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# ‘IN NUMBER THERE IS STRENGTH’: MULTI-AGENCY COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN (OSAEC) IN CAGAYAN DE ORO CITY, PHILIPPINES

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## Abstract

*This research investigates the collaborative strategy response to online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC) in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, a recognised hotspot for OSAEC in the Philippines. The study aims to delineate the administrative mechanisms employed by the City’s anti-OSAEC committee, assess the awareness of OSAEC and collaborative efforts of its members, and identify the challenges and facilitators regarding prosecution, protection and prevention strategies against OSAEC. Utilising a mixed methods research design, the study incorporated a rigorously validated survey questionnaire that had undergone content and expert validity assessments. Participants included 45 members of the City Council for the Protection of Children (CCPC), representing various government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups. The findings indicated that the CCPC operates within a comprehensive child protection framework, addressing OSAEC as part of broader child welfare initiatives. Committee members demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the nature and characteristics of OSAEC, alongside their roles and responsibilities.*

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*And findings revealed that their committee is in “coordination level” in terms of OSAEC prevention, protection, and prosecution. The study identified some major challenges, including the complexity of rescue operations, the anonymity of perpetrators and insufficient resources for public awareness campaigns. Conversely, factors such as active involvement of NGOs, dedicated committee members and ongoing improvements in referral pathways emerged as facilitators enhancing the city’s response to OSAEC. This research offers critical insights into the collaborative governance approach taken to combating OSAEC, illuminating strengths and areas for improvement within the city’s response mechanisms. The findings are intended to inform policy recommendations and best practices for bolstering child protection efforts in urban and rural contexts facing similar challenges.*

**Keywords:** OSAEC; collaboration; child protection; anti-OSAEC committee; prevention, protection and prosecution.

## Introduction

In recent years, the Philippines has witnessed a large surge in online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC) cases, coinciding with the rapid expansion of internet accessibility, the proliferation of mobile devices and advances in digital payment systems. The lockdowns introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and subsequent years exacerbated this issue, creating an environment where children became increasingly susceptible to OSAEC. This period saw an unprecedented level of access to minors by both international offenders and local facilitators, who collaborated in perpetrating these crimes through digital platforms. The convergence of these factors has presented a complex challenge for child protection efforts in the Philippines, even contributing to making it the global epicentre for the production of child sexual exploitation materials (UNICEF, 2016).

The Philippines’ Republic Act No. 11930, also known as the ‘Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials (CSAEM) Act’, defines OSAEC as the ‘use of ICT [information and communication technology] as a means to abuse and/or exploit children sexually, which includes cases in which offline child abuse and/or exploitation is combined with an online component.’ Data show that 20% of Filipino children aged 12 to 17 years who use the internet have experienced OSAEC, translating to an estimated 2 million affected individuals. Alarming, between 23% and 38% of these children do not share their experiences with anyone, with no more than 3% of children reporting these incidents to law enforcement or a helpline (UNICEF, 2023).

In Northern Mindanao, Philippines, two cities have emerged as important focal points in the ongoing battle against OSAEC: Cagayan de Oro City and Iligan City. The former has been identified as a hotspot for OSAEC cases since 2015. In April of 2024, the Department of Justice (DOJ) still identified Cagayan de Oro as being one of the cities with the highest incidence of CSAEM and OSAEC in the Philippines, according to data gathered and

research conducted by the National Coordinating Center against Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children and Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials (NCC-OSAEC-CSAEM) (Antonio, 2024). The increase in OSAEC cases is attributed to greater access to the internet, the availability of broadcast-capable cameras, proficiency in English, established money transfer systems and widespread poverty, which facilitate pay-per-view and live-streaming activities (Mindanao Gold Star Daily, 2020).

As a response, Cagayan de Oro City has established a comprehensive network to combat OSAEC by establishing the City Council for the Protection of Children (CCPC), which involves various stakeholders aiming to tackle the critical issues surrounding this problem. This initiative reflects the city's commitment to collaborating with diverse partners to ensure the protection and well-being of children through a structured approach for effective cooperation among government and non-government organisations. The city's response team actively monitors and addresses cases reported in various barangays (administrative districts that form the most local level of government in the Philippines) in collaboration with the committee members.

The city's response to OSAEC, bringing together a diverse array of stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based groups, represents a concerted effort to provide comprehensive support to survivors of OSAEC and their families. It also offers valuable insights into the application of collaborative governance in tackling social issues. Hence, this study is anchored on two frameworks: the collaborative governance framework developed by Ansell and Gash (2007) and the '4Ps' framework (prosecution, prevention, protection and partnership). (United Nations, 2009).

In the literature, collaborative governance is increasingly viewed as an essential framework highlighting the importance of various stakeholders working in unison towards shared objectives. According to a UNICEF Philippines study (2023), fostering collaboration is crucial for creating a comprehensive continuum of strategies and services to address OSAEC. This continuum encompasses prevention, identification, reporting, rescue, legal proceedings, rehabilitation, reintegration and aftercare. The 4Ps framework, on the other hand, is the primary international framework for addressing human trafficking. It seeks to combat the issue by focusing on four essential components: prosecution, prevention, protection and partnership.

The present study stems from the fact that while there has been increasing empirical research into OSAEC conducted over the past five years, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies regarding collaborations between and within mechanisms that involve government and non-government stakeholders, as most studies conducted have been concerned with the causes of OSAEC and the effects of OSAEC on survivors and their families (Roch et al., 2023). Therefore, this study was a response to the dearth of literature about the novelty of OSAEC as a modern form of abuse in the digital age, as well as the collaborative mechanisms that drive key players in their attempts to curtail the growing numbers of survivors of OSAEC. This study is important because it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of collaborative governance in responding to the OSAEC situation in

Cagayan de Oro City.

Furthermore, this research investigated collaborative mechanisms used by Cagayan de Oro City to address OSAEC, (a) delving into the structure and composition of the committee CCPC created to respond to the crime; (b) examining the level of awareness of the committee members regarding the nature of OSAEC as well as the programmes and services offered by the committee and its related agencies; (c) their specific roles and responsibilities; (d) levels of collaboration; and (e) challenges and (f) facilitating factors that drive successful collaboration. The study explores how these elements affect policy implementation and child protection efforts. The findings contribute to the literature on collaborative governance and OSAEC while offering practical insights to inform policy and practice in other regions facing similar challenges.

The research questions addressed in the following sections are:

1. What is the administrative mechanism in Cagayan de Oro City for responding to online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC) in terms of:
  1. 1. Structures and composition
  1. 2. Programmes and services
2. What is the level of awareness among City Council for the Protection of Children (CCPC) committee members regarding the nature and characteristics of OSAEC?
3. What is their level of awareness of their roles and responsibilities as committee members?
4. What is the level of collaboration among committee members in response to OSAEC?
5. What are the challenges and facilitating factors for collaboration between and among the committee members in terms of:
  5. 1. Protection
  5. 2. Prosecution
  5. 3. Prevention

## 1. Methodology

This study employed a convergent mixed methods research design. The fundamental premise of this methodology is that combining qualitative and quantitative data not only enhances the research process but also provides deeper insights that cannot be achieved through either data type in isolation. In this design, the researcher collects both forms of data concurrently and subsequently merges them to perform an in-depth analysis of the research questions. Within this framework, any discrepancies or conflicting findings are addressed and explored further. For the current study, data were gathered from various sources, including document analyses and surveys, interviews and focus group discussions conducted with members of the CCPC in Cagayan de Oro City. The collected data were then carefully analysed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues being

researched.

This study was conducted between January 2024 to August 2024 in Cagayan de Oro City, a highly urbanised city in the Northern Mindanao region of the Philippines. As the capital city of Misamis Oriental province, Cagayan de Oro is the region's major economic hub and educational centre. Cagayan de Oro represents a unique setting for studying social issues due to its blend of urban complexities and regional characteristics. The city is a notable hotspot for OSAEC, as indicated by records from the Police Regional Office 10 and reports from the Department of Justice (DOJ). Its governance structure, including its active CCPC, makes it an ideal locale for examining child protection mechanisms and strategies to tackle OSAEC.

The participants in this study were members and representatives of the CCPC in Cagayan de Oro City. This committee comprises diverse stakeholders from government agencies, NGOs, private entities and civil society groups. These individuals are tasked with implementing programmes and services to address various forms of child abuse and exploitation, including OSAEC. The CCPC's mandate extends from rescue operations to the reintegration and rehabilitation of affected children and their families. A total of 45 CCPC members participated in this study, representing the entire composition of the committee as outlined in the relevant city executive orders, as reflected in the executive order by the local chief executive. This comprehensive participation ensured there was broad representation of the city's child protection response mechanism.

This study employed a mixed methods approach, utilising researcher-developed and modified Likert-scale questionnaires, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and document analysis. The research instrument consisted of a four-part questionnaire administered to the participants. The first section assessed respondents' understanding of the nature of OSAEC, including its forms and key characteristics. The second section evaluated CCPC members' awareness of their roles and responsibilities as outlined in local executive orders and ordinances. The third section probed the level of collaboration among committee members involved in anti-OSAEC efforts. The final section explored challenges and facilitating factors in OSAEC case responses through a reflective case study by asking respondents to describe and reflect on a specific case they had been involved in. These quantitative data were complemented by qualitative insights gleaned from interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis, to provide a comprehensive overview of the city's OSAEC response mechanisms.

Initially, I conducted pilot testing and sought expert validation of the survey questionnaire. A panel of four experts reviewed the questionnaire content, assessing face validity and providing feedback on structural aspects, language and clarity. Content validity was further established through a rigorous process involving five experts, employing Krippendorff's alpha and the item-level content validity index (I-CVI) to evaluate consensus on item relevance. Despite a low Krippendorff's alpha value of 0.217, the high average I-CVI score of 0.91 indicated substantial agreement among experts regarding item pertinence.

Following the validation process, I obtained ethical clearance and the necessary

permits from the local government of Cagayan de Oro City. The data collection phase encompassed administering survey questionnaires to CCPC members, complemented by semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with selected CCPC members to gather qualitative insights. Key informant interviews were made and transcripts were thematically analysed. Document analysis of relevant executive orders, city ordinances and case studies further enriched the dataset. I made observations throughout the process to triangulate the collected information, ensuring a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Cagayan de Oro City's OSAEC response mechanisms.

This study adhered to ethical standards, obtaining approval from the university's Mindanao State University Ethical Board Ethics Committee and clearance from the local government of Cagayan de Oro City. Before data collection, participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and procedures, and written informed consent to participate was obtained from all respondents. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants was maintained at all times, and strict data protection measures were implemented.

Once the data had been collected and cleaned, various analyses were conducted, including descriptive statistics, specifically computing the mean and standard deviation for each indicator in the survey questionnaire. The mean served as a measure of central tendency, providing an average value for the respondents' levels of awareness regarding the nature and characteristics of OSAEC and their awareness of their roles and responsibilities. The standard deviation quantified the extent of variability or dispersion within the dataset. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, including the interview results, key informant interviews transcripts of key informant interviews and the focus group discussions and documents provided by the CCPC. Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyse and reports patterns within collected data. As noted by Riessman (2008, as cited in Meraz et al., 2019), thematic narrative analysis emphasises the content of 'what' is said, allowing themes to emerge from the dataset.

Upon the conclusion of this research, a summary of the findings was shared with the CCPC in Cagayan de Oro City, contributing to their research repository and potentially informing future child protection initiatives in the city.

## 2. Results and Discussion

**Composition and Structure of the CCPC.** The composition and structure of the anti-OSAEC committee are integrated within the broader framework of the CCPC, as established by the Executive Order 103 series of 2022 of the City Local Government Unit (LGU) of Cagayan de Oro City. This approach reflects a comprehensive strategy to address various child protection issues, including OSAEC, under a single umbrella organisation. The CCPC is chaired by the City Mayor, with the head of the City Social Welfare and Development Office (CSWDO) as vice-chairperson.

The CCPC committee's membership is diverse, encompassing representatives from

various sectors crucial to child protection and welfare. This includes officials from local government units (LGUs), the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), law enforcement agencies, the education sector, health services and civil society organisations. This multidisciplinary composition ensures a holistic approach to addressing OSAEC and other child protection concerns, leveraging the expertise and resources of different stakeholders.

**Awareness of the Nature and Characteristics of OSAEC.** The questionnaire responses and the results relating to committee members' awareness of the nature and characteristics of OSAEC are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Awareness of the nature and characteristics of OSAEC*

State indicator	Cagayan de Oro (n = 37)		
	Mean	SD	Verbal interpretation
1. Online sexual abuse or exploitation of children (OSAEC) refers to the use of ICT (information and communication technology) as a means to abuse and/or exploit children sexually, which includes cases in which offline child abuse and/or exploitation is combined with an online component.	4.14	1.134	Aware
2. OSAEC can also include, but is not limited to, the production, dissemination and possession of CSAEM (child sexual abuse or exploitation materials); the online grooming of children for sexual purposes; sexual extortion of children; sharing image-based sexual abuse; commercial sexual exploitation of children; exploitation of children through online prostitution; and live-streaming of sexual abuse, with or without the consent of the victim.	4.38	1.089	Aware
3. Online sexual exploitation of children (OSAEC) is a phenomenon that has recently emerged and is now prevalent as the world has become smaller and more interconnected through technology and the internet, which provide an easier and wider platform for sexual predators to access vulnerable children in any part of the world.	4.48	1.044	Aware

4. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and the relevant Philippine laws (e.g., RA 7610 1992) define a child as a human being aged less than 18 years ‘who is unable to fully protect himself/herself from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation, or discrimination, or who is unable to care for himself/herself because of a physical or mental disability or condition.’	4.32	1.029	Aware
5. That the age of sexual consent in the Philippines, reflected in the Republic Act No. 116481, was increased from 12 to 16 years (Maralit, 2022).	4.35	1.033	Aware
6. Child sexual exploitation refers to when an individual or a group sexually abuses and manipulates a child to engage in sexual activity. The child may be forced to engage in sexual activity in exchange for money, clothes, shoes, new things or any needs or wants of the child. An abuser may also gain from the sexual exploitation of a child by receiving money or becoming more powerful by using the child to earn money and favours. Perpetrators may also use technology to achieve their ends.	4.38	1.037	Aware
7. Child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) are sexualised materials in the form of video, audio, posters, written material or any other kind of representation that shows children engaging or pretending to engage in sexual acts (International Justice Mission, 2020). In these materials, children do not need to engage in physical sexual activity. Simply having a child pose for a photograph or be videotaped acting provocatively is already considered exploitation.	4.35	1.060	Aware
8. Adults can access child sexual abuse material through the internet, in internet cafes, chat rooms and social media groups. Pictures or videos depicting child sexual exploitation are saved to disks or files and sold to other adults for money. Producing exploitative materials may be a business. Making a child touch her or himself while being videotaped or photographed are examples of child sexual exploitation.	4.38	1.037	Aware



9. Many activities can be associated with OSAEC. They include grooming, live-streaming, production and use of child sexual abuse material, and coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes.	4.38	1.037	Aware
10. OSAEC can also include, but is not limited to, the production, dissemination, and possession of CSAEM (Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials) online grooming of children for sexual purposes; sexual extortion of children, sharing image-based sexual abuse; commercial sexual exploitation of children; exploitation of children through online prostitution; and live-streaming of sexual abuse, with or without the consent of the victim.	4.38	1.089	Aware
11. Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) is a phenomenon that has recently emerged and is now prevalent as the world has become smaller and more interconnected through technology and the internet, which provide an easier and wider platform for sexual predators to access vulnerable children in any part of the world.	4.48	1.044	Aware
12. The UNCRC (1989) and the Philippine laws (e.g., RA 7610 1992) defined a child as a human being below 18 years old “who is unable to fully protect himself/herself from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation, or discrimination, or who is unable to care for himself/herself because of a physical or mental disability or condition.”	4.32	1.029	Aware
13. That the age of Sexual Consent”, reflected in the Republic Act No. 116481, is increased from the minimum sexual consent age of children from twelve years old to sixteen years old (Maralit, 2022).	4.35	1.033	Aware

14. Child sexual exploitation happens when a person or a group sexually abuses and manipulates a child to engage in sexual activity. The child may be forced to engage in sexual activity in exchange for money, clothes, shoes, new things, or any needs and wants of the child. On the other hand, the abuser may also gain from the sexual exploitation of a child by receiving money or becoming more powerful by using the child to earn money and favours. Perpetrators may also use technology to achieve their ends.	4.38	1.037	Aware
15. Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM) are sexualised materials in the form of video, audio, posters, written material, or any other kind of representation that shows children doing or pretending to be engaged in sexual acts (International Justice Mission, 2020). In these materials, children do not need to engage in physical sexual activity. Simply having a child pose for photos or be videotaped acting provocatively is already considered exploitation.	4.35	1.060	Aware
16. Adults accessing child sexual abuse material through the internet—in internet cafes, chat rooms, and social media groups. Pictures and videos depicting child sexual exploitation are saved in discs and files and sold to other adults for money. Producing exploitative materials as a business. Making a child touch himself or herself while being videotaped or photographed are examples of child sexual exploitation.	4.38	1.037	Aware
17. Many activities are associated with OSAEC. It includes grooming, live-streaming, production and use of child sexual abuse material, and coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes.	4.38	1.037	Aware

18. OSAEC has many related or similar terms, including:			
• Online sexual exploitation of children			
• Online child sexual abuse and exploitation	4.46	0.803	Aware
• Live-stream child sexual abuse			
• Webcam sex tourism			
• Cyber-sex trafficking			
• Online child pornography			
19. The Philippines has become a focal point for the global production of child sexual exploitation materials, with 80% of Filipino children at risk of online sexual abuse, sometimes even facilitated by their parents (UNICEF, 2016).	4.00	1.179	Aware
20. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed greatly to the proliferation of OSAEC cases.	4.10	1.149	Aware
21. The Women and Children Protection Center of Region X observed an increasing trend in OSAEC indicated by the number of those rescued: 12 in 2015, 7 in 2017, 42 in 2018 and 44 in 2019. Iligan has been a 'hotspot' since 2015, and lately this has also included Cagayan de Oro City, Ozamiz and Kolambugan, Lanao del Norte.	3.84	1.118	Aware
22. Grooming of children for sexual purposes is carried out to establish a relationship with a minor to enable their online or offline sexual abuse and/or exploitation (CEOP, n.d.).	4.35	1.060	Aware
23. The recent proliferation of social media, messaging and live-streaming apps has caused a dramatic increase in reported cases of this crime.	4.24	1.065	Aware
24. Live-streaming sexual abuse of children is child sexual abuse that is transmitted to a viewer or viewers in real-time via 'streaming' over the internet or using an online video application to view sexual abuse of children and/or to interact with children and other viewers while lewd acts are taking place virtually. This can take both commercial and non-commercial forms (IJM, 2020b).	4.38	0.794	Aware

25. Sextortion is a form of blackmail in which sexual information or digital materials are used to extort sexual favours and/or money from a victim (IJM, 2020c).	4.30	1.024	Aware
26. Luring is an act of communicating, by means of a computer system, with a child or someone whom the offender believes to be a child for the purpose of facilitating the commission of sexual activity or production of any form of CSAEM.	4.22	1.058	Aware
27. Customers/clients typically live outside the Philippines and are usually residents of foreign countries. They purchase live depictions of child sexual abuse over the internet. When they groom children, they start by gaining the trust and confidence of the children, followed by fostering friendship and nurturing a relationship. They then pay for videos or pictures of children to be shared or sold on the internet.	4.30	1.077	Aware
28. Facilitators typically live in the Philippines and provide children to be sexually abused for live online streaming. They buy, force and exploit children to perform sexual acts online. These facilitators are often someone the child knows, e.g. a parent, extended family member or trusted neighbour.	4.05	1.104	Aware
29. Factors in the Philippines that enable the easy proliferation of OSAEC are widespread poverty and the resorting to OSAEC as a form of income.	4.43	1.042	Aware
30. Cheap internet and smartphones, the ability to speak English well, the wide availability of money remittance centres, and prevailing norms of secrecy contribute to the occurrence of OSAEC.	4.30	1.077	Aware
31. Lack of parental supervision, sometimes caused by parents having to work abroad, and a lack of resources to investigate and prosecute perpetrators and rescue and rehabilitate victims, contribute to the proliferation of OSAEC cases.	3.68	1.473	Aware

32. The growth of online remittance technology, predominantly used by overseas Filipino workers, has made financial transactions related to OSAEC progressively easier (Brown et al, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Western Union, Cebuana Lhuillier, World Remit and Gcash have been identified as commonly used financial institutions.	4.18	1.288	Aware
33. Many believe that OSAEC is not harmful as children are only asked to be naked in front of a camera. The truth is that OSAEC harms children as the act itself is not only showing off but also involves the use of sex toys and objects by the adults facilitating OSAEC.	4.35	0.978	Aware
34. OSAEC does not simply involve standing naked in front of a camera, but rather children are being molested and sexually abused by adults by using them as objects to portray sex acts.	3.76	1.442	Aware
35. It is not only girls who become victims of OSAEC but also boys, as they are just as vulnerable to grooming and online sexual abuse, and the indicators for identifying them are the same.	4.08	1.278	Aware
36. True to the prevailing notion that because a child victim was not 'touched' or that there was no physical contact as he or she was just being watched, usually the family does not perceive the act as abusive or see it as a transgression.	4.14	1.032	Aware
37. Some survivors of OSAEC believe that they profited from the activity and even consider their abusers to be helpers and providers. This could mean they feel they owe a debt of gratitude towards their abuser; hence, the survivor will not go after them.	3.84	1.041	Aware
38. When children are rescued, they frequently experience fear, sadness or anguish, and anger, especially if OSAEC practices benefit them and if they are separated from their family members who are frequently the abusers or enablers.	3.94	1.311	Aware

39. Victims are apprehensive that their testimony would ultimately result in someone to whom they are attached being put behind bars. This is especially relevant in cases where a survivor has to testify against their own family member.	4.14	1.058	Aware
40. That RA (Republic Act) 11930 or the “Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials (CSAEM) Act”- is the legal mandate to combat CSEC and OSEC in the Philippines.	4.08	1.382	Aware
41. The following may file a complaint of OSAEC: (1) the offended party; (2) parents or guardians; (3) relative within the third (3rd) degree of consanguinity; (4) an officer, social worker or representative of licensed child-caring institutions; (5) an officer or social worker of the DSWD; (6) a local social welfare development officer; (7) any barangay official; (8) any law enforcement officer LEO; (9) at least three concerned responsible citizens residing in the place where the violation occurred; or (10) any person who has personal knowledge of the circumstances of the commission of any offence.	4.10	1.370	Aware
42. To hire, employ, use, persuade, induce, extort, engage or coerce a child to perform or participate in whatever way in the creation or production of any form of OSAEC or CSAEM will result in imprisonment for 5 years and a fine of not less than two million pesos (P2,000,000.00) when proven guilty.	4.00	1.247	Aware
OVERALL	4.18	0.970	Aware

Scale: 1.00–1.49, very unaware; 1.50–2.49, unaware; 2.50–3.49, neither aware nor unaware; 3.50–4.49, aware; 4.50–5.00, very aware.

On committee members’ awareness regarding the nature and characteristics of OSAEC, the results revealed a relatively strong awareness of OSAEC among committee members. With an overall mean score of 4.18 (SD = 0.970) for awareness of the nature of OSAEC and 4.28 (SD = 1.140) for awareness of the characteristics of OSAEC, Cagayan de Oro CCPC members demonstrated a sufficient understanding of this complex issue. The city’s committee CCPC members showed particular strength in recognising the role of technology

in facilitating OSAEC, with high awareness scores for indicators related to the use of social media and digital platforms for exploitative purposes.

Notably, CCPC members were highly aware of the legal definitions and consent issues surrounding OSAEC, as evidenced by their strong scores on indicators related to the age of sexual consent and the definition of child exploitation. This suggests a good foundation for implementing and enforcing protective measures within the city. However, there were areas where awareness could be improved. For instance, understanding the emotional impact on rescued children scored relatively low (mean = 3.94, SD = 1.311), indicating a potential need for more training in survivor support and trauma-informed care. Additionally, awareness of some specific OSAEC practices, such as live-streaming abuse, while still in the 'aware' category, scored lower than other indicators, suggesting there is room for more targeted education on emerging forms of exploitation.

Overall, Cagayan de Oro City's CCPC committee members demonstrated a comprehensive awareness of OSAEC issues, providing a strong basis for their anti-OSAEC efforts. The city's focus on integrating OSAEC awareness into educational curricula and community outreach programmes, while also strengthening legal and protective frameworks, aligns well with its levels of awareness and suggests it has adopted a proactive approach to combating this issue.

An awareness of OSAEC among decision-makers plays a pivotal role in shaping effective policy responses. Research suggests that factors such as age, educational background and information accessibility have a major impact on decision-makers' understanding of online abuse. Politicians with greater awareness tend to champion more robust legislative frameworks (Jones & Mitchell, 2016). However, competing priorities and limited firsthand exposure can impede engagement (Whittle et al., 2013). While some political figures grasp the basics of OSAEC, this knowledge often fails to address its intricacies. Enhancing comprehension and fostering impactful legislation necessitates ongoing education, global collaboration and specialised training led by experts in the field.

**Awareness of Roles, Responsibilities, Programmes and Services in OSAEC Responses.** The results regarding levels of awareness regarding their roles and responsibilities as members of the city's committee concerned with OSAEC are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Level of Awareness of Roles and Responsibilities as a Member of the City's Committee Concerned with OSAEC*

State indicator	Cagayan De Oro (n = 37)		
	Mean	SD	Verbal interpretation
1. Institute policies and programmes to protect women and children who are victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC).	4.62	0.594	Very aware

2. Create and establish a system of surveillance, investigation and rescue to ensure effective and efficient coordination.	3.94	0.970	Aware
3. Establish programmes including but not limited to education, information campaigns and seminars or symposia on the nature, causes, incidence and consequences of OSAEC, particularly in terms of educating the public on the social impacts of OSAEC.	3.97	1.093	Aware
4. Prevention and suppression/elimination of trafficking in persons (TIP), violence against women and their children (VAWC), OSAEC and CSAEM, gender-based sexual harassment (GBSH) in streets and public spaces, and any other forms of gender-based violence.	3.97	1.093	Aware
5. The committee may call on the assistance of non-government organisations to assist in the formulation and implementation of localised programmes and interventions to address OSAEC.	3.97	1.093	Aware
6. Provision of basic social services for the prevention of TIP, VAWC, OSAEC and CSAEM, and GBSH in streets and public spaces, and any other forms of gender-based violence.	3.92	1.064	Aware
7. Establish linkages with other existing bodies/local councils who work with children and potentially invite other relevant agencies/organisations to participate in its meetings and activities.	4.08	1.010	Aware
8. Implement programmes and activities aligned with the national action plan for anti-OSAEC efforts.	3.89	1.048	Aware
9. Perform any other duties and functions necessary to carry out the above duties and functions.	3.76	1.300	Aware
10. Provision of protection and support to survivors of OSAEC.	3.78	1.315	Aware
11. Implementation of residential care, child placement, educational assistance, livelihood and skills training, and other community-based services that are responsive to the specific needs and problems of the survivors of OSAEC and their families.	3.46	1.070	Aware



12.Strengthening, activation and mobilisation of existing committees, councils, similar organisations and special bodies to prevent and suppress TIP, VAWC, OSAEC and CSAE, GBSH in streets and public spaces, and any other forms of gender-based violence.	3.76	1.300	Aware
13.Monitor and oversee the strict compliance with RA 11930 and other related laws for the protection of children.	4.14	1.134	Aware
OVERALL	3.94	0.977	Aware

Scale: 1.00–1.49, very unaware; 1.50–2.49, unaware; 2.50–3.49, neither aware nor unaware; 3.50–4.49, aware; 4.50–5.00, very aware.

The results showed that the level of awareness of their roles and responsibilities as members of the CCPC city committee concerned with OSAEC were generally high, with an overall mean score of 3.94 (SD = 0.977), indicating that committee members were aware of their duties. The city committee demonstrated particular strength in certain areas, notably in instituting policies and programmes to protect women and children who are victims of OSAEC, with a mean score of 4.62 (SD = 0.594), indicating they were very aware of this responsibility.

Moreover, committee members also showed a good understanding of their role in establishing linkages with other existing bodies and local councils who work with children (mean = 4.08, SD = 1.010) and monitoring compliance with the Republic Act 11930, the anti-OSAEC law and other related laws for child protection (mean = 4.14, SD = 1.134). However, there were areas where awareness could be improved, such as implementing residential care and community-based services for survivors and their families (mean = 3.46, SD = 1.070).

Regarding programmes and services, CCPC members demonstrated varying levels of awareness across different domains. They showed high awareness of child protection measures, with an overall mean of 4.48 (SD = 0.702). Particularly strong areas included considering children’s best interests (mean = 4.70, SD = 0.702) and protecting children at risk (mean = 4.60, SD = 0.725).

The CCPC members’ level of awareness of mental health services was moderate (mean = 3.53, SD = 1.273). There is room for improvement in members’ awareness of promoting internships and programmes designed to provide mental health services to centre-based OSAEC clients (mean = 3.38, SD = 1.341). Meanwhile, the committee members showed greater awareness of the provision of legal services (mean = 4.14, SD = 0.976) and educational support (mean = 3.81, SD = 0.941).

Areas that require more attention include capital assistance and livelihood programmes (mean = 3.51, SD = 1.226), placement services (mean = 3.62, SD = 1.144) and capacity building initiatives (mean = 3.43, SD = 1.385). The CCPC members demonstrated a good

awareness of advocacy efforts (mean = 4.35, SD = 0.841) and membership coordination coordination between amongst them for activities conducted (mean = 3.86, SD = 0.852).

Overall, while the CCPC in Cagayan de Oro City showed a solid foundation of awareness across various aspects of OSAEC response, there are opportunities for improvement, particularly in areas such as mental health services, capacity building and certain aspects of survivor support and rehabilitation. Continued training and resource allocation in these areas could further strengthen the city’s ability to effectively combat OSAEC.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the state’s duty to safeguard children, highlighting the crucial role of local government units in OSAEC response. Partnerships between government and non-government entities have proven beneficial in refining OSAEC-related policies and procedures. These collaborations enhance case management, streamline court processes, improve referral systems and bolster inter-agency coordination. Moreover, such alliances are instrumental in establishing child-friendly judicial practices and implementing effective protection measures in schools and communities. By leveraging these partnerships, local governments can more effectively fulfil their obligation to protect and promote children’s welfare, particularly in addressing the complex challenges posed by OSAEC.

**Level of Collaboration on Functions and Inter-Agency Collaboration.** The results regarding the level of collaboration across various functions and responsibilities are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** *Level of collaboration across various functions and responsibilities*

Cagayan De Oro City (n = 37)				
Function/responsibility	n	Mean	SD	Verbal interpretation Level of Collaboration
Protection	31	2.84	1.846	To a moderate extent
Mental health	31	2.26	1.264	To a small extent
Medical needs	31	1.84	0.898	To a small extent
Legal services	31	1.96	1.140	To a small extent
Education	31	1.96	1.169	To a small extent
Capital assistance	31	2.29	1.321	To a small extent
Placement services	31	2.12	1.204	To a small extent
Capacity building	31	2.61	1.647	To a moderate extent
Advocacy	31	2.90	1.886	To a moderate extent
Spiritual support	31	1.58	0.807	Not at all
Membership of the CCPC	31	2.22	1.647	To a small extent
Youth programmes	31	2.12	1.204	To a small extent
OVERALL	31	2.19	1.159	To a small extent

The CCPCs’ level of collaboration across various functions and responsibilities related to addressing OSAEC revealed there was room for improvement. The overall level of collaboration of the CCPC was categorised as ‘to a small extent’, with a mean score of 2.19 (SD = 1.159). This indicates that the CCPC’s city’s efforts in coordinating and integrating its approach to supporting survivors of abuse and exploitation could be improved.

However, in some areas, the CCPC’s city demonstrated moderate levels of collaboration, particularly in protection (mean = 2.84, SD = 1.846), advocacy (mean = 2.90, SD = 1.886) and capacity building (mean = 2.61, SD = 1.647). Meanwhile, collaboration in critical areas such as mental health services (mean = 2.26, SD = 1.264), medical needs (mean = 1.84, SD = 0.898), legal services (mean = 1.96, SD = 1.140) and education (mean = 1.96, SD = 1.169) was reported to be at a small extent.

Notably, spiritual support showed the lowest level of collaboration (mean = 1.58, SD = 0.807), interpreted as ‘not at all’. Other areas, such as capital assistance, placement services, membership of the CCPC and its engagement and youth programmes, also demonstrated low levels of collaboration, all falling within the ‘to a small extent’ category.

These findings suggest that while Cagayan de Oro City has established some collaborative efforts to address OSAEC, there is considerable potential for improvement across all domains. Enhancing coordination and integration of services, particularly in areas that showed lower levels of collaboration, could lead to more effective outcomes in supporting vulnerable children and combating OSAEC in the city.

The results regarding the level of inter-agency collaboration are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Level of inter-agency collaboration

Agency		Cagayan De Oro City			
		<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	Verbal interpretation Level of Collaboration
National government agencies	OSAEC prevention	10	3.690	1.646	Coalition
	OSAEC prosecution	10	2.806	1.403	Coordination
	OSAEC protection	10	2.777	1.203	Coordination
	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3.091</b>	<b>1.417</b>	<b>Coordination</b>

City local govern- ment units	OSAEC prevention	6	3.543	1.793	Coalition
	OSAEC prosecution	6	2.478	1.217	Cooperation
	OSAEC protection	6	2.349	1.604	Cooperation
	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2.790</b>	<b>1.538</b>	<b>Coordination</b>
Non- governmental organisations	OSAEC prevention	7	3.333	2.098	Coordination
	OSAEC prosecution	7	2.976	1.370	Cooperation
	OSAEC protection	7	2.382	1.638	Cooperation
	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2.897</b>	<b>1.702</b>	<b>Coordination</b>
Barangay local government units	OSAEC prevention	6	3.112	1.958	Coordination
	OSAEC prosecution	6	2.478	1.217	Cooperation
	OSAEC protection	6	2.295	1.635	Cooperation
	<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2.795</b>	<b>1.603</b>	<b>Coordination</b>
GRAND TOTAL OVERALL		37	2.893	1.565	Coordination

**Scale:** 0–0.83, no interaction at all; 0.84–1.67, networking; 1.68–2.51, cooperation; 2.52–3.34, coordination; 3.35–4.17, coalition; 4.18–5.0, collaboration.

In the CCPC, the level of collaboration among agencies involved in OSAEC prevention, prosecution and protection showed a coordinated approach. The overall level of collaboration for the city was categorised as ‘coordination’, with a mean score of 2.893 (SD = 1.565). In this study, the coordination level of collaboration was positioned at level 4 out of 6 levels of collaboration, with 6 being the highest form of collaboration, suggesting that while there is a considerable degree of organised interaction among stakeholders, there is still room to improve collaborative efforts to achieve more integrated and synergistic outcomes in OSAEC response.

Breaking down the collaboration levels by agency type, national government agencies in Cagayan de Oro City demonstrate the highest level of collaboration with the CCPC, with a mean score of 3.091 (SD = 1.417), which falls under the ‘coordination’ category but is closer to the ‘coalition’ level. The city’s LGUs and barangay LGUs show similar levels of

coordination, with mean scores of 2.790 (SD = 1.538) and 2.795 (SD = 1.603), respectively. NGOs in the city also exhibit a coordination level, with a mean score of 2.897 (SD = 1.702).

Notably, OSAEC prevention efforts in Cagayan de Oro City showed the highest level of collaboration across all agency types, particularly among national government agencies (mean = 3.690, SD = 1.646), which reaches the 'coalition' level. This suggests that the city has made major strides in coordinating preventive measures against OSAEC.

As shown by previous studies, effective collaboration among diverse stakeholders is crucial for child protection. Community engagement and cross-sector coordination have proved to be vital in preventing child violence against children and implementing child-friendly policies. Research indicates that multifaceted approaches involving different entities can significantly greatly enhance child welfare systems (Wamimbi & Kasimbu, 2015; Utari et al., 2023). While the present results indicate there is a structured approach to addressing OSAEC in Cagayan de Oro City, they also highlight opportunities for enhancing collaboration, particularly regarding prosecution and protection efforts. The city's commitment to combating OSAEC is evident. However, there is potential for strengthening inter-agency cooperation to achieve more effective outcomes in safeguarding children from online sexual exploitation and abuse.

#### **Barriers and Obstacles to Inter-Agency Collaboration for OSAEC Prevention, Protection and Prosecution.**

**Challenges in Prosecution.** The challenges faced in prosecuting OSAEC cases in Cagayan de Oro City are multifaceted and complex. The city's CCPC's members encounter major hurdles in the intricate process of rescuing children subjected to OSAEC and arresting perpetrators. A primary challenge is the anonymity afforded to offenders through the use of dummy accounts and sophisticated technologies, making it difficult to identify and locate them. This anonymity complicates the investigation process and poses risks during rescue operations. Adapting legal frameworks to tackle technology-enabled crimes effectively is crucial, as the digital landscape presents novel challenges for law enforcement and prosecution (Cullen et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, safety concerns for both the children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse and the rescue team members are paramount. The trauma experienced by children during rescue operations can lead to difficulties in building trust and obtaining crucial disclosures. Social workers and law enforcement officials may struggle to maintain professionalism while dealing with emotionally challenging situations, particularly when confronted with painful disclosures from young children who have been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.

In addition, geographical challenges play an important role in prosecution, especially in geographically isolated disadvantaged areas (GIDAs) within the city or neighbouring areas. The isolation of these areas hampers timely rescue operations and makes it challenging to gather evidence and conduct investigations effectively. This geographical barrier often results in delayed responses and limited access to necessary resources for both survivors and law enforcement.

The legal process itself presents numerous obstacles. Survivors' reluctance to participate in legal procedures often leads to a lack of evidence, resulting in case dismissals. Inconsistent statements from survivors and their families, influenced by factors such as trauma, cultural norms and external pressures, further complicate the prosecution process. The prevailing culture of silence, rooted in beliefs about family privacy and economic necessity, often prevents timely reporting and hinders the pursuit of justice. Cultural stigma and feelings of embarrassment often impede survivors of online sexual exploitation and abuse from providing essential details for legal proceedings, as observed by Tarroja and colleagues in their 2021 study on disclosure barriers among survivors.

Resource limitations pose another major challenge. The lack of adequate funding for rescue operations, evidence gathering and prosecution activities hampers the effectiveness of anti-OSAEC efforts. The absence of proper video in-depth interview (VIDI) facilities in processing areas further complicates the collection of reliable testimonies from child survivors.

Collaboration with local authorities, particularly at the barangay level, can present a dilemma due to potential conflicts of interest, especially when suspected perpetrators are related to local officials. This situation often leads to information leaks that can jeopardise rescue operations and investigations.

These challenges contribute to the complexity of prosecuting OSAEC cases in Cagayan de Oro City. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including enhanced training for law enforcement and social workers, improved technological infrastructure, increased resource allocation, and efforts to change societal attitudes towards reporting and addressing OSAEC. The city's commitment to combating this issue is evident, but overcoming these hurdles remains a challenge to ensuring justice for survivors and effectively deterring perpetrators.

**Challenges in Protection.** For protection against OSAEC, the collaboration challenges facing the CCPC are multifaceted and complex. The city faces considerable barriers to overcome in various aspects of child protection, including human resources, reintegration mechanisms, budgetary constraints and service coordination.

A primary challenge is the lack of human resources and capacity training. The city struggles with a shortage of specialised personnel, particularly social workers, to effectively manage OSAEC cases. This shortage delays the identification and rescue of children subjected to online sexual abuse and exploitation and hampers investigations and support services. The existing staff often lack specialised training in digital forensics techniques, online investigation methods and trauma-informed care for survivors of sexual abuse.

Reintegration of survivors into the community poses another major challenge. The city's aftercare services face difficulties in providing comprehensive support for healing and societal reintegration. Limited resources, inadequate facilities and a lack of trained professionals hinder the provision of long-term support for survivors. The dysfunctional nature of some Barangay Committees Council or local council for the Protection of Children (BCPCs) further complicates the reintegration process, often due to political changes

and lack of continuity in trained personnel.

Moreover, budgetary limitations severely impact the city's ability to respond effectively to OSAEC cases. Insufficient funding affects various aspects of child protection, from rescue operations to meeting the basic needs of rescued children. This financial constraint often leads to overcrowding in residential care facilities and inadequate resources for food, clothing and educational materials. The fragmentation of protection services is another critical issue. The city struggles to establish clear communication channels, defined roles and collaborative frameworks among various service providers.

Cagayan de Oro also faces challenges with mixed clients in residential facilities. The inability to accommodate very young children or mixed-gender sibling groups in many care centres highlights the need for greater options for care. Additionally, the reluctance of some survivors to stay in shelters, often due to feelings of being imprisoned or isolated, complicates the protection process.

Prioritising OSAEC concerns within the broader context of child protection issues in Cagayan de Oro City is challenging. As OSAEC is managed under the CCPC, which deals with all child-related concerns, there is a risk of OSAEC issues receiving less focused attention. Lastly, ensuring confidentiality in communications and data sharing among agencies while facilitating necessary information exchange for investigations remains a delicate balance. The city grapples with establishing secure channels that protect survivors' privacy while enabling effective inter-agency collaboration.

Collectively, these challenges highlight the complex nature of protecting children from online sexual abuse and exploitation in Cagayan de Oro City. Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive, well-coordinated approach involving multiple stakeholders, increased resources and targeted strategies to effectively improve the city's capacity to combat OSAEC.

**Challenges in Prevention.** The research findings highlight several challenges in terms of collaboration to help prevent OSAEC in Cagayan de Oro City. A major issue is the lack of parental awareness and supervision, with many parents unaware of the nature and risks of OSAEC. This is exacerbated by the 'no touch, no harm' belief, where some view OSAEC as a victimless crime due to the lack of physical contact. A study by Munns et al. (2024) highlighted how OSAEC facilitators rationalise their actions through misguided beliefs, such as perceiving foreign payments to be beneficial and that harm is minimal due to a lack of physical contact, underscoring the complex mindset behind these offences. This finding implies that the city faces difficulties in implementing effective awareness campaigns to educate both the public and key stakeholders about the complexities and consequences of OSAEC.

Another major challenge is the absence of barangay-level ordinances and plans specifically addressing OSAEC. The frequent changes in BCPC focal persons are often due to elections, which disrupt continuity in training and implementation of best practices. This turnover results in a constant need for retraining and rebuilding of expertise at the grassroots level.

Resource constraints also greatly hinder prevention efforts in Cagayan de Oro. There was a notable lack of information campaigns and capacity building initiatives, particularly at the barangay and school levels. The problem of insufficient materials for education and information campaigns, which are crucial for effective prevention, was particularly evident at the local/barangay level. Additionally, there is a gap in awareness about the proper referral pathways for OSAEC cases, affecting the timely reporting and handling of incidents.

The prevailing culture of silence in communities further complicates prevention efforts. Many families and neighbours are reluctant to report OSAEC cases, often due to perceived benefits from the financial transactions involved or fear of repercussions. This silence is compounded by a lack of awareness about available child protection services and the view that child abuse is a private family matter.

Taken together, these challenges highlight the need for comprehensive, sustained efforts in Cagayan de Oro City to increase awareness, strengthen local governance structures, improve resource allocation and change societal attitudes towards OSAEC. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated approach involving multiple stakeholders, from local government units to schools and community organisations.

**Facilitating Factors in OSAEC Prevention, Protection and Prosecution.** The findings revealed several facilitating factors in Cagayan de Oro City's response to OSAEC. These factors contribute to the city's efforts to prevent OSAEC, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators of OSAEC. A key element is the role played by NGOs in assisting the government local government and augmenting city programmes. NGOs such as World Vision and Philippine Island Kids have increased community awareness and collaborated with regional offices to promptly address cases of OSAEC. Continuous work in schools and barangays is another important factor. The city benefits from school caravans advocacy campaigns at schools with regards to ANTI-OSAEC and community awareness campaigns that disseminate information regarding OSAEC prevention.

Notably, the accessibility of the Regional Anti-Cybercrime Unit (RACU) stands out as a significant advantage in Cagayan de Oro. The city benefits from constant communication with and proximity to RACU, enabling swift collaboration and enhancing the speed and efficiency of rescue operations. This accessibility ensures immediate assistance to survivors of OSAEC, minimising the duration of abuse. RACU's specialised training in handling cybercrimes and access to advanced technology and forensic tools further bolsters the city's capacity to investigate and intervene effectively in OSAEC cases.

The city has also implemented unified hotlines for OSAEC cases, which serve as critical resources for reporting and intervention. Previous studies have found that centralised hotlines increase accessibility, streamline the reporting process and offer anonymity and confidentiality, encouraging more individuals to come forward. The 24 hours a day, 7 days a week support provided by these hotlines ensures that incidents can be reported at any time, facilitating better coordination among various stakeholders, including law enforcement, social services and mental health professionals (Šinko et al., 2021; He et al., 2022; Goodman et al., 2023). Additionally, Cagayan de Oro benefits from trained focal persons in



the BCPC and youth championing advocacy at the local level. NGOs, such as IJM International Justice Mission and World Vision, have mobilised children, youth and local officials as active participants in combating OSAEC, increasing the reach of awareness campaigns in schools and communities.

Furthermore, the availability of community-based residential facilities provided by various NGOs in the city offers comprehensive care addressing the physical, psychological and social needs of survivors. These facilities play a crucial role in long-term recovery and social rehabilitation by fostering community integration and leveraging local resources. Lastly, adequate remuneration and allowances for NGO workers contribute significantly to workforce motivation and effectiveness in responding to OSAEC cases. Proper compensation has been shown to influence job satisfaction and retention among NGO personnel, leading to better service delivery and outcomes for vulnerable populations.

The core values, teamwork and commitment to protecting children are evident among CCPC committee members, which facilitates dedication and a strong sense of advocacy in the overall OSAEC response. Moreover, child-friendly prosecution is a notable feature in Cagayan de Oro's approach. The use of child-friendly interviews during prosecution procedures is consistent with national best practices. The city's prosecutors benefit from specialised training in handling OSAEC cases, aligning with the DOJ-IACAT Department of Justice -Inter Agency Committee Againsts Trafficking and National Coordinating Council for Anti Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children – Children Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Material. NCC-OSAEC-CSAEM partnership established nationally.

Continuous efforts to improve referral pathways are evident in Cagayan de Oro. The city benefits from the involvement of educational institutions, with the Department of Education's Social Protection Unit playing a crucial role. Ongoing collaborations to harmonise services with national government agencies and NGOs enhance the city's capacity to respond to OSAEC cases.

Lastly, logistics and moral support among team members facilitate effective responses to OSAEC. The strong connections and trust among Cagayan de Oro City CCPC committee members contribute to successful rescue operations and case management. This collaborative spirit aligns with the principles of effective multidisciplinary teams that are essential for addressing complex social issues such as OSAEC.

These facilitating factors demonstrate Cagayan de Oro City's commitment to combating OSAEC through a multifaceted, collaborative approach involving various stakeholders from government agencies, NGOs and the community.

## **Conclusion**

Cagayan de Oro City has made considerable strides in addressing online sexual abuse and exploitation of children through its collaborative governance approach. The city's efforts are primarily channelled through the City Council for the Protection of Children, an

umbrella organisation for various child protection initiatives, including OSAEC response. This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive strategy but may sometimes lead to OSAEC-related issues receiving less focused attention.

The city's efforts demonstrate a strong foundation in awareness and coordination, particularly in prevention strategies. However, the varying levels of collaboration across different domains in OSAEC response highlight the challenges in comprehensively addressing this issue. While commendable, the level of coordination achieved in inter-agency collaboration suggests there is room for improvement towards more integrated and synergistic partnerships. The disparity in collaboration levels between prevention efforts and other areas, such as prosecution and protection, indicates a need for balanced development across all aspects of OSAEC response. These findings underscore the importance of continuous improvements in awareness, role clarity and inter-agency cooperation.

Nevertheless, the city demonstrates strong awareness of OSAEC issues among committee members and has implemented several facilitating factors that enhance its response capabilities. These include continuous advocacy work in schools and barangays, child-friendly prosecution processes and efforts to improve referral pathways. The accessibility of RACU and the implementation of unified hotlines for OSAEC cases are particularly noteworthy strengths.

However, Cagayan de Oro City faces several challenges in its fight against OSAEC. These include human resource limitations, reintegration difficulties for survivors, budget constraints and fragmentation of protection services. The city also struggles with a lack of parental awareness and supervision, the persistence of the 'no touch, no harm' belief, and a culture of silence in communities.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen Cagayan de Oro City's response to online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC):

- **Refine committee structure and roles:** Delineate prevention, protection and prosecution roles among member organisations. Establish a dedicated task force or subcommittee within the CCPC to focus on OSAEC issues.
- **Expand and strengthen partnerships:** Involve private sector entities through corporate social responsibility initiatives and strengthen collaboration with NGOs to augment resources and expertise in OSAEC prevention and response.
- **Enhance training and expertise:** Develop specialised training programmes for committee members, law enforcement staff, judicial personnel and social workers to improve expertise in handling OSAEC cases, including digital evidence handling and survivor psychology.

- **Strengthen grassroots initiatives:** Develop and implement barangay-level ordinances, establish protocols and awareness campaigns and integrate OSAEC responses into annual Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC) plans.
- **Enhance victim support and rehabilitation:** Develop an exclusive shelter for OSAEC survivors, offering tailored care through multi-stakeholder collaboration. Establish more community-based residential facilities, ensuring comprehensive care and effective reintegration programmes. Furthermore, develop and expand mental health services specifically tailored for OSAEC survivors and their families.
- **Reinforce barangay-level commitment:** Ensure continuity in BCPC focal person roles regardless of political affiliations and provide specialised OSAEC training to address evolving online threats.
- **Enhance prevention strategies and public awareness:** Foster collaboration among educational institutions, parents and technology companies to create safer online environments. Launch comprehensive campaigns on the risks and signs of OSAEC, incorporating digital literacy into school curricula. Specifically, strategies should be developed to overcome cultural norms and personal shame that hinder the reporting and prosecution of OSAEC cases.
- **Leverage technology solutions:** Collaborate with technology companies to develop and implement advanced detection algorithms and reporting mechanisms for OSAEC. Enhance the city's technological infrastructure to support digital forensics and online investigations.
- **Implement age-appropriate policies and regulations:** Consult experts to establish guidelines on children's smartphone usage and enforce strict monitoring of internet access points, implementing age restrictions and usage time limits for children.
- **Increase budget allocation:** Allocate more funds for OSAEC response, particularly for rescue operations, survivor support and long-term rehabilitation programmes.
- **Develop secure communication channels:** Establish secure platforms for inter-agency collaboration while maintaining survivor confidentiality.

By implementing these recommendations, Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, can build upon its existing strengths and address current challenges, enhancing its capacity to combat OSAEC effectively. The city's commitment to child protection and strategic improvements in resources, training and community engagement can greatly bolster its efforts to prevent OSAEC, protect survivors and prosecute OSAEC perpetrators and facilitators.

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# ‘IN NUMBER THERE IS STRENGTH’: MULTI-AGENCY COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN (OSAEC) IN CAGAYAN DE ORO CITY, PHILIPPINES

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## *Summary*

*The Philippines has become a focal point for the global production of child sexual exploitation materials. With at least 85.2 million internet users and 84.45 million social media users, 80% of Filipino children are at risk of online sexual abuse, sometimes even facilitated by their parents (UNICEF, 2016). In 2020, the International Justice Mission found that OSAEC in the Philippine setting is a family-based crime. Cagayan de Oro in the Philippines is considered to be a ‘hotspot’ for crimes related to OSAEC. An article published by the Philippine News Agency (2024) revealed that from 2018 to 2023, Region 10 Anti-Cybercrime Unit (RACU) 10 (Northern Mindanao, Philippines) was able to apprehend at least 34 individuals linked to OSAEC crimes in 19 rescue operations. It is important to note that these operations were made possible through close coordination with local government units (LGUs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who also stood as the primary actors in the prosecution of OSAEC perpetrators and facilitators, as well for the protection and reintegration of survivors, thereby underscoring the importance of inter-agency and inter-committee collaboration in bringing perpetrators to justice and helping survivors to heal. In Cagayan de Oro city, the City Council for the Protection of Children (CCPC) is an umbrella organisation addressing all concerns relating to children, particularly in advocating for children’s rights and protection against OSAEC. The foregoing discussion then leads to the idea that a coordinated multi-stakeholder response involves collaboration and coordination between various stakeholders to address a particular issue or challenge. Building on this lacuna, this study intends to fill the gap and explore the complexity of collaboration between and among government, non-government stakeholders and civil society organisations to protect survivors of OSAEC. Specifically, this research aimed to:*

- 1. Understand the collaboration strategies involved in protecting survivors of OSAEC in terms of composition, functions, and programmes and services.*
- 2. Determine the level of awareness among the committee members involved regarding the nature and characteristics of OSAEC and their corresponding roles and responsibilities.*

3. *Explore and understand the challenges and facilitating factors of the committee members involved in prosecuting those involved in OSAEC, preventing OSAEC and protecting children from OSAEC.*
  - a. *Prosecution*
  - b. *Protection*
  - c. *Prevention*

*This research utilised a combination of researcher-made and modified Likert-scale questionnaires, a focus group discussion protocol and key informant interviews. A four-part questionnaire was administered to the respondents. Before administering the survey questionnaires, the researcher conducted a pilot study to ascertain the validity and reliability of the questionnaire used to gather data for the study. This study underwent the rigour of expert validation, having sought four experts to peruse the questionnaire and its contents. Concerning the analysis of the collected data, the researcher utilised descriptive statistics, particularly frequency and percentage distribution, as well as mean and standard deviation. In addition, thematic analysis was used for the qualitative part of this study to identify, analyse and report themes that emerged in the data collected.*

*The findings revealed that the members of the committee had high levels of awareness of the nature and characteristics of OSAEC. In terms of levels of collaboration, the committee garnered a moderate level in terms of protection but scored high in prevention efforts. In their collaborative work, there were challenges in the prosecution, protection and prevention vis-a-vis facilitating factors that manifested in their pragmatic, responsive mechanism to OSAEC. In terms of prosecution, the challenges facing Cagayan de Oro CCPC include the following: the intricate process of rescue of children and the subsequent arrest of perpetrators, the anonymity of the perpetrator by the usage of dummy accounts, the safety of the child and staff, dilemmas in working with the Barangay Local Government Unit (BLGU) for rescue, painful disclosures from survivors, challenges of geographical distance, especially for cases situated in geographically isolated disadvantaged areas (GIDAs), setbacks in case building and hearing, the reluctance of survivors to take part in legal procedures, lack of evidence in filing a case, inconsistent statements from survivors and their parents, the culture of silence by significant others, negative perceptions of rescue and investigation, and the absence of video in-depth interview (VIDI) rooms in the processing area.*

*In terms of protection, the challenges include the following: lack of human resource training and expertise in handling OSAEC survivors, lack of social workers for case management, reintegration challenges to community/aftercare, dysfunctional BCPC (Local Committee-Barangay Council for the Protection of Children) for reintegration mechanisms, lack of budget for operations, agencies involved have different priority programmes, fragmented protection services, mixed clients served in residential facilities, and continuous escapes from the centre. temporary shelter. In terms of prevention aspects, challenges that emerged included the following: lack of parental awareness and supervision, the 'no touch, no harm' belief, i.e. that it is a victimless crime, lack of resources, lack of information campaigns in local villages and schools with regards to OSAEC, the culture of silence, and poor information regarding referral*

pathways.

*Although challenges in OSAEC responses were identified, facilitating or enabling factors were also revealed in this study, such as the presence of non-government organisations (NGOs) in advocacy work, which also augment the city government regarding logistics, funds and training; the commitment of the committee members and their teamwork in responding; availability of VIDI kit; continuous advocacy for the acceptability of VIDI for interviews; continuous training of prosecutors in handling OSAEC cases; continuous efforts to improve referral pathways; and continuous collaborations to harmonise services with the agencies involved.*

*Implicit in the findings is the need to make more strategic, innovative and collaborative efforts to respond to this emerging social issue and problem. Although facilitating factors are mentioned, much has to do with prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership.*

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