A photograph of two young children walking away from the camera. The child in the foreground is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a backpack with a cartoon dog on the back. The child behind them is wearing a light-colored patterned shirt and a backpack. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

CONNECTING SYSTEMS, PROTECTING CHILDHOODS: A JOURNEY OF COOPERATION BETWEEN BRAZIL, SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE, AND UNICEF


for every child

 TRILATERAL
SOUTH-SOUTH
COOPERATION


GOVERNO
SÃO TOMÉ E PRÍNCIPE

 ABC
BRAZILIAN
COOPERATION
AGENCY
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINISTRY OF
HUMAN RIGHTS
AND CITIZENSHIP

MINISTRY OF
FOREIGN
AFFAIRS

BRAZILIAN GOVERNMENT

STANDING WITH THE BRAZILIAN PEOPLE

Technical specifications

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and Príncipe; and the Ministry of Justice, Parliamentary Affairs and Women's Rights of São Tomé and Príncipe.

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Acronyms

ABC | Brazilian Cooperation Agency

CIDCA | Integrated Center for the Rights of Children and Adolescents

CONANDA | National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents

ECA | Statute of the Child and Adolescent

ENDICA | National School for the Rights of Children and Adolescents

MDHC | Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship

MRE | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil

NGOs | Non-Governmental Organizations

UNDP | United Nations Development Programme

SINASE | National System for Socio-Educational Care

SSC | South-South Cooperation

STP | São Tomé and Príncipe

TSSC | Trilateral South-South Cooperation

UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund



INTRODUCTION

Protecting children and adolescents from all forms of violence is a fundamental societal commitment, enshrined in international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet translating this commitment into concrete, day-to-day action within institutions remains a challenge—particularly in contexts marked by limited resources, institutional constraints, and social norms that may inadvertently normalize violence. In this context, investing in integrated approaches that bring together multiple sectors and place children at the center of decision-making and public policy is essential.

Against this backdrop, cooperation between countries emerges as a strategic tool for development. Grounded in the exchange of experiences and supported by international organizations, such cooperation values solutions developed in similar contexts and promotes mutual learning, capacity strengthening, and the co-creation of responses tailored to local realities.

The partnership between Brazil and São Tomé and Príncipe, with the support of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), offers a concrete example of this potential. In recent years, these actors have worked collaboratively to strengthen their child protection systems. This exchange has fostered new ways of approaching the care and protection of children and adolescents, consistently guided by their best interests. It has also contributed to strengthening institutions across key sectors, including health, social services, public security, and the justice system, with the active engagement of the executive branches of both countries.

This document presents the key achievements, lessons learned, and results of this partnership. By highlighting both the challenges encountered and the solutions developed throughout the process, it aims to contribute to the advancement of more integrated, responsive, and sustainable public policies—reaffirming the role of international cooperation as a powerful driver of social transformation.

South-South Cooperation (SSC)

refers to the exchange of knowledge and experiences between developing countries. Its main objective is to develop local capacities by promoting the sharing of practices and public policies that have contributed to addressing social and economic challenges in similar contexts.

Trilateral South-South Cooperation (TSSC) expands this dynamic by involving an international organization that support and strengthen these initiatives. This model is based on partnerships, respect for national sovereignty, and the adaptation of experiences to local realities.

Through this joint effort, it is possible to optimize resources, strengthen institutional capacities, and promote solutions that are better suited to the needs of each context.

South-South Cooperation and Trilateral South-South Cooperation are important instruments for development, as they value the existing knowledge in countries and promote approaches based on collaboration, mutual learning, and the joint construction of solutions.

CHILD PROTECTION IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

Violence against children and adolescents is structural, multifaceted, and often normalized—even in spaces that are meant to provide protection.

Children and adolescents experience psychological, physical, verbal, and sexual violence, as well as neglect and deprivation of their rights. Paradoxically, environments considered the safest—such as the family—are often those where the risks are greatest. Perpetrators frequently include family members, trusted individuals, neighbors, teachers, and even the State itself. This reality underscores the urgent need for comprehensive protection systems that ensure accountability across all actors and contexts.

Historically, this situation has been reinforced by the legal framework itself. The Family Law of 1977, for instance, allowed parents to “reprimand and correct [their children] appropriately and moderately,” thereby legitimizing hierarchical power dynamics between adults and children. In practice,

corporal and emotional punishment were sanctioned by national legislation, limiting opportunities to challenge and transform these norms.

In recent years, however, there has been a gradual shift in both public and institutional perspectives on corporal punishment. This change has been driven by a combination of international commitments undertaken by the country and recommendations from the 2011 and 2015 Universal Periodic Reviews, through which the State committed to prohibiting corporal punishment in all settings.

In 2014, the Government of São Tomé and Príncipe conducted a situational analysis to better understand the challenges faced by children and adolescents exposed to violence and to improve the public services available to them. The study highlighted the multiple forms of violence affecting children in the country, including domestic abuse, sexual violence, child labour, school-based violence, and violence within the household.

Overall, the research identified the following challenges for the country in relation to child protection:

A fragmented response to the phenomenon of violence against children and adolescents, consisting, in most cases, of isolated actions promoted by NGOs for certain groups of children. These groups include children living on the streets or deprived of parental care, whose parents or guardians are subject to significant personal and social difficulties that hinder their protective role;

Fragmented records of data on cases of violence among police, judicial, or health agencies make it difficult to assess the exact number of reports and the proportion of those who received some type of assistance;

Lack of support for the majority of child victims and/or witnesses of violence;

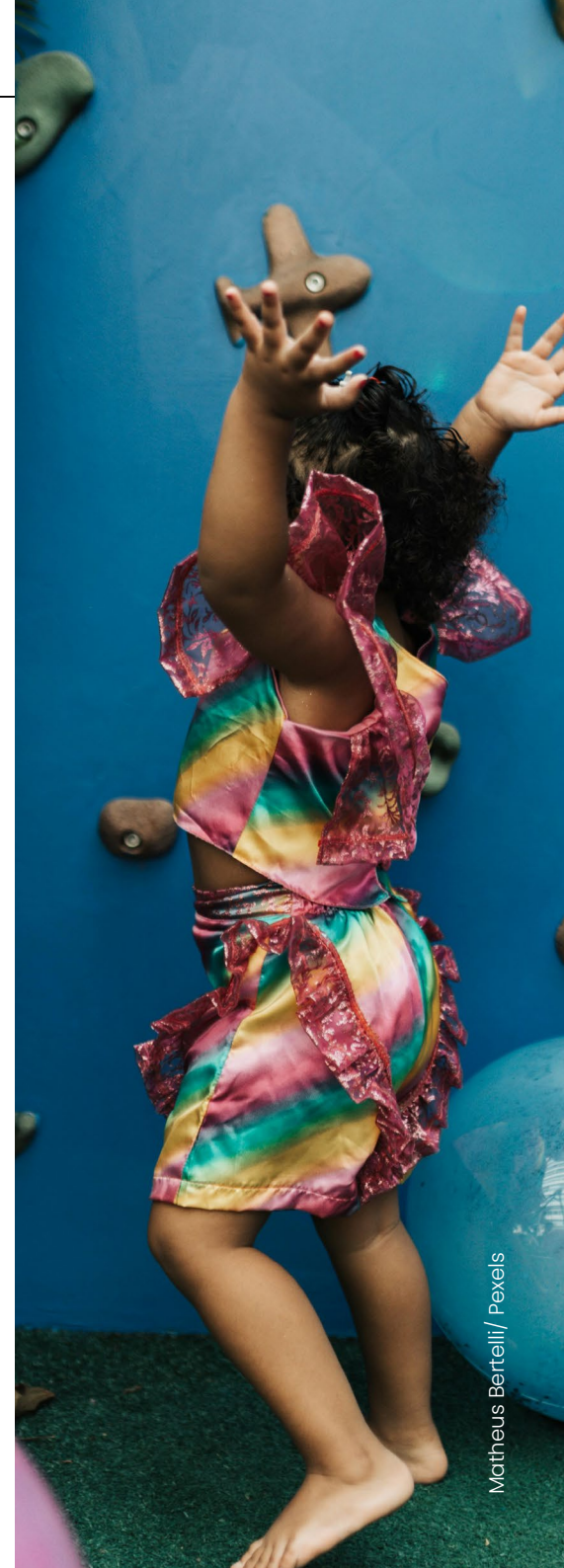
Impunity for those who commit crimes against children;

Lack of a systemic mechanism to ensure that the rights of children in conflict with the law are addressed at the community level;

Flaws in current judicial means of protecting children;

Insufficient number of specialized human resources; and

Failure to fully incorporate the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into legal norms.



Recognizing the urgency of addressing this reality, the Government of São Tomé and Príncipe has developed a series of laws and initiatives to strengthen child protection in the country. A key milestone in this process was the launch of the **National Child Protection Policy** in 2016. The policy established a comprehensive framework for both the prevention of and response to violence, marking a shift from fragmented interventions to a more coordinated, system-wide approach that brings together multiple sectors and actors.

The policy is structured around four main pillars: preventing violence, ensuring adequate care for victims, guaranteeing judicial protection, and strengthening the functioning of the National Child Protection System. It is coordinated by a multi-stakeholder committee comprising representatives from the legislative and judicial branches, as well as key ministries—including security, justice, social affairs, education, and communication—alongside civil society organizations. This arrangement reflects a strong and collective commitment to advancing child protection.

These efforts have been further reinforced by legal reforms, including updates to the **Family Law and the Child Protection Code** in 2018. These reforms replaced the Family Law of the 1970s, which had permitted forms of “corrective” violence, and marked an important step in modernizing the legal framework governing family relations. The revised legislation strengthened protections for children and adolescents and introduced clearer provisions on parental responsibility, filiation, and inheritance, while also recognizing the diversity of family structures.

Also in 2018, São Tomé and Príncipe adopted the **Code of Jurisdictional Organization for Minors**, aimed at protecting children at risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation. In 2021, civil society organizations, in collaboration with the Government, convened the country’s first national conference on sexual violence and abuse against children.

Further demonstrating its commitment, the country launched a national manual in 2024 on the protection of victims



of violence, signaling a shift away from punitive approaches towards models centered on care and child protection.

Within this broader context of normative and institutional progress, the introduction of the Hearing for Future Memory (explained below) mechanism has become a key component of efforts to strengthen the justice and child protection systems, particularly since 2019. Inspired by international good practices—including

Brazil's experience with protective hearings—this mechanism aims to ensure that children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence are heard in a safe, child-sensitive, and developmentally appropriate manner, thereby reducing the risk of revictimization during judicial proceedings.

Its implementation has been gradual, supported by a combination of legal and operational measures. These have

included the adaptation of interview protocols, the training of professionals within the justice system and the broader protection network, and the establishment of dedicated spaces for conducting hearings. At the same time, efforts have been made to strengthen coordination across institutions—including justice, social services, and other sectors—promoting more integrated and child-centered responses grounded in the best interests of the child.

Hearing for Future Memory

The *hearing for future memory* is a child-sensitive judicial mechanism created in São Tomé e Príncipe inspired in best practices internationally, including the Brazilian experience with the Law on Protective Hearing. It is designed to ensure that children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence can provide testimony in a safe, respectful, and developmentally appropriate environment. Conducted by trained professionals in a dedicated setting, the hearing is audio visually recorded so that the child's statement can be used throughout

judicial proceedings without requiring repeated testimony. This approach helps reduce revictimization, minimizes emotional distress, and strengthens the quality and reliability of evidence, while upholding the best interests of the child. Its implementation has been supported through adapted protocols, capacity-building efforts, and the establishment of specialized facilities, reflecting a broader shift toward more coordinated and child-centered justice responses in the country.

PARTNERSHIP WITH BRAZIL

The partnership with Brazil fits within this context of change in São Tomé and Príncipe. The African country identified in the partnership with Brazil an opportunity to exchange experiences to improve practices for the protection of children and adolescents.

Brazil was identified as a partner for this project primarily because of its extensive experience in developing and implementing public policies in the areas of Social Protection, Citizenship, and Child Protection.

Brazil has a set of policies and legal frameworks with a significant focus on human rights, especially regarding children and adolescents. The country's Constitution even stipulates the duty of the State, family, and society to ensure children "the right to life, health, food, education, leisure, professional training, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community life, as well as protecting them from all forms of neglect,



Bruno Brandão/Pexels

discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty, and oppression.”

The country also has the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA, by its acronym in Portuguese), a law approved in 1990 that adapts the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to the Brazilian legal framework. The ECA stipulates that “children and adolescents enjoy all fundamental rights inherent to the human person, without prejudice to the full protection provided for in this Law, ensuring them, by law or by other means, all opportunities and facilities in order to enable their physical, mental, moral, spiritual and social development, in conditions of freedom and dignity.”

In 2000, the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (CONANDA, by its acronym in Portuguese), a group composed of government and civil society representatives responsible for formulating and deliberating policies for the comprehensive protection of children, approved the National Plan to Combat Sexual Violence against Children and Adolescents. Developed through a participatory process involving civil society organizations and federal



government institutions, the Plan sets out guidelines and strategies to steer the Brazilian State's response to sexual violence against children and adolescents. Its core pillars include prevention, accountability of perpetrators, care and protection for victims, social mobilization, and the strengthening of information and monitoring systems. Together, these aim to foster greater coordination and integration of public policies across different levels of government.

The Plan was subsequently revised and updated by CONANDA through a similarly participatory process, in order to reflect social changes and legal advancements in the country. The revision sought to enhance clarity and coordination across key sectors—such as health, education, social assistance, and justice—by better defining roles and responsibilities and strengthening intersectoral collaboration. It also emphasized the importance of improved monitoring of results, expanded use of data to inform decision-making, and stronger prevention and response strategies, all with a focus on the comprehensive protection and well-being of children and adolescents.

In 2017, Law No. 13,431/2017 was enacted, (also known as Law on Protective Hearing) establishing a system to safeguard the rights of children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence. Known as the Law on Protective Hearing, it introduces specific procedures to ensure that children are heard and protected throughout care and investigative processes. The law recognizes that the manner in which children are interviewed by institutions can lead to revictimization and therefore establishes protocols tailored to their developmental needs.

The law was further regulated by Decree No. 9,603/2018, which outlines the organization and functioning of the rights protection system. The decree provides for the establishment of intersectoral management committees responsible for coordinating and overseeing integrated action across health, social assistance, education, public security, and justice sectors. It also sets out guidance for the development of clear and standardized referral pathways, ensuring timely and appropriate case management—from the identification of violence to the provision of comprehensive protection. In addition, it promotes the use of case discussions as

a coordination tool, enabling joint analysis and more effective, child-centered responses.

The Law on Protective Hearing establishes two main procedures: (i) specialized hearing, carried out by professionals within the protection network—such as social services, health, and education—with the aim of providing support and

understanding the needs of the child or adolescent; and (ii) special testimony, conducted within the justice and public security system for evidentiary purposes by trained professionals, in a child-friendly environment and with audiovisual recording to avoid repeated recounting of traumatic experiences. The law also mandates coordination across sectors and institutions within the

rights protection system, strengthening integrated responses to cases of violence. Its overarching objective is to reduce revictimization and institutional violence, ensure comprehensive protection, and uphold the rights of children and adolescents throughout the entire process.

Protective Hearing:

An approach that organizes care for children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence in a safe, supportive, and coordinated manner across services. Its goal is to guarantee comprehensive protection, avoid revictimization, and ensure that the child is heard respectfully, at the appropriate time and in the appropriate environment.

Specialized hearing:

Support provided by professionals from the protection network (such as social assistance, health, and education) to understand the child or adolescent's situation and guide the necessary referrals. It is not for investigative purposes, but rather for care, protection, and access to rights.

Special testimony:

A hearing conducted within the justice system, in an appropriate environment and by a qualified professional, for the purpose of producing evidence. It is carried out in a protective manner, adapted to the age of the child or adolescent, reducing the need to repeat the account and preventing further trauma.

Overall, Brazil has established a comprehensive framework of laws, policies, and regulatory instruments aimed at ensuring the full protection of children. Despite significant progress in recent decades, however, structural challenges persist and require sustained attention and coordinated responses. The reality of childhood in the country continues to be shaped by social and racial inequalities, which expose children and adolescents to both direct and indirect forms of violence. This underscores the need for public policies that are responsive to these intersecting vulnerabilities.



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In this context, Brazil's South-South Cooperation has emerged as a strategic avenue for strengthening institutional capacities and enhancing practices. Its horizontal nature—grounded in partnership and mutual learning—facilitates the exchange of experiences among countries facing similar challenges. By sharing knowledge and solutions, participating countries deepen their capacity for critical reflection on their own policies and advance the development of more effective, context-specific responses.



Taciano Brito/UNICEF

POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS WITH FOCUS ON CHILD RIGHTS IN BRAZIL

1890

Creation of the Criminal Code of the Republic (to contain the increase in urban violence). It considered children age 9 and older capable of discernment (Theory of Discernment).

1921

Approval of the Union Budget Law 4,242/1921, regulated by Decree 16,272/23, authorizing the creation of the Service for Protection of Abandoned Children.

1927

Law on Assistance and Protection to Minors, known as the Children's Code, is consolidated by Decree 17,943-A on October 12, representing an advance in child protection. It set the age of criminal majority at 18, in effect nationwide, as it still is today.

1940

Approval of Decree 2,024/1940, which laid the foundations for maternity, childhood, and adolescence protection throughout the country.

1917

Promulgation of Law 1,801, which increased the minimum age for factory workers to 14, with conditions such as vaccination, minimum schooling, and a medical certificate.

1923

The first Juvenile Court in Brazil established in Rio de Janeiro.

1932

Penal reform, raised the age of criminal responsibility from 9 to 14 years.

1940

Decree-Law 2,848 established 18 as the cutoff age for limited criminal responsibility.

1941

The Child Assistance Service (SAM) is established, the first federal agency responsible for assisting minors under 18 on a national scale. It housed "abandoned" children in institutions and interned "delinquents" in correctional colonies and reformatories.

1949

The Declaration of the Rights of the Child is adopted at the Ninth Pan-American Child Conference.

1964

Law 5,413 creates the National Foundation for Well-Being of Minors (Funabem), with a normative role to be followed by State Foundations which are responsible for implementing this policy.

1979

On October 10, a new Children's Code is promulgated. It introduces the doctrine of integral protection, later a feature of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent.

1946

The Organic Law of Primary Education is enacted, whereby the federal government regulates the extension of public education to the popular classes.

1950

On July 9, the Brazilian government signs its first cooperation program with UNICEF.

1974

Law 6,086 is signed, preventing the employment of minors with salaries below the minimum wage, except as apprentices.

1987

The “Child Priority National Campaign” is created, gathering over 250,000 signatures from voters and over 1 million signatures from children in a Popular Amendment of the same name presented to the National Congress in April of that year. This action, along with the “Child Constituent” campaign, leads to creation of the DCA Forum – a National Permanent Forum of Non-Governmental Entities for the Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents.

1990

On July 13, Brazil approves the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, which comes into effect on October 12. On September 24, Brazil ratifies the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The World Summit for Children is held in New York on September 29 and 30, bringing together heads of state and of government from 71 nations.

1986

At the height of Brazil’s democratization process, UNICEF and partners launch the “Child Constituent” campaign, appealing for Brazilians to vote for candidates committed to children’s issues.

1988

A specific article on children’s rights is inserted in Brazil’s Federal Constitution – Article 227: *“It is the duty of the family, society, and the State to ensure children, adolescents, and young people, with absolute priority, the right to life, health, nutrition, education, leisure, professionalization, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community life, as well as to safeguard them from all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty, and oppression.”* The new Brazilian Constitution is promulgated on October 5.

1991

Law 8,242 creates the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (CONANDA), a permanent collegiate body with deliberative authority, provided for in Article 88 of Law 8,069/90 – the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA). As part of the Ministry of Human Rights, CONANDA is the main body of the Rights Guarantee System.

1992

On May 20, the President of Brazil and governors of 24 states and the Federal District participate in the First Governors' Summit for Children, organized by UNICEF and partners, where they sign the Pact for Childhood.

1993

On July 7, the Second Governors' Summit for Children is held, attended by the President of Brazil, governors from 23 states and the Federal District, the Minister of Justice, the Attorney General, the President of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, among others. The authorities present establish goals to be achieved by the end of their terms in a plan called "500 Days of Action for Children in Brazil."

1996

The Government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso creates the Program for Eradication of Child Labor. Its key component is the Child Citizen Scholarship, with two focuses: combating school dropout and eliminating child labor.

2000

Law 9,970/2000 is approved by the National Congress, establishing May 18 as the National Day to Combat Sexual Violence against Children and Adolescents. The National Plan to Confront Sexual Violence against Children and Adolescents is developed in participation with the government and over 100 organizations.

1992

The International Labour Organization (ILO) creates the Program for the Eradication of Child Labor (PETI).

1993

The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into Child Prostitution is established, putting this issue on the agenda of public authorities.

1998

The Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (SBP) launches the Campaign for Prevention of Accidents and Violence in Childhood and Adolescence, aiming to sensitize and train healthcare professionals to recognize, report, and treat cases of abuse and mistreatment.

2004

A draft bill (PL 4,126) initiated by Congresswoman Maria do Rosário, is presented to the Chamber of Deputies, proposing changes to the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Statute of the Child and Adolescent to establish damage-free testimony procedures.

2006

National Child and Adolescent Rights Council (CONANDA) Resolution 113 provides parameters for internment and strengthening of the Child and Adolescent Rights Guarantee System (SGDCA).

2010

National Council of Justice (CNJ) Recommendation 33/2010 promotes the use of Special Hearing methodology during judicial proceedings when taking testimony from child victims or witnesses of sexual violence.

2003

Brazil begins its first experience with Special testimony, then known as Damage-Free Testimony, in the 2nd Court of Porto Alegre, in the State of Rio Grande do Sul.

2004

On January 27, Brazil ratifies the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography; and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

2007

Draft bill PL 4,126, having been approved by the Chamber of Deputies, was submitted in May to the Federal Senate, where it failed to secure approval owing to debates on the New Code of Criminal Procedure.

2013

Enactment of Law 12.845/2013, making mandatory integral services for persons in situations of sexual violence.

2014

Enactment of Law 12.978/2014, making solicitation of prostitution or of any form of sexual exploitation of a child or vulnerable person a heinous crime.

2018

Presidential Decree 9.603/2018, regulates Law 13.431/2017 and establishes the system for guaranteeing the rights of child victims or witnesses of violence.

2019

The National Pact for Implementation of Law 13.431/2017 is signed on June 13, with participation of the National Council of Justice, the National Council of Civil Police Chiefs (CONCPC), the Ministries of the Presidential Staff, of Education, of Health, and of Citizenship, Women, Family and Human Rights; the National Council of the Prosecution Service (MP), the Public Defender's Office of the Union, and the National College of Public Defenders General (Condege). Planned outputs of the National Pact include construction of a National Service Workflow for child victims or witnesses of violence.

2017

On April 4, enactment of Law 13.431/2017 establishes the system for guaranteeing the rights of child victims or witnesses of violence and amends the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Law 8.069, of July 13, 1990).

2019

National Council of Justice Resolution 299/2019 provides for the System for Guaranteeing the Rights of child victims or witnesses of violence, as set out in Law 13.431.

2021

DECREE 10.701 issued on May 17, establishes the National Program for Combating Violence against Children and Adolescents and the Intersectoral Commission for Combating Violence against Children and Adolescents. It also determines that members of the System for Guaranteeing Rights shall receive continuous training on the provisions of Law 13.431/2017.

THE PROJECT

The project *“Support for the Implementation of Comprehensive Protection Policies for Vulnerable Families in São Tomé and Príncipe”* was implemented under the Partnership Programme established between the Government of Brazil—through the Brazilian Cooperation Agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ABC/MRE, by its acronym in Portuguese)—and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

to promote South–South Cooperation. The initiative originated from a formal request submitted by the Government of São Tomé and Príncipe to Brazil in 2016 and was subsequently developed and formalized in 2019. The project aimed to strengthen state institutions and civil society organizations in São Tomé and Príncipe through the exchange of experiences with Brazilian

counterparts, alongside technical support from UNICEF offices in Brazil and São Tomé and Príncipe. Over the years, a range of initiatives contributed to enhancing the capacity of the national child protection system, including multi–sectoral missions, in–person training cycles, the documentation of good practices, and knowledge exchange through online webinar.

The project was divided into three components:

Component 1:

Violence against children and adolescents (Reference in Brazil: Law No. 13.431/2017).

Component 2:

Alternative care for children who cannot be with their families due to circumstances that pose a risk to their well–being (Reference in Brazil: Alternative Care Programme – *“Família Acolhedora”*).

Component 3:

Adolescents in conflict with the law (Reference in Brazil: National System of Socio–Educational Care (SINASE, by its acronym in Portuguese)).

1. Violence against children and adolescents

The experiences of children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence in São Tomé and Príncipe reveal persistent challenges in ensuring their comprehensive protection. Despite progress in public policies and awareness-raising efforts, available data indicate that 70% of children are exposed to psychological aggression, and one in seven experiences severe physical punishment—reflecting the continued prevalence of violent disciplinary practices within families and communities¹.

Beyond the violence itself, institutional responses have often compounded children’s vulnerability. Formal procedures, for example, have required children to be accompanied by a guardian when providing statements at police stations. In some cases, however, this person accompanying the child was the perpetrator of the violence to be reported. Such requirements created environments

of intimidation and discomfort, limiting children’s ability to speak freely and safely. At the same time, the absence of coordinated referral pathways across services—including health, law enforcement, prosecution, and the judiciary—has frequently led to repeated interviews. Children and adolescents have been asked to recount traumatic experiences multiple times to different professionals, often without specialized training in child-sensitive interviewing. This has resulted in situations of revictimization, exposing children to the repeated reliving of traumatic events without adequate emotional safeguards.

In response, São Tomé and Príncipe has increasingly recognized the need for more coordinated, sensitive, and child-centered approaches. Strengthening inter-institutional protocols, building the capacity of professionals in protective interviewing, and creating safe and supportive environments for children are critical steps to ensure that victims and witnesses of violence are treated with dignity, respect, and full protection of their rights.

¹ National Health Development Plan for São Tomé and Príncipe: 2023–2032. Ministry of Health. São Tomé and Príncipe.

2. Alternative care

The lack of adequate family care is one of the most significant challenges for child protection in São Tomé and Príncipe. Data from 2019 indicate that nearly half (49%) of children aged 0 to 17 live with only one biological parent or with neither parent². This represents a considerably higher proportion compared to the nearly 30% observed in other contexts.

This reality reflects multiple structural factors. Migration—both internal and external—has grown considerably. A recent study indicates that approximately 18% of the São Toméan population resides abroad, which has significant implications for families and children left behind³. The search for better economic opportunities has led many adults—particularly young people of working age—to leave their households, either temporarily or permanently, weakening family care structures.

² United Nations Children’s Fund, Fulfilling the Commitment to Child Protection in Sao Tome and Principe, UNICEF, New York, 2022.

³ [18% of the population of São Tomé and Príncipe lives abroad, approximately 40,000 people, and half of them left the country in 2023 – Têla Nón](#)

In this context, many children are entrusted to the care of extended family members, such as grandparents or older siblings, or to neighbors and other informal caregivers. However, the strain on these informal care networks, combined with limited institutional support, often prevents care from being consistent and adequate. In some cases, this contributes to situations of neglect, inadequate protection, and increased social vulnerability.

High levels of child poverty further exacerbate these challenges. A large proportion of children in São Tomé and Príncipe live in conditions of economic vulnerability, increasing the risks of inadequate care, food insecurity, social exclusion, and limited access to basic services.

Overall, the combination of high migration rates, structural economic constraints, and the weakening of traditional family structures creates a context in which the realization of children’s rights—to protection, care, education, and development—remains insufficient. This underscores the urgent need for robust public policies on alternative care, strengthened social protection systems,



Karin Levi/Pexels

support to families, and the promotion of family reintegration or other safe and sustainable care arrangements.

3. Socio-educational measures

In São Tomé and Príncipe, children and adolescents in conflict with the law face multiple challenges that reflect broader structural weaknesses in the social protection and juvenile justice systems. The country currently lacks adequate policies and specialized institutions to respond to their needs. As a result, when deprived of their liberty, young people are often placed in detention facilities without age-appropriate or socio-educational considerations.

Many of these adolescents come from contexts marked by multidimensional

poverty, low levels of education, and fragile family environments—factors that increase their exposure to violence, neglect, and punitive disciplinary practices⁴. The absence of alternatives to detention, combined with the practice of holding minors alongside adults, further heightens the risks of violence, abuse, and recidivism, with long-term consequences for their mental health, self-esteem, and prospects for reintegration.

These challenges highlight the urgent need to strengthen social protection services, invest in community-based prevention mechanisms, and ensure the implementation of socio-educational

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, *Estimating the Number of Children Deprived of Liberty in the Administration of Justice*, UNICEF, New York, 2021.

programmes that provide meaningful opportunities for development and inclusion.

Advancing comprehensive protection and fulfilling national and international commitments will require increased investment in non-custodial measures, the strengthening of institutional capacities for socio-educational responses, and the development of integrated psychosocial support systems. Only through policies aligned with international standards will it be possible to ensure that no young person is left behind and that the justice system contributes to reintegration, rather than reinforcing cycles of exclusion.



IMPLEMENTATION

Over the course of six years, governments, civil society, and UNICEF collaborated to strengthen the protection of children and adolescents in both countries. This effort included a combination of in-person and virtual activities, such as technical and policy dialogues, knowledge exchange, capacity-building initiatives, evidence generation, and the review of key documents. These initiatives were implemented continuously, with a focus on supporting professionals and institutions to improve services for children.

Through these efforts, experiences were translated into practical solutions tailored to each country's context. Over time, professionals and institutions strengthened their capacities and began working in a more coordinated and aligned manner, contributing to more effective responses for the protection of children and adolescents.

In 2023, representatives from São Tomé and Príncipe visited Brazil to gain first-hand insight into the implementation of protective hearing. In Vitória da

Conquista, they observed the functioning of the Integrated Center for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (CIDCA, by its acronym in Portuguese), including service organization and team dynamics. In Brasília, the programme included exchanges with key institutions and visits to socio-educational services, special testimony facilities, and family-based alternative care programmes.

Vitória da Conquista: A reference in the implementation of the Law on Protective Hearing

The municipality of Vitória da Conquista, in the state of Bahia, is nationally recognized for its pioneering role in implementing Law No. 13,431/2017 which establishes a system to safeguard the rights of children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence. Since 2019, the municipality has undertaken

sustained efforts to structure each stage of this process—from strengthening intersectoral coordination to providing continuous training for professionals involved in service delivery.

As noted by the Secretary of Social Development of Vitória da Conquista, Michael Farias, “there was a strong commitment to promoting intersectoral integration, through training initiatives and the strengthening of protection

networks, always taking into account the cultural specificities of the territory.” This approach led to the establishment of the Protective Hearing Complex, as well as the development of a unified service flow and integrated care protocol for children and adolescents.

Another important step forward was strengthening the Municipal Committee for the Coordinated Management of the Care and Social Protection Network

for children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence (CMRPC). Bringing together professionals from different sectors, the Committee works collaboratively to address challenges and improve how services are delivered. As a result, the municipality now offers a more agile and effective response—one that is better coordinated and focused on the needs of children and adolescents.

The experience of Vitória da Conquista

has also been further strengthened through South-South Cooperation, enhancing the reach and sustainability of its initiatives. Key outcomes include:

- The documentation of local experiences in both written and audiovisual formats, produced by local stakeholders, helping to inspire and mobilize other institutions and municipalities. One example is the web series *“Protective Hearing of Children*

and Adolescents – The Experience of Vitória da Conquista”, available on YouTube.

- Greater recognition of the role of subnational governments, reflected in the engagement and support of federal and international actors, who have contributed to scaling and strengthening the municipality’s experience.



The visits to São Tomé and Príncipe in 2019 and 2025 provided valuable opportunities to better understand the local context and support the adaptation of initiatives.

In 2019, at the outset of the cooperation agenda, UNICEF, the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC), and the Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship led the first capacity-building activities in São Tomé and Príncipe, aimed at introducing the concepts and foundations of protective hearing. These initial engagements were both strategic and formative, bringing together key stakeholders

from the justice system and the broader child protection network. They served to present the conceptual framework, explore its adaptation to the local context, and initiate the development of integrated service pathways. This phase was instrumental in laying the groundwork for technical cooperation and guiding subsequent steps towards more qualified and child-sensitive service delivery.

By 2025, in the final stages of the project, the Brazilian delegation observed tangible progress in São Tomé and Príncipe, including

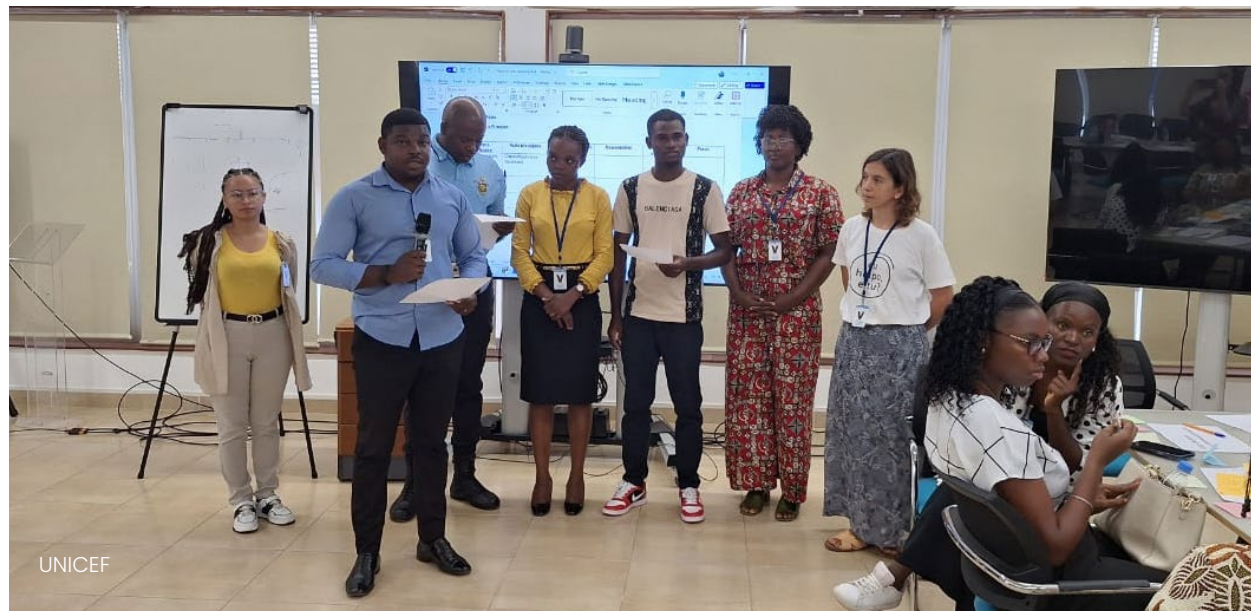


Brazilian professionals visit service facilities for children and adolescents in São Tomé and Príncipe.

the establishment of dedicated spaces for hearing children who are victims or witnesses of violence. One such milestone was the inauguration of the **Hearing Room for Future Memory** in May 2025. This space is designed to prevent revictimization during judicial proceedings by ensuring that children’s testimonies are collected in a safe, sensitive, and structured manner, reducing the need for repeated accounts across different institutions. As stated by the Minister of Justice, Parliamentary Affairs and Women’s Rights, Vera Cravid:

“Here, they will be heard with dignity, with respect, and above all, with safety. Their words will have legal value and, more than anything, they will have human value.”

The visits also included training sessions and high-level dialogues with national authorities, contributing to the strengthening of the child protection system. These sessions brought together professionals from the justice sector and the social protection network, with a focus on implementing protective hearing practices and the “hearing for future memory” approach. Activities included the sharing of Brazilian experiences, discussions on service protocols,



Professionals from São Tomé and Príncipe attend in-person training together with Brazilian technical staff.

and practical exercises aimed at enhancing inter-institutional coordination and promoting more child-centered responses.

In the area of protective hearing, Brazil's practical experience—combined with training tailored to the context of São Tomé and Príncipe—helped identify solutions that were simple, effective, and resource-efficient. Exchanges among professionals from justice, public security, social services, and public administration fostered mutual learning and contributed to the development of more integrated approaches.

The cooperation also encompassed the development and dissemination of technical materials, as well as the joint review of progress in the design of São Tomé and Príncipe's Interdisciplinary Protocol for the Care of Children in Situations of Violence. This process helped clarify service pathways, define institutional roles, and strengthen coordination across sectors.

Beyond its technical dimension, this work enabled the alignment of practices, the identification of operational challenges, and the co-creation of more integrated

and child-centered solutions. It also reinforced coordination among sectors such as justice, health, social services, and public security, leading to more timely and appropriate responses to the needs of children and adolescents.

In parallel, a series of webinars brought together stakeholders from Brazil and São Tomé and Príncipe to exchange experiences in the areas of alternative care and child protection. These sessions engaged representatives from government, the justice system, civil society, and international organizations, fostering dialogue on public policies, family strengthening, and service delivery. Topics included legal frameworks for child protection, different models of alternative care, and strategies to prevent institutionalization and promote family reintegration.

The implementation of the project remained flexible throughout. While initially structured around three components, activities were continuously adapted to align with the priorities of the Government of São Tomé and Príncipe and the availability of resources, ensuring greater relevance and effectiveness.



“My experience participating in the cooperation project between São Tomé and Príncipe, Brazil, and UNICEF was highly enriching and contributed significantly to strengthening my capacities as a judge.

In addition to taking part in the training held in São Tomé in 2025, I was also part of the Technical Mission that visited Brazil from 3 to 8 December 2023. This experience marked a key milestone in my professional trajectory, as it provided me with an in-depth understanding of innovative models for child protection. A highlight of the mission was the visit to an Integrated Center for the Rights of Children and Adolescents and a Protective Hearing Complex in the city of Vitória da Conquista, where I was able to observe firsthand how specialized hearing and special testimony are conducted. Witnessing the coordination between the justice system and psychosocial support networks to prevent the revictimization of children offered a powerful, practical lesson on the level of priority this issue demands. It was also a valuable opportunity to see how intersectoral coordination works in practice, bringing together justice, health, and social services.

In my role as a judge in the Family and Juvenile Court in São Tomé and Príncipe, I often face the challenge of balancing procedural rigor with the sensitivity required when working with child victims of violence. My experience in Brazil demonstrated how appropriate infrastructure and humanized care are as essential as the law itself. This immersion allowed me to reflect on existing procedures and consider new approaches that prioritize the psychosocial well-being of the child throughout the judicial process.

This cooperation project between São Tomé and Príncipe, Brazil, and UNICEF has been extremely rewarding. It provided an opportunity to learn from best practices in child protection and to apply this knowledge to strengthen the local protection system, make child hearings more humane, and ensure that the best interests of the child remain at the center of judicial decision-making.”

Nadgeida Castro

Judge and Member of the High Council of the Judiciary

RESULTS

Throughout the implementation, and in line with the project's contributions, São Tomé and Príncipe achieved significant progress in strengthening services for the protective care of children and adolescents who are victims of violence.

Key results include:

1. Capacity-building through training cycles

A series of training initiatives—delivered through in-person sessions and webinars—were conducted throughout the project to strengthen institutional capacities. These activities brought together representatives from the justice system, police, health, education, and social services, and covered topics such as protective hearing, service pathways, inter-institutional coordination, and the prevention of revictimization. They contributed to the adoption of more integrated and child-centered practices aligned with the best interests of the child.

2. Development of a multi-sectoral protocol

that organizes, guides, and standardizes how the State should act when a child or adolescent is a victim or witness of violence. This protocol guides a humane, coordinated, and child-centered approach, preventing revictimization and ensuring comprehensive protection.

3. Launch of the manual of procedures and guidelines

for handling cases of violence against children in 2024.

4. Establishment of a “Hearing Room for Future Memory”

, designed as a safe, welcoming and suitable space for the protective hearing of children and adolescents who are victims or witnesses of violence, in accordance with international standards, guaranteeing privacy, reducing revictimization and providing better conditions for the coordinated action of the professionals involved.

5. Specialized training for national professionals

Five representatives from São Tomé and Príncipe completed a postgraduate specialization course on the protection of children's rights and care policies, organized by the National Secretariat for the Rights of Children and Adolescents in partnership with UNDP and the University of Brasília. This initiative contributed to strengthening technical expertise and institutional capacity in the sector.

6. Participation in courses promoted by the National School for the Rights of Children and Adolescents

Technical staff from São Tomé and Príncipe participated in training courses offered by the National School for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (ENDICA, by its acronym in Portuguese) to further enhance professional capacities in child protection.

7. Review of legal and policy frameworks

A comprehensive review of laws, regulations, and policy guidelines related to the care of children who are victims or witnesses of violence was undertaken. This process supported the development of a more integrated and child-centered protection system.

8. Sharing of best practices

Reference materials on Law 13.431/2017 (Law on Protective Hearing), developed by Childhood Brazil and UNICEF Brazil. The Communication package includes:

- **A series of eight explanatory videos** about the main concepts of the law and the role of each body in the Rights Guarantee System. The videos were made in formats suitable for computers, WhatsApp, and social media, facilitating the sharing of information.
- Quick reference **guides to support the structuring of the service flow**;
- **Informative cards** for use in digital media.

- ## 9. Development of a systematization package for the implementation of Law 13.431/2017
- in the municipality of Vitória da Conquista. The initiative, developed by UNICEF in partnership with the Brazilian Cooperation Agency, brings together three main products: (i) a report with lessons learned and recommendations; (ii) a policy brief that summarizes the local experience and highlights the institutional initiatives that enabled the implementation of the law; and (iii) a practical guide, in step-by-step format, intended to support managers and technical teams in adopting the legal framework in other contexts.

As part of these efforts, UNICEF and the Brazilian Cooperation Agency launched a series of videos documenting Vitória da Conquista's experience in implementing the so-called Law on Protective Hearing. The audiovisual collection serves as a practical record of the process, highlighting the importance of intersectoral work, the coordinated engagement of different governmental institutions, the participation of actors from multiple areas, and the centrality of political will in ensuring the effectiveness of the public policy.



Sumitava Chowdhury/Pexels

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Government and societal engagement strengthens public debate and advances the national agenda

The experience of Trilateral South-South Cooperation between São Tomé and Príncipe, Brazil, and UNICEF demonstrates that active government leadership is critical to expanding public debate and elevating child protection on the national agenda.

The horizontal nature of South-South cooperation requires coordinated action among multiple stakeholders. In this context, government engagement not only enhanced the legitimacy of the initiative but also generated increased interest across institutions, media, and society at large in the protection of children and adolescents.

2. Multi-sectoral engagement supports sustainability

The involvement of stakeholders from diverse sectors contributed significantly to the sustainability of the project. The joint mobilization of actors from justice, social services, health, public security, and civil society helped build a network committed to implementing agreed actions.

This collective engagement strengthened coordination and accountability mechanisms among stakeholders, reducing reliance on individual efforts and promoting greater institutional continuity. Experience shows that the sustainability of cooperation initiatives depends on strong, shared institutional arrangements and a sense of joint ownership among all actors involved.

3. Capacity strengthening must be accompanied by long-term human resource strategies

Throughout the project, professionals from São Tomé and Príncipe participated in technical missions, specialized training, and courses delivered by Brazilian institutions, significantly enhancing their technical expertise in child protection.

However, the country continues to face structural constraints, particularly the limited number of specialized professionals in this field.

In this context, the experience highlights that capacity- strengthening efforts should be complemented by medium- and long-term strategies to strengthen the human resource base, including:

- expanding access to specialized academic training;
- developing sustainable career pathways; and
- creating incentives to retain skilled professionals in the public sector.

Sustainable institutional strengthening requires not only targeted technical training, but also the development of a robust pool of specialized professionals capable of ensuring the continuity of public policies over time.

4. Aligning Trilateral South-South Cooperation with National Plans as a Driver of Acceleration and Sustainability

When aligned with national priorities and development plans, Trilateral South-South Cooperation can serve as both a complementary mechanism and a catalyst for results. It helps reinforce ongoing efforts, strengthens country ownership, and enhances the sustainability of implemented actions.

5. Capacity building should be grounded in local context and collaborative processes

The project experience showed that capacity-building efforts are most effective when they are designed around the specific realities, challenges, and priorities of the partner country. In São Tomé and Príncipe, combining international best practices with in-depth knowledge of the local context made it possible to adapt content, methodologies, and solutions in ways that were both relevant and practical for day-to-day work.

This required a collaborative approach from the outset, involving local technical staff, public officials, and international partners. Co-creation fostered stronger ownership, better alignment with existing capacities, and the identification of solutions that were feasible within institutional and resource constraints.

Ultimately, the experience highlights that capacity building should not be approached as a one-way transfer of knowledge, but rather as a shared learning process. When rooted in local realities and developed through participatory methods, it enhances effectiveness and supports more sustainable improvements in child protection systems.

6. Legal advances and infrastructure must be accompanied by timely regulation

The adoption of the Law on Future Memory in São Tomé and Príncipe, along with the establishment of dedicated hearing spaces for children and adolescents, reflects significant and coordinated efforts by technical teams and policymakers across sectors. However, the full operationalization of these advances depends on the adoption of the necessary regulatory framework.

In this regard, it is important to ensure that regulatory processes move forward in a timely manner, so that the structures already in place can function effectively and the resources invested can be fully utilized to improve care for child victims and witnesses of violence.

CONCLUSION

The cooperation between Brazil, São Tomé and Príncipe, and UNICEF has led to tangible progress in strengthening child protection systems, with results that extend beyond policy frameworks into meaningful improvements in services for children and adolescents. Key achievements include the development of a multi-sectoral care protocol, the adoption of national guidelines, the establishment of a dedicated room in accordance to the Law on Future Memory, and strengthened capacities among institutions and professionals across the protection network. Together, these advances have contributed to more coordinated, child-centered, and humane responses, reducing the risk of revictimization and improving the effectiveness of rights protection.

Capacity-building efforts played a central role throughout the project.

Through technical and political missions, in-person trainings, and webinars, professionals from sectors such as justice, social protection, health, education, and public security were brought together to exchange experiences, align practices, and develop context-specific solutions. More than simply transferring knowledge, these initiatives fostered collaborative learning, strengthened inter-institutional coordination, and promoted a more integrated and responsive approach to children's needs.

The lessons learned during implementation underscore the importance of multi-sectoral engagement, strong government leadership, and the co-creation of solutions. They also highlight that capacity-building efforts must be complemented by sustained investments in human resources and aligned with

national policies and plans to ensure long-term impact. In addition, they demonstrate that grounding initiatives in local contexts and developing them through participatory processes are critical to their success and ownership. Taken together, these elements reaffirm the value of South-South and Trilateral Cooperation as a strategic tool for development. By fostering mutual learning, facilitating the exchange of experiences, and enabling the joint development of solutions, this partnership has contributed not only to stronger public policies but also to tangible changes in practice and improved protection of children's rights. The experience of Brazil, São Tomé and Príncipe, and UNICEF shows that when diverse actors come together around a shared goal, sustained progress in advancing comprehensive child protection is both possible and achievable.

