

MIDTERM ASSESSMENT OF THE COM.DIREITOS PROGRAM

MARCH 2025



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Evaluation overview

Between November 2023 and June 2024, a midterm evaluation was conducted to assess the progress of *Com.Direitos*, a program that aims to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (CSEC) in the Recife Metropolitan Area (RMA) in Brazil's Pernambuco State. The program receives support from the U.S. Department of State's Program to End Modern Slavery (PEMS), the UBS Optimus Foundation and the Freedom Fund.

This evaluation aimed to measure progress towards achieving the program's goals and outputs, as well as to assess the quality of its implementation. Findings from this study informed the program's strategic planning process in July 2024, which refocused its activities based on identified strengths and areas for improvement to better support the achievement of program objectives.

Program overview

Launched in January 2021, *Com.Direitos* comprises nine partner organisations in the RMA: Childhood Brasil, Centro das Mulheres do Cabo, Casa Menina Mulher, Coletivo Mulher Vida, Fundação Roberto Marinho, Grupo Adolescer, Grupo Ruas e Praças, Instituto Aliança and Universidade Católica de Pernambuco. The program is structured around five strategic objectives, as illustrated below.

Program goal: Eradicate commercial sexual exploitation of children in the Recife Metropolitan Area, demonstrating a workable model for other regions of Brazil.

Objective 1: Improved policies to confront CSEC and greater coordination among stakeholders to hold the government accountable for their implementation.

Objective 2: Scientific knowledge about CSEC and survivors' voices inform policies and programmatic responses.

Objective 3: Vulnerable children and survivors have more support, information and skills to protect themselves from and safely exit from CSEC.

Objective 4: Social acceptance and demand for commercial sexual exploitation of children is decreased.

Objective 5: Frontline organisations and survivor groups are strengthened to work together and improve their responses to CSEC.

According to the Freedom Fund's own monitoring data, between January 2021 and June 2024 the *Com.Direitos* program has made a significant impact in the Recife Metropolitan Area (RMA), transforming the lives of more than 13,000 people. This includes providing vital social and legal support to 9,385 at-risk children and survivors of CSEC, as well as supporting 121 survivors to gain vocational qualifications, expanding their employment opportunities and pathways to economic independence.

Methodology

The evaluation included both quantitative and qualitative data derived from program monitoring reports as well as responses from program participants, government officials, CSEC experts, employers involved in the apprenticeship program and partner organisations. In total, 347 people were interviewed using in-depth interview methods, focus groups and questionnaires.

Each stage of the evaluation was informed by an adolescent advisory group that included CSEC survivors who participate in our partner organisations' project activities. Findings were further validated by the nine partner organisations as well as by Freedom Fund staff in Brazil, the US and the UK.

Results

OVERALL

Insights shared through interviews and group discussions indicate a strong consensus among respondents that *Com.Direitos* is playing an important, active role in addressing CSEC in the RMA. They highlighted the necessity of the program's multi-pronged approach to address a multidimensional problem. Detailed findings from the evaluation are organised by each program objective below:

OBJECTIVE 1: Improve policies to address the coordinated action capabilities of government actors and civil society in efforts to eliminate CSEC.

- The program significantly improved coordination between governmental and non-governmental actors in combatting CSEC, thereby strengthening the Network to Address Violence against Children and Adolescents in Pernambuco state. This increased visibility of the issue and fostered partnerships among civil society organisations in the region. However, political engagement of the Network needs strengthening, as political changes and insufficient government funding to address CSEC remain major challenges affecting the Network's effectiveness.
- The program's efforts led to the restructuring of the Committee to Address Trafficking in Persons, with the purpose of enhancing anti-trafficking policies in Pernambuco. This achievement is credited to a working group established by the program that includes public institutions, state departments, and civil society organisations. However, further efforts are needed to ensure government accountability.
- Partner organisations have been intimately involved in promoting the effective implementation of the Protective Listening Law across multiple municipalities. This is a significant step towards preventing re-victimisation of child and adolescent survivors of violence within judicial processes.

Major program achievement: Important advances in revitalising the agenda of CSEC and strengthening the Network to Address Violence against Children and Adolescents in Pernambuco state.

Focus for future activities: Developing an advocacy plan targeting the different levels of government and supporting adolescent leaders to engage in advocacy processes.

OBJECTIVE 2: Produce and disseminate evidence on CSEC, influencing the process of formulating policies and programs to combat CSEC in the region.

- The program directly influenced officials in strategic government sectors by carrying out rigorous research that is accessible to range of audiences, successfully coordinating with the state government. Nonetheless, the evaluation highlighted that more effort is needed to ensure that research findings reach frontline professionals.

- Survivors now play a much more prominent role in governmental decision-making processes, most notably in developing the municipal plan to prevent CSEC. In future phases, however, more focus will be needed to ensure survivors are at the forefront of the anti-CSEC movement and directly influence key political decisions, going beyond mere “involvement.”

Major program achievement: Producing research on CSEC that is credible and relevant to local decision makers.

Focus for future activities: Wider dissemination of research findings, especially among frontline professionals.

OBJECTIVE 3: Promote improved access to information, support and skills for children and adolescents to protect themselves and exit CSEC safely.

- The program reached a large number of frontline professionals who can now provide better quality services. More than 830 frontline professionals have been trained, with four in five of the survey respondents reporting improved capacity to identify CSEC cases and deliver trauma-informed services.
- Family members of CSEC survivors reported improved relationships with their children and an increased ability to monitor suspicious behaviours, social media use and school attendance due to their involvement in project activities. However, children and adolescents participating in the program did not perceive significant changes in their families’ behaviours. This discrepancy highlights ongoing feelings of shame that prevent open discussions about sensitive topics, often exacerbated by aggressive and judgmental reactions.
- Children and adolescents involved in program activities reported a significant increase in their understanding of various forms of violence. However, focus group discussions revealed that they remain unaware of specific CSEC services available to them and to whom they can report. Community health agents were identified as key figures in preventing and protecting against CSEC, aligning with findings from the Freedom Fund’s prevalence study published in February 2024.
- With regard to the ability of children and adolescents to report incidents of CSEC, program participants still felt discouraged by the heavy burden of proof placed on them, indicating a potential failure of protective services to give credibility to survivors. This underscores the need to improve processes and protocols to prevent re-victimisation.
- Regarding efforts to secure apprenticeships for CSEC survivors, the evaluation observed social stigma by participating employers, with some expressing that the apprentices’ behaviour or clothing were “not fitting” the formal work environment. This demonstrates the importance of sensitising employers while supporting the apprentices to thrive in their job placements.

Major program achievement: Strengthened the capabilities of frontline professionals while increasing awareness and self-protection knowledge among children and adolescents.

Focus for future activities: Enhance service delivery and quality of care for CSEC survivors, and scale awareness initiatives to reach a broader audience of children and adolescents.

OBJECTIVE 4: Reduce social acceptance and demand for CSEC, promoting a more vigilant and protective society for vulnerable children.

- The program has positively influenced children and adolescents’ ability to recognise forms of violence affecting themselves and their communities as something that should not be normalised.

- Contributions by community members during focus group discussions continued to display victim-blaming attitudes and normalisation of CSEC, as well as a reluctance to link the issue to broader economic vulnerability. Nonetheless, sensitisation activities have contributed to a greater, shared sense of responsibility for protecting children and adolescents within the community.
- Gender dynamics play a significant role in shaping perceptions of who is responsible for protecting children and adolescents in the community. Of the family members participating in the evaluation interviews, 94% were women, indicating a patriarchal belief that mothers bear primary responsibility for their children, overlooking the role and duty of paternal figures.

Major program achievement: Families and community members are now more open to discussing CSEC and feel better equipped to recognise and intervene to prevent exploitation.

Focus for future activities: Create campaigns that challenge normalisation of CSEC and the shifting of blame onto survivors, along with others aimed at reducing barriers for children to discuss this sensitive issue with trusted adults.

OBJECTIVE 5: Strengthen frontline organisations and survivor groups by working together and improving their responses to CSEC.

- Survivors reported increased confidence in participating in political spaces and a greater willingness to share the knowledge and experiences gained through program activities with peers and members of their communities.
- Frontline organisations in the region now demonstrate stronger capacities and can provide a more cohesive response in influencing public debates, thereby increasing their influence over governmental decision making.

Major program achievement: Initial collaborations between frontline organisations and survivors have been observed, though these are limited and often centrally coordinated by the Freedom Fund rather than happening spontaneously.

Focus for future activities: Increase deliberate support to survivor groups to bolster their confidence and equip them with the resources they need to occupy leading roles in working alongside partner organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To accelerate progress towards program objectives:

- 1 Review and adjust the program's goals to increase focus on improving service flows and implementing the Protective Listening Law.
- 2 Create a digital training strategy to scale knowledge and awareness-raising efforts for frontline professionals and potential employers.
- 3 Strengthen digital awareness campaigns for children, adolescents and communities, focusing on online safety and prevention of digital CSEC. Complement social media outreach with offline activities in public spaces.
- 4 Deepen partnerships with schools, which were perceived by the evaluation participants as creating highly conducive environments for raising knowledge and awareness to combat CSEC. Additionally, invest in training school professionals to improve identification and response to cases of sexual abuse.
- 5 Adjust the apprenticeship program to include activities that sensitise employers to address stigma towards CSEC survivors, as well as offer more tailored advice to survivors on workplace norms and closely monitor the apprenticeship process to resolve challenges at an early stage.
- 6 Boost efforts to counter discriminatory gender dynamics that place the responsibility of protecting children and adolescents primarily on women. These could include media campaigns and greater involvement of fathers in family-related activities.
- 7 Expand access to therapeutic and psychosocial support services, such as therapy circles, to meet the demand for trauma processing and emotional resilience among youth participants.

To improve inclusivity, especially children and adolescents:

- 8 Establish a permanent, meaningful role for the adolescent advisory group, expanding membership to include more CSEC survivors who can act as leaders and change agents, actively shaping the program's approach to combatting CSEC.
- 9 Develop a comprehensive advocacy plan that engages different levels of government, with thoughtful inclusion of adolescents working alongside partner organisations, to centre their role in advocacy efforts.

To support the capacity of partner organisations:

- 10 Facilitate exchange visits between partner organisations to foster collaboration, sharing of best practices and collective learning.
- 11 Increase support to partner organisations to secure additional funding sources, enhancing their longer-term sustainability and scale beyond the *Com.Direitos* program.
- 12 Adapt the monitoring and evaluation tools to better reflect the local context, as well as the language and technical skill sets within partner organisations.

VISION

Our vision is a world
free of slavery.

MISSION



Our mission is to mobilise the
knowledge, capital and will need-
ed to end slavery.

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