

A GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-LED CHILD PROTECTION PROCESSES

Child Resilience Alliance

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Mike Wessells for the CRA

Preface

Over the past decade, the field of international child protection in humanitarian and development settings has changed and matured in significant ways. A previous focus on deficits and problems is being eclipsed by a new focus on children's resilience, and more attention is being paid to improving the evidence base and strengthening wider systems of child protection.

However, significant gaps remain with regard to prevention, local ownership, and sustainability. Still needed are deeper ways of engaging with communities which enable communities to own and lead internally guided processes of sustainable change in local beliefs, practices, and norms that may enable harm to children.

The purpose of this Guide and its companion Toolkit is to offer a sustainable approach that is led by communities rather than by experts or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Community-led approaches can take many forms, but all of them feature community power, dialogue, and decision-making—including by children. Community-led approaches generate high levels of community ownership, enable stronger harm prevention and sustainability, and decrease dependency on NGOs and externally-led child protection initiatives.

However, community-led approaches are neither a silver bullet nor a replacement for more top-down approaches. Ultimately, child protection requires an appropriate mix of top-down and more grassroots-driven, bottom-up approaches. We still have much to learn about how to balance and intermix these complementary approaches.

Community-led approaches cannot be reduced to a recipe, a checklist, or a universal set of steps. Communities vary enormously, and in each context communities need space to develop their own ways of working that fit the context. Accordingly, this Guide offers no recipes. Instead, it sets out a wider approach that supports effective community action in a way that builds on community strengths and resilience, engages many parts of the community, enables the agency and voices of girls and boys, and is consistent with children's rights.

The Guide was written with multiple audiences in mind: facilitators, NGO and community practitioners, senior NGO managers, and also donors and policy leaders. It consists of seven brief chapters written in an accessible style with a minimum of academic jargon and references. Each chapter offers diverse examples, reflective questions for practitioners, and practical ideas regarding benchmarks, things to do, and things to avoid. To support the application of this approach, each chapter also refers readers to particular tools from the Toolkit which accompanies the Guide.

Part 1 of this Guide focuses on the broad principles that underlie a community-led approach and the need to transform our way of working toward a more humble orientation, featuring greater power-sharing with communities and psychological space for local dialogue and decision-making.

Part 2 develops a highly contextualized, community-led process, the heart of which is slow, inclusive dialogue and collective decision-making which does not reproduce existing community power structures. The Guide emphasizes how outsiders can be valuable facilitators, co-learners, and capacity-builders who enable inclusivity and internal mobilization of people at different levels on behalf of vulnerable children.

The spirit of this Guide and Toolkit is that the journey toward strengthened child protection systems must begin with effective listening and a spirit of humility and co-learning alongside communities.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

CAC	Community AIDS Coordinating Committee
CRA	Child Resilience Alliance
CWC	Child Welfare Committee
ILI	Interagency Learning Initiative on Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Child Protection Systems
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PAR	Participatory action research
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

PART 1:

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY-LED APPROACHES TO CHILD PROTECTION

Chapter 1.

The Limits of Top-Down Approaches to Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms

The global Child Protection Minimum Standards define child protection as “the prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children.”¹ Most child protection workers agree on the importance of top-down steps, which are initiated and guided by authorities, in the strengthening of comprehensive child protection systems.

Child protection systems typically stand on a foundation of child rights instruments, laws, and policies that prohibit violations against children, such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse, early marriage, assault and bullying, trafficking, dangerous labor, and recruitment into armed forces and armed groups, among many others.

The value of such prohibitions derives in no small part from the fact that they are imposed by authorities. In fact, laws and policies that aim to protect children lose their value if authorities do not enforce them in a uniform and fair manner. At the community level, too, top-down approaches have their value and place.

The purpose of this chapter is to help readers step back from current practice, in which top-down approaches are dominant, and reflect on the limits of such approaches. The objectives are to:

- show the value of top-down, expert-led approaches in particular settings; and
- to increase understanding of how these approaches are limited.

The latter point includes how top-down approaches evoke low levels of community ownership, increase dependency, do too little on prevention, and do not help local people to develop their own sustainable solutions to problems of child protection and well-being.

Key Question for Practitioners

Is my agency’s way of working too top-down, and what could I do to help strengthen its community engagement and ownership?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC1; Training: TRN 1 & TRN 2; Management: MGM 1 & 2.

¹ Child Protection Working Group (2012), p. 13.

Top-Down, Community-Based Approaches

Emergency situations clearly illustrate the need for top-down approaches. Imagine that a major earthquake devastates a crowded urban area in a country that is already racked by chronic poverty, weak governance, and a paucity of supports for vulnerable children. In the blink of an eye, masses of families become homeless and large numbers of children become unaccompanied or separated.

As people live on the streets or take refuge in camps that have been temporarily set up, or in whatever neighborhoods remain, children are subjected to risks such as family separation, exposure to live electrical wires and unstable structures, sexual exploitation and violence, discrimination, neglect or lack of proper care, psychosocial distress, and use of harmful substances. Lacking food, some children take to stealing, bringing them into conflict with the law. Although the need for basic necessities and social supports is enormous, the earthquake has badly disrupted services, damaged the social fabric, and worsened poverty, thereby aggravating all of the problems mentioned above.

The urgency of the situation demands immediate, effective action, mitigating against a slower, highly participatory approach. Some of the greatest risks to children arise near where they live—in their community setting. Families can meet some of children’s protection needs, but by themselves cannot always meet these needs, especially in such a context. When existing social structures and processes are not operative, having effective community-based child protection mechanisms in place is a high priority.

This type of emergency context demands immediate action. Such action is often taken through top-down approaches to child protection at community or grassroots level. Typically, in these situations an international non-governmental organization (NGO) assesses the main child protection risks and then enables the formation and capacity-building of a Child Welfare Committee (CWC, sometimes called a Child Protection Committee) in consultation with local people. A CWC might consist of 10–15 community members (or members of the displaced, affected group) who, following training, monitor the risks to children, report serious violations against children (e.g., rape of a child) to authorities, work locally to prevent abuses to children, and enable grassroots supports such as non-formal, psychosocial support for affected children.

A CWC is a community-based child protection mechanism since it operates at community level and the activities are carried out by community members. This is a partnership approach insofar as the NGO and community members work together to achieve the common goal of protecting children.

This approach is top-down in several respects. Typically, it is the NGO that initiates, defines the problem, guides the planning and implementation, and also evaluates its success or lack thereof. Community members are consulted and participate, but the work is defined and often led by external, expert child protection workers who define priorities, indicate that CWCs are needed, and provide relevant training and follow-up support for community CWC members.

Perhaps most importantly, the NGO holds the power and takes the key decisions. Imagine, for example, that an assessment has indicated child-beating as a significant risk to children, but community members say that child-beating is not a problem since parents and teachers need to discipline unruly children and teach them appropriate values and respect for authority. The NGO child protection workers would likely try to teach local people about child rights and the harm caused to children by corporal punishment. They would also likely persuade community leaders to accept that child-beating needs to be addressed, or they would even make willingness to address this issue a condition for partnering with the NGO.

Particularly in desperate circumstances, most communities want to partner with external NGOs in the hope of securing material aid and better conditions for their families. Indeed, NGOs in such conditions wield significant power even without trying—the economic asymmetry between the NGO and affected communities makes communities eager to partner, willing to silence their own priorities and doubts, and compliant with NGO suggestions and approaches.

Top-down, community-based approaches such as those described in the example above are not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, they have several advantages, such as enabling rapid responses like reuniting unaccompanied children with their families. In addition to responding to violations against children, they may also reduce suffering and help to save lives in a highly dangerous situation in which there are no existing structures or group processes that can perform the functions of child protection.

Many agencies favor these approaches because they enable a rapid response to violations against children in a manner that is consistent with international child protection standards. Managers frequently prefer them because they follow fixed timetables and logframes and can be implemented according to standardized protocols. Also, they promise the kind of relatively quick results on a large scale that donors increasingly require. From this standpoint, it would be ill-advised to do away with top-down approaches.

An important point is that bottom-up and top-down approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary. The wider task of strengthening national child protection systems requires a mixture of different kinds of work. Top-down approaches are necessary, for example, in establishing a framework of national laws and policies that prioritize, legitimate, and support the protection of children. Bottom-up approaches, meanwhile, are necessary for enabling sustainable supports for children's protection at grassroots level and building an environment of prevention. And middle-out efforts, such as work at municipal or district level to support child protection, are needed in order to foster connections between the grassroots and national elements of the child protection system and to promote congruence between these different elements.

From this standpoint, it would be misguided to focus solely, as the child protection sector has, on a top-down approach. The spirit of this Guide is that much more attention to bottom-up approaches is needed in order to strengthen child protection systems and achieve the wider humanitarian goal of sustainability.

Limits of Top-Down, Expert-Driven Approaches

Despite their advantages, top-down approaches have numerous limitations and problematic aspects. In terms of strengthening child protection systems, top-down approaches often lead to decontextualization in which outside models (such as those from the Anglo-Saxon world) are imposed in ways that do not fit the local context.² At the community level, significant limitations include relatively low levels of community ownership, self-silencing by community members, backlash, high levels of dependency, and low levels of sustainability.

Community Ownership

With regard to child protection, community ownership refers to the extent to which communities have strong concerns about children's issues, see particular work to support vulnerable children as their own, take primary responsibility for the success of that work, and engage in self-motivated action to improve children's lives. These elements of common concern, collective identity and responsibility, and internal motivation and initiative are typically weak when agencies use top-down approaches,³ which concentrate power in the hands of an outside body such as an NGO.

A global review of community-based child protection mechanisms⁴ found that community ownership was the most important determinant of the effectiveness of such measures. It also found, however, that most NGO-led interventions to establish and support Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) were top-down and achieved relatively low levels of community ownership.

Typically, community members described the work of NGO-led CWCs as being, for example, "a Save the Children project." Seeing the CWC primarily as the responsibility of an outside agency, local people did not exercise high levels of initiative and responsibility for it, nor did they mobilize community resources (such as land, space for meetings, etc.) in support of it. Ordinary people in the communities concerned were not highly motivated to participate in or support the work of the CWCs. When external funding for the CWC work ended, the CWCs tended to flounder or collapse entirely, a point that will be commented on further below.

In short, while there was significant community *participation* in the examples reviewed, there were low levels of community *ownership*. This was reflected in the highly selective participation of community members in child protection work. Community ownership entails high levels of participation and a keen sense of responsibility by diverse people, which is essential for describing something as a community process or action.

Yet the top-down formation of CWCs typically limits the discussion of children's situations to a limited number of people, mainly the CWC members. This gives the mistaken impression that

² Forbes et al. (2016).

³ Top-down approaches can generate significant levels of community ownership, when they help local people to do something they already want to do (for example, reunite unaccompanied children with their families).

⁴ Wessells (2009).

child protection in the community is somehow handled by the CWC. It is as if general community members have no role, when in fact ordinary parents and citizens have very important roles to play in children’s protection and well-being.

A key question, then, is: what enables or impedes community ownership? Table 1 below gives a snapshot of some of the main enablers of and obstacles to community ownership.

Table 1. Things That Enable or Block Community Ownership.

Enablers of Community Ownership	Obstacles to Community Ownership
Community has relatively high levels of power and control, and makes key decisions	Low power, control, and decision-making authority by community
Sense of collective responsibility for children’s well-being	NGO-oriented engagement with community
Community people identify the work for children as their own	Community people identify the work for children as belonging to an NGO
Space for inclusive, collective dialogue and decision-making by community people, with patient cultivation by outside agency	Didactic, top-down approach that aims to achieve quick results
Motivation animated by collective concern and vision of helping vulnerable children	Mostly monetary motivation, with early introduction of large sums of money
Building on existing community resources, networks, and ideas	Ignoring local capacities and resources and emphasizing those introduced from the outside
Outside agency works as a catalyst, facilitator and co-learner, with community in the driver’s seat	Outside agency works as an expert and authority that guides community toward the agency’s viewpoint and approach

Unfortunately, the obstacles to community ownership shown in the right-hand column of Table 1 apply to many top-down approaches. In such approaches, NGOs hold the power and make the key decisions, and they engage with communities in ways that fit their priorities, mission, technical expertise, and funding. In essence, they encourage selected community members to partner with them to achieve particular outcomes.

This colors the engagement with communities, keeping the focus on what the agencies bring and can do rather than on the communities’ power and resources. At best, this way of engaging regards communities as partners, but with limited power. At worst, this way of engaging is paternalistic and regards community members as passive victims or beneficiaries—people who are helped by NGOs but who themselves hold little real power. Money may be introduced early on to pay community people for their time and effort, and this may unintentionally emphasize

external resources and relationships over a community's concern for children as a source of motivation for getting involved.

These problems make it difficult to achieve deep community change in practices such as local people's use of corporal punishment to discipline their children. The prevention of such violations against children requires a slow process of internal dialogue, decision-making, and agreement to develop and use other approaches. Such a process of social change, however, can be undermined by the use of a top-down approach, which can produce problems such as self-silencing and dependency on outside actors.

Self-Silencing



By comparison with an impoverished community or group of local people, an international NGO holds enormous wealth and power. Even NGO vehicles and NGO workers' dress and manner of speaking tend to highlight this disparity of wealth and power.

Because the NGO child protection specialists who engage with the community are seen as being relatively well-educated, wealthy, and powerful, they may be seen as bringing with them Western science and a greater understanding than local people have. Even if the workers of a particular NGO say they are not bringing in large amounts of money, local people will likely know or have heard of people in other communities who have received considerable financial and material goods via the presence and work of an NGO.

This power differential can make it difficult for NGO workers and community members to engage in an authentic manner. Community members may be thinking: "Why are these NGO people talking about beating children, which is normal, when we do not have enough food or

proper shelter or health care?” However, they may be reluctant to say this out loud since that would violate local norms of hospitality. Local people may also “play along” with the NGO in the hope of gaining material aid that could benefit their families. They may silence their own desires, doubts, and views in order to please the NGO workers and keep them engaged in the community.

This self-silencing can limit people’s voice and participation, and it can leave local people feeling disempowered and subjugated by the external agency. If local people feel disrespected and dominated by outsiders, reawakening the pain associated with colonialism, they will be less motivated to pour themselves into the project and achieve positive results on behalf of children. For the NGO, it may be difficult to know what local people really think, and the NGO workers may not look behind the power dynamics and reflect on how they may not be accurately hearing what community members actually think. This dynamic raises the possibility of a contrived partnership and game-playing, which will be unlikely to stimulate the rich community engagement and mobilization needed to ensure the success of the program.

Backlash

Top-down approaches to child protection may also produce backlash—negative reactions toward the NGO and/or its promoted activities that can undermine program effectiveness and sour relations with the NGO.

In post-war Sierra Leone, for example, NGOs frequently established Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) and “sensitized” local people about how child-beating harms children and the importance of supporting child rights. The intent was to support the implementation of the 2007 Child Rights Act, which had called for the establishment of a CWC in each village.

However, this top-down approach to introducing child rights produced backlash. In ethnographic research that asked many different Sierra Leoneans in two districts for the main harms to children, local people spontaneously identified “child rights” as one of the top ten harms. They said that the NGOs had taught child rights to young people, who subsequently reported parents who beat their children to the authorities. The adults complained bitterly that the NGOs had undermined their authority as parents, contributed to bad behavior among children, and taught children their rights without placing equal emphasis on their responsibilities. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, too.⁵

⁵ Behnam (2011); Child Frontiers (2010); Krueger et al. (2013).



Most likely, the backlash occurred not only because people disagreed with the prohibition against corporal punishment but also because it had been imposed on them from outside and conflicted with local social norms and cultural values.⁶

In Sierra Leone, a “well child” is one who is serious in school, obedient with parents, willing to help the family, and respectful of elders. To bring up a child properly is part of a web of interacting social and cultural obligations at different levels. Parents see it as their obligation to beat a disobedient child—this is what it means to be a “good parent” and a good member of the community. Parents also expect to be criticized by other parents if they do not beat an unruly child and teach him or her proper behavior.

Amidst these norms, the process of lecturing parents about what they are doing wrong and on the best way to parent can come across as artificial and disrespectful and ultimately will not have the intended outcome. These parents’ sense of being disrespected stemmed also from the fact that most NGOs in Sierra Leone had apparently not taken the time to learn about local social norms and the values underlying them and to start by listening, asking questions, and respectfully encouraging and facilitating discussion.

⁶ Wessells (2015).

Poor Sustainability



Perhaps the greatest limitation of top-down approaches is their poor sustainability. NGO-facilitated CWCs have produced results, but CWCs seldom endure beyond the period of external funding.

Multiple factors may contribute to this unfortunate outcome. Top-down approaches tend to create dependency since they feature the role of external child protection agencies and experts who analyze the situation and prescribe an intervention to address child protection issues in the community. This mode of engagement sends a strong signal that child protection analysis and intervention is best guided by highly-educated, well-trained specialists.

Communities are not left out, but they are relegated to the back seat, since it is the experts who guide the analysis and take the decisions. Also, CWCs may become dependent on outside agencies for training and advice on how to handle difficult issues. The global review discussed above found that CWC members frequently identified inadequate training as a significant gap. At the end of the funding period, CWCs quietly ceased their work, in part because local people had become dependent on outside experts and agencies who had now moved on.

The most important cause of the poor sustainability of CWCs, however, is a low level of community ownership. Ordinary community members neither take responsibility for the child protection work nor see the work of the CWC as their own. Usually, they see the CWC as the work of an outside agency, which does not reflect the decision-making, power, and action of the local collective. Seeing it as an NGO project, they do not pour their creativity, energy, and resources into helping it to continue. As a result, when the project is over, the CWC flounders and eventually expires.

Weak Focus on Prevention

The strategy of working to protect children through CWCs is much stronger when it comes to response than to prevention.

As noted above, the strength of this kind of strategy is that there is a specified, hopefully well-prepared body—a CWC—that can respond appropriately to or, if necessary, refer to the appropriate body severe violations such as the rape of a child. In practice, the functionality of NGO-led CWCs tend to be quite varied with regard to their response.

Yet the functionality is even lower regarding prevention. At community level, one frequently hears national NGO practitioners bemoan the fact that they have taught people about the harms caused by practices such as corporal punishment and early marriage only to find that community people continue to engage in those practices. Frustrated, the workers may exclaim: “We sensitized them on that, but they still do it!”

The limited attention paid to—and success achieved with regard to—prevention is regrettable. It brings to mind the adage about people who live near a dangerous river that they often have to cross. It may be better to build a bridge upstream than to focus only on rescuing people who are about to drown.

The weakness of CWCs regarding prevention occurs because CWCs often run counter to the tide of local social norms, practices, and values. For a time, the top-down approach of imposing a CWC may seem to work. While the NGO is present, segments of the community may be willing to engage with the NGO on making the CWC functional, and the CWC may have active cases.

Subsequently, however, the weight of local norms leads most local people to circumvent the CWCs and to regard them as not very helpful “NGO projects.”

In fact, many local people tend to see CWCs as outsider-led activities that do not reflect local values, beliefs, practices, and norms. Top-down approaches are weak with regards to key factors such as local ownership, adequately building on local strengths, and locally-guided change of social norms. Quite often, the interventions used do not fit the local context. As a result, they are limited in their effectiveness and sustainability.

Reflection on Implications

In light of these limitations, it is vital to seek alternatives that complement top-down approaches, offer a stronger way forward, and unleash the full creative power and agency of communities. Since reflection is the key to successful change, please take a moment to reflect quietly on the questions presented in the box below:

Questions for Reflection

Have I or my agency used top-down approaches and CWCs in addressing child protection?

What are some of the limits of this approach that I have seen?

How do I see CWCs?

- Are they highly effective when it comes to prevention as well as response? Why or why not?
- Do average community people tend to use and support CWCs?
- Does the use of CWCs have unintended consequences? What are they?
- Is the imposition of a CWC a fully respectful way of engaging with community members?
- Am I open to alternative approaches?

Perhaps the time has come to develop and test alternative approaches that open new possibilities and avoid these limitations. Even if your agency has been invested in top-down approaches, our willingness to innovate and try out new approaches is an important element in being a good humanitarian and achieving accountability to the people we serve.

The new approaches set out in this Guide are best thought of as complements to rather than replacements for top-down approaches. Indeed, a bottom-up approach is not a “silver bullet” solution to be used in all circumstances. A significant challenge in the child protection sector is to find the appropriate balance between the use of different approaches, adapting this balance to fit individual contexts.

Chapter 2.

Community-Led Approaches to Child Protection

As the name implies, community-led approaches are those that are led not by a non-governmental organization (NGO) or other outsiders but by a collective, community process. Community-led approaches are grounded in the idea of “people power”; that is, the ability of ordinary people, even under difficult circumstances, to organize themselves, define their main problems or challenges, and collectively address those problems.

This view of people’s power reflects the thinking of writers such as Paulo Freire,⁷ who has emphasized the dignity, agency, and voice of even the poorest, most oppressed people. It also resonates with work in the tradition of liberation theology,⁸ Robert Chambers’ work on participatory rural appraisal,⁹ Mary Anderson’s Listening Project,¹⁰ and the global wealth of participatory action research,¹¹ among others.

In this respect, community-led approaches are not new, and they reflect development principles that have been known for many years. Still, highly participatory approaches have so far had a marginal presence in international child protection work and deserve much wider attention. Community-led approaches reflect the fact that communities have been taking steps themselves down through the centuries to protect vulnerable children, although they have never named this work “child protection.”

The purpose of this chapter is to help readers to understand what is meant by a community-led approach. Its objectives are to:

- increase awareness of how communities already take action that helps to protect children;
- boost understanding of what a community-led approach is;
- outline key principles that underlie a community-led approach; and
- stimulate critical thinking about community-led approaches.

Key Question for Practitioners

Should there be more room for more community-led approaches in the setting in which you currently work?

⁷ Freire (1968).

⁸ Gutierrez (1988).

⁹ Chambers (1994).

¹⁰ Anderson et al. (2012).

¹¹ Chevalier & Buckles (2013); Reason & Bradbury (2013); Pretty et al. (1995).

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1; Training: TRN 3, TRN 4, & TRN 5; Management: MGM 2.

How Ordinary People and Communities Help to Protect Children

The term "child protection" may evoke images of serious violations against children and the intervention of police, social workers, or trained child protection workers.

In reality, however, most children worldwide grow up without ever having talked with police, social workers, or child protection workers. Usually, family members, neighbors, and other community members do most of the work to keep children safe. For example, imagine the following scenarios:

- A mother hears a dog barking at her crying three-year-old daughter, picks her up, and soothes her while keeping her safe.
- A flood has occurred, and a father and his daughter are stranded on a hilltop with the water rapidly rising around them. But other people from the neighboring town have a boat, rescue them, and get them to a safe place.
- A four-year-old boy in a home starts a fire while trying to cook something and is rescued by a neighbor who sees the smoke and rushes in to save him.



- A 13-year-old girl is sexually assaulted by a stranger but manages to scream loudly. Other community members come to her rescue and even manage to capture her assailant.
- An armed group has attacked and burned a rural village, killing many people. A mother, however, manages to run away and hide with her two-year-old son.
- A 12-year-old boy has started staying away from school and taking drugs. A community member talks with him and learns that the boy hated school because older boys bullied him there. The community member talks with the teacher, who takes steps to stop the bullying and reaches out to bring the boy back to school.
- A single mother has to go to the clinic for weekly medical checkups. Family members help her by taking turns watching her children during her checkups, making sure the children are safe.

These examples, which reflect the daily lives of children, illustrate how the family and community are in most cases the first line of response to threats to children's safety. Overall, it is families and communities who do the heavy lifting in enabling children's protection and well-being.

Since their job is ongoing, the work of protecting children is never completed in any final sense. New threats emerge, yet families and communities are there for their children, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In many contexts, community groups and networks take collective action to address the things that could potentially harm children. For example, a religious group in Southern Africa might observe that there are large numbers of orphaned children who are at risk of being abused sexually. Out of concern for children's well-being, the group takes steps to find safe home placements for the orphans and to help the community to impose penalties on perpetrators of sexual abuse.

In many communities, child protection occurs through the action of endogenous processes that support vulnerable children. In Afghanistan, for example, communities have a traditional structure—the *shura*—a local authority structure which consists of male elders. In northern Afghanistan, one *shura* noticed that young children were being harmed by falling into open, uncovered wells and so organized the villagers to build well-covers, thereby protecting the children.

Similarly, in Sierra Leone following the end of the war, the sexual abuse of girls—some of whom were former child soldiers—was a widespread problem. In response, Paramount Chiefs in some chiefdoms passed by-laws that imposed penalties on people who harassed or sexually assaulted the girls. In Zambia, one female chief single-handedly annulled several hundred early marriages of girls.

These and many other examples both illustrate the potential power of traditional processes and serve as a poignant reminder of the important role that civil society plays in protecting children.

Of course, child protection workers, social workers, and police are significant elements in a wider system of child protection. But ordinary people—family members and community members—are the backbone of strong systems of child protection. If they are not supported well, the protection of children at local, grassroots level will likely decrease.

In many ways, community-led child protection is about enhancing and systematizing the existing ability of communities to contribute to children’s protection and well-being.

What is a Community-Led Approach to Child Protection?

Terms such as “community-led” can take on a variety of meanings. Based on experiences in different settings, there is little doubt that “community-based” and “community-led” processes are often equated. However, there is in fact a world of difference between the two approaches (see Tool TRN 3 in the companion Toolkit), as the former are top-down whereas the latter are bottom-up.

Broadly, a community-led approach to child protection is one that is driven by the community itself. Indeed, a useful guide to recognizing community-led approaches is the adage, “If it doesn’t come from the community, it isn’t a community-led approach.” This applies to all phases of the child protection work, from the selection of the issues to be addressed to the evaluation of the action effects.

The fullest versions of community-led child protection embody all the criteria shown in the box below. However, community-led actions may be thought of as varying along different dimensions, including the extent of community power and decision-making. In the fullest community-led approach to child protection, the community selects the harms to children to be addressed and decides how to address them and what local capacities and resources will be used. This is important because the selection reflects the vision, values, concerns, and judgment of the community members. The issues selected become rallying cries that support community ownership of the issues and the community organization and mobilization to address them.

Criteria for Community-Led Approaches to Child Protection

- Community decides the child protection issue(s) to be addressed
- Community decides how to address the issue(s)
- Community decides what local capacities and resources to use
- Community designs the action
- Community implements the action
- Community conducts its own evaluation of its action
- Relatively low reliance on outside facilitators or actors
- Inclusive community participation, including girls and boys
- High levels of community ownership
- Minimal reliance on outside actors

In weaker variations of community-led approaches, which are perhaps better described as “participatory approaches” or “community mobilization approaches,” the NGO decides the issue or the general contours of the issue. Based on its assessment data or its donor’s priorities, for example, an NGO might decide that the issue to be addressed is violence against children, with the community free to decide which form of this violence to address.

A difficulty with this approach is that the issue of violence against children may evoke low levels of community ownership and may also contravene community social norms. Because such an approach starts with the issue being defined by the NGO, it is difficult to call it a community-led approach.

It is important as well to be clear about the meaning of “community.” A community may be defined in many different ways.¹² Here, it is defined as a collective of people who live in a particular area and are willing to collaborate on the achievement of a shared goal¹³ such as bringing in a harvest or, in this case, protecting vulnerable children.

In relatively homogeneous, stable communities—such as rural communities with low population movement in which residents share a common language, ethnicity, and religious preference—a community may be characterized by shared values, beliefs, identity, and social and cultural practices. However, in peri-urban or urban settings where people come and go, a community may not be homogeneous or stable, and there may not be a shared language, religious preference, and identity. Nevertheless, local people may be willing to collaborate in order to enable the protection and well-being of their children.

Essentially, community-led action happens when a group of people in a particular area recognize that it is within their collective self-interest to work together to address a shared need or concern.

When we say that community-led approaches are led by a collective community process we mean two things. Firstly, the community holds the power and makes the key decisions—it is not an NGO or the government that guides the decisions but the people themselves. Secondly, a significant number and diversity of community members either participate in or give moral support or encouragement to the decision-making and work conducted by the community.

For example, if only 5% of the residents of a community take part in a group effort to improve parenting, it would be odd to call this a community-led approach, since speaking of “a community” implies a more holistic social engagement. However, it is possible that an initiative started by a small number of community members will eventually spread and becomes a community-led action.

It is also important to remember that many communities are dominated by a small, elite group of decision-makers who may be the relatives of the Chief, or the people with the most education. These small elites may not actually speak for local people in the sense of representing their

¹² McKeown et al. (1987); Patrick et al. (1995); Zakus & Lysack (1998).

¹³ It should be noted that in some geographic areas, people who live near each other in a similar area are not willing to collaborate with most other people, possibly because they fear others or because they compete strongly with others for things such as food, water, and shelter. In such settings, it seems inappropriate to speak of a “community.”

interests. Indeed, small power elites frequently act in ways that advance and preserve their own interests and power, while deliberately excluding or marginalizing other people. As emphasized throughout this Guide, it is highly important to reflect continuously on questions such as: *Who is the community?* Who actually participates in or is left out of the community-led process? Who holds the power?

A collective process qualifies as community-led when a significant portion of the community makes the decisions regarding a particular task and actively encourages work on that task. From this standpoint, a community-led process is one that is run through people power, not through the power and action only of men, or formal leaders, or community elites. This point becomes even clearer in the principles outlined below.

Principles of Community-Led Approaches

The principles of community-led approaches in the box below have been derived through the reflection and work of groups and agencies who have used highly participatory approaches in many different countries and contexts, including emergency and development contexts. Reflecting the audience of this Guide, the principles focus on how external workers should be oriented and what they should do in order to place greater power in the hands of communities and enable processes of community-led action on behalf of vulnerable children.

Principles of Community-Led Action: Putting Communities in the Driver's Seat

- Work with humility.
- Build trust, respect, and relationships first.
- Listen in an active, nonjudgmental manner.
- Build on existing community resources and strengths.
- Learn more fully about the context and community power dynamics on an ongoing basis.
- Encourage an inclusive community process at all stages.
- Enable collective agency and action—communities make the key decisions.
- Use a patient, flexible, dialogue-oriented approach.
- Build community capacities for mobilizing the community, making inclusive decisions, and taking effective action.
- Enable bottom-up collaboration and linkages between communities and formal child protection stakeholders and mechanisms.
- Enable children to be key actors in the community-led process.
- Using child rights as a guide, support social change from within the community.
- Be prepared to step outside the usual child protection “box.”

Each of these principles is discussed in turn below.

1. Work with humility

Communities are complex entities, and it is important to enter them with a humility that is grounded in a spirit of listening, learning, and power-sharing. Your spirit of learning should recognize that “I am new to this community and have much to learn about it and how people here understand and care for children.”

Working with humility is not a feigned role but a genuine, appreciative orientation that views local parents, community members, and children as people who have accumulated wisdom in supporting children. The spirit of power-sharing should recognize that the community has agency and can take steps on its own to improve children’s protection and well-being—but only if people have the motivation, space, and power to do so.

2. Build trust, respect, and relationships first

Trust is the essential foundation for NGOs in enabling community-led work on child protection. Without trust, local people will likely be reluctant to get involved, since they may see the discussions and processes as reflecting outsider values and priorities. NGO workers can build trust by listening to and respecting local people and by taking time to build relationships.

Of considerable value is the patient approach of sitting and listening, responding, and talking in an open, respectful manner with elders, women, or youth in contextually appropriate contexts, such as an urban center or under a tree. Even where time is an issue for the NGO workers, it may be possible to continue slow, respectful discussions while assessments are being conducted.

Building relationships requires having a mutual understanding about the role of the agency. Most often, when an NGO arrives in a community, community members assume (based on experience) that the NGO has resources available for those who say and do the “right” things. In a community-led approach, the NGO needs to emphasize the central role of the community.

A useful way to do this is to discuss the limits of what NGOs can accomplish and make it clear from the outset that they are not coming in to convince people to do something in particular or to provide resources to initiate specific action. Rather, the role of the NGO is to support community action on behalf of vulnerable children.

3. Listen in an active, nonjudgmental manner

As child protection workers, we sometimes begin our engagement with communities by analyzing violations against children, using international concepts and terms, and discussing interventions according to international standards.

However, this mode of engagement puts the NGO in the driver’s seat and makes it difficult to learn deeply about the community and to form a strong, authentic relationship with local people.

Having positioned ourselves as “experts” who impose our own language and questions, we tacitly judge local people and practices. This not only marginalizes communities but also makes it difficult to build trust with the community. After all, why should local people open up to us if we, the outsiders, judge local practices by outside standards?

In humanitarian work, there is a pervasive listening gap. Pressed by preconceived timetables and donor expectations and focused on implementing their own programs, NGO workers frequently do not take time to listen to local people. Even when outsiders do listen, they frequently filter what local people say through their own “expert” categories and priorities rather than taking a more empathic, open approach.

Yet empathic listening is an essential first step toward deep engagement with communities (see Tool FAC 4 in the companion Toolkit). Empathy is absent or weak when an NGO worker imposes his or her own language, assuming that they know what the important harms to children are, and spends time analyzing rather than listening in an active way.

It can be valuable to ask in an open way questions such as: “Who are considered children in this community?”, “What harms do they experience?”, “What do people do already to help keep children safe and improve their well-being?”, and “What happens when harms to children occur?” Only by asking such questions and paying close attention to local idioms and understandings will we be in a position to understand how community people see children, child protection issues, and various protective factors.

4. Build on existing community resources and strengths

A useful step toward understanding communities and building trust is to make sure that initial learning efforts focus on community strengths as well as deficits. A deficits focus, such as one that looks only at forms of violence against children, can give a one-sided picture and tacitly judges the community or implicitly prescribes a particular solution. Taking a deficits approach can leave communities feeling disempowered and unappreciated or misunderstood.

Instead, the initial engagement with communities and learning phase should be appreciative and seek to identify existing community strengths, assets, and resources—as well as deficits. Valuable strengths may include natural helpers, female and male leaders who are seen as legitimate and as good role models, traditional or contemporary social norms of caring collectively for children, and religious groups, women’s groups, or youth groups that help to support children’s safety and well-being. Particularly in rural settings where traditional values and practices are strong, there may be endogenous mechanisms for managing conflict between families, promoting justice, and enabling collective harmony.

In all settings, there are non-formal social networks that make it possible to send key messages and mobilize groups of people. One of the most valuable community resources is the habit of collective dialogue, planning, and action. Community-led approaches frequently succeed by virtue of activating and building on these resources, which bring forward practical knowledge and problem-solving abilities, while also being low-cost and sustainable.

5. Learn more fully about the context and community power dynamics on an ongoing basis

The rapid assessments favored by international NGOs have value, yet they do not allow deeper learning about communities, their context, or their power dynamics. Since every context is different, it is essential to regard each community as distinct, learn fully about it, and avoid imposing a universalized approach that does not fit.

To understand and work well with communities, it is essential to learn about the power differences within the community; that is, “who is at the table” and “who is not at the table.” This can be done by learning about children, children’s issues, and supports for children from different sub-groups within the community, who may vary in gender, age, socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity, or other dimensions.

Such learning can help to guide efforts to enable an inclusive process. It can also help to avoid developing projects that quietly privilege the local power elite without doing enough to support the children who are most vulnerable. Ideally, the learning will be ongoing (see Tool FAC 8 in the companion Toolkit) and will intermix quantitative and qualitative methods, including direct observation of children.

6. Encourage an inclusive community process at all stages

A high level of inclusivity is one of the hallmarks of community-led approaches. If elite groups dominate community decision-making then other people may go along with activities, but there may be only modest levels of community ownership and engagement. Similarly, if only a small number of people contribute to a community action process or only particular sub-groups benefit from it, jealousies and social divisions may arise that will likely limit its effectiveness or lead the group to burn out.

In contrast, community-led approaches engage “people power” by bringing in many different segments of the community, enabling everyone to have a voice and to take part in and “own” the decision-making and action.

Although it takes time to cultivate, broad participation not only makes the approach truly a community effort but also makes it more likely to be effective and sustainable. When most people in a community contribute to choosing the issue(s) to be addressed, developing an action that builds on local capacities and resources, and making the action work, then the resulting collective motivation, sense of ownership and responsibility, and lack of outside dependence will help the action to succeed and to continue.

7. Enable collective agency and action—communities make the key decisions

In keeping with a “people power” orientation, a community-led approach puts communities in the driver’s seat and enables them to make the key decisions on matters such as which issue(s) to address, how to take effective action using their own resources, which capacity building is needed, and so on.

Throughout, the role of the NGO is that of facilitator rather than expert. The NGO and its community facilitator do this by means of power-sharing and providing space for collective dialogue, problem solving, and decision-making by the community.

A useful motto for this approach is: “If it doesn’t come from the community, it’s not a community-led approach.” The more typical project-based approach, which puts NGOs in the driver’s seat, undermines a spirit of community agency and action. When communities hold the power and take the key decisions, however, they achieve a high level of collective ownership (see Tool TRN 10 in the companion Toolkit) and responsibility for the work, thereby boosting its effectiveness and sustainability.

8. Use a patient, flexible, dialogue-oriented approach

Extensive dialogue between many people who are positioned in different ways is essential for enabling a community-led approach. Compared to a quick, project-based approach, it takes time and patience to enable inclusive dialogues that help the community to agree on common priorities and a collective vision regarding which child-related issues to address and how to support vulnerable children.

Rather than following pre-established timeframes, it is important to work according to community time and to allow agreement to emerge in an organic manner. Rather than forcing agreement too early, a better strategy is to view disagreements as natural and helpful for enabling a full exploration of ideas and to allow additional time for discussion. Rather than assuming that general community meetings allow full participation, it is better to assume that the most marginalized people and children will not naturally have much voice or decision-making influence in such meetings.

A patient, flexible approach is needed in part to enable the community to invent other processes that ensure full child participation with keen sensitivity to issues of gender, social class, religion, and other possible bases of social exclusion. To work in this slow, inclusive way requires flexibility on the part of not only the facilitators but also the managers and donors.

9. Build community capacities for mobilizing the community, making inclusive decisions, and taking effective action

In developing a community-led process, it is important to build community capacities that enable effective action and that make it possible for communities themselves to implement actions on an ongoing basis. Key skills for communities include conducting dialogues without destructive conflict, mobilizing discussions and actions that include many different people, and building capacities that contribute to effective action.

Initially, an NGO facilitator may stimulate and help to manage discussions. In order for a community-led process to develop, however, the facilitator has to step back, provide space for community leadership, build community capacities for engaging different people in the discussions, decisions, and actions, and help communities themselves to run their own process without dependence on an external facilitator. Building community capacities for self-

mobilization can be useful in taking a community-led approach to scale, as communities who have learned to mobilize themselves in a more effective manner may be in a good position to help other communities learn to mobilize themselves effectively.

At every turn, community-led approaches seek to avoid the creation of parallel systems such as new committees and structures, which can undermine the considerable strengths that are already present. Capacity building should be part of efforts to build on existing resources, and the capacity-building approach, partners, and steps should also be decided upon by communities rather than being imposed by outside actors.

10. Enable bottom-up collaboration and linkages between communities and formal child protection stakeholders and mechanisms

Communities are not islands that can address the full spectrum of child-protection issues themselves. For example, most communities are not likely to have the expertise required to treat and fully support a child who has been raped and who has become suicidal. In such cases, it is vital to have functioning referral mechanisms that help children to receive the specialized mental health and psychosocial support that they need.

Many governments have a formal child protection system that includes specialized mental health supports, though often on a limited basis. Also, the formal aspects of child protection systems frequently include district-level or provincial social services and supports for children that can backstop communities and also help to build community capacities for child protection. If formal stakeholders at district and provincial level see the value of community-led approaches and work to support such approaches, they can become natural allies in efforts to take community-led approaches to scale.

In a community-led approach, linkages and collaboration between formal and non-formal systems are driven not by an NGO or outside experts but by the community itself in a bottom-up process.

This is illustrated by the case of community-led work in Sierra Leone (detailed fully in Tool MGM 2 in the companion Toolkit). Here, the communities chose to address teenage pregnancy and specifically requested the support of district-level health workers, who then provided key services and also helped to build community capacities for preventing teenage pregnancy. This bottom-up approach created a partnership in addressing an issue of common concern for both the communities and the formal actors involved. Because the partnership originated through community action, community members felt a strong sense of ownership about supporting the formal actors' involvement, and they actively welcomed health actors into their villages and heeded their advice in a way that the health actors reported as being quite unusual.

Effective linkages between government actors and communities can also contribute to the scalability of community-led approaches. In Malawi, for example, Save the Children, together with district-level personnel who worked on HIV and AIDS, helped to form Community AIDS Coordinating Committees (CACs) that reflected on how children and adults were being affected by AIDS, what they were concerned about, and what they could do. The members of each CAC used their skills to mobilize Village AIDS Committees, which used volunteer efforts and local

resources to support AIDS-affected children. As the Village AIDS Committees worked within a community-led approach, they received support from their CAC, which in turn connected with district-level structures.

This tiered system made it possible to reach a large number of villages and also to provide the backstopping the Village AIDS Committees needed. Because the process was community-led, the communities were still active five years after the funding had ended.¹⁴

11. Enable children to be key actors in the community-led process

Communities frequently come together around and act on children's issues, and children may be among the leaders of a community-led action. In fact, children are some of the most important resources that any community has. Even in difficult circumstances, children have agency and creativity, which they can use to help prevent and respond to harms to children.

When children become valued participants early on in the community dialogues, communities are more likely to draw on the lived experiences of girls and boys in identifying the key harms to children. When communities are ready to address particular harms to children, children may become central actors in and leaders of the community-led action.

If, for example, a community selects early sex as the issue to be addressed, it would be essential to have children playing a lead role in the community action since children are the key actors in sexual activities at an early age.

To enable a process in which children are valuable actors and change agents is very different from the "participation light" approach of many programs, in which children take part in relevant program activities but do not make key decisions about and lead important parts of the community activities.

12. Using child rights as a guide, support social change from within the community

A community-led approach is not an "anything goes" approach. Some child protection workers are justifiably concerned that certain community-led actions such as early marriage violate children's rights. To avoid such issues, it is important to support only community action processes that are consistent with the best interests of children.

A community-led approach to child protection recognizes that local social norms may consist of a mixture of risk factors and protective factors. A protective norm such as sending children to school supports children's rights and well-being. However, some norms support practices that are contrary to children's rights. In such a situation, it is valuable to view communities as dynamic and potentially open to social change.

¹⁴ Donahue & Mwewa (2006).

By using child rights as a compass, well-trained community facilitators can help communities to reflect on various options, even without explicitly mentioning child rights. Facilitators can also support internal change agents in developing and implementing community-led options that are consistent with children's rights. Without making people feel judged or in some way put down, a facilitator can help community people think through the negative aspects of practices such as early marriage. Through dialogue and reflection, the community may come to see that it is inadvisable to “protect” girls by having them marry early.

In a community-led approach, social change is not directed by an NGO that might seek, for example, to end corporal punishment of children by teaching people about child rights and how to report violations of child rights. Instead, social change is guided by communities through the internal influences of opinion leaders, collective discussion and action by local people, and modeling by people who demonstrate different behaviors, often while respecting positive underlying values. Communities select which issues to address, thereby building on community readiness to change regarding those particular issues. In this respect, a community-led approach capitalizes on community readiness—or ripeness—for change.

Because communities select the issues and design and implement the action for addressing them, they collectively own, drive, and buy into the change process. To be sure, the social change process does not happen overnight. Yet as more and more people become involved in the community-led action, the weight of social behavior comes to lean in a new direction. As youth leaders, religious leaders, women's leaders, elders, and ordinary people model new behavior and come to expect others to engage in the changed behavior, reciprocal social expectations evolve and lead to a change in social norms.

13. Be prepared to step outside the usual child protection “box”

In the humanitarian and development arenas, child protection typically focuses on issues such as violence against children, sexual and gender-based violence, separation of children from families, child labor, and the recruitment of children into armed forces or groups, among others. As expressed in the global Child Protection Minimum Standards, there is keen interest in mainstreaming child protection by incorporating child protection aspects into work in different sectors.

Yet the “silos” that pervade the humanitarian architecture are highly visible when it comes to child protection. For example, issues such as teenage pregnancy are typically seen as health issues rather than child protection issues, unless the pregnancy has resulted from sexual abuse or exploitation. Similarly, out-of-school children are more likely to be seen as an education issue than a child protection issue, unless children have dropped out of school due to bullying or abuse by teachers.

Communities, however, usually take a more holistic approach. In the Sierra Leone case study (see Tool MGM 1 in the companion Toolkit), communities identified teenage pregnancy as one of the biggest harms to children. This was because girls who became pregnant dropped out of school, as did many boys who had caused the pregnancies. Young people saw being out of

school as “losing their future,” and many pregnant girls had to engage in sex work in order to support themselves and their children.

Consistent with the theme of starting where communities are, it is vital to enable communities to define the issues and address them in ways that seem most appropriate and likely to be effective. This requires greater flexibility and a more holistic approach than NGOs and other external actors typically take.

How the principles discussed above translate into practice depends greatly on the context. The fact that each community is unique makes it unadvisable to use a cookie-cutter approach. The principles are designed to invite outsiders to learn deeply about the context and to help support communities to develop contextually relevant solutions to the issues that harm their children. In this respect, using the principles contributes to a highly contextualized approach. Urban communities may take different approaches than rural communities might, yet the process still follows the principles above.

The following chapters will say much more about how these principles translate into practice, but it is also essential to read and use the tools included in the companion Toolkit.

Critical Perspective

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 in order 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 that 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 sub-groups, 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 which 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, 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 an NGO 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.

We should also take the necessary time and effort to educate donors and policy leaders about the value of community-led approaches. In an era of the Sustainable Development Goals, donors are increasingly concerned about sustainability. A useful selling point for community-led approaches is that they tend to be more sustainable.

Last but not least, we need to strengthen the base of evidence regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of community-led child protection processes. There are relatively few systematic studies using robust designs and measures, and until dozens of such studies have been conducted and subjected to peer review it is too soon to promise the unmitigated success of community-led child protection processes.

At present, we are in a situation not unlike that which exists with regard to climate change. Our knowledge of climate change is highly incomplete, yet we know enough to see the need for

immediate, concerted action. The same is true with regard to community-led child protection. We need to continue doing the research to strengthen and guide our approach, and at the same time we need to act urgently. We need to test how to apply the approach on a larger scale, and how to work in different contexts.

With this in mind, we now turn to the more practical aspects of community-led approaches.

PART 2:

USING A COMMUNITY-LED APPROACH TO CHILD PROTECTION

Chapter 3.

Transforming Our Approach from Program to Community Process

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls repeatedly for transformed approaches to humanitarian work. Taking a community-led approach is a vital step toward implementing a transformational process that supports high levels of sustainability.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the transformational process involved in doing community-led work. Its objectives are to:

- increase awareness of how we as child protection practitioners need to change our own roles and ways of thinking;
- describe how agencies who work on child protection need to reorient themselves;
- reflect on the importance of creating an open, inclusive space within which communities act and make key decisions; and
- emphasize the importance of flexibility, since community-led work does not follow a recipe.

Key Question for Practitioners

Are there changes that we as practitioners need to undergo in order to strengthen our work with communities and enable a community-led approach?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1–5.

New Mindsets, Changed Roles

To transform our agencies and child protection practices, we first have to transform ourselves. An essential first step is to reflect on our own mindsets, values, and attitudes.

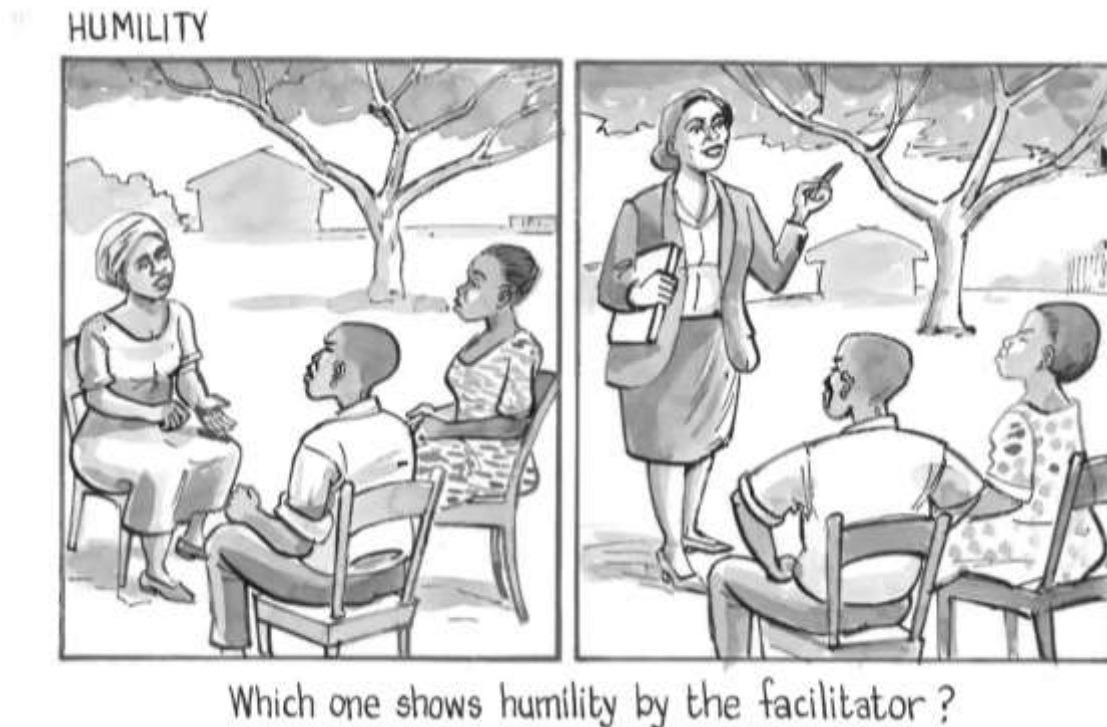
As discussed earlier, many practitioners and agencies assume that they are the “experts” or specialists on child protection. Although communities are regarded as partners, specialists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) typically define the issues to be addressed, design and develop the interventions to be used, and lead the implementation and evaluation of the interventions. The NGO leads the “program,” a term that embodies a focus on its own activities.

The underlying attitude is that communities lack the ability themselves to address the harms to children or may even use inappropriate methods that violate children's rights. Relatively low value is placed on deep empowerment and sustainable action. This mindset lacks humility since it assumes that we, the child protection specialists, have the expertise and answers on child protection issues.

In contrast, community-led approaches trust communities. They assume that communities have the ability to solve their problems and to reinvent themselves in ways that enable full participation and support for vulnerable children. In community-led approaches, communities hold the power to make the key decisions about which harms to children to address, how to take community-led action to address these harms, and how to evaluate their action.

The appropriate role of outside child protection specialists and agencies is to facilitate. This facilitation, however, does not lead toward particular issues or actions but makes sure that it is the communities who take the decisions, using processes of inclusive dialogue and collective problem-solving.

Respect and Humility



Respect and humility are at the center of the attitudes that are needed to enable community-led work. Respect is based not only on human dignity but also the recognition that communities have been engaged for centuries in supporting and caring for children. Respect also comes from understanding and appreciating that communities have many valuable resources such as natural helpers, youth groups, women's groups, religious leaders and groups, informal networks (including kinship networks) for supporting children, nonformal community leaders, teachers,

and nurses. In addition, communities may have social networks, valuable practices, social cohesion and processes of collective discussion and action, among many others. Respect entails appreciating the difficulties that communities face, not the least of which may be ongoing poverty and poor food security in countries classed as low- or middle-income.

Like all aspects of human social organization, communities are imperfect and can themselves present significant risks to children's well-being. However, a respectful orientation recognizes that communities, even in their traditional beliefs and practices, are not set in stone. Rather, they are dynamic and continuously engaged in a process of change.

Humility is grounded partly in an appreciation of all the things we do not know about communities and their context, how they support their children, and community strengths that help protect children (see Tool FAC 1 in the companion Toolkit). Humility also flows from an understanding of what local people do for their children even under challenging circumstances. When we listen and learn deeply, we see that communities are highly concerned for children's well-being and can develop practical solutions that help their children and fit the local context. Community actions build on local resources that tend to be more sustainable than are NGO-run programs and approaches.

It is important, then, to ask ourselves questions such as: "Who am I to think I'm the 'expert' on child protection in this community?" and "Am I doing enough to learn deeply from communities themselves?" Honest reflection on these questions often helps to reposition ourselves from an "expert" to a "co-learner." In this view, outsiders have much to learn from communities, while communities can benefit from the outsider's perspective, questions, and knowledge.

Greater Power Sharing and Trust in the Community Process



To play the facilitative role that is appropriate, external agencies and child protection specialists should respectfully enable the community's own power. For example, it should be up to the community rather than the NGO to decide which issue(s) to address and how. When the community holds the power and makes the decisions, the community empowers and mobilizes itself, taking ownership and responsibility for the process and the well-being of children. As a result, the community is more likely to achieve sustainable results.

This shift of power requires a change in mindsets and orientation. For one thing, it requires much greater trust of the community process. Trusting communities entails seeing them as smart, practical, resilient actors, who have the collective agency and the human resources needed to support vulnerable children.

As discussed below, trust is not a matter of blind faith. We should trust the community process only if it achieves a number of observable benchmarks or qualities. For example, we should trust community decisions only if they have been made in an inclusive manner and do not embody the views only, or mainly of, the local power elite. Inclusivity is not assumed; it is something that is gauged empirically through observation, discussion with people who are positioned in very different ways, and reflection and analysis.

Challenges to trust frequently arise with regard to so-called harmful practices. Some child protection specialists argue that without the NGO guiding the process, communities might decide to do problematic things such as protect girls from sexual abuse by marrying them off at a young age. In a community-led process, however, facilitators can usually help communities to avoid such ill-advised actions by enabling dialogue about the benefits and harms of marrying girls off at a young age and insuring that diverse views are shared. Even if it is a local norm for girls to marry young, these discussions frequently help to plant the seeds of change and to empower local change agents who initiate social change processes that lead communities to reject early marriage.

NGOs that use a community-led approach may set ground rules that keep the facilitator and community within the boundaries of action criteria (see Tool MGM 5 in the companion Toolkit). A commonly used action criterion is that the proposed action should align and be consistent with children's rights. This guards against an "anything goes" approach that could permit a community to choose an action that harms children.

Keeping the Focus on Communities

Perhaps the most fundamental shift required for community-led work is to follow the adage: "It's not about us [our NGO or group] but about the communities."

Top-down approaches frequently focus on us (the NGO or outside experts) and which issue(s) *we* have identified, which intervention *we* have selected, *our* capacity building and intervention strategy, etc. As we do the trainings, lead the implementation, and conduct the program evaluation, we celebrate our accomplishments by branding our work, even placing large signs and plaques in community meeting halls. This approach keeps the focus on the NGO and can encourage low ownership and a sense of local powerlessness and dependency.

Keeping the focus on communities and on what communities do requires first that child protection specialists background their technical knowledge and universalized vocabulary. If a community member says, “A problem here is that children are out of school to do heavy work,” the child protection specialist might reply, “Aha, so there is a problem of child labor,” or even add, “My agency has extensive experience addressing this, and we’d be happy to work with you to address it.” This exchange shifts the emphasis from the community to the NGO, with power concentrated in the hands of the specialist.

Perhaps a more appropriate response would be to ask questions such as: “Could you please give me an example of this problem in your neighborhood?”, “How does this affect children?”, “Why do you see this as a problem?”, and “What do you think the community could do to address this problem?” These questions keep the focus squarely on local understandings and action.

Keeping the focus on communities also requires systematic efforts to support communities’ agency and resilience. If we enter with the attitude that “communities are overwhelmed and don’t know what to do,” we will likely favor an expert-led approach that puts community people in a secondary position. Being in a secondary position undermines people’s sense of agency and well-being. Evidence from many humanitarian and development settings indicates that collective planning and action by local people contributes to their well-being and resilience.¹⁵ When communities take decisions and implement their own steps to help their children, and when children participate in meaningful ways, people’s feelings of empowerment, agency, and hope for the future increase. Taking their own steps and seeing positive results, communities increase their problem-solving capacities, thereby strengthening the community resilience and confidence that are needed to meet future challenges.

Of course, placing the emphasis on what communities do entails a significant shift of mindset. We have to believe that communities can in fact address and solve their problems, perhaps with facilitation and modest support from outside agencies. Program managers must share this belief and be in a position to support practitioners in adopting a facilitative role and using a community-led approach. They must also be able to articulate to senior managers why this approach is essential and will help the agency to achieve its goals.

Creating a Flexible Space for Community Decision-Making

Top-down approaches provide relatively little space for community decision-making and action since the NGO makes the main decisions and guides the intervention. Community-led approaches reverse this by assigning the decision-making power to communities. However, this power will be meaningful only if communities have sufficient room or decision-making space to choose which harms to address, which actions to take, and to work according to their own timetable and process. This approach requires greater flexibility on the part of the NGO.

¹⁵ Bandura (1982); Hobfoll et al. (2007).

Challenges

Experiences across multiple countries and continents and with diverse NGOs indicate that it can be quite challenging to create sufficient community space. In participatory action research (PAR) with formerly recruited girl mothers in Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia,¹⁶ national staff from different NGOs had difficulty letting the ideas about which problem to address or how to address them come from the girls themselves, with advice from their community advisors.

This challenge likely reflected the fact that the child protection practitioners saw it as their role to guide and counsel the girls. After all, they had been trained in child protection, thought they knew the “right answers,” and felt responsible for helping the girls move toward selecting particular issues and using particular interventions that fit global child protection standards.

To manage this problem, the international action research team provided additional training and reflection for the NGO practitioners, who adjusted their mode of working to fit with the maxim “if it does not come from the girls, it is not PAR,” which is a form of people-led action. Happily, the practitioners went on to become good facilitators, with the decision-making power and leadership vested in the hands of the girl mothers.

A practical challenge for many NGOs is how to create sufficient space for community-led approaches without trying to be all things to all people. If the decision-making space and community capacities were infinite, communities could decide to take on harms to children that relate to health, poverty, education, or a host of other areas in addition to the harms that are usually the focus of attention in the global child protection sector. This is a scary proposition for an NGO, which may have expertise or strategic focus on only one or a few areas. How, one might ask, can managers or agencies pretend to be able to address such a wide spectrum of issues?

Further, what happens if the community decided to address a harm to children such as poverty? Although poverty interconnects with and underlies various child protection issues, many child protection stakeholders see poverty alleviation as beyond the work of child protection. Also, child protection practitioners may also point out that poverty alone is not the full cause of child protection issues. Some impoverished families manage to protect their children from harms such as violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and trafficking, whereas others do not.

Managing Expectations and Boundaries

Fortunately, numerous strategies exist that can help to manage these challenges. One strategy is to help the community make linkages to organizations with demonstrated expertise in household economic strengthening.

A related strategy is to manage the community’s expectations about what the NGO can do. As the NGO engages with the community and learns about members’ concerns, it should provide an honest explanation for why it is there, its role, and what its capacities and limitations are. At

¹⁶ McKay et al. (2011).

various points in time, it will likely be necessary for the NGO to emphasize that the community is responsible for developing and implementing long-term solutions to problems facing its children and that the NGO's role is to help the community achieve those solutions. It will be important also for the NGO to explain the time-bound nature of its work so that communities do not expect that the NGO will be there on a long-term basis.

Also useful is a strategy of setting boundary conditions and narrowing the decision-making space from the early learning phase onward, by inviting communities to think about issues other than health and poverty. Useful steps for accomplishing this are to develop a set of action criteria (see Tool MGM 5 in the companion Toolkit) and also a practical script for framing the discussion in this manner (see Tool MGM 8). To be respectful, however, the process should acknowledge the tremendous importance of issues relating to poverty and health.

In setting boundaries, it is important to avoid being too narrow or specific. For example, if an agency tells communities that they are free to address violence against children, that would likely strike community members as a form of outsider imposition. The art of setting boundaries is to balance the agency's need to narrow the field of issues with a community's need to define what they see as the main harms to children and to mobilize themselves around those issues.

Working in Community Time

The creation of a flexible space for communities also entails a willingness to move according to "community time" rather than "NGO time" or "donor time."

For diverse reasons, NGOs that use a mostly top-down approach set their own timetables that reflect agency wishes, donor timetables for deliverables, or other external considerations. This creates a sense of predictability and efficiency for managers, who can track program inputs, outputs, and deliverables.

One drawback of this approach is that it is centered around the NGO, not the community. In the rush to move forward, community ownership is typically the first casualty. Such an approach makes it clear that the issue is "owned" by the NGO. It can lead to some time-bound results, but it also precludes the possibility of community ownership and ongoing action to address the issue.

In a community-led approach, it is the community who decides the tempo. If there are community members who have been unable to participate in discussions, extra time may be taken in order to ensure full participation by all. Or, if discussions on which harm to address are not reaching a widely agreed priority, it may be important for the community to slow down, allow a more complete exploration and discussion of ideas, and take more time in reaching a decision. Consistent with the emphasis on process, time considerations should not drive the community.

If your aim is to achieve high levels of community ownership and sustained benefits for children, the likely gains of moving according to community time more than offset the costs in terms of precise timing and predictability. When communities organize inclusive dialogues, discuss various options, take decisions, and develop and implement their own actions to support vulnerable children, they see the activities as "their own" and as a community process rather than

an NGO project. Taking ownership of it, they pour their energy and creativity into making it a good process and a useful action for supporting vulnerable children. Since it is a community process, the community does not become dependent on the NGO—they do it themselves and hence are more likely to continue the process after the NGO has moved on to other things.

An NGO that supports such community-led work can take considerable pride in knowing that they helped to create the right conditions, such as slow, inclusive dialogue. In this respect, the NGO program becomes not a portfolio of projects that it owns and carries out in partnership with communities. Instead, the NGO program becomes a portfolio of community-owned and led processes that the NGO has helped to facilitate but that are independent of the NGO. The community does not count on ongoing NGO support to support its own processes.

The key for managers, then, is to adjust their and their agencies' modalities of work to allow this flexible space for communities. It is not easy to “go with the community flow” and give up precise timetables. At the same time, there are means of tracking progress in community-led approaches, which include specifiable steps and benchmarks (see Tool MGM 3 in the companion Toolkit).

Focus on Community Process and Relationships

Most child protection work in humanitarian and development settings entails attention to both content and process.

The content pertains to the “what”—that is, to the child protection issues that need to be addressed, the actions needed, the measures to achieve accountability, and so on.

The process pertains to the “how,” meaning how human relations form and evolve, how decisions are taken, how local people are engaged or not engaged, and how the actions are implemented and by whom.

Top-down approaches place greater attention on the content than on community process. This makes sense inasmuch as it is assumed that the experts and external agencies will make the key decisions. Local people have relatively little say in which interventions are made and how, since the interventions are chosen and implemented in accord with global technical guidelines and standards, or the existing evidence base, and so on. The unfortunate results of this approach, however, are low levels of community ownership and sustainability.

In contrast, community-led approaches place relatively greater emphasis on the process—on power-sharing with local people and encouraging people to identify for themselves their concerns and priorities, and creating an inclusive means of conducting dialogue and taking decisions. In a community-led approach, the NGO engages with the community from the start in a way that aims to respect, support, and unlock the creative potential of the community. A slow approach of learning, building trust, and keeping the focus on what communities do is used to lay the foundation for community-led work, while avoiding the usual perception that the NGO is the provider or leader. From the start, the initial engagement is as a meeting of equals, with the outside agency playing a co-learning and facilitative role.

When an NGO or other external actor adopts a community-led approach, it is de facto adopting a facilitative role and taking a process-oriented approach. The NGO focuses less on its “program” and more on local people’s dialogue, relations, decisions, and actions on behalf of vulnerable children. It is trusting that a community process of high quality will yield tangible results for children. The NGO works to achieve a highly accountable process—in particular, an inclusive process in which children have meaningful participation and people who are ordinarily left behind have a voice and help to make decisions. It works to ensure that community discussions of issues are slow, thorough, and authentic rather than quick but superficial. The NGO also enables full attention to and discussion of gender-related perspectives and issues.

Since communities themselves may lack the full set of understandings and skills needed to address particular harms to children, capacity building may be a key part of the community-led process. Here, too, the NGO or external actor again plays a facilitative role.

Rather than directing the capacity building process, external NGO facilitators or local community facilitators ask communities whether there are additional things that might be useful to learn about and who might be well-positioned to provide the relevant information or training. Ultimately, the community selects who does the capacity building and also decides how to use what they have learned in developing and implementing the community-led action.

Throughout the process, there is a powerful focus on enabling the collective agency of the community, helping them to weigh up various options, make solid decisions, and engage in concerted action that effectively addresses the harm(s) to children that they have chosen to address. Keen attention is given to enabling a highly inclusive process. After all, it is fruitless and misleading to speak of community-led action when it is only or primarily the relatively privileged people in a given community who lead the process.

To enable the transformational process of having greater inclusivity in community dialogue and decision-making, a great deal of effort should be devoted early on to working with the community to develop a highly inclusive process. Because facilitation is at the center of this transformational process, Chapter 4 discusses facilitators and facilitation processes in greater depth.

By nature, community-led processes cannot be reduced to recipes, checklists, standard operating procedures, or programming manuals. Communities differ enormously, inhabit very different contexts, and resist a one-size-fits-all approach. Because communities are creative in their approach to solving problems and have divergent actors, power dynamics, and situations, it would be simplistic to take a cookie-cutter approach to enabling community-led planning and action.

In one context, a community-led process might be initiated internally by vulnerable children asking for help. In another community, the process might be initiated and facilitated by religious actors animating community action to help children who live in dangerous circumstances. At every turn, we should start from where the community is and build on its own strengths and change processes rather than imposing an outsider approach that is a poor fit with the local context.

This insight has important implications for how to use the remainder of this Guide. In various places, this Guide discusses the community-led approach that was used in the action research in Sierra Leone and in Kenya. However, the Sierra Leone and Kenya examples are best seen as illustrations rather than roadmaps to be followed. With this in mind, the chapters that follow will bring in examples from diverse approaches and invite readers to reflect on how processes such as community planning, community-led action, or community evaluation might occur in different contexts.

Critical Perspective

In ending this chapter on process, it is appropriate to underscore the importance of taking a reflective, self-critical stance and of challenging our assumptions. At every stage, we need to interrogate our assumptions that a particular approach to community-led work is most appropriate.



For example, we might assume that the best approach involves the whole community. But in a case where there is low social cohesion in the community and only a youth group are interested in taking action to support vulnerable children, it might make more sense to enable action by that smaller group rather than try to force engagement of the whole community. Over time, and once they start to see positive results, more and more people may participate in the action on behalf of children.

Conversely, we might assume that it is easier to support small group led actions such as those by a youth group than it is to develop a whole-community action. Yet this assumption might be questionable in particular contexts. Supporting only one sub-group could create social divisions and feelings of jealousy within the community. In some contexts, it might be more practical to develop an action that involves the whole community than it is to support various sub-groups, who may have a history of competition and of each feeling more marginalized than the others.

As both examples illustrate, we need to avoid clinging to our assumptions and to learn together with the community which approach seems most practical and a good fit for the context.

We should maintain a self-critical stance that guards against imposing any one approach and provides adequate space for community problem-solving. On an ongoing basis, we should reflect on what has gone well and what could be done better, using the learning to improve our own approach and actions. As discussed in the chapters that follow, this reflective approach is highly valuable for community people, too, and is part of the foundation of a community-led approach.

A reflective, self-critical approach is essential also for the longer-term process of institutionalizing the changes needed in order to support community-led work. This shift applies not only to individuals but also to agencies and organizations at all levels of the humanitarian enterprise. Although the process of organizational change within NGOs is beyond the scope of this Guide, it warrants concerted attention as it could help to scale up the use of community-led approaches and increase the level of NGO accountability to local people.

Chapter 4.

The Facilitator and a Slow, Dialogue-Oriented Process of Facilitation

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the facilitator and the facilitation process involved in community-led work. Its objectives are to:

- increase understanding of the role and activities of facilitators in a community-led approach;
- deepen understanding of how facilitation in a community-led approach differs from facilitation in mostly top-down approaches; and
- help readers to think through how to identify, select, prepare, and support facilitators of a community-led approach.

Key Question for Practitioners

What are the advantages of taking the slow, dialogue-oriented approach that is inherent in a community-led approach?

Could the skills of facilitation presented in this section strengthen my organization's work with communities?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1–9; Training: TRN 2–11; Management: MGM 5 & MGM 7.

Facilitation Approach

In a community-led approach, the facilitator plays a key role in all phases: learning with and about the community; the community-led planning regarding which harm(s) to children to prevent and respond to; designing and implementing an appropriate community action; and evaluating the community-led action.

The facilitator may be a staff member of a non-governmental organization (NGO)—an outsider who is not from the community and who brings an external perspective. However, the facilitator may also be a member of the community who brings an insider's perspective.

As we shall see, the facilitator does not counsel, guide, or quietly lead community members to address particular child protection issues or to use a particular action approach. Rather, the facilitator is there to learn, ask questions, invite dialogue among people who are positioned in

very different ways, and to support the conditions conducive to full community participation, discussion of different options, decision-making, and action. In essence, the facilitator accompanies or “walks with” the community without guiding it.

This mode of facilitation contrasts sharply with the way facilitators usually work in top-down approaches. An international NGO that has received extensive funding to address issues of violence against children might use a top-down approach in which a facilitator works with the community for purposes of mobilization and partnership.

Yet the NGO has pre-decided that the issue to be addressed is violence against children. Although the facilitator asks questions and invites discussion, the aim is to awaken community members to problems of violence against children and to empower people to address it, usually through pre-specified, NGO-led interventions. Since this approach blends facilitation and manipulation of the community, some practitioners refer to it as “facipulation.”

In contrast, an NGO that supports community-led child protection uses a more open, nondirective approach. The community members dialogue about children’s well-being and harms to children, identify and discuss the merits and drawbacks of different options, and decide for themselves which harm(s) to children to address.

In this approach, power is vested in the community, not the facilitator or the NGO. From the start, the community’s agency and collective power are at the heart of decision-making. As communities take decisions, they gain a strong sense of ownership about the issues to be addressed and the actions to be taken. These high levels of ownership spark community empowerment and animate processes and actions that are more likely to be sustainable than outsider-led “projects.”

This approach to facilitation entails a different role and orientation, and a stronger set of “soft” skills such as deep listening and enabling constructive dialogue. It also requires having effective facilitators and mentors, who are more experienced practitioners who backstop, co-learn with, and support the facilitators.

Role, Orientation, and Process

In a community-led approach, the facilitator’s role is to create space for and enable community dialogue, decision-making, and action on behalf of vulnerable children. More specific aspects of the facilitator’s role and responsibilities are shown in the box below.

However, the facilitator’s role cannot be reduced to a 1–2–3 series of steps. Being an effective facilitator is as much a way of working as it is a set of specific steps. Like community-led action, facilitation does not follow a recipe but develops in a flexible, contextual manner through collective dialogue and decision-making. Key aspects of this orientation are listening and learning about the community, patient accompaniment, and enabling an inclusive process in which children participate in a meaningful way.

The Facilitator's Role

- Build rapport and trust with diverse community members
- Treat all people with respect and dignity
- Enable inclusive, collective discussion, reflection, and decision-making
- Support community power and autonomy
- Enable meaningful child participation and leadership
- Support the expression and exploration of different points of view
- Help to manage in a constructive manner conflicts that arise during discussions
- Ensure that communities are the decision-makers who lead the community planning, design, and action on behalf of vulnerable children
- Adhere to principles of ethical conduct and child safeguarding
- Work with the mentor and the community to ensure that intervention criteria are met
- Help to connect the community with formal services and stakeholders in the wider child protection system
- Reflect with the mentor on how to handle difficult situations
- Help to document community dialogues, and planning, and action processes
- Give updates and make reports to the supporting NGO

Patient Accompaniment

Rather than inspiring, sensitizing, counseling, mobilizing, or guiding, a good facilitator first and foremost accompanies the community in its own journey of learning, self-mobilization, and action on behalf of vulnerable children. To accompany the community is to be with it, both physically and psychologically. With this in mind, it is important for facilitators to live and work in the community, be with the people, and come down from any high pedestal.

Working in a nonjudgmental manner, good facilitators act as participant observers (see Tool LNG 4 in the companion Toolkit) and enablers of dialogue (see Tool FAC 7 in the Toolkit). To be accepted by the local community, they need to dress in a locally appropriate manner, follow local rhythms, and accompany people in different everyday pursuits.

For example, they may accompany children who are going to school, or they may go with children to work on their farms or to help their families. Alternatively, they may go to the mosque or church with local people, or accompany them to meetings, meals, or ceremonies. As they do these things, they deepen their relationships with local people and build mutual respect and trust.

The accompaniment process is patient in that the facilitator does not rush or impose their own timetable but instead works according to “community time.” It takes time to really hear the views of people who are positioned differently in the community. Discussions of some issues may

become highly animated, evoking divergent views and even arguments about which view is “right.” In such situations, it is a mistake to rush forward, as premature decisions by a small group of community members could leave some people feeling marginalized, frustrated, and resentful. Facilitators should go slowly, move when the community is ready, and recognize that wide agreement cannot be achieved on each issue.

NGO workers who become facilitators and adopt this approach describe it as “transformative.” They acquire a deeper understanding of communities, their struggles and capacities, and their values and practices. Above all, they develop new appreciation for communities’ strengths and resilience, coming to see them as highly capable actors. Understanding more clearly how local people see international NGOs and child protection experts, they learn that they and their NGOs need to work in a different, more humble way.

Listening and Learning

As discussed previously, the initial community engagement should be oriented toward nonjudgmental learning about the community, its children, and the things that harm children or support children. Since the emphasis is on community perspectives, the facilitator should assume that they do not know very much. They should ask open-ended questions that enable broad learning and avoid making assumptions about how the community members view their children and various risk and protective factors. The facilitator is a bit like a student of a new subject, where it pays to ask many questions and learn as much as possible.

The listening under discussion here is not the light or superficial listening that frequently permeates everyday interactions. Rather, it is deep listening that is born out of humility and respect, and that recognizes how little we know about community perspectives in all their varieties. Deep listening (see Tool FAC 3 in the companion Toolkit) aims to empathize with other people or “walk a mile in another person’s shoes” (see Tool FAC 4). This process is respectful in that it avoids judging people and regards every person—regardless of gender, age, ability status, religion, or socio-economic status—as inherently interesting and worth understanding. The facilitator talks with many different people, including teenage girls, teenage boys, young girls, young boys, adult women, adult men, elders, and so on. As they do this, they learn about the community’s patterns of views, values, and practices.

To be effective, a facilitator needs to learn about local power dynamics on an ongoing basis (see Tool FAC 8 in the Toolkit). This entails learning who are the local gatekeepers, who are in positions of power and influence, who are marginalized or even invisible, who are opinion leaders within various sub-groups, and so on.

Without understanding these power dynamics, facilitators will be more susceptible to reproducing existing power asymmetries. Having an understanding of power dynamics puts facilitators in a better position to enable a highly inclusive, participatory process. For example, if the facilitator learns that girls typically do not speak in community meetings, then they can ask questions to diverse community members about what could be done to include girls’ views and voices.

An important form of learning for the facilitator is self-learning. Facilitators do complex work, and they need to have a reflexive, self-critical orientation that enables them to think in honest ways about what they are doing well, what could be done better, and so on (see Tool FAC 5). If, for example, they slip into being directive or too central in community discussions, they need to step back, reflect on how that is inconsistent with their role, and plan how to do things in a more community-driven manner.

Enabling Inclusive Dialogue and Decision-Making

In a community-led process, each member of the community should have a voice and give input into community discussions and decisions. To enable inclusive dialogue, skilled facilitators use a social justice lens, observing who is participating and who is not participating in different kinds of discussions and analyzing the power dynamics that could help to explain the varied levels of participation. Then, they begin the transformational process of enabling full participation. They do this not via didactic methods such as teaching people about their rights but through processes of group dialogue and reflection. This approach recognizes that communities themselves have significant capacities for change. The facilitator does not produce the change toward greater inclusivity but helps the community to see the need for change and to itself produce the movement toward greater inclusivity (see Tool FAC 7 in the companion Toolkit).

For example, if women did not participate in discussions as much as men do, the facilitator could ask questions such as:

- Are women participating as much as men are?
- Would it be useful to hear more from women on these issues?
- What could enable women to participate more fully or contribute to community discussions and decision-making?

Asked with patience, such questions help to create a reflective space for group problem-solving. The reflective space enables people to step back and identify possible alternatives that are more inclusive and participatory. For example, community members may realize that their natural process of taking decision centers mostly around large community meetings and discussions. These are imperfect venues since women may be reluctant to speak on gender sensitive issues such as sexual abuse or interpersonal violence. This realization may lead the community to suggest, for example, that there should be small group discussions for women and to have these discussions complement and feed into the larger group discussions. A similar problem-solving process could be used in promoting the inclusion of the poorest people, people with disabilities, or any sub-group that seems excluded or less prominent in collective discussions and decisions.

Managing Conflict

Discussions about the harms to children and about how to address them frequently evoke divergent opinions. This diversity of views is a considerable strength since it can stimulate learning and creative thinking about how best to promote children's well-being. Because people

care deeply about children, discussions of different points of view may become animated and can sometimes lead to debates and heated arguments. Such arguments frequently block genuine listening and empathy and may also poison discussions by stimulating bad feelings. Often they create a “win-lose” approach that runs counter to collaborative dialogue and problem-solving, and may even leave some people feeling “shut down,” afraid to speak up, or unwilling to take part in future discussions.

Effective facilitators do not hide from or downplay conflict. In fact, they learn to view conflict as a potentially constructive force that can stir creative thinking and enable a full exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of different views. However, facilitators play a valuable role in keeping conflict on a constructive track. Tool FAC 9 in the companion Toolkit explores these topics and gives examples of conflict management strategies that may be useful for facilitators.

Ethics



A full discussion of the ethics of working with children is beyond the scope of this Guide.¹⁷ Although facilitators are “with the people” in the sense of accompanying them, they adhere to ethical principles such as respect, non-discrimination, transparency, and confidentiality. They avoid harmful practices such as getting drunk with the men, sexually exploiting or abusing girls or women, using violence or threats of violence, or getting involved with underage girls, even with the intent to marry them. In general, they are trained on and expected to adhere to their agency’s child protection and/or child-safeguarding policies.

¹⁷ Useful resources include: Alderson & Morrow (2011); Allden et al. (2009); Boyden (2004); Graham et al. (2013); Hart & Tyrer (2006); Morrow (2009); and Schenk & Williamson (2005).

A quandary arises when a facilitator, in the course of his or her work learns about a violation against a child. To do nothing in such a situation seems unethical since the child may be in urgent need of protection, and inaction may be a form of complicity. Inaction is particularly inappropriate in regard to a serious violation. Yet if the facilitators act on a violation, for example, by reporting to authorities, they may no longer be trusted fully. Nor would they be seen as facilitators. Most likely, local people would see the facilitators as judging or monitoring local people, thereby undermining trust and the facilitators' perceived neutrality. Because such facilitators are not trained child protection workers, they may not know how to respond in a way that is consistent with the best interests of the child.

Most agencies that support community-led approaches recognize that they need to support ethical behavior by their facilitators. Yet they adapt the mandatory reporting obligation that is typically part of child safeguarding policies. Most often, these adaptations include provisions for giving children immediate, confidential information about whom to call for help or to report a violation. Also, they call for a slow, long-term approach of developing an effective, sustainable local process for handling such violations. They may also include special processes to be used in the case of severe harms to children. A tool for helping agencies to decide their own approach and in the particular context is included in the companion Toolkit (see Tool MGM 7).

Documentation

Because facilitators are very close to the community on a daily basis, they play an important role in documenting community activities and processes. This can be of considerable importance in capturing the actual implementation, as community-led approaches favor improvisational work that does not unfold according to a fixed manual.

How to Select, Prepare, and Support the Facilitators

Since facilitators play an important role in community-led approaches, it is vital to give careful attention to selecting and training people to become skilled facilitators. The usual processes for selecting and training facilitators may not be a good fit for community-led approaches. Put bluntly, it is considerably easier to do “facipulation” or NGO-guided facilitation than it is to help people become deep listeners and to fulfill the role of the facilitator as described above.

Much remains to be learned about how to select and prepare facilitators who effectively enable community-led work. This section offers suggestions that have proven useful in multiple contexts, yet there is considerable room for creativity and developing other modalities for selecting and preparing facilitators.

Selecting a Facilitator

The box below outlines useful criteria for guiding the selection of facilitators. Since they live with and accompany the people, facilitators need to speak the local language, understand the local context, and be able to fit comfortably into the daily rhythms of the community. Gender

sensitivity is essential for understanding the different situations and needs of girls and boys, and women and men, and being able to engage effectively with females and males and people of different gender and sexual orientations. To be good listeners, facilitators need to have strong skills of empathy, good skills of asking probing questions, and a respectful, non-judgmental orientation. To do these things, facilitators must be able to background their own opinions and inclinations to give advice and direction, thereby creating an open space in which community people engage in dialogue and take decisions. They also need to have keen ethical sensitivities and the ability to stay close to the people while also maintaining their role. For additional ideas on their qualities, see Tool MGM 4 in the companion Toolkit.

Important Qualities and Skills of a Facilitator

- Speaks local languages
- Understands the local context
- Respects people with different views, backgrounds, or orientations
- Sensitive to issues of gender and power
- Empathizes well with different people, including children
- Has good self-awareness and reflexivity
- Enables inclusive discussion
- Backgrounds own views, beliefs, preferences, etc.
- Is ethically sensitive
- Enables meaningful child participation
- Is flexible and thinks and speaks well in the moment, with little preparation
- Manages conflict in a constructive manner
- Helps people to think through different options and make informed decisions, without leading or guiding them
- Works as a team with mentor and program staff

Notably missing from these qualities and criteria are items such as child protection background and expertise, experience in community-based programming, level of education attained, and prior research experience (if the work is described as “action research”). These omissions are intentional. Field experience with community-led approaches in multiple countries indicates that the latter qualities, although valuable in other contexts, are not essential and may even get in the way of facilitating community-led work. For example, someone with extensive child protection expertise and who has worked for international NGOs may be skilled at top-down approaches but may find it difficult to background their expert knowledge. They may tend to impose the “right” answers in favor of open-ended listening and facilitating the community process. Also,

people who have university education may find it difficult to speak in plain ways with rural farmers, most of whom have little formal education.

Further, some needed qualities may have a higher priority in community-led approaches than in top-down approaches. For example, listening, empathy, and asking probing questions may be part of the list of qualities needed in top-down approaches, but they would not be at the top of the list of most essential qualities as they would be in community-led approaches. Whereas top-down approaches favor deep child protection knowledge and expert ability to analyze the situation and prescribe the needed interventions, community-led approaches favor strong skills of enabling collective dialogue and decision-making. In turn, this requires being “quick on your feet,” adjusting your timing to the context, and making flexible adjustments as the community process evolves.

A useful strategy in selecting good facilitators is to not only interview promising candidates but also to engage them in live role-play that require skills such as respectful listening, empathy, and conflict management. This can be done in an engaging manner that is both fun and revealing. Typically, several adults and possibly teenagers are brought into a space to act as different community people in pre-scripted role-plays that the candidate does not know about. There might be two or three role-plays, each lasting 5-10 minutes, with the candidate playing the role of facilitator in each. Following each role-play, there would be a reflective space in which the facilitator reflects on how they did, with others sharing their ideas about how things went and what might have been improved.

Although this strategy is not foolproof, it does give a glimpse of the facilitator’s style, confidence level, versatility, and strength or weakness in regard to particular skills. Concerned about the artificiality associated with role-plays during interviews, one NGO trained the two top candidates for the facilitator’s post and then gave each a short-term contract to work as facilitator. Having observed each perform in the field for several weeks, they then selected as the full-time facilitator the person who had most effectively enabled a community-led process.

Regardless of how the selection occurs, the contract for the facilitator should allow (or even require) that the facilitator live and work in the community on a nearly full-time basis. Without this provision, the facilitator might get called frequently into the NGO office for meetings, trainings, security updates, and a host of other things. These calls away from the community do not allow adequate space for the facilitator to do their work, which is fundamentally in the community. With this in mind, it is valuable to bring the human resources director and NGO staff on board well in advance of searching for and hiring a facilitator.

Preparing the Facilitators

Learning to be an effective facilitator in a community-led approach is a bit like learning to ride a bicycle—direct experience and repeated practice are the best ways of learning. It is valuable to provide good role models who can demonstrate how to listen and learn effectively, how to build respect, how to enable inclusive dialogue, etc. Fundamental to the process is critical reflection on how we are doing. By reflecting on this and by identifying problems and ways of addressing them, we are in a better position to make needed adjustments.

A useful preparation strategy is to engage directly with communities who have previously engaged in community-led action to help prospective facilitators to understand their role and work in a manner that supports community-led decisions and actions.

Experiences from multiple countries suggests the value of having potential facilitators participate in a week-long (five-day) training workshop. Ideally, the workshop should be facilitated by someone who already has strong skills facilitating a community-led process.

The training workshop should aim to develop the new facilitators' skills and also orient diverse stakeholders who may be able to support community-led work on child protection. Among these stakeholders could be: program managers from the agencies that hire the facilitators; UNICEF officers in the district or province; district officers in the government ministry that handles children's welfare; district officers in other ministries (e.g., health, education) as relevant; members of nearby City Councils; staff from other NGOs working in the area who have an interest; one or two community members who have previously participated in community-led work on children's protection and well-being; and mentors or prospective mentors.

Overall, it is valuable to have as many as 20 participants and a good mix of women and men in the workshop. A group of this size enables rich role-plays, group discussions, and reflection with feedback. Fewer than 12 participants would make it difficult to do the participatory scenarios and role-plays, whereas having more than 20 participants could make it difficult to have rich, in-depth discussions.

The participants may also include multiple facilitators, who take turns "in the hot seat," trying out their skills in different scenarios. However, it is important to keep the number of facilitators low so that each individual gets in-depth practice.

Tool TRN 11 in the companion Toolkit gives one example of an agenda for a training workshop for facilitators. Of course, the nature of the activities in the workshop should be modified according to the particular context in which the facilitator will be working. Following an introduction to the approach, the participants should ideally move right into working on scenarios through role-play, followed each time by group reflection and discussion.

One aspect of the training process can be "unlearning" approaches we have been taught and used previously. A useful scenario and role-play early on pertains to the limits of top-down approaches (see Tool TRN 1). Acting within the prescribed roles, one of the facilitators works in a top-down approach, with the other participants in the workshop playing their respective roles. Immediately afterwards, the group discusses each of the reflective questions in the tool and reflects together on the limits of a top-down approach, helping the facilitator to understand things to avoid.

Next, the workshop should advance into its main task of developing the positive skills that facilitators will need to enable community-led work. Typically, these skills are identified by a planning group in advance but include items such as enabling inclusive dialogue, listening deeply and with empathy, introducing yourself to the community leaders and people, managing conflict, helping community members to decide which harm(s) to children to address or to weigh

the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, helping the community adhere to the action criteria, and so on.

Scenarios and role-plays relevant for training facilitators may be found in the associated Toolkit. They may also be improvised by particular agencies or individuals in a manner that enlivens the workshop. Whether they are planned or improvised, the scenarios should mimic what actually happens in the communities and reflect the values and practices of the local culture. It is important to sequence the scenarios and role-plays in a progressive manner so that facilitators develop basic skills before trying to handle very complex situations that require multiple skills and likely also a good bit of thoughtful improvisation.

Before conducting a particular scenario plus role-play, it is best if one of the prospective facilitators is designated to play the role of “community facilitator.” The workshop coordinator then identifies the context and what is about to happen (for example, the facilitator is meeting with community members to discuss which harm(s) to children to address). After that, the facilitator is asked to leave the room and think on their own about how they will approach the discussion. Meanwhile, the other workshop members are briefed on or decide themselves how they will behave in their respective roles. Next, the workshop coordinator invites the community facilitator to enter the room, and the role-play begins and continues for 15-20 minutes (or however long is deemed to be appropriate). When it is time to end or interrupt the role-play, the workshop facilitator steps in, performing the function of a film producer and saying “Cut!” or “Okay, time out!”

Then begins the critical process of group reflection on the scenario and feedback to the facilitator on how to do a better job. This can be done by asking questions that are appropriate to the moment. If the community facilitator seemed confused or nervous, the workshop coordinator might ask, “Okay [name], how did you feel in this setting and why?” and “How did your feelings affect your ability to facilitate?” Or the workshop coordinator might ask the entire group certain questions such as: “How did the participants feel in their respective roles?”, “Did the facilitator listen well/invite the participation of different people/manage the conflict in a constructive manner?”, “What were some things the facilitator did well?”, and “What were some things that need improvement?”

It is important that this process of group feedback and suggestions be done in a constructive manner that reflects a desire to support the facilitator and to help them develop the necessary skills. It helps, too, to remember just how complex the process is and that it takes practice to refine the needed skills. With this in mind, it can sometimes be beneficial to repeat the scenario and role-play, giving the facilitator the opportunity to do a better job the second time around.

A high priority throughout the workshop should be the development of a reflective process that provides space for personal and collective transformation. The facilitators should gain new insight into their interpersonal relations, their communication strategies, their strengths and weaknesses, and their management of power relations. They should also think more deeply about who they are and how they are perceived by community members, how they want to behave in relation to community members, and what personal changes they will need to undergo in order to facilitate in an effective manner.

For everyone in the workshop, transformation is needed to keep the emphasis on the community views, discussions, and actions. This entails deeper respect for community people, repositioning ourselves relative to communities, sharing power more fully with community people, and following the motto: “It’s about community people, not about us.”

Mentoring

A once-off workshop will not in itself prepare facilitators to meet the complex challenges they will face in their work with communities. To provide ongoing capacity building and also support for facilitators, it is vital to associate the facilitators with a mentor, who could also be called by other appropriate terms such as “co-learner.”

The mentor is not a line manager but a more experienced practitioner who can help the facilitators to do their work in a more effective, community-led manner. The mentor serves as a sounding board for ideas, provides a good role model for interacting with community members, and offers advice on how to handle difficult situations.

The sample responsibilities of a mentor include the following:

- Make two 2-day visits per month to the action villages for the purposes of observing, mentoring, and advising the facilitator with regard to the community-led process.
- Communicate weekly with the facilitator to take stock of progress in their work and advise on how to enable a respectful, inclusive process of community dialogue and decision-making.
- Review the facilitator’s written reports, making suggestions as needed.
- Provide periodic updates to the facilitator’s line manager.
- Work with the facilitator and community members to manage difficult situations, if necessary.
- Liaise with the formal stakeholders and service providers, helping to develop appropriate MoUs for their part in the action, and following up with them as needed as the action is implemented.

By making regular visits to the field and also having frequent phone discussions with the facilitator, the mentor tracks the work and approach of the facilitator, helps them to reflect on their work and the community process, and to make any needed adjustments. Understanding the communities and the facilitator’s work, the mentor can help the facilitator to address very challenging situations.

In one community in Sierra Leone, for example, where there was disagreement over who should be the Chief, the mentor provided the steady hand needed to help manage the conflict and to enable community members to engage with the planning and action process, without using it as a political tool.

The mentor also plays a critical role in brokering relationships and collaboration between communities and formal stakeholders and service providers. For example, as communities discuss which harm(s) to children to address, they will likely generate ideas about which formal stakeholders to link with, and how to collaborate with them. These ideas may be quite ambitious or may assume that government actors will be willing to play a significant role. Quietly, the alert mentor can have exploratory discussions with different formal stakeholders to learn more about their possible interest in collaborating and to judge whether they have the capacity to deliver. Questions of capacity and commitment are key, as it would only frustrate communities to help them to collaborate with formal stakeholders only to find that those stakeholders or their ministries will not fulfill their expected roles.

Mentors also play a valuable role with regard to ethics and psychosocial support. When ethical dilemmas arise, mentors serve as a sounding board and help facilitators think the situation through and act in accordance with ethical principles. Mentors may also see when facilitators have gone off course in their personal conduct in communities and can help to bring them back on track.

However, the mentor's primary role is not to spy or to correct but to support. Facilitators who live in the communities and work with them day-to-day will face diverse complexities and challenges, which can create excessive stress or even risk burnout. A mentor's accompaniment helps to give facilitators confidence, find a way through difficult spots, and cope with the stresses in a positive manner.

Chapter 5.

The Learning Phase

How we first enter into and engage with a community can set mutual expectations about the respective roles of the outsiders and the community and about who holds the power.

Most often, child protection workers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) visit communities, establish a modicum of rapport, explain their purpose, and then conduct an assessment of the child protection issues in the community. Typically, the assessment focuses more on risks and deficits than on community strengths. Based on the findings, the NGO workers design an appropriate program and invite the communities to partner on its implementation. This top-down approach concentrates power in the hands of the NGO, does little to build collective agency and resilience, and quietly casts the community into a position of dependency.

A useful way of turning this around and creating a foundation for community-led work is to enter the community in a more respectful manner that focuses on deeper learning about community resilience, views, and strengths as well as risks to children.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the initial learning phase that sets the stage for community-led work. Its objectives are to:

- outline an approach that builds trust, positive relationships, and community agency right from the initial engagement;
- show how an open, grounded approach to learning goes deeper than most rapid child protection assessments and helps enable a community-led approach; and
- emphasize the importance of feeding findings back to the community in a way that prompts reflection about what local people can do to help address the harms to children.

Key Question for Practitioners

In working with communities on child protection, what is potentially lost by asking mostly pre-packaged questions, and what do we potentially gain by asking more open-ended questions?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1–8; Learning: LNG 1–5.

Initial Entry into the Community

Even before the learning phase begins, how we engage initially with the community has significant implications for the power dynamics and relationship with the community. To enter into a community in a respectful manner, we should adhere to local norms and expectations. For example, in a Muslim country, the norm may be to meet first with key imams and the *shura*, the group of male community elders.

In the first meeting, it is essential to greet the local leaders in the appropriate manner, and to dress and behave in a way that local people will see as respectful.

Introductions and Stating Our Purpose

A necessary step is to explain to the leaders who “we” (the visitors) are, including not only our name but also any agency affiliation. How we introduce ourselves, though, can bring complex power dynamics into play.

If, for example, we say, “Hello, esteemed Chief, my name is Mary Smith and I work with Defend the Children [a hypothetical international NGO]...”, that statement could trigger power dynamics and game-playing that are not conducive to a community-led approach.

This introduction fails to create a level playing field since Defend the Children, like most international NGOs, will be wealthy by local standards and staffed by well-educated people. Wanting to attract this wealth, the Chief might begin playing the familiar game of saying: “We villagers are very poor and uneducated, and we need your help.”

Indeed, he might make the village situation look worse than it really is and downplay what the community is doing to support children. The Chief might even have heard about some good projects the NGO has run in the area and might express his hope that it will run such projects here.

With the emphasis on what the NGO can do, it can be difficult to have authentic discussions about the community and its children or to lay the foundation for community-led action. It is important to manage this challenge in an honest manner that focuses on learning and avoids an emphasis on a particular NGO.

For example, in community-led work in Malawi, Save the Children entered the community as part of a district-wide AIDS committee.¹⁸ In the community-led work by the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity/Child Resilience Alliance in Sierra Leone and Kenya, we introduced ourselves as being part of a “Children’s Learning Group.” This was appropriate since learning about children was our initial objective and there was no promise of action or support. Also, multiple agencies such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, and World Vision were involved in the learning phase.

¹⁸ Donahue & Mwewa (2006).

This approach helped to manage expectations and keep the focus on the community. Maintaining that focus had much to do with how we stated our purpose and the use of open-ended, participatory methodologies for the purposes of learning about the community.

In stating our purpose, it is useful to use a broad, respectful framing that recognizes the community's agency, resilience, and ability to support their children. If we take a deficits approach that focuses only on problems of children or risks, it can imply that we are judging the community. An exclusive focus on risks limits the learning, which ought to focus on both strengths and risks.

It is also useful to speak in local idioms rather than use the technical vocabulary of child protection. Technical terms keep the focus on us and position ourselves as experts, thereby beginning a top-down process.

A stronger approach is to learn from key informants in advance of the visit how local people speak of the problems that we refer to as "child protection issues" and to use the local terms for them. Alternately, you could ask about "harms to children and what is done about them." The phrase "harms to children" seems to resonate with people in different countries and often fits with local discourse.

The box below offers a sample of how to state your purpose in a way that embodies these points.

Sample Initial Statement of Purpose

"Thanks for receiving us today. We have come to learn about the children of this village and all the good things that people do to take care of their children and keep them safe. We are part of an interagency learning group that includes global agencies such as Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision, and UNICEF.

"We will not be coming with surveys and fancy equipment. Instead, we would like to sit and talk with different people, including children, in a respectful way to learn about their views of children, what things harm them, and how the community supports them. Our approach will be very participatory, and we think people here will enjoy teaching us about what they do.

"We will not be providing or promising any aid or support for people. Our focus is on learning, so we can help to inform the work of different agencies and the government. In a spirit of learning, we promise that we will feed back to the community what we have learned and give people a chance to correct anything we might have gotten wrong.

"Our learning is not limited only to your village. It is being carried out in several districts. We wanted to work in all districts, but we could not go everywhere. We'll be happy to say more about the learning but first wanted to hear your initial thoughts on whether this learning work is appropriate here and also to respond to any questions you might have."

This statement sets an appreciative tone by asking to learn about all the good things that people do to care for their children. In addition to being respectful, this wording positions the community people rather than the NGO as the experts. The statement also communicates that there is something like a teacher-student relationship between the community and the outsiders. This, too, helps to position the communities as the experts, thereby placing the community in a position of power.

Variations of this statement have proven useful in Sierra Leone, Kenya, and India. However, it is not intended as a universal entry script, as it is always important to use an approach that fits the local context and to avoid reliance on universalized approaches.

Of course, actions can speak more loudly than words. If the outsiders arrive in large vehicles with NGO or UN logos, wear expensive clothing or seat themselves in ways that seem to place them above the community leader, these nonverbal cues can signal that the outsiders hold the power and are not ready to come down to the level of the people.

To manage the nonverbal aspects, it is useful to talk in advance with people who know and respect the community and who can advise on local norms and how to demonstrate respect and humility.

Initial Meetings with Other Key Community Stakeholders

It is respectful to have similar meetings and discussions with other community leaders such as elders, lower level chiefs, imams or pastors, and heads of women's groups and youth groups. Bringing all the main leaders on board serves to legitimize the work and also builds trust. Often this needs to be an iterative process of meeting first with the male leaders and elders and asking for permission to talk with women, children or youth, and others.

But the initial community stakeholder meetings should include more than the recognized community leaders. After all, if you met only with the recognized leaders who are part of the community power elite, that could be seen as a signal that the outsiders only want to meet and hear from relatively powerful, well-off people. Unintentionally, this perception could quietly marginalize people who are not part of the power elite.

A useful strategy for managing such perceptions is to meet first with community leaders and shortly afterwards with people who are not at the center of power. This can be done, for example, by taking a transect walk—that is, by walking along an imagined straight line all the way through the community and stopping and talking with the people, including very poor people, you encounter.

Even if done in the manner of an informal greeting and chat, this can help observe how people live and learn about the situation of children. Also, local people will be watching. If the encounters are respectful, other people will more likely be open to talking with the outsiders.

Doing this in a sensitive manner requires giving attention to which times are likely to be convenient for talking with an outsider. If the poorest people have been out farming or selling all day, it could be best to stop by in the evening, or very early in the morning. Adjusting our timing

to the needs and situation of local people helps to build trust and to open the door for developing relationships and learning in a systematic manner about the community.

An Open, Grounded Approach to Learning

To enable deep listening about the local context, it is important to take a slower approach to assessment than is typically used and to adopt the attitude that “we don’t know what we don’t know.” After all, local people may have views and categories that do not fit outsiders’ understandings. Even their view of who “children” are may differ considerably from that of outsiders.

Orientation of the Learner

The learner should adopt a non-extractive, reciprocal orientation. If the learner comes to a community, acquires information from them, and then leaves with no follow-up, local people will likely feel frustrated and exploited. Such feelings undermine trust and are poor starting points for community-led action.

A better approach is one that establishes a sense of give and take. The community will give information, and in return the learner will use the information in ways that aim to benefit the community. Alternately, the community will provide relevant information about the situation of children, and in return the NGO could provide information about services and resources that community members could access and that are not seen as related to the facilitator.

This kind of reciprocal approach builds trust, keeps the focus on the community, and sets the stage for deep listening and learning about the community.

A process of deep listening and learning requires empathy, curiosity, humility, and a willingness to background our own preconceptions, thoughts, and analyses regarding the situation (see Tool FAC 3 in the companion Toolkit).

For example, if you are talking with local women who say, “Girls sleep with men who give them small items or money”, an empathic orientation is not to judge them but to want to learn more. You might do this by asking questions such as: “How old are the girls?”, “What kind of small items?”, “How is this practice viewed by the girls?”, “Is it usual or normal for most girls, or mainly for a sub-group of girls in the area?”, and “How do you feel about this practice?”

This open-minded, listen-and-learn orientation represents a sharp departure from the more typical “expert orientation” taken by people who conduct child protection assessments. Yet this approach enables us to understand the practice as it is seen through the eyes of local people.

The learning process also helps to build trust since it communicates quietly that local people are not to be judged but have views and practices that are worth learning about.

Of course, this approach does not tacitly condone the ill-treatment of girls. It is out of a commitment to child rights that we want to learn about girls sleeping with men who give them

small things or money. Quite often, we learn that different people in a village or neighborhood hold divergent views about such practices and whether they are good for girls, families, and the community. These diverging views can help to animate very rich follow-on discussions that fuel thinking about how the community could change such a practice.

The key, however, is that decisions to condemn such practices must come from the community itself. As always in community-led approaches, the decisions about what are significant harms to children and which harms to address must come from the people.

Learners should also have a resilience orientation. When we take a deficits approach of asking only about the bad things that happen to children, it is easy for community members to feel that they are not being respected for all the good things they do for children. A deficits approach can also portray people as victims or as unable to solve their problems. Such portrayals can disempower local people. In addition, since effective action builds on existing strengths, it is essential to document those strengths during the learning phase.

Learners should therefore approach their task with a genuine interest in learning about both risk factors and protective factors.

Asking Open-ended, Elicitive, Questions

A good way to listen deeply to local people is to ask very open-ended questions that are likely to elicit the participant's own understandings and views and to invite discussion.

For example, asking open-ended questions such as: "Are there harms to children that occur in this village/neighborhood?", or "What worries or concerns you about the safety of children in this community?" create a large, open space that invites the speaker to identify harms to children. This is critical because it does not pre-judge what the important child protection issues are but focuses on the views of the listener.

Because this approach is designed to elicit or bring forth the speaker's own views, it potentially puts the learner in a position to learn about harms to children that have previously not even been on their radar.

For example, after the war in Sierra Leone, the discussions about harms to children who had been recruited sometimes led people to say things such as: "That girl is not clean, and she cannot eat off the same plate as other people." Follow-up, probing questions and girls' narratives indicated that the speaker saw the formerly recruited girl as being spiritually polluted from being around dead people in the bush. The phrase "cannot eat off the same plate as other people" meant in the local idiom that that she could not interact freely with other people, as normal interactions could invoke bad spirits for community members or family members, causing sickness or death. This point had implications for the girl's stigmatization and also for her reintegration and protection.

This process of asking open-ended questions followed by probing questions is important also for the ongoing learning process of facilitators (see Tool FAC 6 in the companion Toolkit), who ideally would be part of the initial learning effort.

Flexible Yet Systematic Learning

The process described above of asking open-ended questions followed by probing questions requires considerable flexibility on the part of the learner. To a large extent, the learner follows the respondent's lead, going where they want to go.

This is a significant shift from the more typical approach of asking a set series of questions, either in a questionnaire or in a structured interview or discussion.

The flexible approach, however, is far from aimless, and it is important to be clear about the questions that the learning effort seeks to answer. The box below, for example, shows some of the key questions that the initial ethnographic learning phase in Sierra Leone and Kenya had set out to answer. These questions may or may not be asked directly, yet they should be at the back of the learner's mind as things they need to learn about. When the opportunity arises, the learner asks a question that fits the context and is timed to fit with what the respondent has been discussing. Via observation, the learner also obtains other useful information.

Key Questions, Ethnographic Phase

1. How do local people understand:
 - Childhood and children's development?
 - Girls' and boys' normal activities, roles, and responsibilities?
 - The main child protection risks or sources of harm to children?
 - The processes or mechanisms used by families or communities to support children who have been affected by various protection threats? And the outcomes of those mechanisms, and how satisfactory these outcomes are in the eyes of different stakeholders?
2. How do child protection risks vary by gender and age?
3. Whom do girls or boys turn to for help when a particular threat arises?
4. Who are the natural helpers and what networks do they have?
5. What are the indigenous, "traditional" mechanisms of protection?
6. What child-focused committees exist in communities and/or Chiefdoms/districts? How are they perceived by local people? What are their roles, responsibilities, and functionalities?
7. How are very sensitive/complex issues addressed?
8. What are the linkages between community mechanisms and the national child protection system? How do communities perceive the government mechanisms that may exist? What gaps occur in these linkages?

Living in the Area

Trust is the foundation for effective learning, as local people will not speak or act freely if they do not trust the learner or they have concerns about being judged. One of the best ways to establish trust is for the learner to actually live in the community for a period of time.

After several weeks, the learner mixes and talks with many people, developing relationships and collective acceptance. As local people relax and see the learner being comfortable and respectful among the community, they in turn feel more relaxed and willing to speak openly and share more deeply about their culture and practices.

Living in the area, the learner observes when children go to school (and who does not go to school), when people go to their farms or to the market or to the mosque or church, when girls and women rise and what they do, when the men wake up and what they do, when and how people socialize, and so on.

This knowledge illuminates the rhythms and patterns of everyday life. It also enables us to time learning activities so that they are respectful, do not conflict with people's ability to work and earn money, and include people (for example, children who work on the streets) who may not be present in their community during normal working hours.

Living in the area also enables a first-hand understanding of the context. If the learner lived in a house that was typical of the homes in the area, they would experience directly what it means not to have running water and what is required to obtain access to water, health care, and other necessities.

Diverse Methods

Learning through the use of diverse methods is essential since each method has its strengths and weaknesses. By combining methods that complement each other, it is possible to capitalize on their complementary strengths and mitigate against the drawbacks of any one particular method.

Particularly valuable are open-ended, participatory methods that help to unlock people's agency and lay the foundation for subsequent community-led work. A collection of the participatory tools used in the Sierra Leone work is found in Tool LNG 4 in the companion Toolkit. Of these, two particular methods—narrative methods and participant observation—are discussed below.

Narrative methods recognize the importance of language and the fact that people are natural story tellers and makers of meaning. As people narrate their lives and experiences, they communicate rich information about their values, personal views and motivations, and understandings of their social world and their place within it. Narrative methods are highly useful in helping us to learn about local people's perceptions, understandings, values, and struggles.

For example, if a learner were to ask a Kenyan woman, "Who is a child?", she might answer, "The child is someone who cannot do things for herself and has to rely on other people such as

parents to do most things.” This suggests that the speaker does not think of children in terms of age but in terms of being dependent on others.

Probing questions and flexible follow-up discussion could help to clarify what it means for people not to be dependent, whether dependent people are children even if they are 40 years old, and so on. This process can provide rich insight into the woman’s understanding of who is a child and the boundaries between childhood and adulthood.

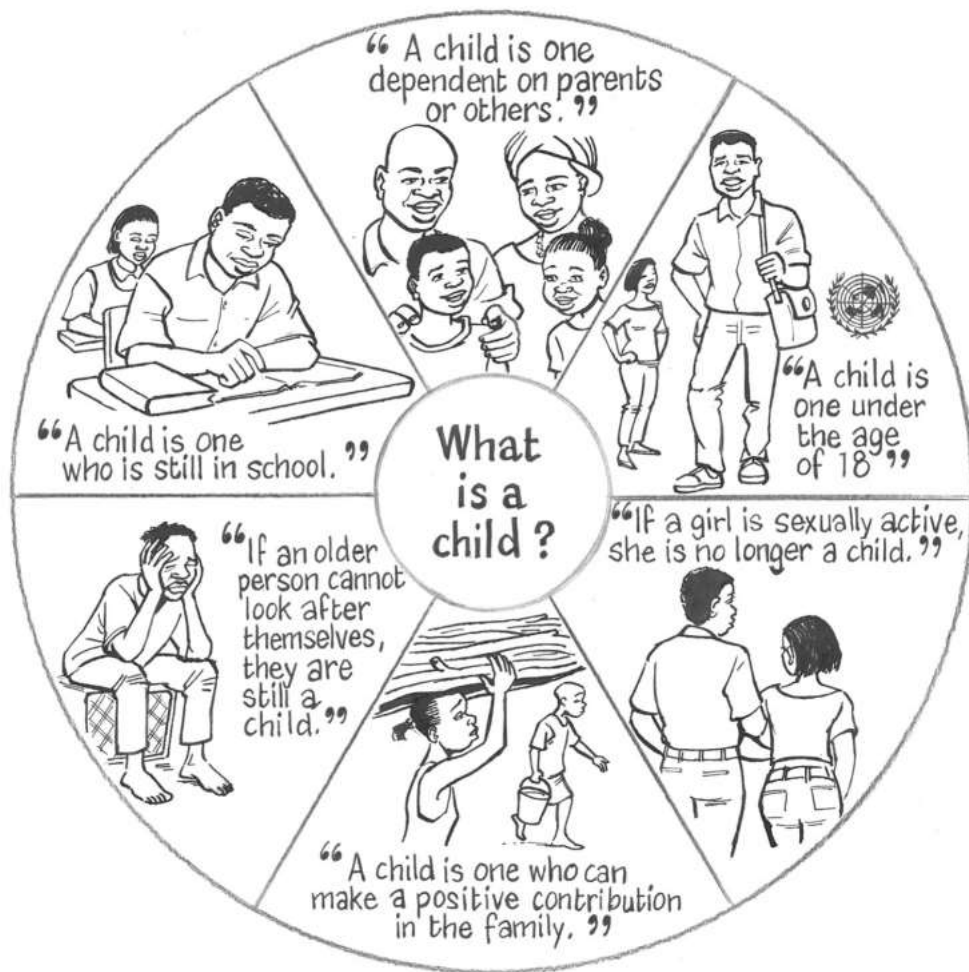
More than most methods, narrative methods also help to illuminate local conceptual distinctions. For example, if a mother is asked what she thinks of child-beating, she might say, “This is the way children learn how to obey their parents and elders. If we do not discipline the child, he will not learn proper behavior.” However, she might add, “Child-beating is not the same as cruelty. Some parents really hurt their children, even burning their hand in the fire. This is cruelty, and we have laws against that.”

Such narratives indicate that the mother does not believe that all forms of physical punishment are good for the child, and if the beating or physical punishment is severe then it falls outside of everyday “child-beating” and into the category of “cruelty.”

Narrative methods help us to learn about these categories, which may differ from outsiders’ categories. Narrative methods may also illuminate areas of struggle or uncertainty. For example, a mother may say initially that child-beating is necessary but then amend this by saying, “I’m not sure that beating is really good for children. Some parents are asking, ‘Is there a better way of disciplining our children?’”

Such reflections offer a window on the people’s subjective struggles and areas of emerging change. If many people in an area ask such questions, it might indicate that the time is ripe for work on social norms change.

Narrative methods may also be used to learn about which harms to children local people see as most important. For example, the ethnographic tools used in Sierra Leone and Kenya include group discussions, in which local people identify various things that they see as harms to children and then rank them according to which ones they see as being most important or significant. This process paves the way for the post-learning work, in which the community as a whole decides which harm or harms to children it wants to address.



In using narrative methods, a key priority is to capture what people say verbatim. As discussed above, recording terms such as “heavy work” or “eating off the plate with others” is critical for capturing what people have actually said and understanding their views.

Not helpful is the tendency for interviewers to insert or inject their own terms by naming “heavy work” as “child labor.” The meaning of “child labor”, which is an internationalized term, may be very different from what the respondent had actually meant.

Whenever it is possible and appropriate, the learning team should work to capture key terms in the exact form used by the speaker. This often entails the use of digital recorders, with careful attention given to adhering to principles of informed consent and confidentiality. If the use of recorders is ethically inappropriate, as can occur, for example, in a conflict setting, it can be valuable to instead train the learners how to take notes in shorthand or how to work with a colleague who can focus on note-taking, with assurances given that no names or personal identifiers will appear in the written records.

CAPTURING LOCAL IDIOMS AND MEANINGS



Of course, narrative methods have significant limitations. If we wanted to know how much violence against children actually occurs, narrative methods might not yield the most accurate information. Parents may underestimate how often or how severely they beat their children, since factual information about that could threaten their image of being good parents who care for their children and avoid cruelty.

Because there is often a gap between what people say and what they do, it is useful to use participant observation to complement narrative methods.

As the name suggests, *participant observation* is a method in which the learner makes observations as they participate with local people in their daily activities. These might include, for example: farming, washing clothing, going to school, going to the mosque, eating meals with family, doing chores, or children playing with other children.

In these contexts, you might actually observe a teacher beating a child, other children bullying a child, a girl and boy helping their parents, teenage girls talking with each other in a supportive manner, and so on.

Such observations depict everyday life with a directness and a richness that is sometimes not apparent in narratives. The combination of participant observation and narrative methods may give a more accurate picture than would be attained by either method alone. For example, narratives might give the impression that child beating is not such a bad or stressful thing, yet direct observation of parents disciplining their children may paint a very different picture.

To ensure the quality of the data, it is vital to have an experienced learner/researcher act as a mentor who checks the data collection process and the data quality. By making regular field

visits, even unannounced visits, the mentor can observe how the learner interacts with people and adheres (or does not adhere) to the learning principles. The mentor should offer observations and supportive advice that helps the learner improve their skills and do a better job.

The mentor should also check on a daily basis some of the written records of interviews or group discussions, reviewing them against portions of the digital recordings for accuracy and giving advice as needed to the learner. Without such a checking process, the intense demands of learning and field realities can tire learners, leading to data losses and decrements in the data quality.

A key part of the learning phase is to contrast different points of view according to gender, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and other related factors. This approach not only avoids homogenized portrayals of community views, but also illuminates how our positioning in the community influences our understanding and views.

If done well, this type of analysis can clarify how, for example, the lived experiences of girls differ from those of boys, and the gendered patterns of risks and protective factors. This information helps to illuminate power dynamics and shows that it is too general to speak of “harms to children.” Such information is an important part of the foundation for children’s full participation and subsequent inclusive community action.

A useful strategy in the learning process is to engage children and other community members in the learning, making the process one of co-learning. For example, we can train teenagers to learn about harms to children through means such as photography, drawing, group discussions, use of electronic media, and so on.¹⁹

The engagement of children in guiding the learning process provides rich information about children’s lived experiences and helps to illuminate issues that may be more salient to children than to adults. Moreover, a child participatory approach draws on children’s creativity and sets the stage for high levels of child participation throughout the community-led process.

Community Discussion and Reflection

Although community members have participated in the learning process, different people may have taken part in different activities and may not have the “big picture” that comes from a collective sharing and discussion of the overall findings.

An important step, then, is to have a process of collectivization in which the community as a whole discusses and reflects on the findings. This process is fundamental for the purposes of validating the key findings. After all, it is possible that the learning effort has been limited or even gone off track.

¹⁹ A full discussion of these methods is beyond the scope of this Guide. For useful resources, see the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (2012) and Skovdol & Cornish (2015).

A whole community discussion can help to ensure that the findings are comprehensive, accurate, and interpreted in an appropriate manner. This process offers valuable opportunities for communities to reflect and begin to mobilize themselves for action to address the harms to children that the learning phase had identified.

Preparation, Sharing, and Validation

In preparing to feed information back to communities, careful attention should be given to how the information will be presented.

For example, if local people have low rates of literacy, it would be more appropriate to feed the main findings back verbally in simple terms, rather than by means of a sophisticated written report. The verbal presentation could be coupled with a “light” written summary report that the community leaders could keep to think through.

To enable a respectful, participatory process, it is important to have a meeting with significant numbers of community people, including children, with the leader’s support. We can ask the leader if it is a good idea and acceptable to have a community meeting that everyone knows about well in advance and in which the findings will be shared. If the leader has felt respected throughout the process, they will likely not only approve such a meeting but will also advise on how to make it successful and best prepare for it.

The objectives of this community discussion of the overall findings are twofold. The first is to share the findings with community members in a respectful manner and in a spirit of co-learning. The second is to check the accuracy of the findings.

The feedback and validation will be most enjoyable for community members if it is done in a highly participatory manner.

For example, in Sierra Leone, one of the mentors (David Lamin) fed the findings back to the community by asking questions at the group meeting, such as: “Now, what are the main things that harm children here?” After community members had called out many items, the mentor then reminded people of all the good things they had taught the learners, noting the key harms to children they had identified. People could see the convergence of ideas or the lack thereof, and they commented accordingly. Fortunately, there was a high level of convergence in this case.

The same process was then repeated with questions such as: “Who is a child?” and “What supports children’s well-being here?” As people chanted out responses, there was animated discussion. In the end, the findings of the learning phase were validated by the community.

This validation is more than a means of checking accuracy. Since local people appreciated the findings and the respectful feedback process, some people said things such as, “This research has given us a fuller picture of our children and what harms them or helps them.” This was the beginning of a process wherein people internalized the findings, not only seeing them as accurate but also taking them on board and owning them.

Community Reflection

The feedback session creates a fertile space for community reflection that ultimately paves the way for community-led action.

Often this happens spontaneously. For example, during the course of validating findings, someone might ask a question such as: “What are *we* going to do about these [harms to children]?”

This question is important because it invites thinking about action by the community itself. Such a question reflects a sense of community ownership. The community members see particular harms to children as the community’s problem and responsibility.

If the question does not arise spontaneously, the mentor or facilitator could ask a general question such as: “Can anything be done to address these problems [or a specific problem]?” Now the question is what the community itself will do about it, which is the subject of our next chapter.

Chapter 6.

Supporting the Community Planning Process

Following the learning phase, communities will have a heightened awareness of various harms to children that need to be addressed.

This awareness, however, may not translate into inclusive action, as community elites may guide discussions and plans for action. An inclusive process is needed in order to unlock the greatest potential for change and to bring forward the views of girls, boys, marginalized people, and others who are not usually at the center of power.

Also, community action alone may not be enough to address harms that require collaboration between communities and formal actors in the child protection system. In this context, outside agencies may contribute to children's well-being by playing a facilitative role.

The purpose of this chapter is to increase understanding of how to support an inclusive community planning process in which communities decide which harm(s) to children they want to address and how they will do so. Its objectives are to:

- emphasize the importance of deep engagement and relationship with communities in enabling community decisions to work with an agency (or agencies) and its facilitator;
- outline how to support contextualized processes wherein communities engage in inclusive dialogue and decision-making to select which harm(s) to children they want to address through community-led action; and
- explore different models wherein communities decide which actions or steps they will take to address the harm(s) to children that they have selected and how they can collaborate with government actors and service providers.

Key Question for Practitioners

How can we co-create with communities a process in which communities decide which harm(s) to children they want to address and which actions they will take to address those harms?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1–9; Training: TRN 2–5, 10; Management: MGM 3, MGM 4, & MGM 6–11.

Deciding to Work Together

The process of deciding to work together may occur organically in the context of providing feedback from the learning phase to the community. During the collective reflection that accompanies the feedback, community people naturally ask themselves, “What are we going to do about these harms to children?”, and they often ask agency workers, “Will you continue to support us?” The latter question is complex and could carry hidden expectations for financial support or even for a donor-beneficiary relationship in which the non-governmental organization (NGO) leads and takes the key decisions.

A useful, honest strategy at this stage would be to (a) express your interest in continuing to learn from and accompany the community in its efforts to support vulnerable children, and (b) say that in the coming weeks, you (the outsiders) will ask to talk with community leaders and discuss further a community-led process for moving forward together.

This approach creates space for deepening the community-outsider relationship and would likely be seen as respectful and supportive. It avoids making false promises or implying that outsiders will now lead the process. In some contexts, it can be very important to state that you do not have large sums of money or wish to bring in outsider approaches.

Alternately, you could go to the community again and ask whether outside accompaniment, co-learning, and support would be useful following the learning phase. You cannot assume that there will or should be an affirmative response to this question.

Indeed, in the next rounds of discussion, it can be useful to help everyone (including yourself) to question whether collaboration is appropriate and what the expectations are regarding collaboration. If community people show little interest in collaborating, or if inappropriate expectations are apparent (e.g., the community leader demands that the outsiders will give the community material aid as is typical NGO behavior in the area), then there will be insufficient grounds for collaboration.

Either way, more discussion is needed in order for both sides to make an informed decision about whether it makes sense to collaborate and how. These discussions are about potentially deepening and enriching the relationship, and they may have significant impact on the depth of the relationship.

What is outlined below is not a recipe but a set of indicative steps for enabling a constructive discussion with communities. The steps assume that the facilitator has been part of the learning phase and is well known to the community leaders and people.

Indicative Steps for Enabling Discussion About Whether to Collaborate

1. Follow the local norms by meeting first with the Chief or leader of the area, recalling the main harms to children that the community has identified.
2. Discuss steps that the community is already taking or has already tried in addressing the main harms to children. Ask: “What are the next steps for the community in addressing these harms?” This often leads to a mention of wanting outside help, which opens the door for discussion about possible collaboration. Keep the emphasis, though, on what communities can do and what local capacities and resources they can use.
3. If the leader is open to collaborating, repeat the process with community people, engaging with people who are positioned in different ways. Usually, it is possible to do this within a week or two, without taking up too much of community members’ time.
4. Meet with different community people outside of any large meetings that are held, inviting reflection on the possibility of collaborating as the community addresses a particular harm to children.

Key messages that the NGO can send during the discussions include:

- Outsiders cannot fix the problems—only communities can do that. We support self-help and the power and action by community people.
- We, as outsiders, can help communities to address self-selected harm(s) to children, yet our role is facilitative only. We are not the “experts” who will lead an intervention. We can help the community to engage with each of its members to choose which issue(s) to address, decide how to address them, take its own actions, and help evaluate the actions. We want to learn from the community and document their work on behalf of vulnerable children.
- We work in a distinct way that engages many local people in dialogue and decision-making, drawing on the strengths of everyone in the community.
- Our role as outsiders is short-term. There are many communities that my organization is concerned about, and we will need to move on to other communities. After you get started, we will be able to check in with you from time to time and may be able to provide information or help you make connections with relevant government or NGO programs that may help to strengthen your efforts.
- We do not provide large sums of money, which tend to create interventions and processes that are not sustainable. Communities have taught us that they can achieve their own

solutions using mostly their own resources, and we would like to support this kind of process.

If there is mutual interest in collaborating, it is valuable to describe the slow, dialogue-oriented process envisioned and to ask questions that invite reflection on how it is best if everyday people rather than community leaders drive the process. It can be useful to do this using local idioms or referring to examples that fit the local context (for example, “Does it takes all the people to raise healthy children?”, or “Can a single farmer/fisherman feed a village?”).

Such questions invite reflection on the importance of everyone in the community working together to address harms to children. From there, you could outline the various stages of the work: selecting which harm or harms to children to address, planning the action, and so on. Throughout, it is vital to stress the importance of the full participation of different people, including teenagers and children.

If there is interest in collaborating, it is useful for the community to define its roles and responsibilities, and for the external facilitator (if applicable) to define what they are prepared to commit to doing and the limitations of their role.

Since the outsider role is facilitative and time-limited, an important NGO responsibility is to support local people in their planning and action, with regular reports and updates given to the community leader. For communities, the main responsibilities are to share their views openly, participate fully at each stage, and work collectively for the benefit of the children in the community.

It is useful to reiterate once again that this is not an NGO “project.” The community itself enables, defines, and leads the work, with light support from the NGO facilitators and, if action research is being done, from the data collectors. Alternately, the community might decide to identify its own, internal facilitator, who is trained and backstopped by the NGO.

Although this process of deciding whether and how to collaborate is highly contextual, it is useful to identify some benchmarks for this process and also some things to avoid.

Key Benchmarks:

- Community decides to collaborate with the outside group.
- Community accepts the facilitator’s presence in the community or designates its own, internal facilitator.
- Clarification of the facilitator’s roles and responsibilities, with clear emphasis on community leadership, decision-making, and power.

What to Avoid:

- Raised expectations.
- Promises of money and monetarizing the process.

- Working only through the community power elite.
- Making the facilitator the focus and initiator of activities.
- Creating or strengthening dependency on outsiders.

Communities Select Which Harm(s) to Children to Address

The community-led process begins with the community itself defining which harm(s) to children it is most concerned about and intends to address.

This decision has significant implications for children’s well-being and also enables genuine community ownership. As the communities themselves take stock of what is most damaging to children and decide which harms to address, they increase their motivation and take responsibility for addressing the issues collectively. In most cases, it is useful for the facilitator to help the community focus initially on manageable tasks that can be completed relatively soon. This initial success helps to build the community’s confidence and ability to take on more challenging tasks.

Like most aspects of community-led work, the process is as important as the actual decisions taken. In keeping with a social justice perspective, inclusivity is a high priority. If the discussions and decisions are dominated by the community power elite, or if many people are left out of the discussions altogether, significant numbers of community members may not see the process as “theirs.” Not feeling ownership of the process, they may have little desire to get involved, even if they are invited to participate in the discussions.

This can be a significant loss for several reasons. If, for example, girls are excluded, the community will likely not learn about girls’ views and the distinctive harms that they face. As a result, the community will be less likely to select the harms that girls see as most important, and the subsequent actions are not likely to be sensitive to girls’ views or issues. Such a flawed, gender-blind process of decision-making would demean girls and help to cement male-privileging values and practices that enable ongoing harms to girls.

Similarly, if the process leaves out people with disabilities, it will not learn about the situation of children with disabilities or be able to benefit from their views, agency, and creativity.

Promoting Inclusive Dialogue and Decision-Making

When asked how can the community make a decision, local people often answer along the lines of: “We will have community meetings that everyone attends, and the community will discuss the issues and make a decision.”

To stimulate awareness about how inclusive community meetings are, the facilitator should ask many different people questions such as the following:

- Does everyone come to community meetings? Who does not come?

- Why do some people not come to community meetings?
- Do girls usually speak up at community meetings? Why not?
- Can boys speak up at community meeting? Why not?

As people discuss such questions, they become more aware that community meetings are not friendly spaces for children to speak up, nor are they fully inclusive. For example, who is excluded from the community meeting in the picture below?



Next, by asking questions such as: “Would it be useful for children to be able to participate in discussions of harms to children?”, and “What could be done to enable girls/boys to have a greater voice in discussions of harms to children and which harm to address?”, the facilitator invites individuals and groups to develop options for having a more inclusive process.

Since the question about options is open-ended, community members are free to make many suggestions. Without favoring particular options, the facilitator helps the community to think through different options with careful attention to feasibility and inclusivity.

Particularly if the community seems uncertain about how to enable everyone to have a voice in the discussion and decision-making, it can be useful for the facilitator to share various approaches that other communities have used, inviting discussion of them, too. This is not an imposition of other approaches since the community still holds the power to decide how it will go about enabling an inclusive process.

In a spirit of co-learning across communities, the approach used in Sierra Leone (see Tool MGM 2 in the companion Toolkit) intermixed community meetings, small group discussions, and home

visits. The small group discussions were conducted privately with groups of ten or so girls, boys, women, men, and elders, respectively, with the general points from these discussions fed back to the community, without personal identifiers.

Small group discussions create a safe space to talk among peers. This allows girls, for example, to speak openly about issues that they would not otherwise discuss if men or boys were present. The aim is not to bring a “right answer” back to the next community meeting but to share with the community the options that have been suggested and enable a discussion of these options.

Home visits are advantageous since they may include people such as a blind child who stays mostly at home or very poor people who work extra long hours and have little time to attend meetings.

Such visits, however, need to be respectful, supportive, and focused on the views of the participants, without judgment. Developing informal guidelines through participatory dialogue for making home visits could help to ensure that the home visits are safe, ethical, and constructive. Throughout the discussions, the emphasis should be on community dialogue and decision-making. This approach is consistent with the spirit that we all stand to learn from community insights and problem solving.

However, there are many different ways of enabling full participation by people in the community who are typically marginalized, and the approach used in Sierra Leone is not intended to be prescriptive.

A different means of enabling meaningful child participation was used by ChildFund in northern Afghanistan in 2002. Here, ChildFund facilitators enabled a process of child-led risk mapping, in which children drew pictures of their village and identified the places that were dangerous for children. When the children presented their findings via role-plays to their villages, they showed how young children sometimes died from falling into uncovered well holes. Without any NGO encouragement, community members became concerned about the problem, identified pieces of wood, and used the wood to cover the holes that had posed a threat to young children.

This community-led process was galvanized by children’s sharing their lived experiences in a creative means of role-plays. To their credit, the children managed the power relations with adults well by demonstrating respect for their elders throughout the process.

When it comes to enabling inclusive participation, there is no “one-size-fits-all” option, and the local community should take the lead in deciding how to bring forward diverse voices and views.

A key step is to work according to community time. It may take several cycles of large community meetings followed by smaller discussions before agreement is reached on how to enable inclusive decision-making. Or the community may decide to work initially via large group meetings, taking subsequent steps to bring in a wider diversity of people.

Multiple obstacles can arise in developing inclusive community dialogue and decision-making. If movement to include the views and voices of children occurs too quickly, it can upset the local norms and the balance of power between children and adults. Similarly, efforts to include

marginalized people can evoke backlash, particularly if there are strong norms related to caste and religion.

As these complexities suggest, the path to an inclusive decision-making process entails slow, social change and requires a patient approach. A good strategy for managers and facilitators is to discuss these and related complexities with respected community members who, together with mentors, can help the facilitator to navigate difficult issues in a contextually appropriate manner.

One issue that warrants attention is whether the community leader should participate directly in the community dialogues. The leader's participation is valuable, since he or she may bring forward good ideas and people may expect him or her to play a central role in the discussions. Also, the leader's participation could legitimate the process, which is critical for its success.

A significant concern, however, is that the leader's participation could control or limit the discussion of different ideas. After all, the leader is a very powerful person and is often seen as being very knowledgeable. To disagree publicly with the leader would be inappropriate. People who disagree might stay silent due to concerns about coming under criticism or about what might happen if they fell out of favor with the powerful leader.

As a result, it will likely be difficult to have a fully honest, open discussion among community members if the leader participates in open discussions.

To manage or prevent this potential challenge, it is useful to talk with the leader in advance of the first full community discussions. Having put the problem before him or her, we can then ask for their advice in handling it.

In Sierra Leone, this led a Paramount Chief to exclaim with a laugh that “no one would disagree publicly with the Paramount Chief!” Appropriately, the Chief then suggested that he would not participate directly but instead would receive regular reports and updates on the state of the discussions and planning. This approach simultaneously recognized the authority of his position and also allowed for an inclusive process.

Generating Ideas About and Prioritizing Harms to Children

Once the community has worked out how to it wants to enable an inclusive process, the facilitator may begin asking questions that help the community to select a harm or harms to children to address through community-led action.

This will likely be a slow process that can take several months, since the issues are complex and the community is just getting into the swing of having highly inclusive dialogues. The process also must unfold in two steps, with broader discussion followed by narrowing down and prioritization of the harms to children to be addressed.

The first step is for diverse community members to generate ideas about the main harms to children. Valuable questions for facilitators and community members to ask might include:

- What were the main harms to children that the community identified during the learning phase?
- What makes these harms so important to address? Why are they of concern?
- Have things changed since the learning phase? Are there additional harms to children that have become more important?

These and related questions help participants to think through what they see collectively as the main harms to children and why those harms are significant or very concerning. Frequently mentioned among the latter are the damage to or suffering of children, limits to their well-being and healthy development, or burdens placed on family and community.

Over time, the discussions develop an ecological perspective, without it being named as such. By inviting the views of many different people and enabling the exploration of ideas without lapsing into debates or efforts to find the “right” answer, the facilitator enables an inclusive process, helps diverse people to participate, and promotes enjoyable discussions in which people learn from one another.

Not infrequently, the inputs from small group discussions by girls or by boys are eye-openers since they remind adults of the gendered nature of the harms and the very different positions of girls and boys. Typically, it takes several cycles of community discussion followed by small group discussions to reach this point.

The second step is then to help the community to narrow down and prioritize the harms to children that might be addressed. Here the facilitator might help the community think about why it is valuable to focus on one harm or a small number of harms and what considerations might help the community to create a shortlist of options. Valuable questions to ask can include:

- Why is it important to focus on one harm or a small number of harms to children?
- What might happen if the community tried to address all the harms to children at the same time?
- Out of all the harms discussed so far, what are the top three harms to children that might be considered further? In other words, what is our “shortlist”?
- Are some harms easier to address than others? Could it be valuable to start with a focus not on the most challenging harm but on harms that the community can likely address effectively?

This second step may be slow in part because there may be divergent views about the most important harms to children. To build an inclusive process, it is essential to take time and make sure that different points of view receive adequate attention. If particular people feel marginalized at this moment, they will likely step back from or even withdraw from the process, thereby weakening its inclusivity.

It may also take time for communities to get past a focus on poverty as the overarching harm to children. To aid this process, the facilitator may stimulate reflection on the fact that in some poor families, children do well, and in some relatively well-to-do families, children fare poorly.

Over time, though, experience shows that communities will slowly reach agreement on the top two or three harms to children, from which the community will select one or several harms to address.

It is valuable for communities to have the freedom to decide whether they want to address a single harm to children or multiple harms to children. In Sierra Leone, communities selected a single harm to children (teenage pregnancy) since the action research aimed to test the effect of a single community action. Yet in many situations, communities may decide to address multiple harms that they see as being interconnected.

For example, in Kenya, the communities selected “early sex” as the harm to children to be addressed. Early sex was a priority in part because it related to early consensual sex, sexual abuse and exploitation of children, and early pregnancy. Similarly, some communities in India chose “child marriage” as the harm to be addressed, and they recognized that child marriage was interconnected with “school dropout.”

A strength of a community-led approach is that communities often do not think in terms of the divisions inherent in the humanitarian system. Instead, they take a holistic approach in their actions to address harms to children. In this respect, we have much to learn from communities.

At the same time, it is important to encourage communities (and ourselves!) to be realistic and to not set themselves up for failure. Considerations of possible community actions often find their way into discussions of which harm to address. This can be helpful in keeping an eye on what is practical to accomplish.

For example, in a recent planning discussion in tribal communities in India, a community felt strongly that alcoholism was one of the biggest harms to children, and people wanted badly to address it. However, when they spontaneously asked themselves how they could address it, they realized they had no feasible means of reducing deeply ingrained, widespread alcoholism. This did not decrease their desire to address it, but they learned through dialogue that it would be better to collectively address harms to children that they can likely address in an effective manner.

Similarly, it is useful to help communities recognize that if they try to take on too many harms at once, their chances of success will probably diminish. In light of limited local resources and other constraints, communities are more likely to succeed in their action if they do not take on too much at once and start with harms to children that practically can be addressed through community action.

A good practice in community-led work is to help communities achieve early wins by focusing initially on harms to children that the communities stand a good chance of addressing in an effective manner.

Community Facilitation

In a community-led approach, the facilitator aims from the start to work themselves out of a job. After all, it is communities who should facilitate dialogues, manage disagreements, consider different options, and make decisions about which harm(s) to children to address and how to address them.

In this regard, a key task of the facilitator is to help community members learn facilitation and mobilization skills. An effective facilitator does this first by modeling the process. In addition, the facilitator invites community members to do things such as facilitate group discussions, coaching and encouraging them as they go. Often, people who already are skilled facilitators come forward and help to move the community process along.

In a whole-community approach, however, it is useful to spread the facilitation responsibilities out and to avoid any particular individual or sub-group having too much power.

One way of doing this is to organize workshops in which different community members practice their skills of facilitation and mobilization and receive constructive feedback from other community members. Subsequently, the participants may become active as facilitators of small group discussions, home visits and other outreach activities, and even large group discussions. Build the capacities for community facilitation is an important part of community-led work.

As discussed below, community facilitation relates closely with issues of community oversight of its planning and action. That is, as the planning progresses, the community may deliberately assign a small number of people the task of facilitating the planning process and development and implementation of community action plans.

Inter-Community Collaboration

Inter-community collaboration is an excellent means of enabling co-learning and collective action on a wider scale. In addition, district or provincial authorities are typically more interested in collaborating with groups of communities (e.g., neighborhoods in urban areas, or villages in rural areas) than with single communities.

As usual, inter-community collaboration is best not imposed from outside but chosen by the different communities involved. If a community decides it would like to work alone, this decision should be respected.

However, if the inter-community path is to be taken, it should be recognized that the collaborative approach adds complexity in that multiple communities will need to agree on which harm(s) to children to address and which action should be taken.

A useful strategy is to begin inter-community discussions after the individual communities have created their respective shortlist of options and had developed an inclusive process. This timing gives individual communities the space they need to develop an inclusive process, but occurs before they have become fixated on addressing one particular harm to children. Such fixation can impede the inter-community process, which requires flexibility and willingness to compromise.

Another useful strategy is to have only a few communities collaborating with one another, since it is easier to gain agreement among three communities than it is to gain agreement among, for example, ten communities. In the community-led work in Sierra Leone, three communities in a similar area collaborated on the community planning and action. In Kenya, two adjoining villages collaborated on the community-led work.

To stimulate thinking about the potential value of inter-community collaboration and how to achieve it with regard to having multiple communities select a single harm to children to address, the facilitator may ask questions in each community like the following, enabling inclusive dialogue about them:

- How do communities here work together on different tasks or issues (for example, planting, water, transportation, etc.)?
- Do the harms to children that you have identified also affect children in nearby communities? How?
- What benefits could there be to having several communities collaborate in selecting which harm(s) to children to address and then deciding together what action to take in addressing the harms(s)?
- Are there particular communities you would like to collaborate with?

If there is keen interest in inter-community collaboration, the facilitator could then ask how, practically, this might occur. In the discussions that follow, communities might decide to have a cross-cutting planning group that plays a facilitative role.

In Sierra Leone, for example, a group of three communities formed an Inter-Village Task Force to help facilitate the selection of a single harm to children that all three communities would choose together and subsequently address together. This approach is described in greater detail in Tool MGM 3 in the companion Toolkit. However, it is not a recipe to be imposed on communities, which should be free to create their own process.

The outcomes of this phase of work should be an inclusive process, the selection of the harm(s) to children to be addressed through community-led action, and, if chosen by the communities, an agreement to collaborate with other communities. This phase also has more specific benchmarks to be met and things to be avoided, as outlined below.

Key Benchmarks:

- First community discussions are followed by a mixture of community discussions and small group discussions.
- The community takes steps to hear views of girls, boys, women, and men through means such as sub-group discussions on harms to children and priorities for action.
- Individual communities develop their “shortlist” of harms to children that might be addressed.

- Facilitation skills are developed and used by community members.
- Communities decide whether and how to collaborate with other communities.
- Communities select the harm(s) to children that they want to address through community led action.

What to Avoid:

- Not creating space for slow, inclusive dialogue.
- Rushing the process.
- Facilitator leads the discussion toward a particular harm or harms to children.
- Men and boys dominate the discussions.
- No participation by marginalized people.
- Tokenistic participation by children.
- Decisions are taken by the community power elite.
- Excessive or singular focus on poverty reduction.
- Trying to take on the most difficult issue(s) initially.

Community Action Planning

Having selected which harm(s) to children they will address, communities can turn next to thinking more systematically about how they want to address those harms through community-led action.

Most communities already have experience in collective action planning, as they regularly take decisions about issues such as where and how to farm, how to help provide education and clean water for their children, how to deal with crime-ridden urban neighborhoods, and so on. Of course, the communities are free to develop their own action plans and planning processes.

Community Planning Group

Communities frequently decide to select particular community members to help enable the planning process. The work of this community planning group is facilitative rather than directive—it does not act as the decision-maker. The group calls meetings, encourages full participation, enables dialogues that explore different community actions and their strengths and weaknesses, and helps the community decide which actions to take and how. The planning group works according to the wishes of the community.

If, for example, the community have decided previously to use planning cycles of community meetings, small group discussions, and home visits for the identification of the harm(s), and the community wanted to continue using this approach, the community planning group would continue to use these cycles in the action planning phase.

If the community decides to form a planning group, a key issue to help them consider is who should belong to it. The community might decide that the planning group members should be the people who had played a significant role in the community-led selection of which harm(s) to children to address. Or the community might decide to use a different approach. For example, it might decide that the members of the community planning group should not only be good facilitators but should also have a strong interest in addressing the particular harm(s) that the community has selected.

An important consideration is whether the members of the planning group represent the wider community. If, for example, all the planning group members were male, women and girls would feel disempowered. Similarly, if the planning group consisted only of adults, children and teenagers would feel disempowered.

Community reflection on these issues could be stimulated by asking questions such as:

- How should members of a planning group be selected—should they be the most popular, or are other qualities important? Should they be all men, or all women? Should children be involved?
- How will the planning group work? Will they help to continue full community discussions, small group discussions, and home visits? Or should they work in some other way?

If the planning involves inter-community collaboration, it could be useful to help communities think about the above questions with multiple communities in mind. If the communities decide to have a cross-cutting planning group, they will need to think how the members of the inter-community planning group would be selected and how the group would work with the individual communities in enabling a participatory process of planning the inter-community action to address the selected harm(s) to children.

Action Criteria

As part of the community planning process, it can be useful to help communities think about whether there are criteria or qualities that the community action should embody (see Tool MGM 6 in the companion Toolkit). For example, communities may decide that they want their actions to endure over time and have long-term effects on behalf of children, or to engage many different parts of the community.

Some key questions that communities might consider include:

- Looking ahead to the community action you are planning, how would you like the community-led action to be?

- Would the action be undertaken by a small group of people, or would many different community members be involved?
- Would the action be short-term—for example, something that is useful for children only in this school year? Or would the action continue longer and help children across different school years?
- Would the action benefit only boys, or only girls? Or would it benefit both girls and boys?

If an outside NGO is supporting the community planning and action, the NGO may have criteria that need to be met if it is to fulfill its obligations to donors, board members, and so on. Three commonly used criteria are low cost, sustainability, and linkage of the community process with formal stakeholders.

It is important, however, to avoid imposing these criteria, which could disempower the community. A useful strategy in this regard is to help communities reflect on these three criteria.

For example, community members can be asked whether most NGO projects continue beyond their period of active funding. Typically, community people answer this in the negative. The facilitator can then ask whether the harm(s) to children that the community wants to address is likely to continue over time.

Having answered this issue in the affirmative, the community members can reflect on how they want the community actions to benefit children over longer periods of time. In this process of reflection and dialogue, communities may embrace the sustainability criterion as being within their own interest.

Once communities embrace the importance of sustainability, it is a short step to helping them to see the benefits of using a low-cost action approach. Impoverished people are quick to realize that expensive approaches such as building schools will not be sustainable if there is a shortage of qualified teachers and little support from the Ministry of Education.

Consistency with children's rights is also an important action criterion. After all, it would make little sense to support a community action that violated children's rights. Few NGOs would be supportive if the community had decided to address a harm such as sexual abuse of girls by encouraging or compelling girls to marry at a very early age.

Fortunately, there are steps that the facilitators and community people can take to avoid this kind of situation. One way is to have the facilitator ask questions that help to raise awareness of the problems inherent in forcing girls to marry at an early age and to explore alternative actions that are consistent with child rights. Without lecturing people about child rights and imposing the child rights approach of the NGO, the agency facilitator could ask whether marrying girls at an early age could cause harm to them.

The ensuing discussion alone would not by itself change a norm of early marriage, if such a norm were present. However, the discussion would likely help to raise ideas about how early

marriage harms children physically and psychologically and to enable dialogue about different points of view on the issue.

The sharing of divergent viewpoints can also help community members to see that not everyone agrees with the practice of early marriage. This divergence of views makes it natural for the community to ask whether there are ways of addressing the problem of sexual abuse of girls. If there are and the discussions generate significant community agreement, then the action planning process would have regained its consistency with child rights.

This consistency can be achieved even without naming child rights per se. As this example illustrates, it can be useful during community discussions of which harm(s) to children to address to blend in preliminary discussion of what the community could do to address the harm(s) to children.

The third action criterion of linkage and collaboration with formal stakeholders is highly important in strengthening wider systems of child protection. Throughout the child protection sector, it is well recognized that communities are not islands and need the support of higher-level government mechanisms in handling matters such as criminal offences against children.

In many countries, however, local people may initially see the government as not helpful or corrupt, as an obstacle, or even as a threat to people's well-being, and their inclination to collaborate with government services may be correspondingly low. These concerns warrant attention since it will not help communities to plan to work with a particular Ministry, only to find out that that Ministry lacks requisite capacities or are unlikely to be a good partner on the action.

To help stimulate community willingness to collaborate with government actors, it may be useful to share with communities the example from Sierra Leone.

Here, having selected teenage pregnancy as the issue to be addressed, communities wanted the Government to help by, for example, providing contraceptives. As a team, the facilitators and mentors worked via UNICEF to determine whether the district-level department of the Ministry of Health could be reliable partners in providing contraceptives. Having received an affirmative answer, they visited the district authorities and began discussions that eventually led to government-community collaboration. The communities were happy with this process since it was not imposed, and the collaboration helped them to address a problem—teenage pregnancy—that they had selected and that they had been unable to address successfully on their own.

This example illustrates the important role of the mentors, who were vigilant behind the scenes, scoping out whether and how various action options might find government support, or not find such support.

Government actors may also take steps to increase community willingness to collaborate with them. For example, district officials might invite communities to think through how they would like to address a widespread problem such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage, or HIV and AIDS. Although this is a government-led selection of the harm(s) to children to be addressed through community-led action, relatively high levels of community ownership may be achieved since the problems are widespread and may already be of considerable concern to communities.

Action Planning Process

The action planning process should be as inclusive as the selection process has been. This stage may even provide opportunities for engaging more people since interest frequently builds when concrete actions are under discussion.

At all levels, it is important to discuss questions such as the following:

- How can parents get involved in the planning and community-led action?
- How can neighbors help support the community-led action?
- What role can schools play in the community-led action? How can faith communities support it?
- What do communities already do that helps to address the selected harm(s) to children?
- What resources do we have as communities that can help to address the selected harm(s)?
- Have people here heard of steps and actions that are not currently being used here but that could possibly help to address the selected harm(s) to children?
- What can we do to learn about the latter steps and actions?
- What can children themselves do to help address the selected harm(s) to children?

Iterative discussion of these and related questions will likely raise numerous action options. From there, the process becomes one of narrowing down and enabling the selection of one or more achievable options.

Through ongoing dialogue at multiple levels, the communities should come to see particular options as better than others and as having greater applicability across all three communities. As the dialogues continue, the need for capacity building may become apparent, even for planning purposes.

For example, in the Sierra Leone discussions of how to address teenage pregnancy, people said things like: “We’ve heard of Marie Stopes—we need something like that here.” Such comments helped communities to identify partners, in this case the NGO named Marie Stopes, that could train people on how to prevent teenage pregnancy. In the initial visit, community people had learned about the potential importance of family planning and subsequently discussed how this could help the communities achieve their goal of reducing teenage pregnancy. Eventually, after the community action had been planned and included family planning, sexual and reproductive health, and life skills, the communities selected Marie Stopes to help train peer educators on the family planning aspects of the action.

In order to succeed, the action planning process needs to focus on what is practical or feasible. If the action tries to do too much, it will likely fail. On the other hand, if it does too little, it may not make a sufficient difference in improving children’s well-being.

To encourage people to strike an appropriate balance, it can be useful to invite local people to think in terms of their daily activities. If a business person tries to sell too many things, they may be less successful than someone who sells particular things that people know them for. People trust the product and see them as the “go-to person” for those items. But if they try to sell too many different items, they might not sell as effectively as they would have through a focus on particular items.

Discussions about keeping the action practical and not trying to do too much can help to enable feasible, community-led actions. In general, it is wise to move in relatively small steps that enable the community to succeed. Having achieved success in addressing one issue, the community may feel more confident and then go on to address a wider array of issues.

Throughout the process of action planning, the mentors, who have extensive practical experience, can help communities to think through how to avoid taking on too much.

The action planning ends when the community members feel that they have achieved an appropriate level of agreement and are ready to move onto taking action steps to address the selected harm(s) to children.

By this point, the community members will have a plan in mind for moving forward, and this plan may be oral and informal or in written form. Particularly in communities that have low levels of literacy, there will probably not be a written plan, which may fit with the traditions of oral communication. Rural communities already make decisions about when, where, and how to plant their crops, and they do so in a systematic manner but without written plans. Similarly, urban neighborhoods may discuss how to address problems such as extreme poverty without developing written plans.

Yet some communities may want to have a written plan that spells out in simple terms the “who, what, when, and where” of the community action, as in an action matrix (see Tool MGM 11 in the companion Toolkit). NGOs often favor written plans since written documents are the means by which plans are communicated.

Although written plans can be useful, it is important to keep in mind that if most community members are illiterate, the use of a written plan can shift the power toward the people who are most literate and who are most likely better off. Written plans can also limit flexibility by implying a level of finality. The community may be more accustomed to taking an oral plan as a “work in progress” that is to be revised as they take action and learn better ways of moving forward.

Written plans can also stifle creativity, as communities may have the custom of communicating their plans by means of song, dance, proverb, and other modalities.

NGOs should therefore give communities space to develop plans that are useful to the community people and should not have to answer to the NGO requirement of written plans. If written plans are developed, they should be primarily for the community members. At the end of the day, a significant number of community members should agree on and feel ownership of the plan, seeing it is their considered way of taking action to address the concern(s) they had selected.

This sense of ownership of which harm(s) to address and of the planned actions to address those harms tends to generate high levels of motivation to take collective action to prevent and respond to the selected harms to children.

It is useful to identify benchmarks and things to avoid during this planning phase:

Key Benchmarks:

- Collaborative, highly inclusive process for deciding which steps or action to take in addressing the selected harm(s) to children.
- Community develops flexible action plan that fits with the broad action criteria.
- Community identifies and is willing to allocate its own resources to the action.
- The action plan is gender-sensitive.
- Girls and boys contribute regularly to the action planning.
- Agreement is reached with community-selected formal stakeholders who will collaborate with the community on the action.

What to Avoid:

- High-cost, unsustainable actions.
- Actions that fail to build on local strengths.
- Actions that are too big or complex and have little chance of success.
- Excessive action complexity (for example, having too many components).
- The community facilitators shift to being the planners.
- Plans and decisions are made by a handful of people in the communities.
- Linkages or collaborations with the government that are unrealistic or not likely to work.

Chapter 7.

The Community-Led Action

The community-led action process is in many respects an organic extension of the community planning process. As communities discuss and prioritize which harm(s) to children to address, the level of community concern about particular harms to children may increase, thereby boosting the motivation of community members to take action to address those harms. Similarly, discussions of how to address particular harm(s) may increase community members' desire to move into action now.

Naturally, some of the people who were most animated by and engaged with the community planning process may come forward to help lead the community action to address the selected harm(s) to children. The community-led action may also overlap with community planning—since as the community acts, it learns from its initial steps. As it reflects on its progress and challenges, it may plan for and make adjustments.

In these respects, there are not two entirely separate phases of community-led planning followed by community-led action, but continuous, partially overlapping cycles of community-led planning and action. For the purposes of focus, however, it is useful to examine community-led action as if it were a separate phase.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore community action processes that enable communities to their self-selected harm(s) to children. Its objectives are to:

- outline the processes through which communities take steps to address the selected harm(s) to children and manage their action;
- explore how communities can monitor and evaluate their actions to address the harm(s) to children; and
- examine how to increase the community ownership and sustainability of the community-led action to address the harm(s) to children.

Key Question for Practitioners

How can we help communities to own, manage, and run their own, community-led, sustainable actions on behalf of vulnerable children?

Relevant tools from Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 6–9; Training: TRN 10; Management: MGM 2, MGM 4, MGM 9, & MGM 12.

The Action Process

Like all aspects of community-led work, the community-led action is highly contextual, and is created, managed, and led by the community.

In some cases, community-led action can spring up without the extensive planning and steps to develop an inclusive process that were discussed in previous chapters. In some settings, the action process may begin with a small group of people who have identified a harm to children and have decided to take action to address it.

For example, a youth group might decide that HIV and AIDS poses significant risks to young people and may initiate actions such as role-plays, discussions, and community campaigns to help prevent HIV and AIDS. Initially, such group action may not look like community-led work since the wider community does not lead it.

Over time, however, the level of participation may increase, as people see the value of the work and become motivated to get involved. Also, full community processes and non-formal governance structures may later endorse the action, thereby helping to legitimate it. The full community may eventually take responsibility for the action, making it fully community led.

As this example illustrates, there is no single recipe for a community-led action process. In each context, it is up to local people to decide things such as whether and how to take action, how to manage the action process, how to take stock of how the action is going, and whether and how to make adjustments.

This chapter features a full community process, but it is important to recognize that many variations on this process are possible.

Community Action Facilitators

The start of the community-led action can be an exhilarating time and a process that animates many different people in the community.

An important first step is for communities to decide how to organize themselves for taking steps to address the self-selected harm(s) to children. If a community planning group has already been formed for planning purposes, it is possible that the same group, or a variation of it, can help the community to facilitate and oversee the community-led action.

For example, in Sierra Leone, the Inter-Village Task Force that had facilitated the community planning process later transformed into the community group that helped to facilitate and oversee the community action to address teenage pregnancy.

As usual, the community itself is best positioned to decide how to facilitate and oversee its action. With this in mind, the facilitator could ask questions such as:

- How can the community guide and oversee its own action to address the harm(s) to children that it has selected?

- Would it be useful to have a group of people who help the community to take steps to address the selected harm(s) to children?
- Should children (girls and boys) be part of such a group?
- What qualities should members of such a group have?
- Should different sub-groups within the community be represented in such a group?
- What would be the role and responsibilities of the group? Would they, for example, be directors or facilitators, and why?

If the action process entails collaboration across communities, it can be useful to stimulate a discussion of similar questions focused on the inter-community action process.

Different communities may develop diverse means of facilitating and overseeing their actions to address their self-selected harm(s) to children.

One community might decide to transition their community planning group—maintaining a similar structure, asking members if they are willing to continue playing a facilitative role, and selecting suitable new members to replace former planning group members who are unable to continue or not interested in doing so. Another community might decide to restructure the group a bit, by adding, for example, more teenagers since they have expressed keen interest and are in a good position to help address the community-selected harm(s) to children.

Alternately, a community might decide that a pre-existing group within the community—for example, a religious group or a community development group—is best situated to facilitate the community-led action. Although most communities seem to prefer having a small group that facilitates the community action, some communities prefer an approach in which one or two community-selected people serve as facilitators or focal points who jointly facilitate the community action. The key is that the community itself decides these issues of governance, oversight, and action.

In most approaches, communities will continue to have facilitators who support them and help to enable the community-led action. Whether the facilitators are internal or external, they should keep the process on track and avoid various problems as outlined below:

Community Facilitation and Oversight of Its Action: Some Things to Avoid

Men run the show: This is a risk because most communities have strong patriarchal norms, and men may feel entitled or expected to lead the community action. However, such an approach would disempower girls and women and likely sap the action of the vitality that comes from creative participation by people who are positioned in different ways. Also, if the guiding/facilitating group does not represent the full community, there is a risk that the group will be seen as discriminatory, causing community divisions and turmoil that could undermine the community action.

The community leader takes charge: Leaders may try to take charge of the action in order to strengthen their leadership position. Also, they may want to see the community succeed, and they may think they are in a special position to help the community. If the leader takes charge, however, it will be difficult for community people to speak openly and discuss freely how the actions are going, what changes are needed, and so on. There is also a real danger that the intervention will actually become led by the community power elite or seen as a way of the power elite supporting its own agenda.

Tokenistic participation by children: Consistent with adult-centric norms of decision-making and action, children may be marginalized in the action process. In addition to violating children's rights, this approach limits the chances of the community action succeeding. Children are in the best position to help community members be aware of children's lived experiences and concerns. Children and adolescents also bring significant creativity and agency to the community action process.

Privileging of particular groups or people: The facilitator may favor particular individuals or sub-groups within the community.

Excessive turnover of members: In some cases, members of the group decide to resign due to economic pressures, the need to address a family emergency, or other reasons. If several members were to resign at or near the same time, there could be a significant loss of continuity. It is useful to encourage members to think in advance about their time, and to encourage members to help share the workload, which can also help to prevent burnout.

Non-facilitative stance: Individual members of the group, or the entire group, may slip across the line and act as directors rather than patient and flexible facilitators. A directive stance can be off-putting, and it can create the impression that "this is someone else's intervention." The key is for as many people in the community as possible to own the intervention and see it as their means of addressing the concern about children that they have collectively chosen to address.

Capacity Building

In community-led action, there is typically need for ongoing capacity building at three levels: the facilitators, the community, and the humanitarian agency or non-governmental organization (NGO). Each of these is discussed in turn.

Facilitators

The action facilitators—particularly if they are new or differ from the planning facilitators—will need participatory training in order to build their skills in promoting dialogue and enabling inclusive participation. This can include strengthening facilitators’ relevant skills, like empathy, asking nonjudgmental questions, stimulating dialogue, enabling voice and participation by different sub-groups, managing conflict, and helping communities reach their own decisions regarding challenges that arise with regard to the community action. Even if the facilitators were involved in the planning phase, it can be useful to prepare them for the action phase by taking a couple of days for reflection and co-learning on questions such as:

- What new opportunities arise during this phase?
- What should the community process be during the community action?
- What will the role and responsibilities of the facilitators be in this phase?
- What challenges may arise during this phase, and how could they be managed or avoided? (See the “Some things to avoid” box above).

On a continuing basis, it is important for the facilitators to check in with mentors or experienced practitioners, take stock of successes and challenges, and carry out constructive problem-solving about how to handle the challenges.

Community Members

Capacity building may also be useful in preparing community members to take action on behalf of vulnerable children.

For example, if a community has selected teenage pregnancy as the harm to children to be addressed, it might include as part of its action plan the training of selected community youth who can develop key messages designed to boost community members’ understanding of teenage pregnancy and how to prevent it. Following a community-led approach, the community itself should select the group or agency who does the training.

This selection can occur by, for example, asking community members whether they know of groups who provide relevant training and whether it would be useful to talk with representatives of those groups. If the community members agree, then there can be visits by and discussions with staff from different groups. Afterwards, the community members can decide which group(s), if any, they wanted to work with.

Most often, communities recognize that it is impractical for an outside group to train everyone in the community. Typically, the community decides that there should be training for a small number of people who will in turn teach other community members and also help to animate work on addressing the selected harm(s) to children.

For example, the community might call for a week-long training of “Peer Educators,” who come from diverse sub-groups within the community. In this scenario, the community facilitators in each community would invite discussion about who should be Peer Educators and to have an inclusive process for selecting them.

To help communities avoid the pitfall of selecting the most popular people, the community action facilitators can ask questions that invite reflection on the importance of diversity. If the harm to be addressed is out-of-school children, the community action facilitators can ask whether it would be useful to hear not only from school-going children but also from children who are out of school.

Similarly, the community action facilitators can ask whether and how it would be useful to engage with girls as well as boys, who may be out of school for different reasons. The use of a dialogue process—similar to the one which had identified the harm(s) to children to address—could help the community to take an inclusive approach in selecting Peer Educators.

In order to keep power in the hands of the community, the community action facilitators and the agency facilitator might engage with the community-selected NGO, community-based organization, or group that will do the capacity building. The NGO or community-based organization should understand well the community-led process and avoid working in a top-down manner. The NGO may need to forego the usual tendency to train people to send fixed messages.

A useful approach is to have the last two days of any capacity building workshop designated as a “workspace” in which the Peer Educators, possibly working with the community action facilitators, take stock of how to communicate with local people about what they have learned and think further about how to animate the community. If young people are to be the targets of messages about issues such as staying in school or avoiding pregnancy, young people should help to sculpt key messages, speaking in the local idioms and in ways that are likely to influence young people.

The capacity building, however, cannot be done well through a single workshop or training course. Every six months or so, according to the wishes of the community and advice from the mentors, there should be refresher trainings of several days each, with communities choosing the focus and methods. Community members usually ask for highly participatory, practical activities interspersed with receiving new information.

It is useful in such refresher workshops for the facilitators to ask what has worked well or what challenges remain. If participants say something like, “Our messages work well with children, but parents still have some mis-understandings,” then the participants could engage in collective dialogue and problem-solving about how to reach parents in a more effective manner.

Ideally, this discussion would occur not only among the Peer Educators but with the wider community as well. Both the Peer Educators and the community might decide, for example, that parents should receive the training since parents are more likely to listen to other parents.

Following the training workshop, parents could convene small group discussions among parents aimed at deepening parents' understanding of the particular harm to children that the community action aims to address. This example illustrates how community action follows a flexible, continuously adapting process of acting, reflecting on what has worked and what needs adjustment, adjusting community plans, and taking further community-led action.

Humanitarian agency or NGO

Before, during, and after its work to support a community-led approach, the NGO or other agency that supports the process will need capacity building.

In many respects, the agency learns together with the community what it takes to support the community process. During the action phase, NGOs need to avoid pressing for quick results and following rigid timetables. They also need to provide space in which communities can improvise and bring their full creativity into play.

A useful strategy for mutual capacity building is to periodically create a reflective space in which key community members (for example, facilitators, action leaders, and so on) meet with one or two people from the NGO. Together, the participants take stock of how things are going, identify challenges, and engage in joint problem-solving about how the NGO could improve its support for the community-led process.

A noteworthy point is that this does not always involve the NGO or humanitarian agency doing more. Indeed, humanitarian agencies need to learn to step back and create sufficient space for communities to guide and own their action process and decide how to handle various challenges.

To support community-led processes, the NGO will likely need to increase its capacities for working in a more flexible, facilitative manner. NGO managers, for example, should learn to avoid asking for immediate results, become comfortable with communities implementing action according to their own timeframe, and focus more on the quality of the community process rather than on checklists of which activities have been completed. In turn, the NGO leaders will need to see the value of this approach and support the process.

To support this capacity building, it can be useful for the NGO to conduct reflective workshops in which workers and managers at different levels reflect on the potential value of community-led action and what they will need to do differently in order to support it. On an ongoing basis, they should reflect on what is going well, what challenges have arisen, and what steps need to be taken in order to address the challenges.

Activating Different Sub-Groups

In some situations, community-led actions are grounded in steps decided upon and implemented by a relatively small group of community members.

For example, a young mother's group might decide to take its own actions to keep children in primary school. Over time, other community members who see the positive outcomes of this action may get involved, and the action might expand to include steps taken by youth groups, religious groups, or even the wider community.

Although there is no single "correct path" toward community-led action, it is desirable to have many different people and sub-groups engaged in action to address harms to children. For one thing, a community-led action is more likely to be effective if it is collectively owned and many different people participate in it. This makes it easier for the community to develop synergies between steps taken in homes, at school, and in neighborhood settings in addressing their selected harm(s) to children.

In addition, community action is more likely to be sustainable if many different people own it and help it to move forward. As discussed above, if a community-led action is implemented only by a small sub-group in the community, the action itself could be seen by some community members as "someone else's work" or even as helping only particular people, and hence, discriminatory.

A useful step toward a whole-community approach is to enable participation by different sub-groups within the community.

For example, imagine a community who has selected child marriage as the harm to children to be addressed. They might plan an action that includes parents talking with parents and also with children about the harms caused by child marriage, with support from Peer Educators. Discussions among small groups of parents could help them to learn from the Peer Educators about the harms caused by child marriage and also to think about alternatives to child marriage. They could also discuss how to enable community reflection through role-plays, collective discussions, or media campaigns. This engagement by ordinary parents is an important part of the path toward inclusive participation and collective ownership.

The same logic applies to other sub-groups in the community. Ongoing dialogue processes within youth groups, women's groups, and religious groups, for example, can help to engage many people and invite them to think through how they are using or want to use what they are collectively learning.

If more people come on board and want to contribute spontaneously to the action by, for example, organizing community campaigns, street dramas, or community discussions, that, too, helps to build inclusivity and collective ownership.

This improvisational approach frequently unleashes considerable creativity and excitement. Indeed, as people see the excitement growing and many people participating, they are likely to move off the sidelines and into the action process. In a community-led process, there should always be room for greater participation and also for innovation on behalf of vulnerable children.

Cost

The cost of community-led action is much lower than the cost of typical NGO-led child protection interventions. The lower costs reflect the emphasis on what communities themselves do, the reliance on community resources, and the fact that community members receive no pay for taking action to address their selected harm(s) to children.

Although costs vary according to the context, the nature of the action, and the action criteria, the cost for the community-led action in Sierra Leone was approximately \$30,000 for six communities. Most of these costs were for capacity building and meetings, including transport and small daily subsistence allowances. The small size of these funds helps to keep the focus on what the community does, without looking to an NGO for an infusion of larger funding.

Of course, the costs are higher when the salary, allowances, and travel costs of the facilitators and mentors are added. Although these costs build up over time, this seems a good investment if sustainable results are achieved. After all, there are limited cost savings in using a top-down approach that is unsustainable, as the program has to be repeated again and again in order to protect vulnerable children.

A key question during the action process is how to manage external funding. Providing funding directly to the community can lead to dependency and increase community divisions and turmoil.

As usual, there is no cookie-cutter solution for this set of potential problems. It pays to attend closely to the context, and build upon existing mechanisms for managing the money in a transparent, ethical, and accountable manner.

At the same time, we should avoid slipping into a strictly top-down approach. For example, local people may suggest that it is the community leader's responsibility to manage the money that belongs to the entire community. If the community prefers this approach, it could be useful for the agency facilitator and mentor to work with the community leader to make sure that his or her management of the money does not create the perception that he or she has become the action manager or director. At each step of the action process, care should be taken to maintain the bottom-up nature of the process.

When to introduce external funding is also an important consideration. Work funded by the USAID Displaced Children and Orphan's Fund in Malawi and Zambia found that there should be no external funding until after the communities have started to take action on their own.²⁰ Otherwise, the focus shifts from helping vulnerable children to getting money.

The monetarization of the process not only shifts the motivation for getting involved but also creates dependency. If people are engaged because they want the money, then when the funding ends, so will the community action. Throughout community-led work, it is a priority to keep people's concern about children as the primary motivation for taking action to address the selected harm(s) to children.

²⁰ Donahue & Mwewa (2006).

In summary, it is useful to identify some of the key benchmarks and things to avoid in regard to the community action phase.

Key Benchmarks:

- Community selects community action facilitators and decides how they will work to enable the community action.
- Steps are taken to develop facilitation skills of the community action facilitators.
- Strong participation in the community action by diverse community members, including children.
- Community discusses and decides whether it needs technical training assistance from an NGO or other actors.
- Capacity building occurs for community selected members.
- Trained community members adapt messages.
- Community takes steps to address its selected harm(s) to children.
- Functional collaboration with child protection actors at other levels occurs.

What to Avoid:

- Gaps between the planning stage and the beginning of the community action.
- Early introduction of funding for the community action.
- Little active dialogue and problem solving by ordinary community members.
- The agency facilitator plays too central a role.
- Too little space provided for improvisation.
- Monitoring information is not used to guide reflection and corrective steps.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Most communities have a history of collectively planning activities around issues such as poverty, farming, and education and then taking action in accordance with their plans. As they work, they periodically take stock of how they are doing and make needed adjustments. Although they may not refer to these activities as “monitoring and evaluation” (or M&E), the process is important.

In Guatemala, for example, a group of Mayan mothers took stock of their efforts to increase food security by counting the number of graves for children each year. Asked about their accomplishments, they pointed with pride to the sharp decline in the number of children's graves.

In community-led protection of children, these processes may involve a variety of community-decided modalities. Depending on the wishes of community members, monitoring processes may be relatively informal, or they may be quite structured and systematic.

It is important to give communities the space to decide upon their own processes of monitoring and evaluation and to avoid imposing outside approaches. Indeed, even the terms “monitoring” and “evaluation” should not be imposed.

Community-Led Monitoring

Through monitoring of their activities, communities keep track of which steps they have taken, and identify gaps or challenges that require adjustments to the action process. Communities may also evaluate their work by periodically stepping back from their action to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses and how it is affecting children. These reflective sessions can yield insights that point toward needed improvements in the community work.

Community-led monitoring of the steps taken to address the selected harm(s) to children may occur in an organic manner that requires little effort on the part of an NGO. Both community action facilitators and communities themselves may recognize the need to keep track of which activities are under way and of where the community is in regard to its planned steps.

For example, the community might have decided to address teenage pregnancy using methods such as providing contraceptives, educating people about sex, puberty, and reproductive health, and doing role-plays and group discussions to stimulate awareness about the problems associated with teenage pregnancy. In such a context, the community action facilitators might decide that they need to know things such as whether contraceptives are actually available, whether people have actually been requesting contraceptives, whether people such as Peer Educators have been trained on issues of sex, puberty, and reproductive health, and which actual role-plays and group discussions are underway.

Even if they track these things informally, without written records, the action facilitators could collect information that would help the community to take effective action.

Other community members, too, may be involved in monitoring activities. For example, a youth leader might keep track of how many role-plays and discussions the youth group had conducted, and who had helped to lead them.

The community action facilitators might then use this information to help the community to make any needed adjustments. For example, community action facilitators might have noticed that no contraceptives were readily available but that young people were asking for them. In response, the community action facilitators could meet as a group or with the full community to

decide how to correct this shortage, thereby modifying the action plan and putting themselves in a position to take corrective steps.

Similarly, if a youth leader remembered that they had agreed during community planning discussions to organize role-plays and group discussions on a regular basis but noticed that no such activities had occurred yet, they might talk with other youth group members to learn about what activities are planned, whether there have been challenges in organizing the activities, and so on.

Ideally, the youth leader would communicate what they learned to the community action facilitators, so that they, too, would know the status of the youth activities. This feeding back process could be an occasion also for dialogue with the community action facilitators about how to address any challenges and take steps to move forward in implementing the community action plan.

If these activities happen organically, without the assistance of an NGO, it is a useful indicator that the process is indeed community-owned and led. However, if such activities do not arise organically, it is useful for an NGO facilitator to support such activities with the aim of enabling them to become community-led as soon as it is possible and appropriate.

For example, the NGO facilitator could ask the community action facilitators (or other community selected agents) or the entire community questions that invite reflection on the status of the community-led action, without making community members feel that they are being judged. The questions could invite an overall update on activities, probe particular aspects of the community-led action, and then invite reflection on challenges and how to address them.

Sample questions that might be useful to ask include the following:

- I'm eager to learn where you are in your community-led action. What steps is the community taking at present to address its self-selected harm(s) to children? What activities are being conducted?
- In your planning discussions, you had decided that an NGO should provide training for a number of community members, to better enable the community to address the harm(s) to children. Has that training occurred? How did it go? Following the training, what activities did the trainees engage in with the community?
- Your planning discussions also called for youth groups to be active in conducting role-plays followed by open discussions in order to raise awareness of the problem and identify steps that people could take to address the problem. Are role-plays being conducted? Who is participating, and how are they going?
- Working on harm(s) to children has many complexities, and it is natural for challenges to arise. What challenges are coming up in your community-led action? What steps might be taken to address these challenges?

In a spirit of capacity building, the NGO could also ask whether it would be helpful for the community to establish its own process for taking stock of how the community-led action is going and making any needed adjustments.

For example, an NGO facilitator might ask whether this discussion has been useful and why. Community members might respond, as they often do, that it is valuable to create space for looking at where they are in their community action overall, identifying challenges, and discussing whether and how to adjust their community action.

The facilitator could then ask whether the community should engage in its own reflective process like the above discussion on a regular basis. If the answer were affirmative, the discussion could then turn to how the community would enable such regular discussions. As usual, it would be up to the community to decide how it wanted to move forward.

If the action is inter-community, an approach that has proven useful is to have a focal person in each community who regularly updates the inter-community facilitating group as to how the action is proceeding in each particular community.²¹

It is important, however, to avoid having the focal person become seen as being the director of the community-led action. Instead, the focal person is a collector and sharer of information who helps the community move forward in its action with an informed, reflective stance. Often, communities decide to have one of the community action facilitators serve as the focal point, and even to rotate this responsibility among different community action facilitators.

For monitoring purposes, an inter-community process could also include visits across the participating communities by, for example, the community action facilitators. Although they can be expensive, such visits can enable cross-learning, enable constructive discussions about how to address challenges, and ignite new excitement in a community that is perhaps struggling under the weight of other issues. However, such visits might not be appropriate if they are unlikely to be sustained by the communities themselves, using their own resources.

Community-Led Evaluation

In a community-led evaluation, the community steps back following a significant chunk of time—such as the passage of each year—to take stock of the effectiveness and sustainability of its action.

Communities may decide themselves to enable such a reflection. If not, the NGO could ask whether it would be useful to have a reflective, two-day workshop led by the community action facilitators, with preceding and follow-up discussions with the community.

²¹ In the community-led process in Sierra Leone, for example, each community had a focal person who updated and served a point of contact for the inter-community facilitating group (the Inter-Village Task Force, outlined in Tool MGM 3 in the companion Toolkit).

In most cases, communities quickly discern the potential benefits of such a workshop and set about organizing it themselves. Community members are likely to bring songs, drawings, stories and narratives, and other materials that help to evaluate their action to the meeting. In some cases, they may even take a child-led approach in which they invite both girls and boys selected by the community to help gather relevant information and play a central role in the evaluation.²²

Ideally, the evaluation process should ask and seek to learn about the difference the community-led action is making in the lives of children.

If the community had decided to address the harm of children being out of school, what has changed? Are fewer children out of school, and if so, why? If there has been no reduction in the number of out-of-school children, why is that?

Communities frequently ask such questions on their own. Yet if they do not, it can be useful for an NGO facilitator to help them to consider and discuss such questions.

It can also be useful for communities to reflect on the inclusivity of the action, and how to bring more people into the process. The evaluation process should include strong components of collective reflection, problem-solving, and ideas about corrective action, if needed. In this manner, the reflection process becomes part of the means through which communities take responsibility for the well-being of their children.

In a spirit of coordination and mutual learning, it can also be important to share the learning with other agencies and government stakeholders in the area who are involved in child protection and supporting vulnerable children.

For example, the supporting NGO could convene an interagency workshop in which leaders of the community action, including children, discuss their action, what they have accomplished, and their challenges and way forward. Hopefully, this might inspire other agencies and the government to take greater interest in using community-led approaches. It could also be a moment for joint reflection about how to take the community-led approach to scale.

Key Benchmarks:

- Communities establish a monitoring process for each area, with participation from diverse community members.
- The community process tracks the community activities and needed materials, trainings, and other inputs.
- Community members periodically reflect on how the community action process is going, identify its strengths and any challenges, and identify any corrective steps needed.

²² NGOs may help to facilitate such processes through child-led research. See the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (2012).

- At longer intervals, communities step back and take stock of whether and how the community-led action is helping children, with findings shared with different stakeholders.

What to Avoid:

- A monitoring and evaluation process with no follow-up action or adjustments.
- Monitoring and evaluation processes that are too dependent on the NGO.
- Infrequent or poor communication across villages.
- Focal points, community facilitators, or coordinators acting as if they drive the monitoring and evaluation process rather than facilitating it.

Sustainability

The international humanitarian community has prioritized sustainability in its global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The links between these SDGs and child protection are most visible in SDG 16, which targets the ending of abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children. Another target of SDG 16 is ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.

The community-led approach is a useful tool for achieving SDG 16 because it enables sustainable action against harms to children and engages people at a grassroots level in participatory decision-making and collective action in support of vulnerable children.

Community-led approaches also support the international agreement under the Grand Bargain²³ to support locally-driven approaches to aid.

Numerous features of community-led approaches enable the sustainability of the community action and the associated outcomes for children. Because the process is community-led, there are high levels of community ownership. Community members see the action as an extension of their collective concern and responsibility for children. As a result, they are likely to continue their efforts even after the NGO has left their community.

The steady, ongoing emphasis on what the community does to support vulnerable children also creates less dependency on the NGO, auguring in favor of sustainability. In addition, the high levels of volunteer effort and the low costs of the community action further enable its sustainability.

²³ Australian Aid et. al. (2016).

Nevertheless, various issues can limit the sustainability of community-led approaches. One issue is an excessive reliance on particular facilitators. If an NGO uses external facilitators, communities may become dependent on them and lack the full confidence to stand on their own.

To prevent, this, NGOs could ensure the gradual phasing out of external facilitators early in the action process while at the same time training action facilitators who themselves are members of the community and have been selected by the community. In the Sierra Leone action research, for example, the external facilitators spent progressively less time facilitating and more time documenting the community action process and helping to prepare community members to play a facilitative role.

A similar problem can arise even if communities use internal action facilitators. Communities may become reliant on particular individuals to facilitate and energize the community action process. If a health problem or a difficult family situation pulls that facilitator away or leads him or her to resign, the community action process can suffer as a result.

A useful strategy for preventing this is to train multiple, internal facilitators, thereby enabling backstopping and avoiding gaps that might occur if a particular facilitator needs to step back. Also useful is a strategy of training up members of different sub-groups—such as youth groups or religious groups—on community facilitation skills.

Through this approach, greater numbers of people become involved in facilitating the community action, thereby avoiding reliance on one or two individuals. As this type of process develops, it is useful to help communities think through how they will coordinate the work of different facilitating individuals and/or groups.

Despite communities' best efforts, a recurrent challenge to sustainability is the extensive time that people such as community action facilitators, Peer Educators, and focal points invest in the process, without remuneration and having sacrificed the earnings they would likely have made if they spent that time working. Paying everyone is unlikely to be a practical solution, as this can monetarize the helping. Payment also tends to be unsustainable, since the community is not likely to have the money to pay people on an ongoing basis.

Fortunately, communities are good problem solvers and frequently develop ways of supporting and thanking people who give extra time and service to the community. In Sierra Leone, for example, communities thanked the community members who had helped to facilitate, coordinate, and monitor activities by setting aside extra land for collective gardening. With little support from external actors, the community members who devoted the most time to enabling the action received seeds and took part in collective gardening that improved the food security of their families.

Because communities need support from the formal child protection system, efforts to ensure sustainable action should focus also on government stakeholders. A useful strategy is to engage with government stakeholders at district, province, and other levels to gain their buy-in on the community-led action and to enlist their collaboration.

Often, the community-led action on an issue such as teenage pregnancy creates grassroots pressure for the delivery of services (for example, contraceptive related services) by the relevant

Government Ministry. If UNICEF and/or NGOs provide parallel training to the relevant Ministry, thereby building its capacities to support the community-led action, the groundwork is laid for sustained collaboration across all levels in ways that strengthens the wider child protection system.

Learning from the community-led action can also be used by different agencies to promote child friendly policies that support vulnerable children.²⁴

Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, is internal to ourselves and humanitarian agencies. There is a risk that agencies will try a community-led approach to child protection but treat it as an “interesting pilot” rather than a highly useful approach that ought to be made sustainable on a wider scale in the child protection sector. Extensive work is also required to institutionalize a community-led approach and to make it central in our work on child protection.

This work entails reorienting, reeducating ourselves and our agencies, and helping other agencies and stakeholders take a community-led approach. At the end of the day, the question is whether we have the courage to transform ourselves in order to strengthen child protection outcomes for all.

²⁴ Wessells et al. (2017)

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