



firetree circle

CHILD PROTECTION
AT FIRETREE

Photo credit: M'lop Tapang

Firetree brings over two decades of direct experience to child protection as founders, board members, operators, and funders. This depth of practice shapes how we run our own programs and how we select the partners we support.

Child protection is often described in terms of individual services such as rescue, shelter, counselling, education. But effective protection is better understood **as a cycle, with multiple services running in parallel** throughout.

Mith Samlanh, Friends-International's program in Cambodia, developed a model that captures this well. A child's journey may begin with outreach, being identified in the community as at risk. From there, they may access protection services, drop-in centres, harm reduction, or healthcare for immediate stabilisation alongside supporting carers through parenting support income generation and family mediation services. Some need transitional housing while longer-term plans develop. Education and training build the skills for independence. The immediate goal is safety; the long-term one is reintegration: back to school, into employment, with family or foster care, as a functioning adult, parent, and member of the community.

But the **process is non-linear**. A child reintegrated into family may later need transitional care again. Someone in education may face a crisis requiring acute intervention. Protection systems must accommodate setbacks without treating them as failures.

Certain services operate throughout the entire cycle, regardless of where a child sits within it: protection of rights and participation, life skills education, HIV/AIDS prevention and care, and medical services. These aren't stages to pass through but constant layers of support.

No two children follow the same path. A child's needs, circumstances, fears, and aspirations determine which services they access and in what sequence. Some need intensive therapeutic support; others need documentation to access school. Some are ready for vocational training; others must first address the family situations that put them at risk. The cycle is the same; each child's journey is unique.

Beyond the direct work of child protection organisations

The professional child protection workforce is necessary but insufficient. A social worker or case manager may intervene at a critical moment, but they cannot be present in the daily life of a child. **Protection becomes embedded in the community** and long-lasting when the **people closest to children**, including families, neighbours, teachers, local leaders, and business owners, **understand their role and have the skills to act.**

Children and young people are active participants in their own protection, not passive recipients of it. Children who know their rights, have a voice in decisions affecting them, and are connected to a community of peers is fundamentally less vulnerable than one who does not.

Government partnership at multiple levels, central policy, provincial coordination, local-level implementation, is essential for systemic change, and this partnership must be sustained through networks, training cascades, formal governance mechanisms, and economic empowerment rather than dependent on one-off campaigns or individual leaders. **Systems endure; projects end.**



Photo credit: Stairway Foundation

Child protection as trafficking prevention

Anti-trafficking has become a donor buzzword, often sensationalized at the expense of substance. Firetree's partners choose not to use the label, yet child protection work, done the way we have described, is essential to preventing human trafficking.

The children and youth facing abuse, neglect, family breakdown, lack of documentation, or economic desperation are those most vulnerable to traffickers. A child without a birth certificate cannot prove their age or citizenship. A teenager estranged from family has no safety net. A young person without skills or employment options is susceptible to false promises of work.



Photo credit: Baan Dek Foundation

Every element of the protection cycle reduces trafficking risk: outreach identifies vulnerable children before traffickers do; stabilization and safe housing remove them from dangerous situations; education and vocational training create legitimate pathways to independence; family strengthening rebuilds the support systems that make exploitation less likely; documentation gives children legal identity and access to protection under the law.

This is prevention at its most practical. Rather than addressing trafficking after the fact, effective child protection intervenes upstream building the resilience, options, and support structures that make children less vulnerable in the first place.

Firetree's leadership has been immersed in child protection work across Asia for over 20 years. Francesco Caruso, Firetree's Principal, has co-founded child protection organizations and served on multiple boards in the sector. Nicky Wilkinson has worked within child protection organizations and continues to sit on several boards. We also employ Nancy Agaid, a child protection specialist with over 40 years of professional experience, as our senior technical advisor. Nancy provides direct oversight to our operations at TCI and brings the kind of deep practice knowledge that only comes from decades of frontline and leadership work in the field. **This isn't grantmaking at arm's length. It reflects careers spent understanding what effective protection requires.**

Tondo Community Initiative (TCI) in Manila is Firetree's own child protection program, with Francesco serving as President and Nancy as senior technical advisor. TCI works in the largest slum area of Tondo— home to one of the Philippines' most marginalized urban communities.

TCI's structure with specialized units for community social work, sexual abuse cases, and alternative care, alongside community programs for women and youth exemplifies the multi-faceted approach needed in effective child protection. Our partners operate similarly: M'Lop Tapang's multidisciplinary teams, Baan Dek's three pillars, Stairway's integration of direct services with national advocacy. We all recognize that child protection requires both a pathway (outreach to reintegration) and a foundation (rights, health, skills) that never drops away and that each child moving through that pathway needs a plan built around them, not around our programs.



Photo credit: Tondo Community Initiative



Photo credit: Friends International

We, at Tondo Community Initiative, employ 16 licensed social workers who provide crisis intervention for children facing sexual abuse, severe neglect, abandonment, or life-threatening situations. Our teams are organized into specialized units: a Community Social Work Team that identifies and responds to emergencies, a Child Protection Unit focused on sexual abuse cases, and an Alternative Care Unit that finds safe placements when children cannot remain with their families. We have opened a Crisis Center to provide short-term protective care while longer-term solutions are developed.

Beyond crisis response, TCI runs community programs that build resilience over time and aims to create a safer environment for all children and youth: a Women's Forum that develops mothers' leadership and economic agency, a Youth Program designed around young people's own aspirations, and efforts to secure birth certificates so families can access public services. We partner with other organizations for education, vocational training, and healthcare contributing the specialized social work capacity that many lack resources to maintain.

What we fund

We support partner organizations across Southeast Asia whose approaches reflect what we know works from our own practice:

M'Lop Tapang in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, serves over 5,000 children, youth, and families through integrated services delivered by multidisciplinary teams. Like TCI, they prioritize keeping children with families, operate a 24-hour emergency hotline, and train community members to recognize and respond to risk. Their staff is 98% Cambodian, with deep roots in the communities they serve.

Stairway Foundation in the Philippines has spent over 30 years developing child protection capacity nationwide. Their Break the Silence campaign has trained thousands of teachers, social workers, and police officers in child sexual abuse prevention, and their network now includes 45 organizations across the country. They bring the advocacy and training expertise that complements TCI's direct service work.

Photo credit: Tondo Community Initiative





Photo credit: Friends International

Baan Dek Foundation in Thailand focuses on migrant children in construction site camps—an estimated 60,000 children living in precarious conditions with limited access to services. Their model parallels ours: specialized case management, peer educators trained within communities, and systemic engagement with construction companies to improve conditions sector-wide.

Friends-International's programmes in Thailand and Cambodia. Their 'Saving Lives and Building Futures' framework inspired TCI's sequencing of crisis stabilization before longer-term development.

- Mith Samlanh, in Phnom Penh, dedicated to protecting and reintegrating vulnerable children and youth through a cyclical process: outreach, drop-in centres, detoxification, transitional housing, education, and reintegration into school, work, or family.
- Peuan Peuan, works with vulnerable Thai and migrant children, youth, and families in Bangkok and Pattaya. Its outreach teams identify children at risk and provide case management, child protection support, and referrals to public education, healthcare, vocational training and social services as well as protection and family reintegration for migrant children hailing from bordering countries.

The importance of involving the whole community in the protection of children is core to the work of all our partners through Friends-International's ChildSafe Agents and community training, M'Lop Tapang's family strengthening and 24-hour hotline, Baan Dek's community empowerment pillar and private sector engagement, Stairway's national Break the Silence network, and Yayasan Chow Kit's role as a recognized community resource for marginalized children.

Why practitioner-led funding matters

Child protection is work that requires a combination of strong professional skills and empathy. The difference between adequate and excellent practice in case management, in trauma-informed care, in navigating legal systems, in knowing when family reunification is safe and when it isn't, is difficult to assess from the outside. Organisations that only fund this work can struggle to evaluate quality.

Because we operate TCI, we evaluate partners against what we know from direct experience. We can assess whether case management is rigorous, whether organizations genuinely center children's agency, whether they understand the relationship between crisis intervention and longer-term development. Our work and board experience across multiple organizations gives us pattern recognition that funders without operational experience lack.

The relationship works both ways. TCI learns from M'Lop Tapang's community-based protection networks, from Baan Dek's private sector engagement, from Friends-International's coordination and advocacy models, from Stairway's national training infrastructure, from Yayasan Chow Kit's work with stateless and undocumented children. We are practitioners in conversation with practitioners.





Photo credit: Stairway Foundation

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