How Communities Support Children's Well-Being: Lessons from the Interagency Learning Initiative

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Overview

- Snapshot of the Interagency Learning Initiative
- Objectives of the research
- Brief outline of methodology
- Some key findings
  - Sierra Leone
  - Kenya
- Wider lessons learned
- Linking the work with policy and practice

The Inter-Agency Learning Initiative

- Global review of community mechanisms to support children—weak evidence base, harmful practices, importance of community ownership and linking community mechanisms with formal aspects of national child protection systems

- Multi-stage learning and action research in Sierra Leone and Kenya

- Bottom-up approach to systems strengthening—testing the effectiveness of community driven interventions for strengthening linkages between community based mechanisms and formal mechanisms

Research Objectives

- Learn about how children, families, and communities support children's well-being

  - Who are children?

  - What are the main risks/harms to children?

  - When those harms occur, what happens?

  - What are preventive factors?

  - How do community processes/mechanisms link and align with formal, government led systems?

- Contribute to improved policy and practice that strengthen community supports for children's protection and well-being

Sierra Leone

"Children in Sierra Leone have traditionally not only belonged to parents and the immediate family but also to the larger community." (Government of Sierra Leone, *Child Welfare Policy: Supporting Families and Communities to Protect Children*)

Interagency Learning Initiative—Acknowledgements, Sierra Leone

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- National research team
- Government of Sierra Leone
- Community leaders and people
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Rapid Ethnographic & Qualitative Methods

- Moyamba and Bombali Districts—2 Chiefdoms in each
- Reaching women, men, teenage girls & boys, 'non-elites'
- Building trust
- Methods:

  - Participant observation & living in villages

  - Group discussions—risks and pathways of response

  - In-depth interviews: Government, NGO workers, and local people

  - Timelines: childhood, markers, roles

  - Body mapping: learning from younger people

  - Contrasts by age, gender, positioning within the formal system

Who Are Children?

- *Children are those that are not able to do anything for themselves. They depend on people to do everything for them.*

- *A child is the one who benefits the parents.*

- *What I know about a child is in the name. In Mende we call a child "Ndoe"* [leave behind]. *It means that when you die you will leave it behind.*

- *A child is anyone is not yet big and who has not started doing 'mama en dadi bizness.'*

Local Views of Harms to Children

'Most serious' harms

- Out of school children
- Teen pregnancy out of wedlock
- Heavy work
- Maltreatment of children not living with their biological parents

Additional harms

- Child beating
- Cruelty
- Incest, rape, and sexual abuse
- Neglect and bad parenting
- Witchcraft
- Abduction & ritual murder
- Child rights

Response Pathway in Moyamba for 'Tampering' Related Pregnancy

Girl misses period

Girl tells mother → Mother tells girl's father

Parents bring case to Chief

Chief summons the man and levies fine

OUTCOMES: Man pays girl's school fees
Man marries the girl

Child Rights

- *...one of the things that hurts us here, the government says we should not cuss or beat our children. They no longer listen to us or obey us. They say, if you beat me, if you cuss me, I'll report you to human right. As a result, the girls get out of hand and in the end, they get pregnant and drop out of school. When this happens, we have nothing to do because as the saying goes, "bad bush nor dae for troway bad pikin"* ['there is no bush to throw away a bad child'].

- People complained frequently that NGOs had taught children about their rights without educating them about children's responsibilities.

Disconnect Between Nonformal and Formal Supports for Children

- Child Welfare Committees had been mandated by the Child Rights Act (2007), but

  - Most people did not mention or report through the CWCs

  - For over 90% of the cases of harms to children, people preferred to use traditional processes through the Chiefs

- Even for crimes such as rape of a child, people were reluctant to report to police and state authorities

- Backlash against 'child rights'

KENYA

- Research areas

  - Mombasa—two urban slums (informal settlement areas)

  - Kilifi—two rural villages

  - Kisii –two rural villages

- Time frame: 2011-2013

Kenyan Partners

- UN/NGO: UNICEF-Kenya, Action Aid International, AMREF, ANPPCAN, APHIA PLUS, CARE, CEFA, ChildFund, Child Line, CLAN, CRADLE, Girl Child Network, IRC, KAACR, Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision, UNICEF/Kenya

- Government: Department of Children's Services, Area Advisory Councils (and LACs), District Children's Officers, Chiefs, Assistant Chiefs, and elders

- National Research Team: Ken Ondoro (Team Leader) with Jemaiyo Chabeda-Barthe , multiple Kenyan researchers
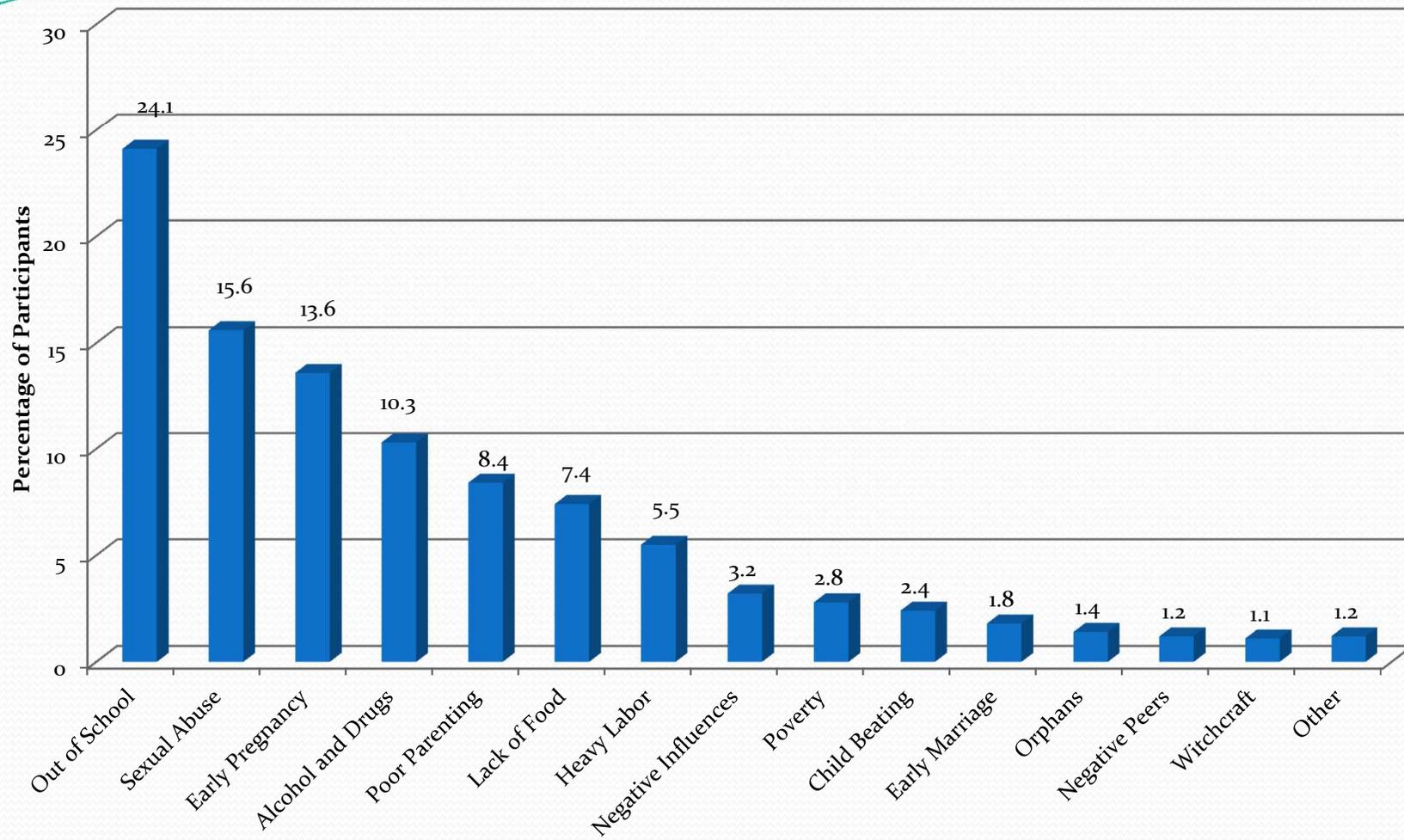
- Youth, children, women, community people

Local Views of Harms to Children

'Most serious' harms

- Out of school children
- Sexual abuse and exploitation
- Early pregnancy
- Alcohol and drugs

Additional harms

- Poor parenting
- Hard and heavy work
- Lack of food/poverty
- Negative influences
- Orphans
- Child beating
- Witchcraft
- Child rights

Out of School - Lack of School Fees

Although the government announced that education was free for all, there are still small expenses that force parents to choose between educating the child and buying food for the family. (Key informant interview, Tudor Moroto)

Sexual Exploitation: Prostitution

Some of the parents can't buy these girls things like 'Always' [sanitary pads] *and some of them do not even have enough food to eat. So when it becomes too much for these children, they drop out of school and get into prostitution in order to survive....* (Young woman, in-depth interview, Marafa)

Sexual Abuse

There are also other people who give children money and every now and then, they keep on buying for them "viazi" for ten shillings. Later on, they call these children inside their houses and start touching them on their private parts. (Adult man, in-depth interview, Bangladesh)

When the mother leaves and you are left alone with the father, then father turns to you and rapes you. (Teenage girls, group discussion, Tudor Moroto)

Chang'aa sale from homes and sexual abuse of daughters.

Sexual abuse by those with money and power

- *That's why we don't want tuition because teachers tell us to stay in school up to eight o'clock in the night and then they come at that time and start touching you on the thighs.*

  And some do bad things to girls at that time (Teenage girls, group discussion, Bangladesh)

- *When your mother dies and then you are taken to stay with your uncle, the uncle will now be the person who buys you everything.... Then after some time, the uncle comes to you and tells you that you have to sleep with him...*(Teen girls, Tudor Moroto)

Sexual Abuse of Boys

- *There is also the issue of young boys "kuwekwa na wamama wazee."* [Being misused by the old women, including sexually]. *They* [young boys] *brew chang'aa for the women and they also perform "husband duties."* (Key informant interview, Bangladesh)

Preventive Factors

- Family (grandmothers, parental guidance)
- Religious groups and leaders
  - Preached good values and morality to the youth
  - Counseled the youth, raised money for children's fees, & helped orphans
- Youth group: Alpha and Omega, Young mothers, Amkeni Youth Group
  - Educated the youth on safe sex
  - Distributed condoms
  - Educated youth on dangers of early pregnancy
- Women's groups: 'Merry Go Round'
  - Source of money to help keep children in school

Response Pathways

- For 70-80% of harms to children, the response was through non-formal family and community mechanisms

- Pathways of response were particularly weak in regard to sexual abuse within the family

- Family honor and avoidance of shame were often prioritized over the well-being of girl survivors of sexual abuse

- 'Traditional' mechanisms such as traditional courts or councils of elders were rare to nonexistent

Non-formal Mechanisms

- Nonformal family and community mechanisms were of central importance in responding to risks to children yet were overstretched and variable in their effectiveness

- Some nonformal family mechanisms caused harm to children
  - Abortion by dangerous means
  - Early and forced marriage
  - Family agreement in cases of rape
  - Corporal punishment

Linkage of CBCPMs
With the Formal System

- Importance of linkages: referrals, prevention, authority, capacity, etc.

- Diverse connectors: Chiefs, Assistant Chiefs, elders, police, DCOs, VCOs, AACs, LACs

- These connectors did in fact respond to harms to children, encourage prevention, and make appropriate referrals.

- Area Advisory Councils (AACs) and LACs emerged as potentially useful in bridging formal and nonformal child protection supports, yet most were in the planning stages regarding child protection.

- Overall, there was mixed evidence regarding the use of linkages with the formal system – local social norms frequently pulled in a contrary direction.

Alignment Between Formal and Nonformal Elements of the Child Protection System

- Alignment is important for a coordinated, consistent approach.

- Overall, there was a moderate level of alignment.

  - Views of harms to children (out of school, teenage pregnancy, drugs and alcohol, sexual abuse, poor parenting, etc.).

  - Some consistency of response by formal and non-formal actors to those harms.

- But, social norms frequently ran counter to the laws and policies of the formal system.

Challenges of Non-Alignment between Nonformal and Formal Elements

- Definition of childhood
- Kenyan law prohibits corporal punishment, early marriage, female circumcision, and sexual exploitation of children, yet each of these was a customary practice in the research sites.
- Actors within the formal system (Chiefs, teachers, elders) frequently used corporal punishment on children.
- Approximately one quarter of the participants were not willing to report a statutory crime such as the rape of a child to the authorities.

Lesson 1

Children are resilient and skilled at navigating and negotiating complex, toxic environments, yet many struggle against the odds.

Lesson 2

Poverty is a central feature in in children's lives.

- Structural violence as source of suffering
- Driver of multiple harms
- Effects of socio-economic status

Lesson 3

Violence, particularly sexual abuse and exploitation, is pervasive in children's lives.

Lesson 4

Children's situation varied according to gender, SES and age.

- Nature of main risks
- Access to supports
- Voice

Lesson 5

Nonformal actors and processes do most of the work on supporting and protecting children.

Lesson 6

Preventive factors are present and helpful yet are overstretched and unable to meet children's enormous needs.

Lesson 7

A social norms change approach is essential for changing harmful practices and enabling better alignment of nonformal and formal elements.

- Patient, internally driven approach
- Understanding of current norms, values, & practices

Implications for Practice

- Prioritize the strengthening of community supports that are central in efforts to support vulnerable children.

  - Learn about and build upon existing supports.

  - Make community-based prevention a priority.

  - Integrate economic supports, with measurable benefits to children

- Change the manner in which we work to support vulnerable children

  - Community-driven action

  - Slow, patient approach toward social change

  - Strengthen supportive formal-nonformal linkages

Implications for Policy

- Importance of a collaborative approach

  - Government-UNICEF-NGO-community partnership approach in the action research

  - Decentralized partnerships, including community representatives

- Balance and cooperation between formal and nonformal aspects of the national child protection system

- Support for holistic, contextualized community supports

- Limits of adding new structures

Community Child Protection Exchange
www.childprotectionforum.org

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