As valuable as community-led approaches are, they are by no means a “silver bullet” to be used in all situations. If the pressures of time and the magnitude of violations against children are enormous, as can happen in emergency settings, then a slow, deliberate, community-led process by itself may not be the best option. For example, if girls and boys are being recruited in large numbers and put into very dangerous settings, it might be more appropriate to use a top-down approach to stanch the flow of recruited children.

Even in such settings, however, it might be possible to overlay top-down and community-led approaches. One could, for example, use a top-down approach to provide immediate action and support, while also using a slower, community-led approach to help generate community solutions and preventive steps over the longer term. This is an area that requires much more attention in the future.

Community-led approaches may also cause unintended harm in particular contexts. In a war zone where spies and fears pervade all social levels, some people or authorities might see the group discussions and meetings, which are usually the backbone of community-led processes, as a form of political organizing or recruitment. Such perceptions could lead to violence against the perceived organizers and the children involved, thereby violating the humanitarian imperative to “Do No Harm.”

In areas of armed conflict or strong political tensions, then, care must be taken to decide whether it is safe and appropriate to use a community-led approach. Of course, this same point applies to other modalities of child protection support as well.

It is also important to view critically the idea of community. Community-led approaches presuppose a sense of community, yet “community” may be contested or even nonexistent in particular contexts. Community-led approaches may be inappropriate or very challenging to implement in settings where there is little sense of community, or deep divisions and tensions exist between groups in the same setting. In urban contexts with highly fluid populations and frequent movements, neighbors may not know each other or may view others as competitors for scarce resources such as housing, food, and water. Amidst very low levels of social cohesion, there may be too little community spirit and sense of commonality of purpose, values, and identity to make it feasible to implement community-driven approaches.

Similarly, if a community had significant ethnic or religious divisions and active hostilities between subgroups, it would likely be very difficult to enable peaceful dialogues, mutual respect, and the highly inclusive process that community-led approaches call for. On a practical level, so much time could be given over to managing the tensions and divisions and ensuring a relatively equal power distribution across groups that relatively little attention could be devoted to addressing the actual child protection issues.

In any particular community, there may be underlying dynamics of power or economics that are not evident initially, but may preclude enabling a community-led process to work well. Practically, there are times when it may be necessary to cut our losses and withdraw.

Other significant obstacles to community-led approaches can arise from the humanitarian architecture, which includes donor demands for immediate results and strict adherence to preconceived timetables,

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logframes, and results frameworks. Some managers may feel that their agency has no choice but to comply with rigid donor demands, which frequently drive top-down approaches. Management demands within a non-governmental organization can also require adherence to standardized approaches with fixed inputs, outputs, and achievements.

Despite these pressures, it is important to step back and remember that our greatest accountability is to the people who have been affected and are in need of support. If community-led approaches are more sustainable and generate better results than top-down approaches do, we must have the courage and the humility to admit the limits of current top-down approaches and change our way of engaging and working with communities.