

## Strengthening Local Child Protection Systems for Children in Rwanda: Lessons Learned and Best Practices

The ‘Strengthening Local Child Protection Systems for Children in Rwanda’ project was implemented in the context of the legacies of the genocide of 1994 and increased sexual violence and abuse of women and children. The project was a two-year partnership between Save the Children, World Vision and Lawyers of Hope implemented in Rubaya and Kageyo sectors in Gicumbi district. The project sought to capitalize on the strong commitment shown by the Rwandan Government to the protection of women and children, by working at the local level to build the capacity of service providers in providing quality services to children and strengthening the referral pathways and case management. By adopting a systems approach the project aimed to move the protection of children from being project-based to system-based, in order to reach more children in a more comprehensive manner and with longer term sustainable results.

### **Key Project Outcomes**

- Improved knowledge among children, adults and service providers’ on the types of violence, abuse and exploitation affecting children and possible avenues to prevent and respond to cases, through training, sensitization campaigns and the *Rengera Umwana* (Protect the Child) radio programme
- Strengthened local child protection systems for prevention and response, in particular the partnerships between the Children’s Forums, Nkundabana, and local authorities
- Stronger coordination of local child protection systems by standardizing and harmonizing the reporting format and referral pathways for child protection cases
- Alternative pathways for children to access the justice system through legal aid clinics
- Increased participation by children through the Children’s Forums, which undertake a wide range of activities including peer training, awareness raising/sensitization, advice to peers and parents, advocacy to local authorities and income-generating activities



*“I was trying to find my father but he kept saying ‘I don’t know you and I don’t recognize you as my son.’ I tried to ask my mother and she was saying that he was my father and even the neighbours were telling me he was my father. On Radio Ishingiro I heard the broadcast of Save the Children and I tried to find out where they work from. I found out where they were working...They asked me about my problem and I explained what I can. They tried to find my father but he refused and that is why with Lawyers of Hope they decided to take the case to court. They assisted me by giving me a lawyer and then I won the case. After the judgment my father agreed to help with school fees and he received me back at home like his son.”*  
(Boy, 17, giving testimony at a community meeting holding his court judgment and encouraging others to seek legal help, Kageyo sector)

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### Lessons Learned

Throughout the project a number of lessons learnt and best practices were identified which can inform the future directions of this project, as well as being a useful resource for other organizations working on strengthening child protection systems:

- the importance of being able to communicate in a simple and concrete way the value brought by adopting a systems approach to tackling the multiple risks and providing protection for all children
- standardizing and harmonizing reporting formats and referral pathways for child protection cases increases coordination between the different government administrative levels, service providers and other stakeholders. The district Vice-Mayor in charge of Social Affairs now receives a monthly summary of child protection monitoring reports from sector authorities.
- enabling children to access the formal child protection system requires child-friendly practices and alternative entry points, such as the legal aid clinics
- community-based Child Protection Networks (CPNs), bringing together Children's Forums, community volunteers (Nkundabana) and local authorities are an effective way of reaching large numbers of children, in the absence of a formal system
- children's participation is central to child protection but to be effective requires training, resources and collaboration with supportive adults.

An additional set of lessons learnt relate to the implementation of the project by the partnership. Recommendations include the strengthening of internal documentation, a budget review after the first year of the project and considering re-balancing the number of activities undertaken between

'quantity' and 'quality', namely the provision of more in-depth support.

### Best Practices

Best practices emerging from this project include: the model of local legal aid clinics and the birth registration campaign; the multi-pronged approach to tackling violence, abuse and exploitation of children (such as strengthening informal structures, building the capacity of local authorities, using a variety of mediums for raising awareness, involving service providers in developing child-friendly practices and facilitating access to social protection and poverty reduction programmes); putting children and families at the centre of child protection to work with forces for social change; and the model of the Children's Forums supported by the Nkundabana community volunteers.

#### ***Best Practice: Legal Aid Clinics***

The legal aid clinics brought together different expertise (the legal skills of Lawyers of Hope and the psychosocial skills of Save the Children) to provide holistic support to children. Lawyers of Hope went to all cells, in both sectors to conduct needs assessments. Further legal aid clinics were held where lawyers went with Nkundabana to each cell, accompanied by the Executive Secretary of the cell. The lawyers provided legal advice and where the child needed representation they drafted a legal submission. The project's Legal Officer provided follow-up on all the cases. A total of 167 cases have been resolved in the clinics. In addition, 558 children are being registered following the campaign on birth registration (where the fine for late registration was waived and legal assistance provided in cases of disputed paternity). This is a good example of partnership between the local authorities, the community-based Child Protection Networks and

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project staff and the bringing together of legal and psychosocial support.

### Challenges

The project has made substantial progress in strengthening local systems for child protection. However, further efforts are required to ensure sustainability:

- the Nkundabana and Children's Forums are committed to their work, yet their effectiveness may be undermined if there are not resources to support their work (e.g. transport fees and airtime)
- the CPNs need to continue to be coordinated after the project's completion, once the sector-level Project Management Committees cease functioning
- child protection concerns (reporting and referring cases of violence against children or providing support and follow-up in cases of neglect) are not fully embedded in local authorities' performance contracts.

### Best Practice: Children's Forums

Children's Forums meet regularly and undertake a wide range of activities including peer training, awareness raising, advice to peers and parents, advocacy to local authorities and income-generating. The Children's Forums also work well in partnership with the Nkundabana and local authorities to promote children's rights, identify child protection cases and implement awareness raising activities such as the Day of the African Child. With the income-generating activities, the Children's Forums are helping peers by providing school materials and uniforms.

*"Talking to children is what we did... 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)

### Recommendations

This project was designed as a pilot to be implemented in two sectors of Gicumbi. During the evaluation there were calls from the CPNs, local authorities and service providers to scale up this project to other sectors in the district. It is recommended that this project be expanded to other sectors, but be adapted to take account of the lessons learnt and best practices developed during the pilot. In addition, it is suggested that some ongoing support is provided to Kageyo and Rubaya to address the sustainability concerns, as well as advocacy at national level to disseminate the lessons learnt to inform national child protection policies and action plans.

### Modifications to pilot model

- **Simplification of CPNs:** There is a danger that too many different structures and clubs are created by different actors working with children which may not only overstretch financial and human resources but also lead to fatigue, and confusion. It would be more efficient to focus on strengthening existing structures rather than duplication.
- **Simplification of training model:** While the initial trainings and refresher trainings worked well, it is not clear the value-added by the cascade trainings for the CPNs. Also the amount of trainings contained within the project meant there was less time for follow-up activities with the CPNs to assess impact and consolidating the gains made. It is suggested instead that more time is spent by project staff in mentoring the

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CPNs and working alongside local authorities.

- **Review of training materials** to cover wider forms of violence and abuse against children (in particular other forms of sexual abuse and indecent assault, in addition to rape).
- **Tackling corporal punishment and promoting positive discipline:** Teachers were very open about continuing to use corporal punishment in Rubaya sector and children highlighted this as major problem. Further training is needed on the damaging effects of corporal punishment and more support provided to teachers to use positive discipline.
- **Facilitate the participation of marginalised children:** While Children's Forum members are reaching out to marginalised children and attempting to resolve their problems, it is important that these children also have the opportunity to participate in the Forums. This means not only targeting children in school to participate but also by ensuring children not in school or with special needs are given extra support from the CPNs to participate.
- **Establish social funds earlier:** Leaving the establishment of the social fund until nearly the end of the project has meant that there was not enough time for it to be fully functioning (or functioning at all in Rubaya) and be able to continue to support the work of the Nkundabana after the project closure. It is suggested that this aspect of the project is introduced much earlier along with planning for the project handover to the local authorities and communities, to iron out any problems and to strengthen the sustainability of the CPNs.

A follow-on phase would enable Save the Children to build on the partnership with district authorities to develop further a systems approach and mainstream child

protection concerns in other sectors (such as education, health etc.).



### *Dissemination of lessons learnt and advocacy at national level*

The Government of Rwanda is building a national child protection system through the work of the National Commission for Children (NCC) to implement the Integrated Child Rights Plan (ICRP) and the Revised Family Policy. There are a number of key areas in which Save the Children can contribute to the development of a strong national system:

- Disseminate the lessons learnt, best practices and training materials from this project to key government ministries, institutions and other organizations working in child protection.
- Advocate to government and non-governmental partners for the strengthening of CPNs (as set out in the ICRP) and to retain the strength of a systems approach which addresses multiple risks faced by children (rather than a single-issue approach).
- Inform the NCC proposed birth registration campaign by sharing the model developed with Lawyers of Hope.
- Advocate for the collection of data on children experiencing violence, abuse and exploitation as part of local authorities' needs assessments of vulnerable children.

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- Advocate for greater budgetary allocation to child protection activities and that child protection targets (beyond the reintegration of out-of-school children) such as responding to and resolving cases of violence and abuse against children, be included in the performance contracts of district and sector authorities.
- Explore greater linkages between child protection and child-sensitive social protection to meet the needs of all vulnerable families and mitigate poverty and conflict which often drives violence, abuse and exploitation against children.