



**Testimony of
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**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights
On
International Child Abduction
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing and for inviting me here today. My name is Jesse Eaves and I am the Child Protection Policy Advisor for World Vision U.S. World Vision is a Christian relief, development, and advocacy organization serving millions of children and families in nearly 100 countries. Our 40,000 employees are dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice. This work includes emergency relief after natural disasters; long-term economic development projects; programs that work to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children; and advocating for effective systems and laws that can provide a safety net for vulnerable populations. World Vision U.S. has over 1 million private donors in every state and congressional district and partners with over 6,000 churches in the United States. We are part of the global federation of World Vision International, which last year contributed more than \$2.6 billion to helping children through international development assistance.

Based on that description of our work, I have been asked to bring a global perspective on child protection, especially as it relates to preventing and responding to any illegal movement of children.

I want to thank you again Mr. Chairman for your leadership in working to protect children not only here in the U.S. but around the world. You have been behind some of the most important pieces of child-focused legislation in our nation's history and the child protection systems within our country are stronger for it. As this hearing has shown, we still have more to do and that is also sadly the case for the vast majority of countries around the world. Of particular note are those countries in a post-conflict or post-emergency context where children are often found in their most vulnerable state and where the informal and formal systems that should protect them have either failed or never existed to begin with. This hearing allows the opportunity to address not only how the United States can deal with issues like international child abduction but also opens the door to put systems in place that can prevent and respond to all cases of abuse, neglect, exploitation, abduction, and violence against children.

Systems of child protection are an inter-linking web that forms a safety net of prevention and response for children. An effective system includes formal mechanisms such as laws and regulations; services and service delivery mechanisms; and the human and financial capacity to see those laws implemented and services effectively delivered. Combined with informal mechanisms such as community training and awareness, child protection systems are the first and last line of defense in providing a safe environment where children can flourish.

Governments in fragile contexts are often unwilling or unable to perform the services required of them to protect their most vulnerable populations. That's why it's

incumbent upon organizations like World Vision and donor governments like the U.S. to partner with governments to fill in the gaps until the country can do it on their own.

The issue of identification documents is of extreme importance. In fact, something as simple as birth registration can determine whether children remain in the care of those that love them or slip through the cracks, never to be seen again. The birth registration rate in Sudan is around 33%. In South Sudan, nearly 300,000 people have returned to take part in the creation of a new country that already has a low capacity to handle such an influx. However, with an estimated 60% of returnees being under the age of 18, a lack of birth registration and identification documents means that unaccompanied and separated children are less likely to find a caring home and are extremely vulnerable to abuse. We now see homeless child populations increasing in urban centers, particularly in the southern capital of Juba. With no identification and no way to find their families, these children are extremely vulnerable to abuses that include abduction, recruitment into armed militias, and sexual or labor exploitation.

Having proper documentation and officials trained in how to identify suspicious behavior is crucial to protecting vulnerable children, especially in fragile states. Since the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, many organizations including World Vision and our partner Heartland Alliance have worked to train border guards on preventing illegal movement of children. There have been several documented cases where trained and alert Haitian officials were able to stop children from being taken across the border. In one case a thirteen year-old girl was found in the cab of a cargo truck with a man who could provide no proof of relation. The girl was placed in the family tracing system and her mother was able to come and provide proof that she was indeed related to the girl and had not intended for her to be taken anywhere, let alone out of the country. In this and so

many other cases, the importance of documentation and officials implementing protection policies have meant the difference between a happy reunification and a life cut tragically short.

The U.S. can play a central role in encouraging countries as they work to protect their most precious resources: their children. Mr. Chairman, last year you introduced a bill that is a prime example of how the U.S. can take a systems strengthening approach in its engagement with other nations. The Child Protection Compact Act was originally designed to create a partnership between the U.S. and countries trying specifically to combat child slavery. Though the bill uses a human trafficking lens, it has profound implications that can help combat not only child trafficking, but virtually all forms of abuse, exploitation, and violence against children. The bill aims to strengthen the very institutions that are crucial to the protection of not just the most vulnerable children but all children. 127 of your colleagues cosponsored the legislation with you, showing the political will to keep the U.S. as a global leader in preventing and responding to vulnerability. Legislation like the CPCA can play a crucial role in providing a safer world for children and we look forward to seeing similar legislation in the future. We also look forward to working with you to ensure that every child can experience life in all its fullness. Thank you again for your leadership Mr. Chairman and I'll be happy to address any questions.