

# Chapter 3.

## Transforming Our Approach from Program to Community Process

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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.

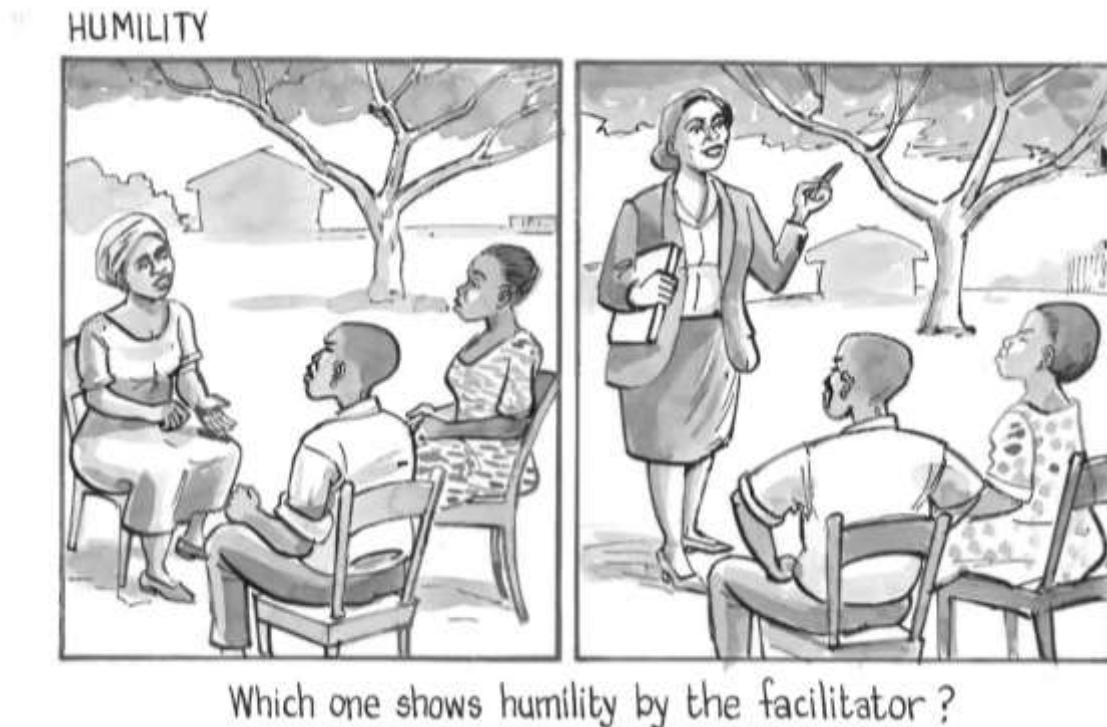
As discussed earlier, many practitioners and agencies assume that they are the “experts” or specialists on child protection. Although communities are regarded as partners, specialists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) typically define the issues to be addressed, design and develop the interventions 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,

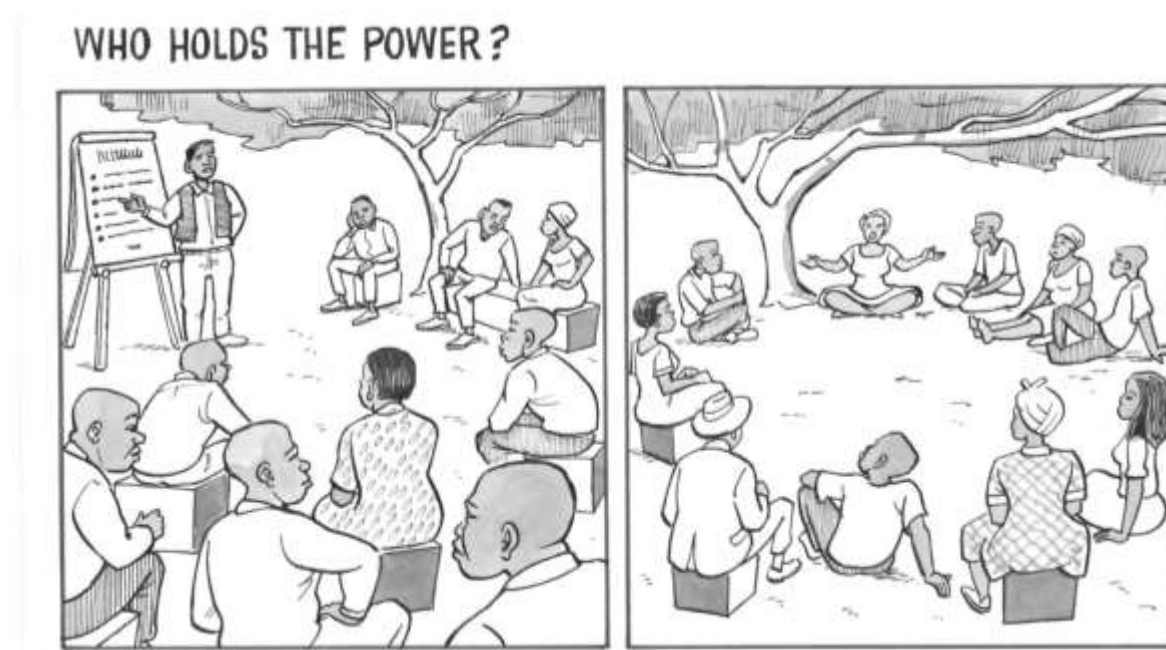
and nurses. In addition, communities may have social networks, valuable practices, social cohesion and processes of collective discussion and action, among many others. Respect entails appreciating the difficulties that communities face, not the least of which may be ongoing poverty and poor food security 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.

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<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> 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.