

Building Community-Based Child Protection Networks

The ‘Strengthening Local Child Protection Systems for Children in Rwanda’ project focused on strengthening child protection systems to provide quality support for child survivors of violence, abuse and exploitation. The two-year project was implemented by Save the Children, World Vision and Lawyers of Hope, in Kageyo and Rubaya sectors in the Northern Province. The project adopted a systems building approach, to move beyond simply responding to individual cases and instead address the multiple causes that lead to children being abused. It focused on building an integrated and coordinated network of people and services to prevent, respond, monitor and report child abuse and to increase the capacity of stakeholders to advocate for the protection of children in their community.



Children and Nkundabana sing and dance at end of sensitization meeting, Kageyo sector

In building the capacity of the community-based Child Protection Networks (CPNs) the project developed some best practices for strengthening local systems for child protection.

Children’s participation is central to child protection

Through the project 342 children from Kageyo and Rubaya sectors were trained in children’s rights to form Children’s Forums at village, cell and sector level. The Forums meet regularly and undertake a wide range of activities including peer training, awareness raising/sensitization (such as the Day of the African Child), advice to peers and parents, advocacy to local authorities and income-generating activities to help peers access school by providing school materials and uniforms.

“What we did to solve the problem of about the violence against children...Save the Children was a great help to us. They helped us solve some of the problems we used to have especially orphans, or those children who dropped out of school or even those ones who became pregnant when they were still children. Save the Children worked with the authorities to organize Forums to show us what to do....For us who represent children, the Forums helped very much...Talking to children is what we did because that is what we are able to do and we reported cases that we couldn’t handle to our superiors. When I think about the total number of children who suffered violence before Save the Children got here at Rubaya and today...the number reduced.” (Children’s Forum member, Rubaya)

Challenges remain in ensuring that the importance of children’s participation is fully recognized by local authorities at cell and village level and in involving marginalised

Effective participation requires partnership with adult mentors and local authorities

Effective child participation requires training, resources and collaboration with supportive adults. Once these are in place children are highly effective in peer training, problem solving and monitoring and reporting child protection cases. The Children's Forums work in partnership with child protection community volunteers (Nkundabana) and local authorities.

“There are children trained by the Nkundabana. When there is a problem, they run to report it immediately saying that there's a child experiencing violence. There was a child and another child saw their friend was pregnant but wanted to keep it secret. That child came to report it to an old woman and we helped the pregnant girl.” (Community member, Kageyo)

“We have a good partnership with the local authorities as our skills complement each other. We hear first if a child has gone missing and can make the investigations and if we find the child has gone to Uganda then we can speak with the local authorities who liaise with the Ugandan police to bring the child back again.” (Nkundabana, Rubaya)

The project trained 112 Nkundabana in both sectors and a wider network of 1,948 members of the CPNs (including Nkundabana, community health workers, teachers, community policing officers, local leaders, church leaders and leaders of community-based organizations). All participants received training on children's rights and protection. More specialist training on reporting, referring and responding to cases of abuse, including documenting legal and medical evidence and ensuring confidentiality was given to service providers and local authorities.

Local child protection systems need a strong coordination mechanism

Through the project the work of Joint Action Development Forum (JADF) at sector and district level has been strengthened and has been key in coordinating child protection activities and bridging the CPNs and the formal structures and so to work more efficiently and effectively.¹ A key outcome is that the reporting format for child protection cases has been harmonized across the different organizations and stakeholders and the ways to refer cases harmonized. This is coordinated by the district Vice-Mayor in charge of Social Affairs who now receives a monthly summary of child protection monitoring reports from the sector authorities.

Summary

Developing effective strategies for protecting children necessitates working with children, families and communities to understand the root causes of rights violations and identifying local support systems and opportunities to strengthen child protection. Working with communities to challenge attitudes and change actions takes time but the project has demonstrated how working with forces for change within a community (such as the Nkundabana or supporting the initiatives of the Children's Forums) is more effective than relying just on external forces, such as laws and policies.

¹ JADF brings together local authorities, civil society, the private sector and NGOs to set local development priorities and planning.