equilibrium and less likely to re-experience traumatic events. (Wolmer, 2011).

Another study on basic psychosocial interventions and alleviation of distress reflects that teachers have the important task of supporting and understanding students, facilitate discussions, reinforcing skills, and identifying suffering children and prepare students for future experience (Burde et al, 2015). Similarly, the VSO PSS project implemented specific methods for calming children so that they feel less anxious, fearful, and worried as a result.

Good Practices from VSO PSS Project to share:

- Involving both local and international volunteers by itself is the best practice of the project to bring new perspectives, insight, and diverse experience. Volunteers have provided opportunities for the project to learn from the perspectives, insight, and experience they bring and to work in partnership in developing new approaches.
- Cascading the project objectives using teachers and parasocial workers is the best approach in terms of reaching and supporting displaced children to come out from psychosocial distress/trauma.
- Integrating the PSS curriculum with the In-Service Teachers Training Service Plan, building school's/Teacher Education Colleges' capacity, development of Self-Learning programs are best practices to shift ownership and sustain the project.
- The project established good partnerships especially with government organizations (Ministry of Education) which helped to cascade the project approaches and improve the intervention.

Could the VSO PSS model be applied elsewhere?

The VSO PSS model can be applied to many other public and private schools/colleges both in conflict and in a normal environment as it promotes interactive learning and acquaints teachers with new skill packages that help them to easily understand students' psychosocial problems and properly respond to them. The specific model that can be applied in the conflict-sensitive area includes a model that promotes a sense of belongingness through active participation of the students both in and outside classroom activities. The model can be integrated both in teacher training and school curriculum to develop or enhance individuals' sense of belongingness as the main component for better self-esteem.

Main challenges of the project

- Large classroom size (200 in case of Somali region) hampered teachers to apply some of the PSS skills like calling students by name, dealing with their emotions, managing misconducts/

conflicts, side talks, engaging all students (group work), correcting classwork, checking learner understanding and providing individual support while teaching in class.

- The teachers in all study sites agreed that factors such as shelter, food, stationery materials, shortage of chairs, textbooks, teaching aids, and reference materials were out of the project's scope but they affected the capacity of teachers to fully implement psychosocial support skills.
- The implementation of psychosocial support depends on the individual teacher's performance had an impact upon the effectiveness of the project.
- Due to ethnic tensions in the two regions (Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz), children there have developed lower emotional and social competencies compared with the other two regions (Oromia and SNNP) which need further support on PSS in the schools.

Voices of study participant

"From the beginning of the project I am very well aware of the project's objectives. I am working as a volunteer. I don't ask any payment for every assignment I took from VSO. I am actively engaging in capacity building of teachers and the project's rollout process." (Education Bureau Coordinator, SNNP region)

"At this moment, we are so happy to go and stay in the schools. Our teachers' teaching techniques are also attractive. Our teachers are motivating and encourage us to actively participate in classwork without any age and sex differences." (Children in the age group between 6 to 8 years old from SNNP region)

"My child is in grade 7. He scored lower in his academic achievement during the conflict periods of 2019. He ranked 47 out of 50 students. In the mid-semester of this year, he ranked 12th which was a great change for me. Even he participated in the question-answer competition and was awarded three exercise books and three pens from teachers. I can see that the mind of my child is changing in a good way." (A parent from Benishangul-Gumuz region)

"I can say the training has brought a lot of changes, for instance, teachers have been using the skills and knowledge obtained from the training to solve the social and interaction issues among children. As evidence, I have observed when those trained teachers helped children who did not want to sit and interact or play together due to ethnic tension." (Education expert from Benishangul-Gumuz region)

"Teachers used to beat us, yell at us, and even send us home if we engage in disruptive behavior. However, lately, they are changing, and they are trying to advise us instead of beating and insulting us." (Children above 12 years old from SNNPR, Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regions).

"The problem with most teachers here and elsewhere is that they think they are always right, and students are always wrong. They tend to associate misbehavior and absentees with weaknesses of students. Nevertheless, after the PSS training, teachers started to exercise the skills they have learned in understanding their students' perspectives." (An education expert from SNNP region)

What are VSO & Partners to learn?

- Continue supporting teachers in enhancing their capacity on the management of an emergency, chronic crisis, and early reconstruction contexts as they have a significant impact on their students' wellbeing.
- Conducting follow-up and consolidate teacher skills have paramount importance to register long-term success.
- The project should ensure the full involvement of parents, caregivers, community groups (women, religious leaders, etc.) in the PSS programs to get their support to ensure the sustainability of the project. Similarly, children themselves should be involved in the program design to make it tailored to specific groups.
- The project should support children who need clinical interventions for trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, organizations should recognize the importance of programs that help

internally displaced persons to deal with day-to-day stressors.

- It would be good to expand the program to all schools as it brought several positives changes in the school's environment, students' safety, psychosocial wellbeing of students, relationship, communication, teachers' teaching approach, etc.
- The project needs to expand its coverage through training of more teachers thereby offering psychosocial services to needy children and their families.
- The project should continue working with TTCs (Teacher Training colleges) and schools to integrate PSS, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding in the pre-service curriculum as part of the sustainability of the program.
- Students have different unmet needs like food, stationery materials, clothing, etc. which affect the implementation of the project. Thus, the government and other partners should be mobilized to address these basic needs.



Details of the Research

The research team employed both quantitative and qualitative methods of research as a primary source of information. The research covered four regions (Oromia, SNNP, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Somalia regions) and 12 primary schools from the four regions. A total of 1,194 students (almost 300 per region) were selected randomly for the quantitative analysis regarding their core competencies. For the qualitative analysis, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions were held with students, teachers,

Para-social workers, teachers from Teacher Education Colleges, parents and community members, and local government partners.

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