

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)