

BREAKING BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

BURKINA FASO AND GHANA CASE STUDY

**STARTING RIGHT: Early childhood development
and the learning through play method**



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The initiative to improve the accessibility and quality of basic education for children in West Africa began as just an idea. Children Believe's journey to make it a reality, however, required the support of our global community of sponsors, donors, partners, community members and dedicated staff. We are deeply grateful to all these key players for their compassion, commitment and investment in this valuable work, the results from which we proudly share in this case study.

We'd like to recognize the Government of Canada, in particular, for their funding support, which allowed us to expand our early childhood development (ECD) work and our learning through play (LTP) program to propel the positive gains from the initiatives in West Africa. We are very thankful for the support and opportunity.

We would also like to express our thanks to the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre¹ in Toronto, Canada for training our staff in the LTP method, which we were then able to tailor to suit the community context for greater efficacy.

In both Ghana and Burkina Faso, ChildFund Korea (CFK) remains the biggest investor in our ECD-LTP programs. Their support allowed us to construct community empowerment centres (CECs), train health personnel on ECD-LTP and integrate LTP into in-service training for teachers in Ghana and into the teacher training curriculum in Burkina Faso. UNICEF has also been a pillar of support for our work in Burkina Faso. We'd like to acknowledge both these organizations for helping us widen the reach and benefits of our work, and we extend our deepest gratitude to them.

Collaboration has been critical for the success of these efforts and we are greatly appreciative to the various government ministries, departments and agencies in joining us in pursuit of our vision to advance ECD in Ghana and Burkina Faso.

In Ghana, we are particularly indebted to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare; the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service; the Ministry of Health and the Ghana Health Service; the Department of Children's Affairs; the Department of Social Welfare; the Department of Community Development; and the Faculty of Education at the University of Development Studies.

In Burkina Faso, we are grateful to the Ministry of Education and Promotion of National Languages (MENAPLN); the Ministry of Women, National Solidarity, Family and Humanitarian Action (MFSNFAH); the Ministry of Health (MS) and the National Schools of Primary Education (ENEP).

Additionally, we'd like to recognize our long-time partners in Ghana: A.G. Care Ghana, Baptist Relief and Development Agency (BREDA), Markaz Al-Bishara (MAB) and Participatory Action for Rural Development Alternatives (PARDA), as well as our partners in Burkina Faso: Christian Relief and Development Organization (CREDO), the Evangelical Church of the International Missionary Society (EE/SIM), the Catholic Organization for Development and Solidarity (OCADES) and the Christian Organization for Relief and Development (formerly AOG). These partnerships have helped us ensure that children and parents in our program areas in West Africa thrive.

Finally, we would like to sincerely thank Dr. Chrysogonus Anab from the Department of Sustainable Development Studies at the University for Development Studies, Ghana for her valuable contributions in the preparation of this case study.

Children Believe, 2021

¹ The Hincks-Dellcrest Centre is a children's mental health treatment, research and teaching centre. They provide services to children aged zero to 18 years in Toronto, Ontario, Canada along a continuum of need including prevention and early intervention; outpatient, individual and family services; intensive residential treatment and youth justice. Their model of care is rooted in an interdisciplinary approach involving psychiatry, psychology, social work, child and youth workers, and nursing. Children are treated within the context of their family and community environment.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANC	Antenatal Care
BREDA	Baptist Relief and Development Agency
CECs	Child Enhancement Centres
CEP	Primary Studies Certificat
CoE	Centre of Excellence
CP	Child Protection
CRs	Child Rights
CWC	Child Welfare Clinics
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
ECD	Early Childhood Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IDI	In-Depth Interviews
IDP	Internally Displaced People
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
JHS	Junior High School
LTP	Learning Through Play
MENAPLN	Ministry of Education and Promotion of National Languages
MFSNFAH	Ministry of Women, National Solidarity, Family and Humanitarian Action
MS	Ministry of Health
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NR-RCC	Northern Region Regional Coordinating Council
NSIECD	National Strategy for Integrated Early Childhood Development
PARDA	Participatory Action for Rural Development Alternatives
PDSEB	Basic Education Strategic Development Program
PNC	Postnatal Care
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SHS	Senior High School
SMC	School Management Committee
TLMs	Teaching and Learning Materials
UN	United Nations
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Association
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
YSLAs	Youth Savings and Loans Associations

FOREWORD

Over the last decade, Children Believe, (formerly Christian Children’s Fund of Canada) has been committed to investing in early childhood development (ECD) in Burkina Faso and Ghana. Children Believe recognizes the importance of “starting right” because early childhood, particularly during the first two years of life, is when the most significant development of the brain occurs and this shapes a child’s future. Investing in ECD, therefore, makes sense for not only advancing an individual, but a nation, as well. Yet, in spite of the evidence, the investments in ECD currently being made in West Africa are inadequate.


In reading this case study, I am convinced you will feel compelled by the insights to agree with us on the importance of ECD and the need for greater investment by governments and other development partners. You will come to see that interagency collaboration is critical for advancing ECD and understand the meaningful contribution Children Believe has made in Burkina Faso and Ghana through our initiatives.

Children Believe employs the learning through play (LTP) methodology in our ECD program in West Africa. The goal of LTP is to promote holistic child development and the case study goes into detail about how this works and its many benefits.

We also reference studies and testimonies that reinforce the significance of ECD-LTP for health, nutrition, child rights and protection, and the positive impact of Children Believe’s ECD-LTP initiative over the years. Additionally, you’ll read about how our LTP efforts have had the added value of being an effective tool to support the integration of Internally displaced people (IDP) and hope for children to have safe spaces for learning in Burkina Faso.

Through our years of advocating for and promoting ECD and LTP, Children Believe has gained knowledge along the way and we’re eager to share it to broaden the gains. Learnings, best practices and an overview of concrete steps to move forward are provided with an intention to inspire positive change in West Africa.

I hope that after reading this case study, you will be inspired to join our journey to make an even greater difference by advocating for the adoption of the ECD-LTP approach by government and development actors in West Africa and investing more in early childhood development.



Fred Witteveen
Chief Executive Officer, Children Believe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early childhood development (ECD) is an important national priority in Ghana and Burkina Faso. Through various legislations and policies, these countries have supported the provision of comprehensive services for children aged zero to eight years. However, ensuring the quality of the ECD services provided, especially in rural areas, remains a challenge. ECD pedagogies have not been child-centred and need urgent attention and improvement.

Children Believe introduced the learning through play (LTP) method in 2005 to our program communities in Burkina Faso as a key component of our ECD programs. With the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, Goal 4 has provided a needed push for greater investment in ECD.

The goal of LTP is to promote holistic development in young children. The LTP methodology utilizes a hands-on approach to learning and is unique because



A young girl participating in LTP.

it recognizes the importance of early stimulation for children, particularly within the first 1,000 days of a child's life, a critical period for brain development. LTP seeks to provide caregivers with information and activities for the healthy growth and development of young children (birth to six years) focusing on their physical, intellectual, linguistic and social-emotional development. It also promotes parent-child attachment through active parental involvement in their children's development while teaching play activities that enhance brain development. The LTP method is possible to apply in both community-based interventions and institutional-based care services and has seen much success in aiding the development of children (UNICEF, 2018).

This case study adds to this evidence by demonstrating how Children Believe's ECD-LTP initiatives in Burkina Faso and Ghana have contributed to the advanced development of children and building stronger bonds between them and their parents/caregivers.

Specifically, results show that through LTP, school enrolments have increased, the quality of teaching and learning have improved, parents are more involved in raising their children and spaces for children in family decision-making processes have improved.

For example, the correlation between academic performance and the use of LTP is exhibited in the Group Artillerie "A" school in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. At this school, the use of the LTP approach resulted in a 100 percent pass rate in the Primary Studies Certificate (CEP), an examination for children aged 11 to 13, from 2016-2018. However, with the discontinuation of the LTP program in the 2019/2020 year, the performance dropped to 57 percent for the same age group.

Recognizing the success of Children Believe's ECD-LTP programs, as well as the barriers that continue to pose challenges in the expansion of ECD and access to quality programming in West Africa, we arrive at the following next steps:

- Advocate for greater investment in ECD from the governments of Burkina Faso and Ghana, as well as their development partners to bridge the gaps between policy and implementation.
- With the success of Children Believe's ECD-LTP program in multiple communities in Ghana and Burkina Faso, we must capitalize on these accomplishments and further the gains by scaling up in other countries in the region. To help us accomplish this, we must facilitate the establishment and strengthening of national and West African networks to support collaboration and mutual learning and growth.
- Continue working with relevant agencies and development partners to improve access to ECD and the quality of ECD activities, including forming relationships with health, nutrition, education and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) training institutions to expand LTP services.
- Considering the current insecurity in Burkina Faso and the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, examine opportunities for virtual LTP training and partnerships in technology.
- Similar to how Children Believe played a role in the adoption of the LTP method into the teacher training curriculum in Burkina Faso, we must advocate for the same in Ghana.
- In communities where LTP has been applied, positive shifts related to gender equity have been made. More men are sharing caregiving responsibilities with their wives. This behaviour is foreign in West Africa and, thus, needs further exploration and promotion.

INTRODUCTION



Children in a program-supported community in Burkina Faso (photo taken prior to COVID-19).

In line with Children Believe’s mission to create a future of hope for children, families and communities through the development of skills and resources, our West African program prioritizes early childhood development (ECD) in two of its implementing countries, namely Burkina Faso and Ghana. It is a proven fact that early stimulation, good nutrition and health, and positive parenting skills contribute to the advanced development of children and stronger bonds between children and their parents/caregivers.

ECD is part of the transformative agenda developed by the United Nations General Assembly, making it an international priority for the 21st century. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 set global targets in child education (SDG 4.2), health (SDG 3.2),² nutrition (SDG 2.2) and protection (SDG 16.2). The goals identify key outcomes to help realize the developmental potential of young children. The focus on ECD is particularly in line with Goal 4, Target 4.2, which is “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development and care so that they are ready for primary education.”

² Target 3.2, which states “By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortalities to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births.”

Children Believe's focus on ECD also aligns with the position and approaches highlighted by the World Bank in their 2018 publication, "Learning to Realize Education's Promise". The global institution opined that, to set children on high-development trajectories through early childhood nutrition, stimulation and care, three approaches stand out from successful experiences:

1. Target mothers and their babies with health and nutrition interventions during the first 1,000 days of the child's life to reduce malnutrition and foster physiological development.
2. Increase the frequency and quality of stimulation and opportunities for learning at home (starting from birth) to improve language and motor development, and cultivate early cognitive and social-emotional skills.
3. Promote daycare centres for very young children, preschool programs for children ages three to six years and caregiver programs that enhance the nurturing and protection of children to improve cognitive and social-emotional skills in the short run, as well as education outcomes and labour market outcomes later in life.

In the specific cases of Burkina Faso and Ghana, ECD has yet to receive the needed investments from the state. The most recent statistics from the World Bank reveal that the percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP) spent on education for 2018 was four percent in Ghana and just over five percent in Burkina Faso. Further, from this miniscule Basic School Education Budget, only six percent of the total was allocated to ECD in Ghana and less than two percent in Burkina Faso. The preschool gross enrolment rate for Burkina Faso was estimated at a little over five percent for the 2018/2019 year (MENAPLN, repertory of preschool 2018/2019), clearly illustrating the need for more investment in ECD.

In addition to this, although both Burkina Faso and Ghana have well carved out laws and policies in support of ECD, their implementation is weak.

In Ghana, the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, Article 29, makes specific demands to improve access to education, nutrition

and health services for children. The Children's Act, 1998, Act 560, criminalizes all forms of abuse against children, and the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy (2004) calls for interagency collaboration to deliver the best of services to children in the country.

In Burkina Faso, there is the National Strategy for Integrated Early Childhood Development (NSIECD), which aims to promote children's rights, particularly in the areas of health, nutrition, education, water, sanitation, hygiene and protection. The Basic Education Strategic Development Program (PDSEB, 2012–2021) aims to increase the preschool rate from three percent in 2010 to 11.5 percent in 2015 and at least 25 percent in 2021. These policy initiatives show the interest and policy-level commitments to promote ECD in both countries.

However, there are two existing gaps that compromise their implementation and, thus, efficacy. These are: 1) weak interagency collaboration to deliver comprehensive services to children in a holistic manner; and 2) limited financial investment to turn the policy commitments into practice. To address these gaps in implementation, a concerted and focused effort is required.

In response, Children Believe concentrated on promoting early childhood care and development (ECCD) in Burkina Faso and Ghana through the introduction of the learning through play (LTP) method.

The learning through play (LTP) methodology enables children to learn and make meaning of the world around them. It promotes physical and cognitive growth, relationship building, communication and social skills, emotional maturation and self-confidence in children.

Children Believe's LTP method was first introduced in Burkina Faso in 2005 and in Ghana in 2010. Currently,

Children Believe supports 57 schools in Burkina Faso and 53 in Ghana that use LTP.

The total annual number of children aged zero to six benefiting from LTP activities in Burkina Faso is 33,012 and 16,687 in Ghana.

In Burkina Faso, Children Believe is implementing LTP in seven out of the 13 regions, and in three out of the 16 regions in Ghana. This demonstrates there is a great opportunity to scale up ECD-LTP programs in both countries.

Children Believe's LTP journey in West Africa

The introduction of LTP in Burkina Faso has brought positive change for the children, families and communities in Children Believe's project areas. The benefits are summarized in Diagram 1.

These positive outcomes have brought to light the benefit of and need for LTP, and the value Children Believe brings to program communities and nationally.

In Ghana, Children Believe has been invited to serve on the technical group for the development of a new ECCD policy for the country. In Burkina Faso, we have been training senior staff members from the Ministry of Children on the LTP method.

With over 15 years of experience in implementing ECD activities in West Africa, Children Believe is now viewed as a leader in ECD. Our successes and the visibility of our work are a direct result of concrete, results-oriented actions, such as:

- investing in an infrastructure for ECD;
- providing play facilities in schools;
- adapting the LTP method to the local context;
- training teachers and caregivers;
- collaborating with health services to provide nutrition education;
- encouraging the uptake of maternal and child health services; and
- advocating for the rights of children.

DIAGRAM 1: THE LEARNING THROUGH PLAY JOURNEY IN CHILDREN BELIEVE'S PROJECT AREAS

Situation in communities without LTP

- Care of children is the responsibility of mothers
- Children 0-3 physically strapped to mothers while they work
- Stimulation of learning viewed as the role of ECD educators
- Teaching and learning materials lacking and not age appropriate
- Lack of broad, cohesive education about ECD for community committees and associations
- Service sectors work in isolation, LTP not mainstreamed

Situation in communities with LTP

- Fathers more involved in nurturing their children
- Children 0-3 start development activities
- Early stimulation viewed as function of both parents and educators
- Age appropriate teaching and learning materials available, including LTP calendars
- Members of local committees and associations trained in the ECD-LTP method
- LTP method mainstreamed into health, education, WASH, child protection and rights programs

THE ECD-LTP METHODOLOGY IN DETAIL

In West Africa, Children Believe uses a holistic and integrated approach to ECD. Our activities, based on the LTP methodology, target parents and caregivers, teachers, children, youth, community leaders and officials from the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Protection. Thus, it focuses on the entire eco-system - not just the individual child - to achieve a greater impact and real, transformative change.

The LTP tools were developed with accessibility and sustainability in mind and so, are designed for parents and caregivers with low literacy and are low-cost.

The methodology is based on "doing", and so, it is practical. This method is unique because it focuses on the early stimulation of children, particularly within the first 1,000 days of the child's life, a critical period for brain development. LTP seeks to provide parents and caregivers with information on the healthy growth and development of young children (zero to six years), focusing on their physical, intellectual, linguistic and social-emotional development. It promotes attachment through active parental involvement in their children's growth while teaching play activities that enhance development. Children Believe's LTP model in Burkina Faso and Ghana combines both community-based interventions with institutional-based care services to ensure the holistic development of children. This is illustrated in greater detail in Diagram 2.

The Learning Through Play (LTP) tools developed by the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) in Toronto, Canada can be used by parents and early childhood educators or professionals anywhere. It provides information about how to support healthy child development for children aged zero to six. The material is culturally inclusive, mostly picture-based, and adaptable for different contexts.

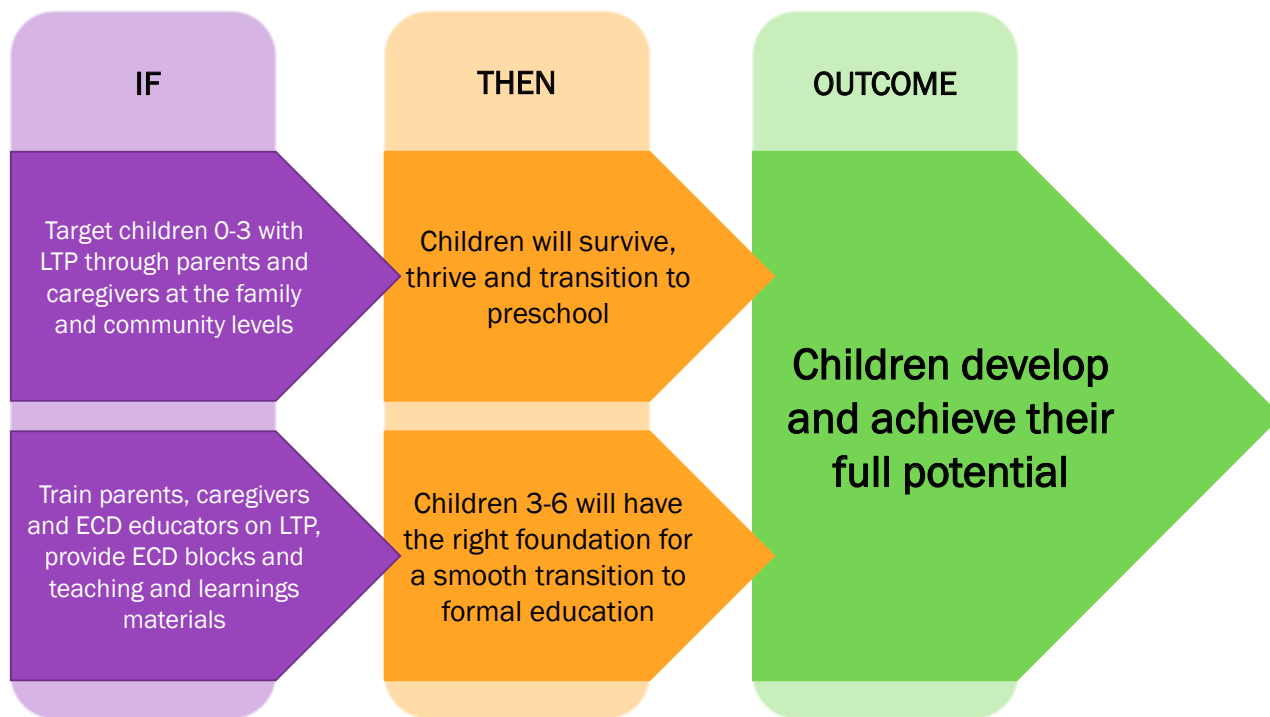
DIAGRAM 2: CHILDREN BELIEVE'S LEARNING THROUGH PLAY ACTIVITIES IN WEST AFRICA



The logic behind Children Believe’s West African model is that when children zero to three years are provided with good nutrition and stimulated through LTP activities, they are better positioned to make a smooth transition to formal school at ages four to eight in Ghana and three to eight in Burkina Faso.

Through active participation in LTP activities, the aspirations of parents to enroll their children in schools will also increase. The end result will be children developmentally on track to thrive, as illustrated in Diagram 3.

DIAGRAM 3: CHILDREN BELIEVE’S LEARNING THROUGH PLAY LOGIC MODEL



Another unique and crucial feature of Children Believe’s ECD-LTP model is that it is participatory and community-driven. In rolling out LTP, both the facilitator and participants mutually agree on dates, the venue and duration, which provide flexibility that is especially helpful for women.

Flexibility is essential to ensure the program is accessible and encourages participation from community members, ultimately broadening the impact and benefits of LTP.

This was well articulated by a community member who participated in an in-depth interview (IDI):

“Before the start of the project, the OCED (Christian Organization for Relief and Development) field workers came to this village to sensitize us on the learning through play methodology and its benefits. We found it empowering and signed on. We were happy to go through the LTP training because it will help in the holistic development of our children. We also noted the flexibility of the program. We were permitted to fix our own time and date for the LTP awareness sessions. We chose to allow our women to go to their farms and then come back to participate in the animation sessions in the evenings and this was adopted.”

– IDI participant, Linonghin, Nagréongo commune, Oubritenga province

THE IMPACT OF LTP ON EDUCATION, HEALTH, NUTRITION AND CHILD RIGHTS AND PROTECTION

Learning through play has made a positive impact on children, families, communities and the Ministries in West Africa in various ways. We discuss each of them in this section.

Improving the academic performance of children

In Burkina Faso, interviews with head staff from Children Believe's program schools show that the children who participated in the LTP program performed better in school than those who did not. For some, in addition to advanced development, the LTP approach allowed them to learn in groups and further nurture each other's success.



A local teacher engaging young children in the LTP method at an ECD centre in Ghana (photo taken prior to COVID-19).

Former students from the Groupe Artillerie "A" school in Ouagadougou who were involved in LTP, showed a similar positive outcome. During the time LTP was

applied in their school, the school saw better results on the Primary Studies Certificate (CEP) exam.

In applying LTP, the school made a conscious effort to focus on five key areas when preparing their lessons/ class activities, namely (1) self-esteem, (2) communication, (3) relationships, (4) comprehension and (5) physical development and play. As a result, for three successive years (2017 to 2019), the school saw 100 percent pass in their CEP results. But with the discontinuation of LTP activities after the 2018-2019 academic year, due to multiple transfers of teachers who had been trained in the LTP method, the academic performance dropped. From the 100 percent CEP pass attained in the 2018-2019 academic year, the school saw a pass of only 57 percent in the 2019-2020 academic year.

The above examples demonstrate the need to advocate for ECD-LTP and influence policies for the systematic integration of the LTP program into preschool and primary teacher training programs across the country.

New teachers must be included in this training to ensure the continued implementation of LTP and exposure to its benefits.

Breaking traditional barriers in child nutrition

The adoption of good nutrition practices is fundamental to a child's survival, growth and development. However, 18 percent of children under five years of age in Ghana and just over 27 percent in Burkina Faso are stunted. Further, for every 1,000 live births, 56 children do not make it to their fifth birthday in Ghana and the number jumps to 78.9 in Burkina Faso (UNICEF, 2018).

Traditional beliefs related to nutrition is among the reasons for the high rate of stunting among children under age five in West Africa.

For example, children in West Africa have been prevented from eating eggs, fish, liver and other nutritiously rich foods due to the belief that consumption of these items will make them grow to become ‘thieves’.

This negative perception has continued to persist and denied many children the right to a diet that includes protein, vitamins, carbohydrates, fats and oils, all of which are needed for their healthy development. Fortunately, this is changing through the use of LTP calendars and training materials which are raising awareness about harmful traditional practices and providing much needed education about nutrition.



Children provided with nutritious food at an ECD centre in a program-supported community in Burkina Faso (photo taken prior to COVID-19). Education on nutrition is also provided to parents and community members to sustain healthy eating and development.

A participant from a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) recounts her experience:

“Thanks to LTP, we now understood that traditional prohibition of children from eating eggs, fish or other nutritious foods is disadvantageous to their growth and have since refused to comply with these traditional beliefs. We have also learned about what to eat during pregnancy and why we should visit the clinic regularly. I am now much more confident as a mother than before due to the LTP training.”

– FGD with women, Koulwéogo, Méguet Municipality

Evolving gender roles

Many West African societies remain patriarchal, with men consigning child care and nurturing to women. Husbands scarcely support their wives in performing household chores, including feeding their children and attending to their needs.

However, this has changed in Children Believe’s program-supported communities. An important component of the LTP method is the provision of training for not only mothers, but fathers and community leaders as well.



A father and his child looking at LTP material at one of Children Believe’s ECD centres in Burkina Faso.

There are different types of training groups, including mixed group trainings, and Children Believe has also introduced dedicated fathers' LTP groups in Burkina Faso to encourage peer support and learning.

These efforts have left an impression on fathers and positively influenced their involvement in parenting, the care and development of their children.

This is aptly captured in a comment from a female FGD participant in a program-supported community:

"At first, I struggled to take care of my children alone. I usually wake up very early in the morning to go and fetch water, firewood, cook for the household, wash and bathe the children. I rarely had a good night's sleep since I had to wake up by 5 am each day. I could not visit friends because there was no time. Before the LTP program my husband hardly took care of our children, but now he is very supportive. He plays with them while I cook and he helps bathe them too. This has helped a lot."

– FGD participant, Achanyeri, Boulsa North District

Strengthening positive parenting skills

Due to a lack of knowledge, role models and opportunities to gain skills in positive parenting, parents in West Africa often use harsh physical punishment to discipline their children.

Children Believe's ECD-LTP program has helped mitigate this issue as the program reinforces child protection and rights through teaching positive parenting skills and, as a result, changing behaviours. LTP promotes the use of positive parenting skills that do not cause physical harm to children by emphasizing the importance of communication.

The effect of these teachings are evident in the following example where a partner organization, the Baptist Relief and Development Agency (BREDA), implements a LTP community program in the Kumbungu district of Ghana. In this district, while as many as 65 percent of mothers from communities not involved in LTP reported having slapped their child the week before the interview, this behaviour was reported by none of the mothers in the LTP-program communities.

This positive change in parenting is further verified by the testimony below from a mother who participated in a FGD in the Kumbungu district:

"My youngest son is fond of fetching water and then wasting it on the ground. This upsets my husband and I every day. Sometimes we have no option but to spank, shout or look at him sternly. But from the education we got from Children Believe's partner organization, we have stopped the physical abuse. I talk to him and explain why he should stop what he is doing, and he actually conforms."

– Cheyohi, FGD participant (BREDA), Kumbungu District

The same outcome was also achieved in Burkina Faso, as indicated by the testimony of a mother in Koulwéogo, Méguet Municipality:

"Thanks to LTP, we have learned to play with our children. For example, playing with them in the mud, to make toys with clay and more. We have acquired knowledge that allows us to engage better with children. We did not know that a child could chat with his parents or with adults. It was not known that the child had the right to speak in front of his parents. It was also believed that one has to hit the child in order to educate him. But we now understand that the exchanges we have with our children help awaken them and strengthen the affection between them and us."

– Zam, FGD participant, Koulwéogo, Méguet Municipality

Improving health-seeking behaviour

LTP has also positively influenced the health-seeking behaviour of mothers. Chart 1 shows that in all the communities where Children Believe’s ECD-LTP initiative is implemented, 100 percent of the mothers interviewed visited clinics at least 4 times for antenatal care (ANC) services before giving birth.

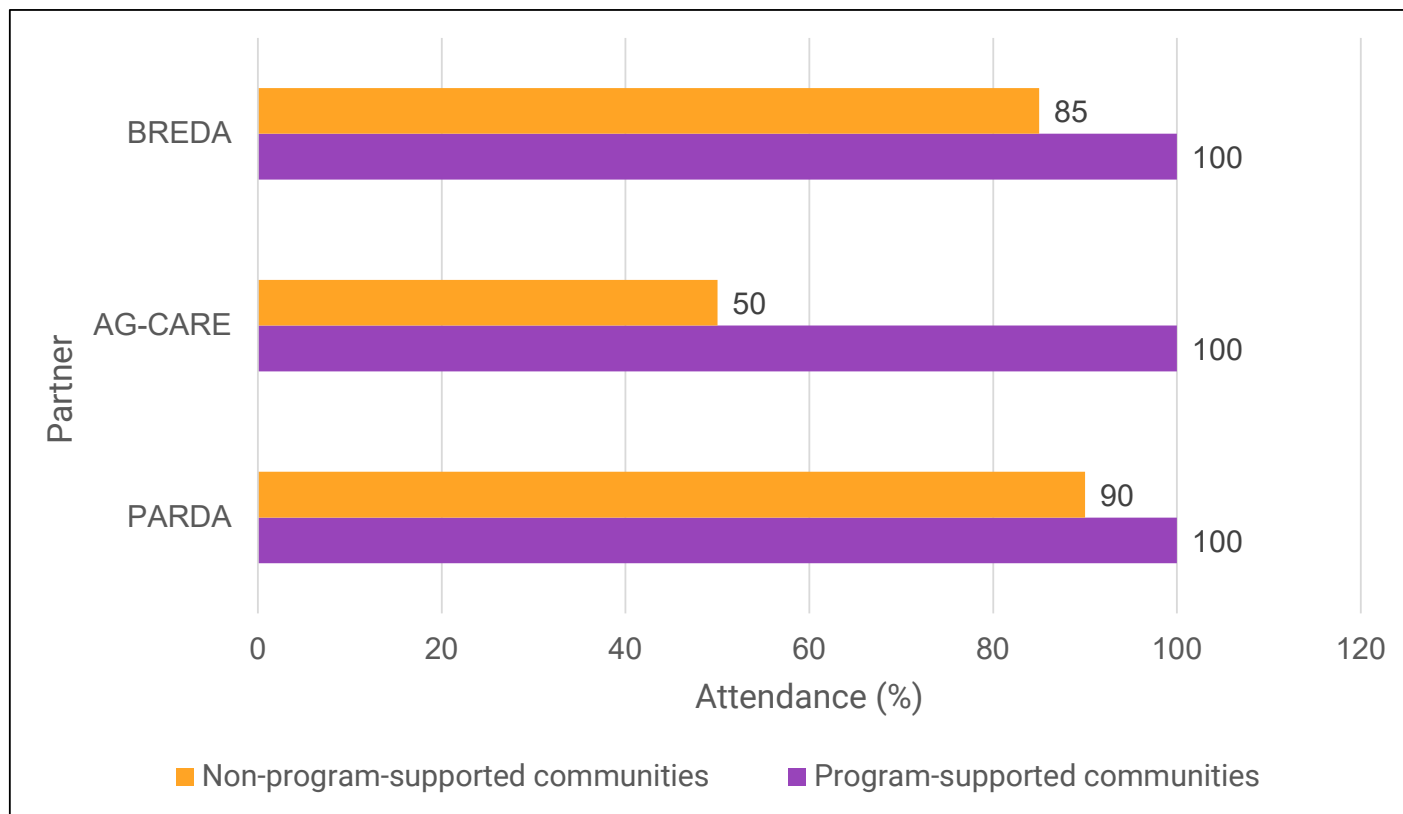
This was not the case for the communities without the LTP program. The results for these communities were 85 percent, 50 percent and 90 percent in BREDA, AG-CARE and PARDA program districts, respectively. Positive reinforcement from peers contributed to sustaining this behaviour in Children Believe’s program areas.

The following statement from one mother in Burkina Faso captured this positive shift in health-seeking behaviour:

“Since taking the advice of the LTP program, I no longer need to wait for my husband, mother-in-law or father-in-law for advice to send my children to the clinic when they are sick. I am free from this constraint, and I am able to improve the health of my children.”

– FGD participant, Koulwéogo, Ganzourgou Province

CHART 1: PERCENT OF MOTHERS IN GHANA WHO MADE 4+ ANTENATAL CARE VISITS TO A HEALTH FACILITY BEFORE DELIVERY



Increasing school enrolment

It has been confirmed that more women have sent their children to ECD centres in the communities where Children Believe implements the LTP method than in communities without the program (Chart 2).³

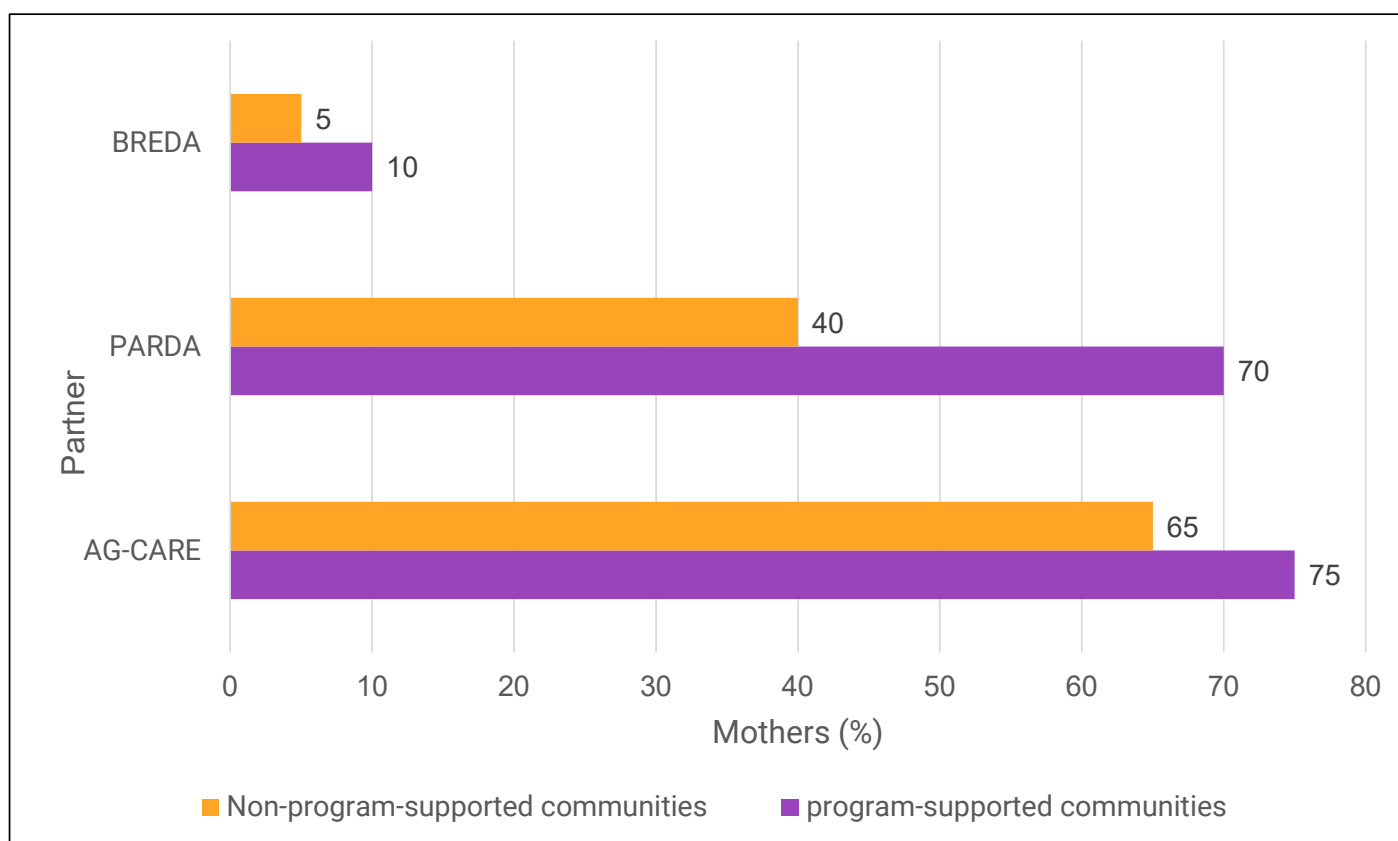
This indicates that exposure to the LTP program has increased the desire of mothers to send their children to school, raising the number of children benefiting from ECD and the LTP method.

One of the mothers from a program-supported community in Ghana expressed:

“Initially, I was reluctant to send my youngest daughter to the ECD centre because she was only two and a half years old. I said to myself, what can a young girl like that learn? However, when the community health volunteer showed us the LTP calendars and what we should be doing with children aged zero to three years, I was convinced and made her to go to the community daycare. Now, in our community, almost all the children aged zero to three are in the community daycare centre.”

– FGD participant, Dakpam, Nanumba North District

CHART 2: PERCENT OF MOTHERS IN GHANA WITH CHILDREN AGED 0-3 IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRES



³ The variance in the overall enrolment between BREDA and PARDA or AG-CARE is also influenced by the locations where women in each community typically work, which would effect their decision to send their children to ECD centres. In the BREDA area, women traditionally engage in economic activities that requires them to work from home, while women in the PARDA and AG-CARE areas are mobile, thus increasing their likelihood to send children to ECD centres

Opening spaces for children and youth

Another important area where the implementation of LTP has made positive gains is in the area of child and youth empowerment.

By advocating for child rights and their protection, awareness has been raised and behaviour changed to ameliorate the position and voices of children and youth within their families and communities in West Africa.

The follow statement was shared by an FGD participant in Ghana:

“Concerning child rights, there has been a lot of improvement. This is due to the education and trainings given to community members and children's groups. Parents now know their roles and responsibilities, and children know their rights and responsibilities. There is some level of improved participation in decision-making now at the family level. Typically, parents leave the children out because they don't have a say, but with the education that has been given, there is improvement. Now a child can have a say in the family and their views are respected and implemented. Also, our girls now know what to do and where to go if they face a situation of abuse. This has reduced abusive behaviours towards girls in our community. So the observance of child rights and protection has really improved in our community.”

– FGD participant, Dakpam, Nanumba North District

An example of the critical impact on child and youth empowerment made by Children Believe's LTP program is in the case of Ruki (her name has been changed to protect her privacy) from the Sukaya community.

In the Sukaya community of the Gushiegu District in the Northern region of Ghana, 'sister exchange' is a common marriage agreement among one of the ethnic groups. In this marriage arrangement, in order for a man to get married, he must commit his sister to marry the brother of the bride.

This was the situation Ruki had to fight against. Her story is shared below.

BOX 1: SUCCESS STORY – STANDING UP AGAINST FORCED MARRIAGE IN THE SUKAYA COMMUNITY

Ruki is a 15-year-old girl. Due to the 'sister exchange' system of marriage in her community, her brother betrothed Ruki to his wife's brother without her consent.

Ruki had received education on child rights in her community. She therefore reported her brother's behaviour to the community leaders and demanded their intervention. The community leaders followed through and helped block her marriage, allowing Ruki to remain in the community and in school. She successfully completed Junior High School (JHS) and decided to continue her education with vocational skills training.

Ruki is currently enrolled in a dressmaking apprenticeship with the expectation of becoming a professional seamstress. If not for the awareness created in the community about child rights, she would not have been able to complete her education, advance herself and pursue her dreams.

Bringing visibility to Children Believe, the importance of ECD-LTP and collaboration for change

The importance of ECD in West Africa has improved over the last 10 years. Children Believe played a part in this shift by providing technical support in both Burkina Faso and Ghana.

Today, Children Believe's ECD-LTP model in West Africa is recognized as a Centre of Excellence (CoE) in early childhood development.



A mother with her young child in a program-supported community in Burkina Faso.

In Burkina Faso, Children Believe’s partners broadly promote LTP on the radio and align it with the African Day of the Child to emphasize its merit. Further, our investment in training primary-level teachers as part of our ECD-LTP work has been recognized by the country’s national government. In order to contribute to the sustainability of ECD promotion, Children Believe developed a network of ECD stakeholders in collaboration with the Directorate of Health and Family.

The network includes state agencies, the World Bank, UNICEF and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the area, as well as the ministries in charge of Social Welfare, Education and Health. Children Believe has also worked with the Ministry of Women and other state agencies through our LTP trainings. These initiatives have established Children Believe as a champion of ECD in Burkina Faso.

In Ghana, Children Believe’s country team has been invited to contribute to a new national ECD policy that is under development. As part of efforts to gather the evidence needed to strengthen the national ECD program and influence ECD policies and programs, our team conducted a situational assessment of ECD in five regions in Northern Ghana (January to March 2021). Our team also organized a successful forum on March 26, 2021 to share the findings from the assessment with key ECD stakeholders from

five regions in the country.

Among the stakeholders were regional and district heads of the Ghana Education Service, Ghana Health Service, Department of Children, Department of Social Welfare, Department of Gender, Colleges of Education and the Faculty of Education at the University for Development Studies. Also present were sister NGOs working in the area of ECD in Ghana.

Strong solidarity for our ECD-LTP work was shown at the forum through messages we received from the National Director of the Department of Children and the Director of the Northern Regional Coordinating Council. The two high ranking officials expressed their appreciation for Children Believe for championing ECD and LTP in Ghana. They noted that the LTP model was unique and should be scaled up nation-wide. Similarly, the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University for Development Studies stated:

“This forum has revealed the great work Children Believe is doing in the area of ECD using LTP. We look forward to collaborating with Children Believe to introduce this methodology into our curriculum at the University.”

– Dr. Ibrahim Mohammed Gunu, Dean of Education, University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

The positive sentiment and recognition is reinforced by a staff member on Children Believe’s Burkina Faso team who notes:

“The Centre of Excellence is an effective management and knowledge creation space to advance ECD. It’s a virtual centre where institutions working in the early childhood field can learn and share activities and information about early childhood development. One of the greatest advances is the integration of the LTP method, generated by the Centre of Excellence, in the training curriculum for primary school teachers.”

– Josephine, Program Officer ECD, Children Believe Burkina Faso

LTP SUPPORTS THE INTEGRATION OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE IN BURKINA FASO

The high level of insecurity experienced in Burkina Faso has resulted in the displacement of 1,121,960 people.⁴ These internally displaced people (IDP) require support in their host communities in order to survive.

About 60 percent of the displaced population are children and youth, and their struggle is two-fold. First, they experience trauma associated with the forced relocation from their own communities. Second, their chance to gain an education that will empower them to break the cycle of underdevelopment has been taken from them with the closure of schools in areas vulnerable to violent extremism.

To address these challenges, the government and NGOs have built camps in some communities to provide housing for IDPs and also offer psychosocial and health services. Dedicated child-friendly spaces have been built as well, and today, Children Believe operates 55 of these spaces in the Centre-North and East regions with support from UNICEF.

Within these child-friendly spaces, Children Believe has set-up provisional learning centres to make it possible for displaced and vulnerable children to receive an education. From January to December 2020, we supported the education of 2,300 children aged three to 17.

In these centres, Children Believe provides ECD and employs the LTP method.

Part of this work involves screening children for malnutrition and diseases, and making referrals for treatments at appropriate health facilities. It also involves providing psychosocial services to parents, which is made possible through collaboration with municipal counsellors, the village development committees and social welfare officers. IDPs are also members of the community LTP groups and, therefore, have a platform for addressing their challenges in the context of their displacement.

It was observed that Children Believe's program helped reduce the stress level of parents who had to flee their communities and suffered the loss of properties and relationships in the process. The program also prevented the interruption or loss of education for displaced children, offering them hope for a better future.

What has come to light is that Children Believe's LTP emergency response acted as an effective community integration tool.

It eased the adjustment of displaced parents and children into host communities by providing the needed psychosocial and health support, opportunities to build new relationships and the chance for children to learn even under threats of violent extremism. This experience has proved that this model is worth replicating in other insecure geographies where Children Believe and other NGOs work.

⁴ Relief Web. Burkina Faso : Aperçu de la situation humanitaire (Au 10 mars 2021). <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-aper-u-de-la-situation-humanitaire-au-10-mars-2021>

LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

Lessons learned

It has been 16 years since Children Believe introduced the LTP method in West Africa. During this time, Children Believe and our partners have learned several valuable lessons that can strengthen the implementation of LTP and its efficacy as a cross-cutting tool for child development and community empowerment. These lessons are shared below:

- As a result of the community-led approach employed by Children Believe, our LTP method has become part of the everyday activities of parents, caregivers, teachers and community members. The campaign for ECD services in communities started with massive community mobilization; campaigns, including *durbars* (gathering of Chiefs, Elders and people of a community); and community dialogues on the need for children, especially girls, to begin their education at an early age. Children Believe then worked with community members as trained volunteers at our ECD-LTP centres. In fiscal year 2021, these centres directly benefited 3,029 children under five years of age in Burkina Faso and 9,454 children in Ghana. This was complemented by education for caregivers, parents, teachers and community leaders on child rights, child protection and LTP.

A key contributor to our success in establishing ECD has been the importance of empowering community members. By providing knowledge, tools and engaging members in the advancement of their communities, they were encouraged to adopt ECD-LTP and maintain its implementation.

- Children Believe and our partners in West Africa have had considerable success in scaling up our ECD-LTP activities in both Burkina Faso and Ghana. Localizing the LTP program played an important part, as it removed barriers to the facilitation of the program

activities. This was accomplished through research and by developing innovative solutions, such as incorporating local resources to make toys, drums, balls and other materials for children to play with.



A local teacher supporting parents and their children in one of Children Believe's ECD-LTP centres.

Additionally, we found that the concepts of child rights and protection naturally mainstreamed into structures, such as Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), Youth Savings and Loans Associations (YSLAs), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs), demonstrating a readiness to align and uphold these concepts.

The use of community radio and phone-ins have broadened the listenership of LTP education programs and also raised awareness about child development and rights, and helped with their adoption.

- Children Believe's ECD strategy involves working alongside government ministries, departments and agencies. These partnerships have been critical for the implementation, integration and expansion of the ECD-LTP method. In Ghana, Children Believe has collaborated with the Department of Children, Department of Social Welfare, the Ghana Education Service and the Ghana Health Service. In Burkina Faso, Children Believe and our partners work closely with two sectoral ministries in charge of Education and Child Protection (MENAPLN and MFSNF), and the Ministry of Health (MS) in the design and implementation of several ECD projects.
- Last, we learned that the implementation of Children Believe's ECD-LTP method in West Africa was an effective way to support gender equity. West Africa is predominantly a patriarchal society where the father is seen as the head of the family. In this role, he does not freely engage with his young children. Caring for children is traditionally part of the woman's role. However, these traditional norms are slowly loosening their grip in our program communities. Children Believe's efforts are helping to accelerate and sustain behavioural change in men by targeting those in the community who hold power, such as men, traditional rulers and religious leaders, in our LTP program.

Children Believe has facilitated trainings in LTP for the senior staff members of these ministries, departments and agencies, resulting in their recognition and acceptance of the methodology. This directly led to the mainstreaming of LTP in the national teacher training curriculum in Burkina Faso, with a strong possibility of Ghana following suit.

- A key learning from implementing LTP in two countries is that it can be an effective and efficient cross-cutting theme which can be embedded in local, regional and national planning systems. At the community level, Children Believe and our partners have included LTP activities in VSLAs, YSLAs, PTAs, SMCs and child protection clubs in West Africa. It can therefore be included in the other sector-specific projects effortlessly. In Burkina Faso, the LTP+ (LTP Plus) program has successfully mainstreamed LTP into maternal and child health interventions, which has resulted in positive gains.

LTP+ is the integration of the learning through play method in the initiatives of relevant sectors, including education, health, nutrition, WASH, child protection and household economic development, to support the holistic development of children.



A father and son participating in an LTP activity in a program-supported community.

For example, in Burkina Faso, fathers' LTP groups have been created. These groups engage in peer learning and exchange, which has improved men's parenting skills and their ability to bond with their children, while also questioning the age-old belief that caring for children is a woman's responsibility. This is a significant step towards fostering positive change in West African societies in the long term.

Best practices

The roll-out of the ECD-LTP method in West Africa over the years has been impactful due to the application of several best practices. These are highlighted below.

- **Comprehensive services.** As described earlier, LTP is a holistic approach to ECD. In Burkina Faso, Children Believe has elevated this by adapting LTP to LTP+. In addition to the focus on education, the LTP+ program goes further by incorporating and enhancing activities related to maternal and child health, nutrition and child protection. This is a meaningful approach that addresses multiple local issues simultaneously.



Mothers engaging in play with their children at a program-supported ECD centre in Burkina Faso.

- **Economic and health motivations.** Being able to anchor LTP to economic empowerment and good nutritional health helped motivate parents to participate in LTP activities in the interest of their children and families.
- **Collaboration for social change.** To effectively apply the LTP method, which involves stimulating the cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development of children, interagency collaboration is required. Children Believe has been working with a variety of stakeholders who can deliver the breadth of services needed to fulfill the holistic development of children.

These include the state, NGOs and the communities themselves.

Learning through play is worth replicating in other countries. Apart from benefits to children, it creates opportunities for interagency collaboration, a nation-wide roll-out of the ECD-LTP methodology and its sustainability, and offers a coordinated way to form and implement policies.

- **Building the capacity of communities.** To implement the LTP program, Children Believe worked closely with local community members. Community volunteers were trained and supported to become caregivers and teachers in their communities. Additionally, other critical community actors, including parents, health workers, social workers, child rights advocates, traditional leaders, women's group leaders as well as youth and children, were engaged to build skills related to ECD and LTP.

Children Believe's capacity-building strategy has been vital for the continuation and sustainability of ECD and the LTP method. Through training and the development of human resources, technical knowledge is retained at the community level even after a community graduates from Children Believe's program.

- **State engagement.** Being strategic and engaging key staff from relevant ministries in LTP trainings has been an effective way to get the LTP method adopted nationally.
- **Use of public communication channels to educate and amplify the message.** Employing community radio and other virtual means were effective ways to raise awareness about ECD-LTP and its benefits. This strategy also helped encourage the adoption of LTP, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHAT'S NEXT: FUTURE STEPS

We believe this study has made a strong case for a greater investment in ECD and scaling up the LTP program in Ghana, Burkina Faso and, broadly, the West African region.



Child participants from a community where Children Believe implements its ECD-LTP program (photo taken prior to COVID-19).

Having a strong foundation in ECD fosters the capacity of individuals to accelerate a country's social and economic development. However, in West Africa, investment in ECD remains limited.

Less than seven percent and two percent of the basic education budget in Ghana and Burkina Faso, respectively, is committed to ECD. Further, interagency coordination and the implementation of laws and policies in support of ECD remain weak. Many state and non-state agencies have been working in isolation. These shortcomings create barriers and make it unlikely that either Ghana or Burkina Faso will be able to attain SDG 4, Target 4.2, which is "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education."

However, this direction can be changed. For this to happen, it is essential to have collaboration among the state, the private sector, Children Believe and other INGOs. This will support a concentrated effort which is needed to establish early, holistic development for children in both countries and in West Africa. The following are concrete steps to help us achieve this:

- Advocate for greater state investment in ECD.
- Partner with relevant UN agencies and other development partners in West Africa to improve access to ECD and the quality of ECD activities. This is a strong policy agenda for Children Believe.
- Establish relationships with health, nutrition, education and WASH training institutions to expand LTP services. These relationships will help build further evidence to link the theory and practice of ECD-LTP in the West African context.
- Champion the strengthening of national ECD networks and the formation of a West African ECD-LTP network. This will help ensure national and sub-regional policies align. Networks will also offer opportunities for cross learning, exploring collaborations and scaling up.
- In Ghana, advocate for the adoption of the LTP method in the training curriculum for teachers. This effort was made in Burkina Faso and successfully achieved.
- In light of the insecurity in Burkina Faso and the COVID-19 pandemic, explore opportunities for delivering LTP trainings virtually and possible technology partners in West Africa. This will support the sustainability of ECD and LTP programs, as well as future initiatives to scale up.
- Explore opportunities for intra- and inter-LTP learning.
- With the positive impact of LTP on evolving gender roles and supporting gender equity, explore these outcomes further while continuing to promote and enhance the approach.

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Children Believe works globally to empower children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in — and be heard. For more than 60 years, we've brought together brave young dreamers, caring supporters and partners, and unabashed idealists. Together, we're driven by a common belief: creating access to education — inside and outside of classrooms — is the most powerful tool children can use to change their world.

A member of ChildFund Alliance, Children Believe is part of a global network of 12 child-focused development organizations working to create opportunities for children and youth, their families and communities. ChildFund helps nearly 23-million children and their families in more than 70 countries overcome poverty and underlying conditions that prevent children from achieving their full potential. We work to end violence against children; provide expertise in emergencies and disasters to ease the harmful impact on children and their communities; and engage children and youth to create lasting change and elevate their voices in decisions that affect their lives.

CHILDREN BELIEVE CANADA

1200 Denison St.
Markham, ON
L3R 8G6

childrenbelieve.ca
askus@childrenbelieve.ca
1.800.263.5437

CHILDREN BELIEVE BURKINA FASO

Bureau Pays sis à Ouaga 2000
17.66 Avenue Ousmane Sembène
01 BP 5159 Ouagadougou 01, Burkina Faso

childrenbelieveburkinafaso.org
burkinafasoinfo@childrenbelieve.ca
+226 25.37.55.58

CHILDREN BELIEVE GHANA

Chogu Block VI, Behind IPA/Gariba Lodge
Naa Luro Estate, P.O. Box 1151
Tamale N/R, Ghana

childrenbelieveghana.org
ghanainfo@childrenbelieve.ca
+233 (0)3720.22004

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