



HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON THE LAKE CHAD REGION

Plan International Key Messages

The crisis in Lake Chad Basin is one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world, having displaced more than 2.4 million people, half of whom are children, and left more than 10.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.¹

The crisis has unfolded in a region beset by chronic fragility, where poverty, unemployment and a lack of prospects for young people fuel extremism and are compounded by environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change.

On the 3rd and 4th September 2018 the international community will gather in Berlin, Germany to discuss how to strengthen collective efforts to address the complex crisis in the Lake Chad region. This conference will build on the achievements following the Oslo Conference in February 2017. In addition to highlighting and mobilising funding for humanitarian needs, the High-Level Conference on the Lake Chad Region will aim to promote resilience, as well as crisis prevention and stabilization initiatives to meet the longer-term needs of those affected by the crisis.

Plan International welcomes this initiative. While we remain concerned about the ongoing, urgent humanitarian needs facing children, and particularly girls across the affected countries, we recognise that progress towards children's rights and equality for girls cannot be made without concerted efforts to bring about peace, build resilience and promote sustainable development across the region.

We also welcome emphasis on the regional dimension of the crisis – we urge that attention is paid to both the specific situation in each of the affected countries but also the interdependencies across the region. It is important that donors recognise this aspect of the crisis in funding allocations and support sub-regional approaches which allow a regional analysis of the Lake Chad crisis and take into account cross-border dimensions such as refugee movements, including possible returns.

This document provides Plan International's key messages and recommendations for donors and governments attending the High-Level Conference on the Lake Chad Region.

KEY MESSAGES

Adolescent girls are being affected by the Lake Chad crisis in ways that are different both from adolescent boys and from adult women, and in ways that are being overlooked. Their protection and assistance needs are falling through gaps in humanitarian response programming - they are often counted among children, youth or women, resulting in their specific needs being neglected, while sector specific programmes and funding fail to address the complex, interrelated challenges adolescent girls face.

The voices of adolescent girls are not being heard. They are rarely consulted by the humanitarian community or other actors, and excluded from decision making at all levels.

Listening to girls helps us to understand their experiences of living through crises and to better recognise and appreciate their agency – this in turn can help to provide potential entry points for working with and supporting adolescent girls. For example, our research has demonstrated girls' entrepreneurial skills and desire to help others in the community, which can be used to build the resilience of themselves and that of their communities.ⁱⁱ Girls are best placed to talk about their needs and what can be done to address them – listening to them can enable more responsive and effective programmatic interventions.

The crisis has multiplied and exacerbated the risks of all forms of violence and human rights violations that girls and young women face. Girls describe a spectrum of violence which pervades every aspect of their lives.

The conflict and displacement has given rise to new forms of violence which particularly affect adolescent girls due to their age and gender, including conflict-related violence and communal violence. Girls kidnapped by Boko Haram are subject to forced marriage, rape and sexual slavery, while others are subject to abuse by members of State security services.ⁱⁱⁱ

Girls who have experienced sexual assault, or who return to their communities after escaping capture, often with children, face stigma and exclusion, including by their peers. Such girls and their children are amongst the most vulnerable, often ending up as female-headed households lacking viable livelihoods and unable or unwilling to access gender based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health and right (SRHR) services. These girls require multi-sectoral support.

Violence is widely prevalent, within and outside the home. In our research, over a third of girls told us they feel unsafe at home, with girls who are displaced or separated from their families and those working in domestic service being particularly vulnerable. Girls also commonly report sexual harassment and assault in their communities.^{iv} Such pervasive violence and insecurity pre-dates, and will outlast the conflict without concerted efforts to confront and challenge harmful gender norms.

Poverty and limited livelihood options are contributing to the prevalence of survival sex amongst girls and women. Assessments have also shed light on widespread sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and weaknesses in awareness of and reporting mechanisms for SEA.^v Trafficking is also widespread with girls being at particular risk.^{vi}

Despite the level of need, undoubtedly underestimated due to stigma and underreporting of GBV, capacity constraints, access barriers and limited resources mean that the coverage and quality of GBV services is extremely limited.^{vii}

Girls and young women face heightened constraints on their social roles and their mobility.

Due to concerns about safety and security, families are placing tighter restrictions on girls, while girls themselves report changing their behaviour and limiting their movement in public spaces in response to harassment and abuse. These constraints restrict girls' ability to access essential humanitarian assistance, but also undermine their basic human rights, including their right to education.

Girls' access to education is being severely curtailed. Education has been deliberately attacked by Boko Haram, with girls' education targeted in particular; 983 schools have closed across the region due to insecurity.^{viii} This has exacerbated the other barriers girls face in realising their right to education and the lack of investment in education prior to the crisis.

Schools have been burnt, bombed and used for military purposes and teachers forced to flee. For girls, attacks and disruption to education have served to compound other gender-related barriers to education. Girls have told us that the burden of household chores, the costs associated with school, concerns about security on the way to school and child, early and forced marriage all impinge on their access to education and ability to stay in school.^{ix}

Ongoing disruption of education by the conflict, compounded by the low value accorded to girls' education undermines girls' and women's wellbeing and future prospects. For the region as a whole, a generation of young women and men denied their right to education are being left ill

equipped to take advantage of opportunities, advance peace and security and challenge gender inequality and discrimination.

Adolescent girls are clear that child early and forced marriage is a threat to their current well-being and future prospects. They feel scared and anxious about marriage. Our evidence suggests that rates of child, early and forced marriage, commonplace before the crisis, are increasing.^x Families are marrying their daughters early as a response to economic hardship.

We know that child, early and forced marriage forces girls to drop out of school, is a powerful driver of adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality and undermines the fulfilment of a host of other human rights. In a Plan International needs assessment in North East Nigeria, respondents in 60 percent of sites surveyed reported that married girls are unable to participate in any activities outside the home, including continuing their education, without approval from their husbands.^{xi}

Child brides are often denied their right to decide when and if they want to have children and are less likely to be able to negotiate safe sex due to inherent power imbalances in the marriage.

KEY ADVOCACY ASKS

- Governments of affected countries, donors, international organisations, and civil society actors should **urgently address and prioritise the specific rights and needs of adolescent girls in the Lake Chad region** across humanitarian, resilience building and development interventions.
 - All humanitarian actors should ensure that **needs assessments and humanitarian response plans include gender- and age-related analyses** and employ participatory methodologies to best capture the voices and perspectives of girls and boys of different ages and allow responses to be tailored to their specific needs. Adolescent girls must be able to shape programme design and implementation, and accountability mechanisms should be accessible to adolescent girls.
 - Donors should provide **funding for programmes which respond to the needs of adolescent girls holistically** with comprehensive, cross-sectoral programming that addresses both immediate life-saving needs, and promotes long-term resilience.
- All humanitarian actors, including donors, should **urgently increase prioritisation, funding and coordination of efforts to prevent and respond to ongoing gender based violence and child protection needs and to fulfil adolescent girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)**.
 - There is an urgent need for **increased and sustained funding to improve GBV service delivery, coverage and quality**.
 - Gender-based violence and child protection prevention and response programming interventions must be **specifically tailored to address the needs of adolescent girls**. Targeted efforts should be made to address child, early and forced marriage in particular.
 - All humanitarian response, resilience, and recovery programming must ensure **potential gender-based violence protection risks are identified, addressed and mitigated**, with a specific focus on the needs of adolescent girls who may face distinct age-related vulnerabilities. All sectors should also seek to identify and integrate gender-based violence protection and response entry-points.
 - Humanitarian interventions designed to prevent and respond to GBV must **link to and reinforce longer-term efforts to address violence against women and girls** in the affected countries. This includes addressing impunity for perpetrators and promoting demand for and access to justice processes. It also involves addressing root causes of gender-based violence, including discriminatory gender-norms that excuse or accept violence against women and girls and tackling the stigma and culture of silence around GBV which prevents survivors reporting violence and seeking help.

- Governments and UNHCR should ensure that during voluntary repatriation appropriate **measures and safeguards are put in place to ensure that the risks faced by adolescent girls are mitigated during the return and reintegration process.** This includes ensuring that child protection and GBV case management is maintained throughout the return and reintegration process. Cases need to be transferred as needed and a continuum of protection and care must be maintained for children at risk and survivors of gender-based violence, ensuring that the principles of child protection and GBV and a survivor-centred and do no harm approach is maintained. Security agencies and the criminal justice system in all countries should be targeted for gender awareness training and capacity building on appropriate handling of GBV,
- **Comprehensive SRHR services, supplies and information must be funded and provided in consultation with adolescent girls.** Services must be appropriate to the needs of adolescent girls, including survivors of sexual violence and girls who are married, pregnant or mothers.
- Governments of affected countries, with the support of donors, should **invest in and promote safe, inclusive, quality and gender-responsive education with a particular focus on adolescent girls' education.**
 - Continued **investment in education in emergencies remains critical** in areas where schools remain unusable. There is a particular need for education in emergencies interventions to be provided in hard to reach areas, for example through mobile education units,^{xii} and for education in emergencies interventions to link to and provide a bridge into longer term education.
 - As part of efforts to rebuild and strengthen education systems across the region, it is essential that **gender-related barriers to education faced by girls are addressed.** These include insecurity on routes to school, school-related gender-based violence, and community attitudes that devalue education for girls. It is also important that inclusive and gender responsive approaches to education are adopted; that female teachers are recruited and trained and that schools provide separate latrines and sanitation facilities for girls and boys. Specific measures must also be taken to support girls who have dropped out, or who are at risk of dropping out of education.
 - Education interventions should be used as platforms to **deliver other critical health and protection interventions,** including sexual and reproductive health and rights, and as spaces to challenge harmful gender norms.
 - Governments of all affected countries should **take concrete measures to prevent and prepare for attacks on educational facilities, students, and teachers.** This includes the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration by the Government of Cameroon, and sustained commitment to its domestication and implementation by the Governments of Nigeria and Niger. It is essential that these efforts **recognise and address the gender-related dimensions of attacks on education** as girls' education and female teachers are being specifically targeted by armed groups.
- All actors should promote and fully resource the **systematic participation of adolescent girls in all decisions that affect their lives.** This means they must be included in the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian and peacebuilding programmes and processes.
 - Initiatives are needed that both **develop adolescent girls' skills for leadership and participation in decision-making and create an enabling environment.** This includes establishing mechanisms and spaces and supporting their participation in decision-making processes at all levels; building family and community support for their engagement, and promoting attitudinal change to recognise, and not devalue, the rights of adolescent girls.
 - Adolescent girls must be supported to **participate from the outset in rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation processes** to ensure that their voices are heard and concerns addressed. Specific reintegration and reconciliation programs are also needed that

address the stigma and community backlash faced by adolescent girls released from armed groups, provide psycho-social support for adolescent girls and address their longer term recovery needs, such as access to education and livelihoods.

- All actors should recognise and take steps towards **addressing social norms and discrimination linked to gender and age** which are the root causes and drivers of human rights violations experienced by adolescent girls.
 - Invest in and implement targeted and context specific programme interventions that focus on **identifying, challenging, and addressing gender-based discriminatory attitudes and harmful norms** and positively shape gender equality. This includes supporting attitudinal and behaviour change so that communities and duty bearers are encouraged to recognise and support girls' rights, and working with adolescent boys to challenge harmful masculinities and to engage them as advocates for girls' rights.

ⁱ OCHA (2018) "Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Overview" 26 March.

ⁱⁱ Plan International (2018) 'Adolescent girls in crisis: Voices from the Lake Chad Basin' <https://plan-international.org/girls-in-crisis>

ⁱⁱⁱ Amnesty International (2018) 'They Betrayed Us' <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR4484152018ENGLISH.PDF>

^{iv} Plan International (2018) 'Adolescent girls in crisis: Voices from the Lake Chad Basin'

^v GBV AoR (2018) Assessment Findings of the Gender-Based Violence response services in North-East Nigeria, February -March 2018

^{vi} <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigerian-activists-warn-human-trafficking-danger>

^{vii} *ibid*

^{viii} UNICEF (2018) 'Lake Chad Basin Crisis: Education in Emergencies (EiE) –Jan -March 2018'

^{ix} Plan International (2018) 'Adolescent girls in crisis: Voices from the Lake Chad

^x Based on reports from adolescent girls and boys, parents and community leaders from research sites across North east Nigeria, Diffa and Far North of Cameroon.

^{xi} <https://plan-international.org/publications/needs-assessment-borno-and-adamawa-state>

^{xii} Plan International (2018) 'Mobile Education Units in Emergency Contexts'

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Mobile%20Education%20Units%20in%20Emergency%20Contexts%20Report_Digital_240518.pdf