

# From Borders to Bridges: How Kenya and Ethiopia United to Safeguard Childhood in the Horn of Africa

**A “Child Protection through Capacity Building, Transformation of Social Norms and Strengthening of Protection Mechanisms in Northern Kenya” Project Success Story**



A BMZ-funded initiative led by Terre des Hommes Germany and implemented by Strategies for Northern Development (SND)



## Executive Summary

In the heart of the Horn of Africa, where intersecting vulnerabilities such as conflict, climate shocks, displacement, and deeply ingrained traditions continue to threaten children's rights, a powerful cross-border movement was born. From 2022 to 2025, a BMZ-funded initiative led by Terre des Hommes Germany and implemented by Strategies for Northern Development (SND) redefined how child protection can be scaled in crisis-prone, culturally complex, and geographically fragmented landscapes.

With over 20 government and civil society institutions mobilized across Kenya and Ethiopia, the project unified law enforcement, judiciary systems, social services, and grassroots actors into a singular transboundary protection network. At its core, the project tackled harmful traditional practices (HTPs), child marriage, and child trafficking, challenges that continue to persist not only in ASAL counties like Marsabit, but across much of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Driven by growing urgency from the global community, including the UNCRC General Comments, Sustainable Development Goals (notably SDG 5.3 and 16.2), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, this project embraced a whole-of-society approach. Through capacity building, strategic litigation, border coordination mechanisms, and survivor-centered care, it catalyzed institutional shifts and social change.

The results speak for themselves: increased school enrollment among girls, improved legal prosecution of offenders, heightened community awareness, and successful cross-border rescues. Beyond the numbers lies the story of a region learning to heal, protect, and rise together. This initiative stands not only as a best-practice model for borderland child protection but as a rallying call for sustained investment in Africa's children where risk is greatest.

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## At the Crossroads of Culture, Crisis, and Change: The Marsabit Child Protection Story

Marsabit County, particularly the porous, high-stakes corridor of Moyale, has long borne the scars of silent suffering among children. In some pastoralist communities, up to 95% of girls undergo female genital mutilation (FGM), often as a precursor to child marriage as early as 13. These practices are deeply entrenched, passed from generation to generation under the veil of culture, religion, and social control.

Compounding this are transboundary trafficking networks that exploit the informal and poorly regulated border with Ethiopia. Children are moved across with little trace; victims of forced labour, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. Weak institutional coordination and overstretched enforcement agencies mean many of these cases vanish without justice or recovery. Survivors, where they exist, often return to silence.

Between 2021 and 2025, Marsabit stood at the intersection of multiple crises: severe droughts and floods that displaced families, resource-based ethnic conflict, rising insecurity along the Ethiopia-Kenya border, and chronic underinvestment in health, education, and justice systems. For children, this convergence created a perfect storm of vulnerability.



*Figures 1 & 2: Between 2021 and 2025, Marsabit stood at the intersection of multiple crises: severe droughts and floods that displaced families, resource-based ethnic conflict, rising insecurity along the Ethiopia-Kenya border, and chronic underinvestment in health, education, and justice systems.*

Evidence from the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS), UNICEF, the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA) and the recently conducted research conducted through the BMZ Project “*Child Trafficking and Unsafe Migration Between Kenya and Ethiopia: Transforming Social Norms and Strengthening Child Protection in Marsabit*” pointed to alarming patterns: high dropout rates for girls, rampant underreporting of abuse, and limited institutional capacity to respond. Child protection officers were few, shelter services were near nonexistent, and inter-agency communication was often broken or ad hoc.

Globally, these challenges were not isolated. Reports like the UN Secretary-General’s 2023 report on violence against children and the African Union’s Agenda 2040 underscored the urgency of

locally driven, cross-border, and context-responsive protection systems, especially in fragile and hard-to-reach zones.

It was against this bleak but urgent backdrop that the BMZ-funded cross-border child protection project was born.



*Figures 4, 5 & 6: Rooted in regional solidarity and a survivor-first, rights-based approach, the initiative envisioned a future where law enforcers, social workers, traditional leaders, communities, and survivors united to protect every child—regardless of distance, taboo, or entrenched cultural norms.*



This is the story of that vision. A story forged in heat, hardship, and hope. A story of community courage, legal innovation, and unwavering cross-border collaboration.

## The Turning Point: Strategic Intervention

Between 2022 and 2025, the BMZ-funded child protection project redefined how child rights are safeguarded in the fragile, conflict-affected and drought-prone borderlands of Kenya and Ethiopia. What had long been fragmented, under-resourced efforts became a unified, cross-border ecosystem of protection rooted in regional solidarity and strategic intent.

At the center of this transformation was a multi-layered Theory of Change with an overall objective to contribute to the strengthening of the child protection system and the reduction of child rights violations in Northern Kenya by September 2025, while promoting the physical, mental and social well-being of the target group through combined institutional strengthening, survivor-centered approaches, social norm change and cross-border coordination. The project broke new ground by bringing together two nations, over 20 institutions and entire communities under a shared mission: to protect the child, across all borders.

A key innovation was the revitalization and strengthening of the Cross-Border Child Protection Working Groups. These became the nerve centers of coordination, bringing together law enforcement agencies, judiciary, Community Resource Persons, social workers, and child protection actors for joint planning, cross-border referrals and harmonized case management. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and bilateral protocols gave structure to what had previously been ad hoc and siloed efforts.



*Figures 7 & 8: A key innovation was revitalizing and strengthening the Cross-Border Child Protection Working Groups as coordination hubs, uniting law enforcement, judiciary, community resource persons, social workers, and child protection actors for joint planning, cross-border referrals, and harmonized case management.*

Institutional capacity-building formed another critical pillar. Police officers, magistrates, prosecutors, DCI units, and children's officers were trained not only in legal frameworks but also in trauma-informed, child sensitive procedures. This ensured more effective identification, prosecution and protection of child Survivors, turning legal systems into instruments of justice, not re-traumatization.

At the grassroots level, societal transformation took root. Community dialogues, interfaith forums, survivor-led storytelling and school-based sensitization efforts helped dismantle the social acceptance of child marriage, FGM, Child trafficking and Unsafe Migration. Traditional and religious leaders, once passive or complicit became vocal allies in defense of children's rights, catalyzing a shift in norms from within.



Figure 9: Grassroots dialogues and leader engagement transformed norms, challenging FGM, child marriage, trafficking, and unsafe migration.

To sustain momentum, the project leveraged strategic partnerships with media outlets, celebrities and advocacy networks, triggering mass awareness campaigns and public conversations. These initiatives moved communities from awareness to action and from silence to accountability.



Figures 10 & 11: To sustain momentum, the project leveraged strategic partnerships with media outlets, celebrities and advocacy networks, triggering mass awareness campaigns and public conversations.

What began as a project intervention became a pivot point for the region, a structural shift from fragmented responses to a resilient, responsive and locally owned child protection system. The groundwork laid by this initiative has already influenced policy reforms, improved cross-border collaboration and elevated child protection as a shared priority across sectors and borders.

## Key Achievements: A Cross-Border Community in Action

The BMZ-funded child protection project between Kenya and Ethiopia catalyzed one of the most diverse, community-rooted coalitions seen in the region, where stakeholders across sectors and borders collectively redefined what protection means for a child. At the heart of this success were over 630 school going children, majority of them being girls, whose voices were amplified and for championed their own rights. Through Child Rights Clubs in 21 schools (15 primary 5 secondary and 1 special school), they led dialogues, participated in soccer tournaments and hosted several inter-school competitions, sparking a peer to peer and multiplier effects on awareness that contributed to a documented 5% increase in girls' enrollment. *"We now know our rights. Some of us even stopped a marriage from happening by reporting to our club patron,"* shared a 14-year-old club member from Butiye Primary School.



Figures 12 & 13: Through Child Rights Clubs in 21 schools participated in soccer tournaments and hosted several inter-school competitions, sparking a peer to peer and multiplier effects on awareness that contributed to a documented 5% increase in girls' enrollment

In Moyale, the Kenya Police Service took a bold step by deploying a trained female officer to lead the Moyale Gender Help Desk and who also acts as the projects goodwill ambassador, now a beacon of child-sensitive response. Supported by the project, the desk resolves more than 15 complex child rights violation cases in any given month.

*"These cases are heavy. Psychosocial support and debrief sessions should be standard for officers like us, we absorb a lot of pain,"* remarked the officer. One of the DCI officers reiterated that they were *"parents before police"*, This officers are instrumental in tracing perpetrators across borders, supported by training for over 90 officers on trauma-informed procedures.

The judiciary's role was equally instrumental. The Moyale Magistrate commended the project's legal support: *"These children are learning to speak up in court and win. It's a tradition we must nurture within the justice system."* Over 125 cases on child abuse/violations which were reported (27 reported at the Gender help desk, 28 matters reported and resolved during children service month in November 2024 and 70 reported at the community level through school Club Patrons and Community Resource Persons). Total reported cases since project implementation is 173 Reported cases. (41 matters in total were accompanied by legal aid/pro bono service and successfully prosecuted since the inception of the project. During the Children Service Month, the courts fast-tracked child-related matters with logistical support from the project, ensuring that no child was left behind due to transport or procedural gaps.



Figures 14, 15 and 16: Over 125 cases on child abuse/violations which were reported (27 reported at the Gender help desk, 28 matters reported and resolved during children service month in November 2024 and 70 reported at the community level through school Club Patrons and Community Resource Persons).



The project has demonstrated significant progress in addressing cases of child exploitation stemming from harmful traditional practices and most notably through the Cross-Border Child Protection Working Group which was attributed to close collaborations, co-ordinations and awareness creation sessions. With over 30 active members, including Law enforcers, prosecutors from Ethiopia’s Regions 4 and 5, the group has documented tremendous success in resolving cross-border rescues and resolving child protection matters.

*“We removed the borders of justice. Now, with one phone call, we can track a perpetrator across the border,”* said a member of the cross border Child Protection working from the Ethiopian side. Joint referrals and harmonized case management are now a routine reality rather than an aspiration.

On the community front, parents, teachers and CRPs like Mama Shamsia ignited a cultural shift by confronting harmful traditional practices like FGM and child marriage. *“They used to call me nosy. Now, they call me Mama Justice,”* she said with a laugh, recalling how she helped rescue girls and even offered her home for temporary foster care. Seven community action plans were born from grassroots dialogues, with religious leaders publicly renouncing practices they once defended.

The media fraternity amplified these voices. Six Interactive radio talk shows and three regional events reached over 50,000 listeners. *“People call into our show lamenting how difficult it was to hold such conversations with their children initially as it was a taboo but here they are now, telling their stories for the first time,”* said a Marsabit based journalist involved in the campaign. Departments of Education and Immigration, alongside the Directorate of Children’s Services, worked to remove documentation barriers and led campaigns like “Take Girls to School,” giving girls a renewed chance at education and protection.

In Ethiopia, the Women and Children Affairs office and the Ministry of Health integrated child protection messages into maternal health outreaches. *“You cannot talk about child health without talking about child rights,”* shared a health outreach worker. Meanwhile, social workers and a Community Resource Person from SND and UNICEF pioneered integrated referral models connecting health, education, and protection. These efforts led to district-level adoption of SOPs that now guide case handling across sectors.



Figures 17 & 18: Ethiopian Law enforcers and other key stakeholders have played a key role in enhancing protection of girls against HTPs

Together, these coordinated efforts laid the foundation for a resilient, cross-border protection ecosystem; locally led, survivor-informed, and structurally anchored. This was not just about rescuing children, it was about changing the very systems that failed them.

### **From Data to Dignity: The Story of a Transformative Research Breakthrough**

Under the BMZ-funded SND Kenya project, an evidence-based study on child trafficking and unsafe migration with a cross-border perspective was conducted to uncover hidden exploitation of children in Marsabit and neighboring counties and presented to all relevant stakeholders dubbed,

*“Child Trafficking and Unsafe Migration Between Kenya and Ethiopia: Transforming Social Norms and Strengthening Child Protection in Marsabit.”*

But this wasn’t just another document, it was a mirror, a map and a megaphone rolled into one.

“We had anecdotal evidence for years,” said Joan, the Projects Manager. “But what we lacked was structure, data that could provoke action across institutions.”

And provoke action it did.

- The study mapped out trafficking corridors, cross-border migration vulnerabilities, and cultural drivers of HTPs—especially FGM and child marriage.
- It exposed gaps in cross-jurisdictional case handling, where perpetrators exploited legal blind spots between Kenya and Ethiopia.
- It captured community attitudes, revealing not just risks, but *possibilities* for norm transformation through dialogue, education, and faith-based engagement.

This was no ivory tower research. It sparked operational reform:

- Police stations redesigned their investigation SOPs.
- Teachers received trauma-sensitive reporting protocols.
- Magistrates and prosecutors incorporated its findings into cross-border evidence validation.
- It even inspired the revival and the strengthening of the Cross Border Child Protection Working Group, now praised by both governments as a replicable model.



Figures 19 & 20: SNT conducted a cross-border study exposing child trafficking, sparking stakeholder action to transform harmful norms.



Figure 21: “This research wasn’t just informative, it was catalytic,” said Mr. Ndirangu, a sub-county children’s officer (Moyale). “It turned theory into action.”

The study's findings now guide:

- The drafting of county-level child protection budgets and legislative inputs.
- It enhanced the capacities of at least 10 local/regional civil society organizations which strengthened evidence-based programmatic work in the project context.
- The research supported in the adoption and implementation of the national action plan on combating human trafficking.
- Calls for investment in psychosocial care and rescue shelters, grounded in real needs not assumptions.

“Before this, we were patching wounds with blindfolds on,” said Tune, a police officer from the Moyale Gender Help Desk. “Now, we know where to look, who to train, and how to intervene.”

The research gave the project, and the region, *vision*. Not just of what was broken, but what could be built.

### **Borders Broken, Dignity Restored: The Story of Fatuma**

Each morning, 15-year-old Fatuma (*\*not her real name*) crossed the border from Ethiopia into Moyale, Kenya with her school bag slung over her shoulder and a quiet determination in her eyes. She was a familiar face at her school's *Child Rights Club*, where her voice, though soft, always stood tall against injustice.

But one Monday morning, she didn't show up.

Rumors began to swirl: whispers of a trip home, a traditional ceremony, and silence thereafter. Her club patron noticed her absence; and her absence of joy.

“She had always been vocal, curious... but something changed,” the teacher said. “We feared the worst.” The patron raised the alarm. The school administration, SND's child protection team, and local police at the Gender Help Desk launched into swift action. Investigations confirmed the devastating truth: Fatuma had undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) during a brief visit back to Ethiopia.

Thanks to the Cross-Border Child Protection Working Group, support was mobilized rapidly. Fatuma was brought back, medically treated, and placed in a confidential foster care arrangement. She received counseling, legal support and perhaps most importantly, validation.

“I didn't know people would fight for me,” she whispered through tears. “I thought I had to carry it alone.”

Her case triggered unprecedented cooperation between Kenyan and Ethiopian authorities. Perpetrators were identified, tracked and arrested, thanks to cross-border intelligence and judicial coordination. It marked one of the clearest testaments to the project's vision: that no child should be abandoned to silence just because they crossed a line on a map.

“This case reminded us why we formed the working group,” noted an Ethiopian prosecutor. “*Justice should never be stopped by a border.*”

Fatuma, once withdrawn, is now an agent of change championing for rights of her peers. She has returned to school, rejoined her club and speaks to girls about their rights, their bodies, and their strength.

“I want to be a nurse,” she smiles, “so I can help girls like me heal, not just their bodies, but their hearts.”

### **From Silence to Verdict: Bilan and the Teacher Who Listened**

In the dry, dusty outskirts of Moyale, 14-year-old Bilan (*\*not her real name*) sat quietly at the back of her classroom. She rarely raised her hand. Her silence, though unnoticed by many, masked a harrowing past, an escape from forced child marriage, a brutal encounter with FGM, and nights spent in fear of being taken again.

Then came the BMZ SND Kenya project, and with it, a different kind of education, one that didn't just speak to the mind, but to the wounds of the heart.

“They told me I had a right to say ‘no,’” Bilan recalls. “That I wasn't just a child, I was someone who could choose my future.”

The project introduced a court sensitization visit for children. Bilan, along with others, was taken to witness live court sessions, mentored by legal officers and supported by counselors. There, in a courtroom filled with law books and courage, she found her voice.

“The magistrate spoke to us like we mattered. I began to believe it.”

But Bilan's journey was not a solo flight. Behind her stood Mr. Abdi, a quiet, thoughtful teacher who had never been trained on the emotional scars his students carried.

“I always suspected some of them were in pain,” he says. “But I didn't know how to reach them.” Through SND-led trainings with the Moyale Sub-County Director of Education, Mr. Abdi learned about trauma-informed teaching and how to support survivors. He transformed his classroom into a safe space, hosting student-led dialogues and encouraging stories like Bilan's to emerge, not with shame, but with power.

“She spoke about the courts. About choice. About strength,” he says, his voice catching. “That was the day I realized: I'm not just a teacher, I'm a shield.”

Today, Bilan dreams of becoming a lawyer, her heart set on defending girls like herself. Mr. Abdi, once uncertain, now trains other teachers on how to identify abuse, engage sensitively, and refer cases with confidence.

“Before, I thought I'd be married,” Bilan says. “Now, I think I'll be the one giving the verdict.”

## Justice at the Gate: The Story of Officer Tume

At first glance, the Gender Help Desk at Moyale Police Station looks like an afterthought, stationed awkwardly near the gate, exposed to public view. But for dozens of girls and young survivors, it is the first stop on the long road to justice. Behind it sits Officer Tume, a soft-spoken yet fiercely determined woman who has become a beacon of hope in one of Kenya's most marginalized frontiers.

"They don't walk in with confidence," Tume says. "They come in with tears, silence, sometimes blood and a deep fear that nothing will change."

Tume's journey began not in a courtroom or classroom, but on the frontlines of trauma. Day after day, she listens to children recount violations no child should endure: cases of FGM, child marriage, sexual violence, and trafficking. She partners closely with Strategies for Northern Development (SND), receiving referrals, initiating investigations and ensuring survivors are not just heard, but protected.

But it's far from easy. "This desk is right at the gate. Everyone sees who comes in. Sometimes, victims hesitate because they don't want to be recognized. They already carry so much shame. Privacy is dignity, and we don't have that here."

Despite limited infrastructure and working alone most days, Tume has helped resolve over 15 cases, many of which involved inter-agency coordination and support for prosecution. Her work has increased community confidence in reporting, leading parents and even children themselves to come forward, something unthinkable a few years ago in this deeply patriarchal setting.

Yet the emotional toll is immense.

"Sometimes, the stories stay with you. You think of your own daughter. You think—how are we not doing more? How are we still normalizing pain as culture?"

Tume is now advocating for systemic changes: the relocation of the desk to a more private, trauma informed space, and structured psychosocial support for officers who handle such emotionally heavy cases.

She believes the state has a duty to protect not only the victims—but also the protectors.



*Figure 22: "I'm not just here to take statements. I'm here to remind these girls that their lives matter. Their stories matter. And that justice, real justice, begins with being seen and heard in dignity." – Officer Tume*

Her dream? A child walks in, not with whispers, stares, or shame, but to a safe, sound-proof room, welcomed by a trained, supported officer who will walk with them every step of the way.

### **From Forced Marriage to the Classroom – Diramus Journey of Hope**

In the dusty, remote village of Kinisa, nestled in the expansive terrain of Marsabit County, lives Diramu(\*not her real name), a bright and resilient 16-year-old girl whose life has taken a transformative turn against all odds.

Diramu hails from a very poor household, the third-born in a family of nine siblings. Her parents, though loving, struggled to make ends meet, let alone afford the basic necessities of life. Despite the challenging conditions at home, she excelled academically. In her Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE), she scored an impressive 385 marks out of a possible 500, earning a place at a reputable high school.

But her academic dreams almost came to a halt.

Unable to afford her secondary school tuition and personal effects, her family arranged for her marriage to a rich camel herder as a third wife, a decision rooted in desperation and the deep-seated cultural norms that often force girls into adulthood too soon. With every passing day, Diramus hopes faded. Her books gathered dust, and her future appeared to slip through her fingers.

Through the BMZ Project, SND—together with a network of stakeholders including local authorities, teachers, community Resource Persons and community champions—swiftly rescued Diramu from the forced marriage arrangement. Recognizing her academic potential and her vulnerability, the team enrolled her into Kinisa Mixed Secondary School, where she is now proudly pursuing her education in Form Three.

Beyond linking her up with county bursaries to support her school fees, SND also provided basic personal essentials, including sanitary supplies, school uniform, shoes and stationery—restoring Diramus dignity and empowering her to concentrate fully on her studies.

Today, Diramu radiates confidence and ambition. She aspires to become a nurse, a career she believes will allow her to give back to her community and help protect other girls from the injustices she faced.

“I thought my life was over. I cried every day, thinking I would never wear a school uniform again. But thanks to SND and their partners, I got a second chance. Now I can dream again — not just for myself, but for every girl like me.” I am forever grateful,” she shares, holding back tears of gratitude.

Diramus story is a testament to the power of collaboration, the impact of timely intervention, and the resilience of girls when given a second chance. Her journey serves as both a warning and a beacon—highlighting the dangers of poverty-induced harmful traditional practices and the hope that can be restored through structured protection systems.

## Fostered by Hope: The Journey of Mama Shamsia

When night falls over Moyale, a flicker of warm light seeps through the windows of a modest home at the edge of town. Inside, voices of girls once silenced by violence and fear now echo with laughter, courage, and healing. This haven belongs to Mama Shamsia, a woman without official title, but whose presence has changed the face of child protection in Northern Kenya.

“I’m not a rich woman,” she says, “but I have an open door and two ears that listen. That’s where protection begins.”

What started as her quiet involvement as a Community Resource Person under the BMZ-funded project quickly turned into a full-time, frontline mission. Over the years, she’s harbored survivors of rape, girls fleeing forced marriages, and children kidnapped by adult perpetrators, giving them not just shelter, but dignity.

The risks are real. Threats have come—sometimes from perpetrators released on bond, sometimes from those in the shadows of cultural acceptance. But Mama Shamsia stands her ground.



Figure 23: “They tell me to stay quiet. That I’m interfering with tradition. But how can I stay quiet when a 13-year-old is being forced to marry a 40-year-old man?” Mama Shamsia, during one of the live radio talk shows.

Her courage extends beyond her home. Mama Shamsia became a founding voice in the Cross-Border Child Protection Working Group, a landmark collaboration between Kenya and Ethiopia. What was once a lawless, silent corridor of cross-border trafficking and escape routes has now become a closely coordinated watchtower for justice.

“We used to lose girls across the border—disappearances with no answers. Now, we have officers we can call in Ethiopia. Files are shared. Children are found. That’s power.”

Even though her home isn’t a formal rescue center, it operates like one, full of care routines, trauma sensitive support, and community referrals. She’s helped track perpetrators, coordinate with local police and magistrates, and offer foster care when no other facility was available. Mama Shamsia has offered her own private residence as a safe haven for survivors of Harmful Traditional Practices and GBV survivors, exemplifying her personal dedication to the cause. This space has not only provided immediate physical protection but has also served as a place for healing, restoration, and empowerment, where survivors are treated with dignity and compassion. She complements this support by offering psychosocial counseling and working closely on case management to ensure survivors receive justice and comprehensive care.

Her role also shaped new social conversations: bringing religious leaders into dialogue, challenging deep rooted myths about FGM and child marriage, and giving other women in the village the courage to say *no*, to abuse, to silence, to complicity.

*“I tell every girl who walks through my door, You are not the problem. You are the reason we keep fighting.”*

Mama Shamsia’s legacy isn’t built on concrete or funding, it’s built on compassion, resilience, and an unyielding belief that no child should be abandoned because of where they live or what they were born into.

Her home may not wear a government badge, but it breathes the spirit of justice. And in this borderland where children once vanished without a trace, Mama Shamsia has made sure they are not only seen, but remembered, healed, and empowered.

### **Courtroom to Classroom: The Magistrate Shaping Justice for the Young**

For Magistrate Hon. Larry Kombe, justice is more than gavel strikes and legal codes, it’s education, empowerment, and empathy in action. In Moyale during Kenya Children Service Month, he didn’t just inherit child protection cases, he reimagined the court as a platform for societal transformation.



*Figure 24: Hon. Larry Kombe*

“At first, the children came in anxious, quiet. But something Transformative happened when they saw the law defending them,” he recalls. “They began to ask questions, about rights, fairness and even the Constitution. They didn’t just attend court; they began to understand it.”

With the support of the BMZ-funded project through SND, Magistrate Hon.Kombe led a courtroom revolution partnering with the project to mobilize and prioritize child-related cases, ensuring victims and witnesses had transportation, meals and guidance throughout the process. The courtroom became a safe space, not a site of secondary trauma.

But he didn’t stop there. Hon Kombe encouraged the inclusion of school-going children as observers, not to relive trauma, but to learn what justice looks like. They met prosecutors, spoke

to clerks, sat through deliberations, and discovered that courts aren't just places for punishment, but for protection and possibility.

"I wanted them to walk away with something bigger than a verdict, I wanted them to walk away believing that *justice belongs to them, too.*"

He is now a strong advocate for structural reforms: designated private sections in court for child-sensitive hearings, capacity-building for judicial staff in trauma-informed care, and regular "Open Court Days" for local children.

"Children in this region grow up seeing violence normalized. But if they also grow up seeing justice upheld, we change what's possible for a generation."



Figures 26 & 27: Hon Lary during a past event under the BMZ SND Project activity.

Under Magistrate Lary's leadership, the courtroom didn't just become faster or fairer, it became a classroom of hope, a theatre of courage, and a cornerstone of protection for children across Moyale and beyond.

### Public Participation as a Catalyst for Child Protection

Beyond systems and policies, one of the project's most powerful tools for change was public engagement, elevating the voices of children and communities in national platforms where they were often excluded. Through strategic support from the BMZ SND Kenya project, children, guardians, and community leaders found seats at the table — not just as participants, but as agents of change.

During international celebrations like the *Day of the African Child*, key national public holidays and notably the Lake Turkana Cultural Festival, which coincided with the *16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence*—children were empowered to speak, perform, and challenge norms. "*I stood in front of elders and said, 'FGM hurt my friend. We must stop it.' They clapped. I felt heard,*" shared a student from Moyale primary Child Rights Club. These symbolic platforms became action-oriented spaces, where lived experiences met cultural authority.



Figures 28 & 29: During international celebrations like the Day of the African Child, key national public holidays and notably the Lake Turkana Cultural Festival, which coincided with the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence—children were empowered to speak, perform, and challenge norms

The 13th Lake Turkana Cultural Festival in Loiyangalani became a national stage for advocacy. SND mobilized and facilitated over 92 participants from different cultural groups advocating for the fight against HTP, ensuring representation from the very communities most impacted by harmful traditional practices. Youth performed interactive theatre, while IEC materials on FGM and child marriage circulated widely. *“We danced, but our message was serious,”* said one youth performer. *“We want peace, not pain.”*



Figure 30: The 13th Lake Turkana Cultural Festival in Loiyangalani became a national stage for advocacy.

Then came a pivotal moment: The President H.E William Ruto’s address. In a landmark speech, he publicly condemned FGM and child marriage, calling them “impediments to the well-being of our children.” He challenged elders, religious leaders, and families to take responsibility, and affirmed that legal consequences awaited perpetrators. *“FGM has no place in the future we envision for our children,”* he declared. *“We will not tolerate the violation of their rights.”*



Figure 31: H.E President William Samoei Ruto addressing participants during the 13th Lake Turkana Cultural Festival in Loiyangalani

This endorsement reverberated through the project landscape. SND’s interventions gained national visibility, donor confidence surged, and local leaders began integrating child protection messages into cultural narratives. Media coverage amplified the impact, and school-based clubs grew in confidence and reach. *“The President spoke our truth,”* said a guardian from Marsabit. *“Now, our children know they matter.”*

### **Alternative Rites, Enduring Rights: The Girls Camp that Redefined Womanhood**

In December 2024, Moyale Sub-County became the stage for a quiet revolution. During the school holidays, a three-day Girls’ Empowerment Camp brought together 100 students from 10 primary schools, each with active Child Rights Clubs. But this wasn’t just another holiday program — it was a rite of passage without pain.



Figure 32: Held as a model for alternative rites of passage, the camp celebrated the transition to womanhood while rejecting the harmful tradition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Held as a model for alternative rites of passage, the camp celebrated the transition to womanhood while rejecting the harmful tradition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Through mentorship, storytelling, health education, and peer-led discussions, the girls explored identity, dignity, and agency — all in a nurturing, protective space.

The culmination of the camp coincided with Madaraka Day celebrations on December 12, where Governor Mohamud of Marsabit County personally presided over the graduation ceremony. Each girl received a certificate and a dignity kit, but more importantly, they were celebrated publicly as champions of change. By tying the event to a national holiday, their transformation was not only personal — it was civic, symbolic, and proudly cultural.

This intervention stands as a blueprint for sustainable change: where schools, families, government, and communities unite to honor tradition without violence. It proved that it's possible to celebrate girlhood, affirm cultural identity, and *end FGM* — all at once.

“I didn’t lose anything,” said one participant. “I gained confidence. I’m becoming a woman my way, proud, safe, and heard.”

### Systems-Level Impact

The BMZ SND Kenya project catalyzed transformative, systems-level change by embedding child protection into the very structures that shape governance, justice, and community behavior. At the policy and institutional level, it fostered cross-border legal coordination between Kenya and Ethiopia, closing long-standing protection gaps that had allowed perpetrators of child trafficking and harmful traditional practices to evade justice by simply crossing a border. In Moyale, courts began prioritizing child-related cases, with magistrates actively mentoring young people through court exposure, turning legal systems from intimidating bureaucracies into spaces of empowerment. As one Ethiopian child protection officer put it, *“We’ve removed the borders of justice. Together, we’re stronger.”*

This systemic shift extended into multi-sectoral coordination, with the establishment of the Cross Border Child Protection Working Group, a first-of-its-kind platform for intelligence sharing, case referrals, and synchronized rescue efforts. The project united actors across law enforcement, education, immigration, health, and community leadership into a cohesive response mechanism, dissolving silos that had long fragmented child protection efforts. Within schools, Child Rights Clubs and trained patrons became early warning systems, flagging at-risk cases like Fatuma’s FGM ordeal, triggering swift response and support.

But perhaps the most lasting change lay in shifting mindsets and dismantling entrenched norms. Through community dialogues, radio campaigns, survivor-led storytelling, and grassroots engagement, once tolerated practices like child marriage and FGM began to lose legitimacy. Survivors such as Fatuma and Bilan emerged as peer mentors and youth advocates, reshaping conversations around dignity, justice, and choice. Teachers like Mr. Abdi reimagined their roles; transforming classrooms into safe spaces of protection and awareness. *“Before, I thought I’d be married,”* said Bilan. *“Now, I think I’ll be the one giving the verdict.”*

Driving this transformation was evidence-based planning, anchored by a groundbreaking study on child trafficking and unsafe migration. This research mapped vulnerabilities, informed training

curricula, and guided policy reform — from school-based protocols to national-level strategy. *“It’s not just a document,”* a senior officer from the Directorate of Children Services affirmed. *“It’s a living tool — one that continues to shape how we respond, protect, and empower.”*

## Lessons Learned and What’s Next

### What Worked

At the heart of the project’s success was community ownership. Empowering Child Rights Clubs, school patrons, and grassroots defenders like Mama Shamsia proved transformative. These community-led surveillance systems became frontline defenders—raising the alarm, rescuing children, and shifting cultural perceptions from the ground up.

The establishment of the Cross-Border Child Protection Working Group was a groundbreaking move. It broke long-standing jurisdictional and cultural barriers, enabling real-time rescues, intelligence sharing, and joint legal action between Kenya and Ethiopia. As one Ethiopian child protection officer powerfully stated, *“We’ve removed the borders of justice. Together, we’re stronger.”*

Strategic engagement of the judiciary and law enforcement also paid dividends. Magistrates opened their courtrooms to children, nurturing legal awareness and ensuring that survivors were not re-traumatized in the justice process. Police officers and CID investigators embraced trauma informed practices, while public forums like the Lake Turkana Cultural Festival and Day of the African Child elevated youth voices from the margins to the main stage.

All of this was anchored by data-driven action. The research on child trafficking and unsafe migration didn’t just sit on shelves—it reshaped programs, informed policy, and helped target high-risk communities with precision and urgency.

### Challenges Faced

However, this transformation did not come without obstacles. Deep-rooted cultural stigma and fear of retaliation still keep many victims in silence, especially in remote pastoralist areas where community bonds can both protect and oppress.

Limited staffing and infrastructure, particularly in high-risk counties, placed immense pressure on a small cohort of dedicated officers, teachers, and social workers. The absence of dedicated safe spaces, both in courts and at police stations, meant that justice was often served in environments that unintentionally compromised the dignity of survivors.

Frontline workers like Mama Shamsia faced security risks, especially when perpetrators were released on bond. And while systems improved dramatically, some departments still operated in silos, slowing responses and weakening the follow-through needed for lasting protection.

## Charting the Path Forward

The journey from isolated interventions to a unified child protection movement across Kenya and Ethiopia has revealed one critical truth: systemic transformation is possible when communities, institutions, and governments walk hand-in-hand with children.

The stories of Fatuma, Bilan, Mama Shamsia, and Magistrate Lary were not anomalies they were early signals of what works when protective ecosystems are properly resourced and integrated. These learnings directly inform what needs to be done:

1. **Institutionalize cross-border cooperation** by scaling the Moyale Child Protection Working Group into a regional body with legal recognition and decentralized coordination hubs.
2. **Embed school-based protection mechanisms** in national policy, transforming every classroom into a surveillance and referral point — a strategy validated through Fatuma’s rescue and Bilan’s advocacy.
3. **Integrate alternative rites of passage** (as seen in the December 2024 Girls Camp) into county-level education and cultural programming to fully replace FGM and other harmful traditional practices.
4. **Invest in protective infrastructure and workforce** — from safe interview rooms in police stations to psychosocial care for officers like Amina, and additional rescue homes to support CRPs like Mama Shamsia.

“Before, I thought I’d be married,” said Bilan. “Now, I think I’ll be the one giving the verdict.”

## Towards a Continental Model

This initiative has become more than a borderlands intervention; it is a potential blueprint for intergovernmental child protection programming across the Horn of Africa. With political goodwill (evidenced by presidential endorsements), robust community networks, and clear legal pathways, institutions can anchor child rights at the heart of cross-border governance.

To make this future real, governments, donors, and civil society must now act boldly, not just to sustain gains, but to multiply them. Because for every child who crosses a border in fear, there should be a community ready to receive them in dignity.