



**Save the Children**

**MOZAMBIQUE**

**AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF  
RETURNEE\* CHILDREN  
IN MACOMIA AND PALMA, CABO DELGADO**

**THEIR CALLS FOR NOW AND THE FUTURE**

November 2023





Photo: Child participants in the focus group discussions



# INTRODUCTION

## Save the Children's role as a child rights organisation is to be the voice for and with children.

In May 2021, we released "[Hearing the Voices of Children in Cabo Delgado](#)", the first comprehensive analyses of life as a displaced child, detailing the daily challenges, fears and hopes raised by children who had been displaced by the horrific violence in Cabo Delgado. These findings guided our own humanitarian response, and we lent on government, humanitarian agencies, and national and international donor decision makers to ensure these children's voices informed theirs too.

This year in Cabo Delgado, one of the most distinct features of the ongoing humanitarian conflict and crisis has been the return\* of nearly 600,000 people, half of whom are children, to their districts of origin. This has brought a profound change to this complex context, with new challenges and opportunities.

Returnee\* children now represent a significant face of the conflict, among others who are displaced and living in host communities. This is why we conducted extensive consultations with 120 girls and boys in Macomia and Palma. We wanted to hear from them, about the daily challenges they face, where they have returned to, their hopes for the future, and how they think that humanitarian assistance best responds to their needs, with and for children.



The findings tell us that returnee\* children continue to face profound immediate and longer term challenges that must be addressed in humanitarian response and subsequent longer term programming.

This consultation tells us once again how important it is to listen to children. The children we spoke to are remarkably resilient. Despite undergoing unspeakable personal and community tragedies, they have hopes and they know what's best for them.

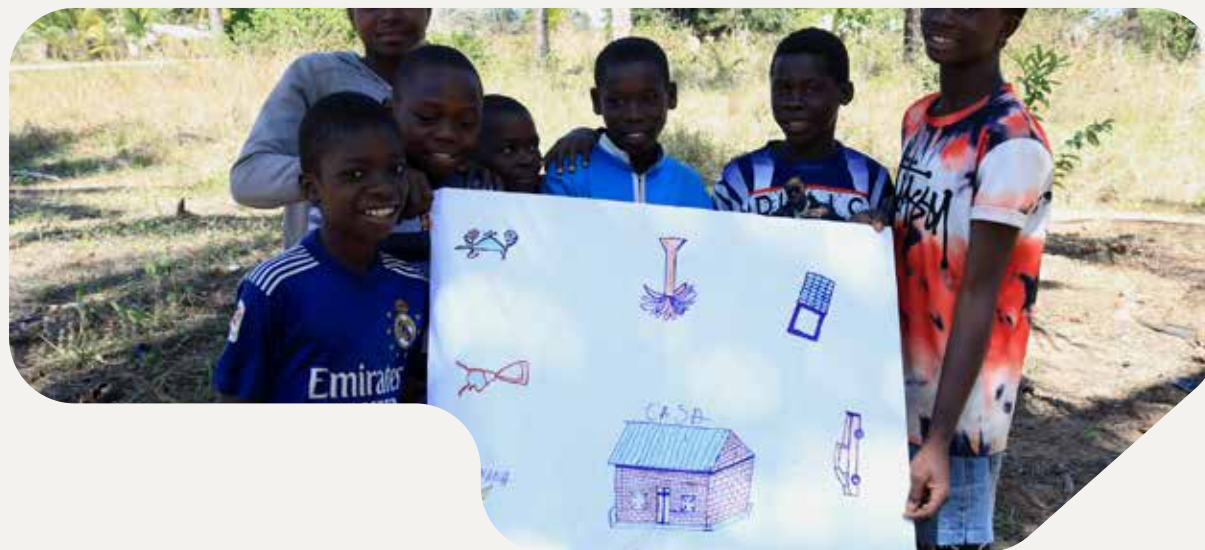
The girls and boys we consulted were generally positive about returning to Macomia and Palma. They expressed happiness about being back 'home', reuniting with family members and friends after truly horrific and traumatising years apart. They spoke of the joy and sense of relief in being able to resume aspects of their lives they had halted due to their displacement, such as going to school and farming. They talk about the struggle for food, clothing and the most basic of services in the places where they had been, and the discrimination they faced on the basis of being internally displaced.

**But the fact remains that a large number of these children, particularly those we met in Macomia, were still not back to where they used to live.**

As a result of the ongoing fragile security situation and nearby brutal attacks, they still live in difficult settlement-like conditions. They speak about having to rebuild their lives from scratch.

The greatest concern returnee\* children have is fear for their safety. The security situation remains delicate and they are still frequently hearing gunfire in the night, reinforcing the very real fear they may have to flee again. All of the children had witnessed extreme violence, and lost parents and family members, affecting their physical and psychological wellbeing. Children spoke about peers who had been abducted, while some of them managed to escape the armed groups.

Children have been deeply distressed by the violence and upheaval and require a range of mental health and psychosocial support to help them recover and reintegrate. They speak of the high rates of physical and sexual violence within their communities, especially affecting girls, with child marriage and pregnancy being common.



As they look to the future, children mention immediate basic needs and services such as clean water and civic documentation. They specifically call to invest in their education and health care as well as food security and stable livelihoods for their families.

In short, the stories of returnee\* children highlight the need for ongoing humanitarian assistance and the conflict has brought disproportionate suffering to children. Even before this crisis Cabo Delgado was the worst place to be a child in Mozambique. There is a critical need to address children's immediate needs and build towards functional systems that ensure continued access to basic services.

**We call on the entire community, government, donors and private sector, to listen to what these returnee\* children are saying and act to protect them, support them, and help them survive and thrive in the future.**

Brechtje van Lith  
Country Director for Mozambique  
Save the Children



*The Humanitarian Protection Cluster emphasises that although some populations have returned, it does not necessarily indicate that a durable solution has been achieved as per IASC Framework on Durable Solutions nor, in some cases, that these IDPs have physically returned to their place of habitual residence. Therefore, the Cluster recommends that the term returnees\* includes an asterisk \* in recognition of these circumstances. (Protection Cluster, Glossary of Terms, Northern Mozambique Conflict-Affected Areas, 19 January 2023).*



# HOW WE CONSULTED RETURNEE\* CHILDREN IN MACOMIA AND PALMA

Between 24 July and 1 August 2023, Save the Children conducted a consultation with 120 girls and boys [60 girls and 60 boys, 90 from Palma and 30 from Macomia districts] aged between 8 and 17 years old that have returned to their districts of origin in Macomia and Palma districts. These children had in some cases returned to their original communities before the conflict, others have not, and remain in very challenging conditions. The children had been mainly displaced in Montepuez (45), Palma (20), Mueda (18) and Pemba (12).

The consultations involved a range of different qualitative approaches, including games and focus group discussions to discuss the challenges they are facing where they have returned to; their hopes for the future; and how humanitarian actors could better respond to their needs and aspirations. The exercises took place in 5 different communities, 3 in Palma district (Muaha, Ncumbi and Mute) and 2 in Macomia district (Macomia Sede and Xinavane). Unfortunately, due to nearby attacks, planned consultations in other communities had to be halted. A team of 10 people led the exercise, including 5 Save the Children staff, 2 Community Facilitators and 3 government staff, all technicians from the District Health, Women's and Social Welfare (SDSMAS) offices of Macomia and Palma.

Separate focus group discussions were organised for girls and boys. The sessions were held in local languages, and involved drawing, movement and speaking (so the children did not require reading or writing skills). All the sessions observed strict child safeguarding procedures, including voluntary and informed participation, plus parental or caregiver consent.

The sessions began with the mapping of clear and safe child protection referral pathways. To prevent participants from having to re-live traumatic experiences, the exercise avoided questions on what they had undergone in their lives. During the sessions, five children (3 girls and 2 boys) received first aid treatment for the wounds they had been carrying.

All the children's names quoted in this report have been changed to maintain confidentiality and all children's statements were not fact checked or verified.

*I am happy because I was able to return to my home, it was difficult to live where we were.*

**-Alda\*, 15,  
Macomia Sede**

*When there were attacks in Palma, we ran away. Now I feel good to come back to my house, play and study.*

**-Faira\*, 13, Muaha**

*War is something horrible and painful, we saw people we know being killed, that's why we fled, when there's peace, it's always better. Many of us returned, some still remain there.*

**-Artur\*, 17, Xinavane**

*I appreciate being with my family again, before we were separated*

**-Helio\*, 17, Muaha**

*Our houses were destroyed by the [Kenneth] cyclone, our parents were trying to rebuild, but the "insurgents" destroyed them again.*

**-Júlio\*, 16,  
Macomia Sede**



Photo: Children illustrating their dream community through drawings





# KEY ADVOCACY MESSAGES FROM CHILDREN

01

## Returnees\*, especially children must remain a priority for the ongoing humanitarian response and nexus programming in Cabo Delgado

Children have seen the widespread destruction of homes, schools and health facilities in areas they have returned to. They need initial support and access to basic services (including civic documentation) to enable them to rebuild their lives.

“  
As soon as we returned, we found our houses destroyed.

-Célia\*, 13, Muaha

“  
Even our hospital was destroyed by this war, now it is operating in tents.

-Júlio\*, 16, Macomia Sede

02

## Prioritise mental health and psychosocial support for children (MHPSS)

Some children show signs of psychological distress due to the traumatic experiences they carry as well as the ongoing conflict in their direct environment. They are afraid of many things – including further attacks, as well as not having housing and food – aggregates their stress. Both community-based interventions as well as specialised MHPSS services are needed to help them deal with these experiences and develop positive coping mechanisms as they move forward.

03

## Address specific needs of children demobilised or escaped from armed groups

Consulted children were or knew others who had been abducted, while some had escaped from armed groups. These children are in critical need of both MHPSS and reintegration support with their families and communities. Children are also calling for adolescent programmes to prevent the further recruitment of children.

“  
I don't like seeing planes and helicopters flying over our community, they remind me of the time there was an attack and we had to flee from here.

-António, 15, Macomia Sede

“  
I don't like guns or seeing men with guns, because they killed my father.

-Josefa\*, 15, Mute

“  
Gunshots still happen here in Mute, some of them are fired by some men from the local force when they're drunk and that scares us.

-Célia\*, 14, Mute

04

### Urgent action needed to prevent and respond to child marriage

Children are alarmed by the high number of other children in their communities who have been forced to marry and already have children. Girls are often forced to marry by their parents, including, they say, to members of the armed forces or to traders as a livelihood coping strategy. Girls are in critical need of being protected against early marriage and early pregnancy.

“

*We don't like parents who send their daughters off to get married while they are still children.*

*-Josefa II\*, 15, Muaha*

”

“

*There are many cases of girls being forced by their families to get married at a very early age.*

*-Lira\*, 13, Muaha*

”

05

### Attention must be given to the widespread Violence Against Children (VAC)

Returnee\* girls and boys talk about the daily physical violence, sexual harassment and abuse that they experience in their families and schools. Urgent investment is needed to prevent violence against children and offer comprehensive child-centred support to child survivors of GBV, including medical care, psychosocial support, protective care, and legal services. Corporal punishment in schools and families must be ended, and positive teaching and parenting approaches urgently introduced.

“

*Children are beaten in the street, at school and at home.*

*-Maria\*, 13, Macomia Sede*

”

“

*My father often beats me, and so does my teacher.*

*-Osvaldo\*, 11, Mute*

”





06

### Urgent investment is needed to ensure access to and quality of education

Girls and boys expressed their desire to continue with their studies. But they are demanding safer and more child-friendly school environments. They are asking for more support in terms of school supplies. They also see a lot of other children out of school and facing barriers to return. The resumption of quality education is critical for children, to ensure their learning, to prevent child marriage and to protect them from recruitment by armed groups.



*I don't like seeing children not going to school.*

**-Aldo\*, 15, Xinavane**

07

### Investment in agricultural and income generation programs is critical to build families' livelihoods and food security

Most families of the children consulted in Macomia and Palma traditionally rely on fisheries, crops or livestock for their livelihoods, but these have been disrupted by the conflict. If they are given adequate start up inputs, skills and support, families will be capable of producing their own food and generate income.

*There are children who won't go to school because they're hungry.*

**-Joana\*, 14, Macomia Sede**

*We want to have access to our fields so we can produce our own food like we used to.*

**-Vitorino\*, 14, Macomia Sede**



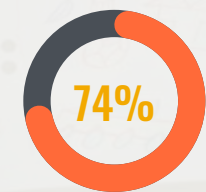
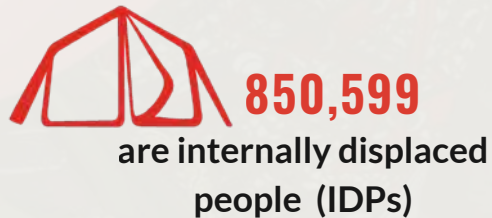
# SNAPSHOT OF THE CONFLICT IN CABO DELGADO



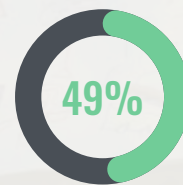
*It is critical to note that many of the IDPs have been displaced multiple times and been repeatedly exposed to a cycle of extreme violence and uprooting. New displacements are ongoing, due to continued violence as well as poor access to services and livelihoods.*

## KEY STATS:

In the northern parts of Mozambique, as of August 2023, the conflict has led to over **1.4 million** displacements



internally displaced people (IDPs) are in Cabo Delgado



of all returnees are children



**Mocimboa da Praia**  
**176,174**  
**people**



**Palma**  
**116,016**  
**people**



**Muidumbe**  
**58,887**  
**people**



**Top 3 districts in Cabo Delgado hosting returnees\***



# WHAT RETURNEE\* CHILDREN ARE SAYING ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION & SECURITY

Returnee\* children expressed security related concerns, in both districts their houses had been destroyed due to conflict however those who could were able to return and rebuild their homes. Physical and sexual violence, including violence against the elderly and conflict among children happens often during the curfew hours.

In Macomia district, before the armed attacks in the community, the district was hit by Cyclone Kenneth, which devastated several families' homes and crops. After a long recovery journey the community was hit again, this time by armed attacks perpetrated by non-state armed groups. Child marriage is a particular cause of concern for returnee\* children, who highlighted that this is one of the main issues facing girls in their communities.

*Some girls end up dating or marrying the soldiers who operate in the area.*

**-Berta\*, 15,  
Macomia Sede**

*Many girls stop studying to get married, others because they get pregnant.*

**-Alda\*, 15,  
Macomia, Sede**

*When girls get married as children, their husbands forbid them to go to school or don't believe that they have actually been going to school because they think they are involved with other men, so they tell them to stop going to school.*

**-Joana II\*, 17, Muaha**

*Here in our community, there are many girls who have become pregnant mainly by older men, especially traders, who offer the girls things to get involved with them. When the girls refuse to get involved with them, these men threaten and insult us.*

**-Teresa\*, 16, Mute**

*The government must end this war, we are suffering.*

**-Paulo\*, 12, Xinavane**



# CHILDREN HAVE THE RIGHT TO LIVE FROM VIOLENCE

Some children who returned to locations with relative peace expressed their joy of feeling a somewhat safer in their communities. Children are thankful because they are together with their friends and reunited with their families.

However, for other returnee\* children it has been challenging to adapt to the hosting community due to the difficulties they face in accessing basic services, although communities have been welcoming them in most areas.

*I wish they wouldn't hit me anymore.*

**-Teresa & Mafalda, 16, Xinavane**

*I don't like war and when people beat me. My grandmother often beats me.*

**-Manuel\*, 9, Xinavane**

*We've seen boys being sexually abused in the community.*

**-Mafalda, 15, Macomia Sede**

*When we go to present or correct our work next to the teacher, he says things and looks at us strangely.*

**-Célia II\*, 13, Mute**

*Some parents beat their children if they don't finish their household chores.*

**-Berta\*, 15, Macomia Sede**

## WHAT RETURNEE\* CHILDREN ARE SAYING ABOUT EDUCATION

Girls are particularly concerned about the prevalence of sexual harassment by teachers and community members when moving around. A number of girls said they have experienced sexual harassment or have witnessed this being perpetrated against other girls. Children said when they report this to their parents or to schools, their allegations are not taken seriously or are not followed up for fear of reprisals.

In Palma District, there is only one secondary school, which is located 6 km from Ncumbi and 37km from Mute. Children said their parents cannot afford daily transport costs nor the accommodation cost for children to be based in the district capital. As a result of this, children are dropping out of school. The majority of them end up staying at home, spending most of their time engaged in household chores, working on the farmland, exposed to many risks.



Some returnee\* children expressed great satisfaction for having been able to go back to school, meeting many of their friends in an environment that they consider to be relatively peaceful. They see school as a space to dream and develop.



# CHILDREN HAVE THE RIGHT TO QUALITY EDUCATION

“  
I really like studying, I want to be a doctor to help people who are sick in my home area.  
”

-Victoria\*, 15, Muaha

“  
We've tried to report these things to our parents, but they don't believe us and blame us for having a bad attitude.  
”

-Maria\*, 12, Mute

“  
I don't like to see teachers coming to school drunk.  
”

-André\*, 15, Xinavane

“  
I like to study so I can be able to have a good future, to have a job and a better life with my family.  
”

-Gito\*, 14, Mute

“  
Going back to school was one of my daily routines that I missed.  
”

-Otilia\*, 13, Mute

“  
My school has no place for us to play.  
”

-Luís\*, 17, Muaha

“  
Rehabilitate the bathrooms in our school, they're not good, there's a lot of broken stuff.  
”

-Antonio\*, 15, Macomia Sede

“  
We don't have balls or other materials to play with.  
”

-Vitorino\*, 14, Macomia Sede

# WHAT RETURNEE\* CHILDREN ARE SAYING ABOUT HEALTHCARE, WASH AND FOOD

Access to health services and drinking water was among the concerns for returnee\* children. Children said that it was difficult to get medical care because the health centres were too far away. They proposed bicycles or mobile ambulances to help them access health services. Those that had received care complained about the low quality of service at clinics. A number of health centres were destroyed due to the conflict, heavily affecting the availability and quality of health services.

Children also spoke of the satisfaction of having their meals regularly with their families again, underlining that when they were internally displaced they faced more challenges being able to eat and drink clean water. This was because they did not have access to land and so could not produce their own food and had few other income sources.

As they look to the future, many of the children call for longer term recovery support – to invest in their education, and basic services like water, and food and livelihoods security for their families.

*I don't like going to the hospital because the nurses don't give us good care, they just talk to us and don't even diagnose us and give us medication.*

**-Teresa\*, 12, Muaha**

*We lack food at home because we don't go to the field and doing our farming, it is very dangerous going there.*

**-Félix\*, 16,  
Macomia Sede**

*We are now able to eat our food, because where we were when we fled away, we faced many difficulties being able to eat and drink clean water.*

**-Celia\*, 13, Mute**

*There is a shortage of water, many boreholes are damaged and broken, some older people fall along the way because where we fetch water is too far away.*

**-Júlio\*, 14, Mute**

*Now we can have our meals more often, which we couldn't when we were displaced.*

**-Maria\*, 13,  
Macomia Sede**





# SAVE THE CHILDREN'S COMMITMENT

Save the Children has a commitment to consult and listen to children directly about issues that affect their lives. Save the Children conducted this exercise to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that are important to children who have returned\* to their districts of origin in Cabo Delgado. Children, regardless of their circumstances, have duties and rights, and should be active participants in making decisions that shape their futures, rather than voiceless beneficiaries of assistance efforts.

For us, this exercise does not end with the release of this report. We remain committed to:

- Use these children's voices to inform the decisions, design and planning of Save the Children's humanitarian, nexus and longer-term development interventions in northern Mozambique.
- Ensure that children's perspectives reach decision makers at different levels, including the government, humanitarian agencies, private sector, and national and international donors.
- Ensure that children's perspectives are integrated into the community dialogue sessions, for example during discussions between the community leadership and children in returnee\* committees.
- Be accountable to children, particularly to those who participated in this exercise. We share the findings of this report with them, but also ensuring that this is only the beginning of the dialogue.
- Continue to seek additional avenues for children to meaningfully participate in their own development, and particularly in areas such as in Cabo Delgado.





**Save the Children**

Photo: Save the Children staff in discussion in one of the focus group with girls in Palma



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