

## PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY

### A Photovoice Study with Refugee and Host Community Children in Northern Uganda

Study Report  
November 2022



**Friendship Emphasized:** The game brings friendship among children both at school and in the community. It also brings physical growth and breaks boredom.



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## INTRODUCTION

Play-based learning is a pedagogical approach that is gaining fast momentum in crisis-contexts globally. As part of this movement, the PlayMatters project, a multi-year initiative led by the International Rescue Committee, in partnership with Plan International / Planbørnefonden, War Child Holland, Innovations for Poverty Action, the Behavioural Insights Team, and the LEGO Foundation, aims to embed play-based learning and social emotional learning into education systems for refugee and host-community children across Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. The PlayMatters project also includes a robust research agenda, which aims to answer a range of questions related to implementation, impact, challenges, and cost-effectiveness of play-based learning in refugee and host-community contexts.

As the concept and experience of play is highly dependent on culture, context, and societal norms, it is imperative for the PlayMatters project to understand how the communities it works with perceive and experience play. As such, Planbørnefonden proposed to conduct a research study in order to explore this topic. As Planbørnefonden is a highly child-focused organization, they explored child-led research options and identified the photovoice methodology.

Photovoice is a type of qualitative participatory action research that enables participants to identify, represent, and enhance their community and life circumstances through photography. The methodology of photovoice puts cameras in the hands of individuals to observe and record their daily lives, analyze what they have taken photos of, tell their story to a wider audience, and work together to bring about positive social action and change in their communities (Duplessis & Asencios, 2016; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice has been used in all corners of the world to explore a wide range of topics with a variety of different participants, including refugees. Many photovoice studies have taken place with refugees living in asylum countries, as well as refugees living in camp settings (Logdberg et al., 2020; McBrien & Day, 2012; Miled, 2020). Photovoice is also a popular activity to do with children and youth, and specifically refugee and displaced children and youth. These include studies done with internally displaced children in Uganda (Green & Kloos, 2009), Syrian refugee children and youth in Lebanon (Karr et al., 2020) and Jordan (PhotoVoice and World Vision UK, 2014),



Burmese refugee children in Thailand (Oh, 2012), and internally displaced children in Sri Lanka (Photovoice and Save the Children, 2005).

## PHOTOVOICE AND PLAYMATTERS

The PlayMatters project aims to improve refugee and host-community children's holistic wellbeing. While many of the PlayMatters activities and interventions generally support this aim, many of the activities and interventions target adult stakeholders, for example training teachers to deliver play-based learning activities in their classrooms. As Planbørnefonden strives to work with vulnerable children so that they can learn, lead, decide, and thrive, it is important to include child-centered and child-led activities in the PlayMatters project that support this strategy. Photovoice provides a fun and engaging learning opportunity for the children targeted by the PlayMatters project to develop new skills, find their voice, feel empowered to tell their story, and work together with their peers to bring about positive social action and change in their communities.

Additionally, the LEGO Foundation is interested in better understanding how crisis-affected communities around the world perceive, understand, and experience play, and specifically learning through play. While some formative research to understand this is included in the PlayMatters research agenda through secondary research activities, as well as behavioral mapping activities, these activities largely focus on adult stakeholders and provide only a snapshot of knowledge, attitudes, and practices at a single point in time. By complimenting this research with a photovoice study, we were able to engage children directly in this research. Additionally, if we are able to engage the same children at a later point in time, we will be able to better understand how their perceptions and experiences of play, and learning through play, change and evolve over time through a longitudinal study approach.

## METHODOLOGY & STUDY ACTIVITIES

Photovoice is defined as a qualitative participatory visual research methodology (Brown et al., 2020; Moskal, 2019). As such, this study used a qualitative research design and was guided by the following research question: **What are refugee and host-community children's perceptions and experiences of play in Northern Uganda?**



## Study Timeline

The study proposal and budget were initially developed from March – April, 2021. The study proposal and budget were approved by key PlayMatters decision-makers in May, 2021. Ugandan research and ethics approval was initiated in November, 2021 and was confirmed as of May, 2022. Planning and preparation for study activities began in March, 2022. The Ugandan Principal Investigator was recruited and onboarded as of July, 2022. Data collection activities began in October, 2022 and concluded in November, 2022. Data analysis and report writing began in November, 2022, and concluded in December, 2022.

## Ethics Approval and Integration Into PlayMatters

As Planbørnefonden is not a research lead for the PlayMatters project, this photovoice study was included as an activity in the educator and school-based research led by IRC. While IRC facilitated the IRB and Ugandan research approvals for the photovoice activities under their research study, Planbørnefonden was responsible for the execution of all photovoice study activities.


## Research Team

The Research Team included: a Ugandan Principal Investigator with experience in journalism, photography, and visual storytelling, hired as a consultant by Plan International Uganda, who led all study activities in Uganda; the Planbørnefonden Regional Research and Learning Advisor for the PlayMatters project, who served as the study coordinator and co-Principal Investigator, and supported the study remotely; a Plan International Uganda MEAL Officer for the PlayMatters project, who supported the logistics of study activities; four facilitators from the refugee and host communities<sup>1</sup>, who supported the logistics of study activities and particularly supported on translation; and the Deputy Head Teacher of the Elema Primary School, who also voluntarily supported the logistics of the study activities, as well as translation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Iranya – from the Onigo community, Jacob Thon Abuoi – from the Baratuku refugee community, Jimmy Aruma – a primary-school teacher from the Elema Primary School/community, and Victora Ruba – from the Elema community.

<sup>2</sup> The PLAN-Denmark MEAL Specialist at the time also supported the start-up of study activities, but eventually transitioned off of the study.



The study design was initially developed by the Planbørnefonden Regional Research and Learning Advisor, with inputs from the Planbørnefonden MEAL Specialist at the time.

The Principal Investigator and Plan International Uganda staff members were trained and introduced to the study design virtually by the Planbørnefonden Regional Research and Learning Advisor and Planbørnefonden MEAL Specialist.

Study facilitators were recruited using job advertisements and participated in an interview process. Facilitators were selected based on their levels of education; ability to translate between English, Madi, Arabic, and Kuku; relevant work experience (i.e. as a teacher, caregiver, work with children, etc.); and a clean criminal background. Additionally, the facilitators participated in a two-day training. The training content was developed in collaboration by the Principal Investigator, Plan International Uganda staff members, and Planbørnefonden Research and Learning Advisor and MEAL Specialist. The training was delivered in person by the Principal Investigator and Plan International Uganda staff members. See Annex 2 for the workshop agenda and content covered.

The volunteer Deputy Head Teacher from the Elema Primary School was included in the study due to an effort to balance the gender of facilitators available for the participating students. She also participated in the facilitator training.

The four facilitators received a bank transfer of 100,000 UGX per session/day, while the Deputy Head Teacher received a reimbursement of 200,000 UGX through phone transfer, which was considered to cover cost for transportation, as well as 20,000 UGX per session/day when she supported study activities.

### **Study Locations**

The activities took place in the Adjumani District of Northern Uganda, which borders South Sudan. Specifically, the study engaged the Elema host community, which also includes children from the Onigo community, and the Baratuku refugee community, which includes refugees from South Sudan, specifically from the Dinka tribe. These locations are approximately 1 kilometer away from each other and 30 kilometers away from the Plan International Uganda office in the town of Adjumani. These communities were selected for the study due to: their close proximity to the Plan



International Uganda office, their involvement in the PlayMatters project, feasibility of conducting the study there, and easy access to both refugee and host-community children.

### Sample Size and Demographics

From the Elema community seven students (3 boys & 4 girls) participated, from the Baratuku community seven students (3 boys & 4 girls) participated, and from the Onigo community six students (3 boys and 3 girls) participated, bringing the total number of study participants to twenty students (9 boys and 11 girls). The criteria for selecting study participants included: gender, age, settlement of origin, and ability. The study team relied on teacher recommendations, based on this criteria, about which students should participate. Study participants were between the ages of 7 and 12 (grades 4-6) and one study participant had a physical disability. Other key stakeholders, including community leaders and church leaders, were also consulted in the process of participant selection. All study participants attended the Elema Primary School, despite residing in three different communities.

The students from Baratuku spoke the Dinka language and the students from Elema and Onigo spoke the Madi and Kuku languages, as well as Arabic. In order to accommodate all language needs, facilitators and the volunteer Deputy Head Teacher supported translation for all activities as the Principal Investigator and Plan International Uganda staff were not fluent in these languages.

### Preparation Activities


In order to prepare for data collection, the Research Team developed a **budget** and **workplan**, and conducted a **risk assessment**. These project management tools supported the team to execute the study in a timely manner, within the budget allocated, and to anticipate and mitigate potential risks for study participants. Initial activities included: the procurement of branded PlayMatters visibility materials, such as: t-shirts and umbrellas for Research Team members, facilitators, and study participants<sup>3</sup> and cameras<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Visibility was procured for study participants as a protection measure.

<sup>4</sup> Twelve Sony W800 Compact with 5x Optical Zoom cameras were procured for the project with the intention of two students sharing one camera between them.





Next, the Research Team engaged in **community awareness** activities. These included holding an initial meeting with the Assistant Camp Commandant of the Nyumanzi settlement, who oversees the Baratuku and Elema areas, to seek support and approval. This also included providing awareness and seeking permission from UNHCR, Windle Trust Education, and the District Education Officer. Finally, the Plan International Uganda team met with various community chair-persons, members of the Elema School Management Committee, Elema teachers, including the Head and Deputy Head Teachers, and local religious leaders.

The Research Team then engaged in the process of **student recruitment and selection**, as detailed above.

Once study participants were selected, the Research Team held a 4-hour **introduction workshop** with the participants and their parents to provide more details about the study activities, manage expectations, answer questions, and obtain **consent** from parents and **assent** from students. Consent and assent forms were printed in English, but were verbally translated into Madi, Kuku, Arabic, and Dinka during the workshop. Signed consent and assent forms were kept in both paper and digital formats as per Plan International's data security and protection policies.

Finally, study participants engaged in three 3-hour **preparation workshops**, after school from 2pm-6pm, which introduced them to the photovoice study and prepared them for photo-taking and discussion sessions. The workshops included all twenty participants, with 100% attendance. Students were provided with meals during the workshops, which took place in the Elema Primary School. See Annex 3 for the content that was covered during the workshops.

Starting during the study preparation activities, and continuing throughout data collection and analysis, the Principal Investigator, Plan International Uganda staff members, and the Planbørnefonden Research and Learning Advisor had **weekly calls** to share updates on progress, problem-solve, and plan ahead.

### **Data Collection Activities**

The study participants were split into three groups based on their community of residence (Elema, Baratuku, and Onigo). Each group then participated in two



sessions whereby they were led by the Principal Investigator and facilitators into their communities and Plan International Uganda early childhood development centers to take photos<sup>5</sup>. Each **photo-taking session** lasted approximately between 40 minutes and 1 hour. The participants were split into pairs and given one camera to share between them. This was in an effort to facilitate teamwork, discussion on approaches to photo-taking, and to remind each other on the guidance they received from the facilitators and Principal Investigator. The participants were instructed to take photos of what they perceive or consider to be play and were encouraged to take a minimum of 5 photos and a maximum of 15 photos each in order to minimize point-and-click shooting and to motivate the participants to be more thoughtful and intentional about their photos.

After taking their photos, the study participants then participated **in discussion sessions** at the Elema and Baratuku community centers, as well as the Elema Primary School. These sessions took place directly after each photo-taking session and lasted for approximately 40 minutes. Each discussion session was facilitated by the Principal Investigator with support from the facilitators. The Principal Investigator led the participants through a general discussion on their experience taking the photos and then allowed the participants to review their photos and select their favorites. The Principal Investigator then led the participants in a targeted discussion that allowed them to explain to the other participants why they took their photos, how their photos exhibit their ideas about play, and develop stories and titles for their photos. All discussion sessions were **audio recorded** for analysis purposes.



Study participants in the preparation workshops learning about the photovoice study and how to use cameras.

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<sup>5</sup> All students had the chance to take photos in both the Elema and Baratuku communities.



During photo-taking and discussion sessions the Principal Investigator took **observation notes** for analysis purposes. Additionally, the Principal Investigator kept files of each students' top selected photos for analysis purposes.

Finally, after completing two photo-taking and discussion sessions, all twenty study participants met in a **final 2-hour workshop** to select their favorite two photos<sup>6</sup> to display during a community exhibition event. The students were clear that they did not want their names displayed with their photos in order to encourage other children to learn from their work, rather than focusing on who took which picture.



Study participants in the final workshop reviewing their photos and selecting the ones they want to be displayed during the community exhibition event.

The goal of the **community exhibition event** was to allow the study participants to share with their communities what they had done during the study and to share any key messages they collectively decided upon. During the final workshop, the Principal Investigator and facilitators tried to elicit key messages or stories that the participants wanted to convey to their communities and encouraged them to lead in the development of the event agenda and activities. However, the participants refrained from actively engaging in the intended child-led process and remained

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<sup>6</sup> Two students were able to select a third photo to display.



somewhat quiet and shy during this final workshop. As such, the Principal Investigator led the participants to select their top photos and confirmed their titles and captions. Upon completion of the workshop, the Principal Investigator worked with the Plan International Uganda team to have the participants' selected photos printed and prepare the logistics for the community exhibition event.

The community exhibition event was held on November 11, 2022 at the Elema Primary School grounds. While it was intended for the event to run from 9am to 2pm, due to logistical delays the event ran from 1pm to 5pm. Those who attended the event included: local chairpersons and government officers, teachers, students, parents, School Management Committee members, religious leaders, Plan International Uganda staff, and the District School Inspector. Key activities during the event included: speeches from local chairpersons, speeches from the study participants, student performances, cultural dancing, a gallery walk of the 42 photos that were displayed for the event, and responses from parents of study participants.



Parents and students viewing the study participant photos during the community exhibition event.

**In summary, study data sources included:** participant photos, discussion audio recordings, and observation notes taken during photo-taking and discussion sessions, as well as during the community exhibition event.



## **Data Storage and Security**

All photos, audio recordings, and observation notes were digitized and stored within the Plan International One-Drive cloud system. They were also backed up on a password-protected external hard-drive.

## **Data Analysis Activities**

Upon completion of the community exhibition event, the Principal Investigator and the Planbørnefonden Research and Learning Advisor worked together, both in-person (for four days) and virtually, to review all sources of data. First, they identified key categories of the 42 photos shown during the community exhibition event and then refined these categories to key themes. These themes then became codes, which were applied to all other sources of data. All data sources were entered into NVivo software and were further coded using sub-codes. Upon reviewing the data as it was coded, the co-Principal Investigators were able to identify key findings.

## **STUDY FINDINGS**

The following findings are specific to the views and experiences of the study participants from the Elema, Onigo, and Baratuku communities and are not statements or findings about play in general. Additionally, all photo titles and captions in the following sections were developed by the study participants, with translation support from the Principal Investigator and facilitators.

### **General Participant Experiences Were Positive**

During discussion sessions, most study participants reported feeling warmly welcomed by their communities during the photo-taking sessions. Almost all study participants mentioned feeling safe and secure during study activities and one participant even mentioned feeling proud to be seen by their community with a camera. Additionally, many participants mentioned feeling happy during the photo-taking sessions, others mentioned being interested in seeing how children in their communities play, and many study participants mentioned that most children they encountered during the photo-taking sessions wanted their photos to be taken. When asked if there were any challenges or problems moving safely and easily throughout their communities during the photo-taking sessions, or with the study activities in general, the study participants did not report any challenges or problems. Study participants expressed that they highly enjoyed learning to use the



cameras and requested for the photovoice activities to be continued if possible. The study participants also mentioned enjoying wearing PlayMatters-branded t-shirts. Finally, the study participants enjoyed presenting their photos and work to their community during the community exhibition event and enthusiastically celebrated their participation in the study.

**Play is Social**

A key finding from this study is that participants perceive play as highly social. Only six out of the 42 photos selected by study participants showed a single individual; all other photos displayed at least two or more individuals.

In discussion sessions and in photo captions, many study participants expressed how play helps to foster **friendships** and often includes many individuals:

*“This is my best photo because it shows children playing together.”*

*“It shows togetherness because the game involves many people and you play together.”*

*“When the children are playing like this, they feel friendship.”*

*“He likes that photo because it brings friendship. It involves very many learners whereby it brings together the community.”*



**Friendship for All:** The game shows friendship amongst colleagues and is also shown in school during play.

Study participants also perceive play as supporting **social cohesion**, as evidenced by numerous mentions of **love, peace, unity, and community togetherness**:

*"I selected this picture because it shows that the children love themselves and the community and they play together."*

*"I saw the children were playing together, others were playing football, others were playing games, which bring the community together in unity."*

*"Children loving themselves and the community; they come to play together symbolizing unity and peace."*



**Peace and Unity:** Because the people play in the mood of peace and unity, they are joyfully coming together.

### **Play is Largely Physical**

Another key finding is that participants perceive play as largely physical. Twenty-nine photos show children engaged in some kind of bodily physical activity, such as: running, kicking, jumping, skipping, playing on jungle-gym equipment, or physically interacting with other children. The remaining thirteen photos display children physically manipulating small objects, local materials, or interacting with other children in activities that engage their fine motor skills. Additionally, the study participants expressed how play can help children develop physically:



*“It also makes your body to be strong. Running, laughing, and jumping makes the body to be strong.”*

*“The game brings friendship among children, both at school and in the community. It also brings physical growth and breaks boredom.”*

*“...making one’s body strong; a physical activity makes our bodies to be strong.”*

Also, organized physical **sports and games** featured heavily in many photos, especially football:

*“It is my best photo because those people learn how to play football using their hands, which means there is socializing among them. They learn football first using their hands.”*

*“The young boys display their talent in playing football.”*



**Friendship:** Showing talent and developing relationships is all exhibited in the photograph.



Furthermore, eleven study participants featured jungle-gym play equipment in their photos. This equipment is located in Plan International Uganda child-friendly spaces and facilitates a variety of types of physical play.



**Love and Friendship:** When you see children like that, there is love among them and it also shows friendship.

### **Play Often Includes Objects, BUT...Not Always**

As noted above, many of the study participants depicted play through the use of physical **play or sports equipment**, including: jungle-gym equipment, footballs, balls made from tying plastic bags together, and jump ropes. Though, thirteen photos depict children using **small objects**, including: rocks, bottle caps, sticks, and leaves. Additionally, two photos depict children drawing board games or boundaries in the sand or dirt, while six photos display children playing with **no objects at all**.



**Togetherness:** A display of togetherness in a unique game that is not so common in the community.

### Play is Local & Can Be New

Five study participants mentioned games that they felt were **unique to their communities**, including the picture just above:

*“That game is only here and not anywhere else.”*

Additionally, three study participants depicted games and activities that they had either **not seen before** or that were **rarely seen** in their communities.

*“I selected this game to be the best game is because it is the first time to see a person jumping like that...”*

*"This is my best photo because it shows children playing together and it is a game I have never seen before in my community."*



**Rare Game:** The game is rare one and so the is children can see and be able to practice at their various places.



**Friendship:** The name of the game is 'Onji', and it not common in other places. It is rare and can bring friendship. When you are playing, it brings friendship because it involves many people.

### **Play Facilitates Learning & Wellbeing**

Numerous study participants expressed how play can facilitate learning. Four participants mentioned play activities that facilitate learning about **math, counting, and understanding weight.**

*"They were playing while jumping, which shows unity, friendship, and encourages them to learn because they were jumping while counting."*

*"The use of small rocks helps in understanding numbers."*



**Mastering the Balance:** Under this play, the children can understand the balancing of weight, with the heavy person going down and the light-weight one going up.



**Let's Count:** The name of the game is Gerry; it is good because it involves learning. In the game, there are sticks involved; one has to count the sticks, making learners to learn counting.

Additionally, five participants mentioned how play can help students learn **positive behaviors** and gain **desirable characteristics**:

*"The game brings unity and cooperation among the children."*

*"I chose that photo because when you play together like that it means there is no fighting among yourselves."*

*"The game calls for unity, tolerance, and also participants gain confidence-building."*

*“The children indulge in playing as a means of resisting being idle and bored.”*



**No Bad Language:** The game controls children in airing bad messages or insults during play

Also, four participants expressed how play can help children learn and develop **skills for later life:**

*“Under this game, children learn how to cook as part of their growth.”*

*“My best photo is because it is encouraging the music industry.”*



**Mr. DJ:** guy seems like he is in the music industry, and I find it interesting.



**Future Driver:** The learner seems interested in driving and may in future be a good driver.

Two participants also mentioned how play can help students **remember or apply what they have learned in school**, while ten participants mentioned how play can **encourage students to attend school**:

*"What it was taught for them in the school, they have not forgotten it, they are still practicing it at home."*

*"Recalling the games taught at school to practice even at home or in the community we live."*

*"When I show children this picture it will make children interested to go to school because there is a place of play in the school. It will attract the interest of the children."*

*"Once the children who are still at home get to see this type of play, they will be interested to come to school, because they would know there are play facilities in the school."*

*"The game welcomes learners to school and if this kind of game is there in the school it brings the interest of the learners."*

Finally, six participants expressed how play can help students **cope with stress and hardship**:

*"That play removes stress, because there are many people involved in the game. When you are involved in the game you are with your friends and it removes stress."*



*“The game makes children so involved not to think about hunger and develops friendship.”*



**Call for Unity:** This brings unity among participants and the play will also make them forget about being hungry.

### **Play Is Often Gendered, But Not Aged**

The majority of photos display groups of either only boys or only girls playing together, with only eight photos that show a mix of boys and girls playing together. This was also confirmed by observation notes taken by the Principal Investigator during photo-taking sessions. Additionally, the Principal Investigator and facilitators observed that pretend play in these communities often includes **traditional gender roles**, seen for example in a photo titled “Cooking Skills”, which includes only girls. One study participant even specifically expressed their preference for gendered play:

“My interest is with games only involving girls.”

Though, there are some photos that display female children engaging in traditionally male activities, such as football or playing on jungle-gym equipment:



**Football Talent:** The young girl displays her talent in playing football.

While play may be generally gendered in these communities, the study participants made it clear that play is **not age-discriminant**. The majority of photos display multi-age groups of children and one participant in particular wanted to highlight this key message in the following photo and caption:



**No Age Difference:** The participants are of various ages; the older children play a fair game that the young ones copy.



## Play Is Joyful

Many of the photos show children smiling, laughing, and generally displaying happy and positive affects. Additionally, observation notes from photo-taking and discussion sessions indicate that children in the Elema, Baratuku, and Onigo communities generally enjoy themselves during play. Also, as numerous study participants expressed that play can entice children to come to school, this indicates that children enjoy play so much that if they know they will play at school, they will be more likely to attend. Finally, some study participants specifically expressed that play makes children happy and joyful:

*"...as they play it makes him feel happy."*

*"Because people play in the mood of peace and unity, they are joyfully coming together."*

## Play Can Be Inclusive

While there is limited data about the inclusiveness of play in these communities, two study participants intentionally captured photos that display the inclusion of children with disabilities. During the discussion sessions, one participant mentioned intentionally including a child with a physical disability in their photo, while the other participant expressed that:

*"I have chosen this photo because there is a certain boy that has a psychological issue, but when I meet people like that I feel ok and I like that he is not feeling alone."*



**Disability Not Inability:** The game involves a boy with special needs, who is still liked by colleagues to play with, who amidst people as they play makes him feel happy.



## LESSONS LEARNED


The following are key lessons learned from conducting this study with the hopes of informing possible future photovoice activities within the PlayMatters project and beyond.

### Community Consultation is Key

Upon reflection, it was acknowledged that the activities involved in this study would not have been possible without the support of the communities involved. Extensive consultation and community awareness activities conducted by the Plan International Uganda team members were key in ensuring the success of this study. By involving various community members and respectfully seeking support and approval, study activities were able to be conducted smoothly and safely, ensuring the protection and security of the study participants and all those involved. Additionally, due to enthusiastic support from community members, and especially parents of study participants, many of these individuals served as voluntary ambassadors for the study activities to ensure the ease and safety of study activities in their communities.

### Working with Different Communities

The Elema, Onigo, and Baratuku communities were selected because the PlayMatters project is supporting both refugee and host communities. Therefore, the photovoice study also wanted to ensure that both refugee and host-community children were involved. However, the Baratuku and Elema communities (Onigo is included in the Elema district settlement) have existing tensions between them. Those residing in Elema and Onigo have been doing so since the mid-1990s, whereas the Baratuku community is comprised of South Sudanese refugees who have arrived at various times over the last ten years. As such, there are tensions related to who has rights over certain land and resources. While the communities generally combine many social services, like education, the Baratuku community regularly requests its own systems and services separate from Elema. This was also reflected in the photovoice study. During community awareness, the Baratuku community requested to have their own photovoice activities separate from Elema. However, the Plan International Uganda team highlighted to them the importance of having the students from the different communities—who study at the same



Elema Primary School— work together, which would hopefully contribute to social cohesion.

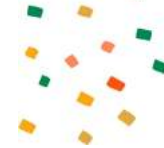
These tensions also stem from cultural differences and self-perceptions. The Principal Investigator observed a variety of instances whereby the Baratuku community members, study participants, and facilitator regularly asserted themselves and their Dinka culture over those from Elema and Onigo. For example: 1) the facilitator from Baratuku regularly engaged the study participants from his own community more frequently than the other study participants; 2) the study participants broke up into smaller groups during photo-taking and discussion sessions, as well as during the preparation workshops and community exhibition event, based on their communities of origin; and 3) the Baratuku community members and leaders dominated mixed-group discussions and even inserted additional Dinka cultural activities during the community exhibition event without consulting the Plan International Uganda team or the Elema school staff and community members involved in the planning and logistics.

Finally, the fact that numerous study participants included aspects of “unity” and “peace” in their photos and captions was noted during the community exhibition event. Key speakers during the event cited the need for greater social cohesion and communication between the communities and acknowledged the photovoice activities as a good step in that direction.

## **Gender**

While Plan International regularly champions gender equality and equity in its programming, gender is an aspect that was somewhat ignored in the planning of the photovoice activities. As the Elema Primary School uses the approach of mixed-gender classrooms, it was assumed by the Principal Investigator and Plan International Uganda staff that mixing male and female facilitators and study participants would not be a problem. Additionally, at no time during the planning process did any teacher, parent, community member, or facilitator raise the issue of working with mixed-gender groups.

However, during the preparation workshops, photo-taking sessions, and discussion sessions the Principal Investigator observed male and female participants separating into smaller groups based on gender, and particularly the female




participants from the Baratuku community. Initially, the Principal Investigator had proposed to pair male and female students together to share cameras during photo-taking sessions, however the facilitators recommended against this. During study activities, the Principal Investigator recognized that a discussion with the communities specifically on gender and how to navigate gender preferences during the photovoice activities may have helped to avoid any discomfort study participants felt during the activities.

### **Concept of “Child-Led”**

The photovoice methodology aims to directly engage study participants in knowledge production. Additionally, as Plan International is a child-centered organization, this particular study strived to leverage these approaches and values by ensuring that the study activities were driven by the study participants and were thus “child-led”. However, the Principal Investigator observed many instances whereby, when asked to participate and engage in study activities, particularly discussion sessions and the planning of the community exhibition event, the study participants were somewhat shy and hesitant to engage. Study participants required significant encouragement and prodding from the Principal Investigator and facilitators to fully participate in the study activities. Additionally, most study participants tended to repeat the messages of their fellow participants while giving reasons for why they selected their top photographs. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that many of the photo titles and captions, in addition to the planning of the community exhibition event, were significantly influenced by the Principal Investigator and facilitators. When reflecting about this challenge and consulting the Principal Investigator and Plan International Uganda team members, it was determined that that the concept of “child-led” is somewhat new for the Baratuku, Elema, and Onigo communities and is not a common way of working. Culturally, adults are the members of these communities who are outspoken and engage in such activities, rather than children. Therefore, it is recognized that it may take time and additional similar activities to impact cultural behaviors and values for these communities to fully understand and embrace the concept of “child-led”.

### **Language and Translation**

Due to the use of the Madi, Kuku, Dinka, and Arabic languages among the study participants, the study facilitators were required to translate all aspects of the study between the study participants and the Principal Investigator. This was a significant



challenge specifically during the discussion sessions as the Principal Investigator observed that the facilitators were not necessarily directly translating what the study participants were saying. This likely impacted the meanings and intentions of the study participants regarding their views and perceptions of play, as well as the titles and captions of their photos. Additionally, much of the translation was delivered in broken English, which required the Principal Investigator and co-Principal Investigator to intuitively guess what study participants were trying to say at some points during the analysis process. This is a key issue related to the child-led aspect of the photovoice methodology as this methodology is meant to ensure that participants' voices are clearly heard and understood in the process. Therefore, these challenges with language and translation serve as a limitation to this study.

### **Compensation for Participation**

Refugee response activities in the Adjumani district have a long history. Many NGOs who wish to engage refugee and host-community members through activities like the photovoice study routinely distribute cash as an incentive for participation. However, as per its policies Plan International Uganda does not provide cash incentives through its programming. The Principal Investigator cited this as a key challenge in community mobilization for the photovoice activities as community members were expecting to receive cash incentives for their involvement and support. However, rather than cash, the Plan International Uganda team decided to provide two branded PlayMatters t-shirts and one branded umbrella for each study participant and facilitator, and one branded t-shirt for parents of study participants. This not only served as a protection and visibility measure for study participants and facilitators, but also provided an incentive for community participation and support.

### **Logistical Challenges**

A number of logistical challenges impacted the execution of study activities. These included:

- staff taking annual leave, which delayed certain study activities;
- needing to schedule study activities around the Elema Primary School calendar of activities, including exam times and school holidays;
- study activities occurring over the period of the close of the Plan International financial year and opening of the next financial year, which delayed procurement and finance processes;




- a limited number of cars and drivers that were available for the Principal Investigator to use, thus hindering the efficiency and scheduling of many study activities;
- the Principal Investigator was hired as a consultant, therefore they did not have certain privileges and authorities within the Plan International financial and procurement systems. Thus, he was reliant on Plan International Uganda staff to do things like raise procurement requests, approve study activities in the Plan International digital systems, etc., which significantly delayed processes and activities;
- the Principal Investigator having limited personal availability to extend their time on the study, resulting in the condensing and rapid execution of photo-taking and discussion sessions; and
- general COVID-19 and Ebola issues that delayed activities like procurement.

### **Research Design and Technical Learnings**

While the research design was presented in written form and the Principal Investigator and Plan International Uganda team members were trained on the research design and workplan, the methodology of photovoice was new for them. As such, there was some confusion over study activities despite regular check-in calls between the Principal Investigator, Plan International Uganda team members, and the co-Principal Investigator. In particular, it was intended for the study participants to engage in three photo-taking and discussion sessions. However, due to confusion over the research design and workplan, as well as scheduling challenges with Elema Primary School activities and the availability of the Principal Investigator, the study participants were only able to participate in two photo-taking and discussion sessions. Though, the Research Team does not think this issue impacted the study in a significant way.

Additionally, there was a challenge of the digital labeling process of photo files. Due to the methods used by the Principal Investigator during the photo-taking and discussion sessions, in an effort to protect the privacy and anonymity of the study participants, the digital photo files were not labeled clearly. As such, this caused confusion over which titles and captions belonged to which photo. This was a problem on the day of the community exhibition event when the Research Team was trying to match the titles and captions, which were printed on stickers, to the printed photos that would be displayed for the communities. As such, there were



some incorrect titles and captions that were matched with photos and apologies were made to those particular study participants.

## **CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

While this photovoice study was conducted in a manner somewhat differently than the original intended study design, overall the Research Team feels that this study was executed successfully. The Plan International Uganda team is open to conducting future similar activities and the Baratuku, Onigo, and Elema communities also requested additional photovoice activities in the future if possible.

Upon completion of data analysis, we can conclude that in these three communities, the study participants perceive play as:

- highly social with opportunities to support social cohesion, relationship-building, peace, love, and unity;
- highly physical with frequent use of physical objects and materials, though not always;
- somewhat localized to particular games and activities that are unique to these communities, with opportunities for individuals to engage in new forms of play;
- facilitating various forms of cognitive and behavioral learning and wellbeing;
- largely gendered and reinforcing of gender norms and roles, though inclusive of all ages with the frequent mixing of age groups;
- largely joyful;
- and inclusive of opportunities to involve children with disabilities.

It is recommended that these findings be considered by the PlayMatters Uganda team to inform project activities going forward. For example, asking teachers what local games and play activities they can incorporate into their lessons; incorporating play activities that involve both social and physical interaction between students; exposing students to new forms of play; aligning play activities with what students find enjoyable; being sensitive to how play is gendered and trying to balance both the comfort of students while not reinforcing harmful gender norms; and ensuring they use play activities that are inclusive of all students in their classrooms.




While these findings are generally aligned with the current PlayMatters approach and training content, it is recommended that PlayMatters teams encourage teachers, parents, and community members to ask children and students what kinds of play they then enjoy and regularly engage in outside of learning activities, in order to align their Learning Through Play approaches and activities to existing forms of play.

If the Plan International Uganda team or any other PlayMatters partners would like to conduct future photovoice activities, we recommend the following:

- begin the planning process early to account for the time it may take to obtain needed approvals, recruit and train staff, and procure needed items and materials;
- ensure you engage in community consultation with targeted communities before moving forward with any activities in order to secure approval, support, and buy-in;
- if targeting multiple communities, be aware of the historical and contemporary context in order to appropriately navigate any existing tensions or conflicts;
- consider the issue of gender throughout the planning and execution process to ensure you are responding to and/or addressing gender norms appropriately;
- ensure you recruit staff, and especially a Principal Investigator, who speak the same languages as the target study participants and communities to avoid problems with translation;
- plan ahead for any issues around incentives and physical material or cash distribution for communities to participate in the planned activities. This will involve understanding the historical and contemporary practices that the target communities are used to and expect;
- manage community and participant expectations clearly and early in terms of incentives, benefits, and potential risks for participation in activities;
- when conducting a risk analysis, in addition to assessing potential risks related to participant protection and safeguarding, also conduct a risk analysis to anticipate any logistical challenges that may impact or impede activities in order to mitigate them ahead of time;
- ensure that all team members involved are clear on the workplan, schedule, and activities. Have regular check-in calls to update on progress and plan





next steps. Regularly check for comprehension on planned activities and study design details across all team members;

- allow for a longer period of data collection with more photo-taking and discussion sessions to get more and richer data. This may also help study participants to get used to the study processes and become more comfortable and confident in engaging in study activities;
- set up a clear data management plan before activities begin to appropriately label and store digital files in an intuitive and efficient manner;
- anticipate potential issues around the concepts of “participatory”, “action-oriented”, and “child-led” research as target communities may not align culturally with these concepts and ways of working. If possible, through community consultations, gauge receptiveness and awareness of these concepts ahead of study activities and determine whether any pre-photovoice workshops or sensitization activities need to take place to create the appropriate atmosphere and environment for the success of activities.

Finally, the Research Team thanks the LEGO Foundation and IRC for their support of this study. This study serves as a pilot project with the aim of testing the use of participatory visual research methods with refugee and host-community children, as well as to collect qualitative data that can help to inform PlayMatters activities. Through this study, we were able to engage children directly in physical, joyful, social, creative, and cognitive ways that allowed them to have fun, learn new skills, and share their voices and experiences with their communities. The Research Team concludes that this Photovoice study garnered further appreciation and support for the PlayMatters project more generally in the Baratuku, Onigo, and Elema communities and we hope to conduct future photovoice, and other similar, activities if possible.



## ANNEX 1: Additional Participant Photos Not Already Included Above



**Cooking Skills:** Under this game, children learn how to cook as part of their growth.



**Lessons From Our Parents:** Shows a peaceful atmosphere for children to play together as encouraged by their parents.



**Football Talent:** The boy displays talent in football.



**Play As You Work:** Finding time to play as people sent by family to fetch water build friendship among young people.



**Social Interaction:** Early learning of football play using their hands and social interaction during play.



**Play and Don't Fight:** When you play together as like shown, there is no fighting amongst players. The game also creates relationship and friends.



**Deep Involvement:** The game makes children so involved not to think about hunger and develops friendship.



**Greater Heights:** Interestingly, the players can even reach the higher level for all to see.



**Play & Learn:** The children who are still at home would pick interest to join school and learn because they will always remember.



**Jump & Count:** They were playing while jumping and counting, which shows that they learn counting as they play.



**Come to School and Play:** The game brings the rest of the learners who are out of school to join in, because this play is just at the school.



**Unity and Peace:** Children loving themselves and coming to play together from the community for unity and peace.



**Community Spirit:** In the community when you stay together, you dispel problems and instead strengthen peace and relationships.



**Confidence Building:** The game calls for unity and tolerance and also participants gain confidence-building





**Play and Work:** It is interesting to have play at the borehole side.



**Stress-Free:** Play is capable of removing stress with many people involved in the game and with friendship involved, hence removing stress.



**Say No to Boredom:** Playing removes boredom amongst learners, but also helps in bringing children together, hence attracting the rest of them to learn.



**Thank You, Plan International:** The photo is interesting because the game play was provided by Plan International and the school was built.



**Join Me For Play:** A game that brings unity and cooperation among children, because the game involves many people.



**Peace & Relationships:** In the community when you stay together, you dispel problems but instead strengthen peace and relationships.



**Welcome to School:** The game welcomes learners to school and if these kind of games are there in the school it brings the interest of the learners.



**It's Fun at School:** Once the children who are still at home get to see this type of play, they will be interested to come to school.



**Girls Play:** My interest is with games only involving girls.



**Unity:** Interestingly, it was the first time to see a person jumping like that and people gather around, so it brings unity.



## **ANNEX 2: Facilitator Training Agenda**

### Day 1

- Welcome and introductions
- What Photovoice is all about
- Activities within the Photovoice study
- Goof facilitation & roles & responsibilities
- Research focus: child perceptions & experiences of play
- General child safeguarding overview
- Using a camera and taking photos, including child-friendly practices
- Safeguarding within the Photovoice study
- Safety and behavior management of study participants
- Review and wrap-up

### Day 2

- Welcome back and re-cap
- Reminder of how to use a camera and practice time
- Discussion and feedback about previous day's content
- Troubleshooting in the field when working with children and cameras
- Do's and Don'ts of taking photos, including ethics and permission
- Safe storage of photos and how photos will be used by Plan
- Time for questions
- Next steps and logistics
- Wrap up and closing of training



## **Annex 3: Participant Workshop Agendas**

### Day 1

- Overview of Photovoice study
- Review of key activities
- Questions
- Basics of photography
- Short break
- Camera basics
- Camera care
- Questions
- Wrap up

### Day 2

- Review of day 1
- Distribution of cameras
- Review of camera basics
- Portrait vs. Landscape
- Practice time & discussion debrief
- Short break
- The use of light
- Practice time & discussion debrief
- Questions
- Wrap up

### Day 3

- Review of day 2
- Questions on camera use
- Setting up a composition
- Practice time & discussion debrief
- Short break
- Confidence booster discussion
- Ethics and consent
- Questions
- Wrap up



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