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The Development of a Community-Led Child Protection Approach in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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ABSTRACT

Child protection actors, including community members, work to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and the exploitation of children. Child protection approaches implemented by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and other agencies are often located in communities but are not led by those communities. This limits contextual relevance and sustainability. A community-led child protection approach was developed (*Seeds*). This paper describes the iterative process of its development, including (1) a systematic review of the literature, (2) formative work in Uganda and Lebanon, (3) a field test in Sri Lanka and (4) a feasibility study in Colombia, with a review by technical experts. This process resulted in the identification of a six-phase community-led approach aiming to (i) enhance the protection of children and (ii) increase children's sense of protection.

The paper explores four themes that emerged from reflections on the development and testing of *Seeds*. First, it delves into the relevance of community ownership. Second, *Seeds* has relevance beyond a narrow professional definition of child protection and could be a generic approach with relevance to other sectors. Third, community-led processes could be seen as an important part of the localisation agenda. Fourth, there is a need to continue learning about community-led action in humanitarian contexts.

1 | Introduction

An estimated one billion children between 2–17 experience physical, sexual or emotional violence or neglect on a yearly basis (Hillis et al. 2016; World Health Organisation 2022).

Violence against children is a public health, human rights and social concern (Hillis et al. 2016; Seddighi et al. 2021) with an impact on the physical, emotional and social development of individuals (Molano et al. 2018; Rubenstein and Stark 2017). Furthermore, it has consequences at the family and community

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Summary

- Implementing a community-led approach to child protection creates a higher likelihood of contextual relevance and sustainable outcomes.
- Power can shift from implementing organisations to communities throughout the community action process through the use of facilitation skills such as being humble, deep listening, building trust and creating vision.
- As a community-led approach to child protection, *Seeds* consists of the following 6 phases: (1) community entry and building trust, (2) learning, (3) community action planning, (4) action plan implementation, (5) community reflection on progress and change and (6) exit from the community.
- The defining characteristics of the approach are that it is (i) a prevention approach, (ii) strengths-based, (iii) community-led, (iv) implemented using a facilitation approach, (v) requiring a shift of mindset and (vi) inclusive.

levels, has economic and social implications for countries as a whole, and can be transmitted over generations (Greene et al. 2020; Hillis et al. 2016; Seddighi et al. 2021; Stark and Landis 2016). Violence against children often occurs in places that are supposed to provide protection, such as the home, school and community, and is mainly perpetrated by people known to children (Wessells and Kostelny 2021). In humanitarian emergencies, including armed conflict, natural disasters and pandemics, violence against children exacerbates as new risks arise and pre-existing protection mechanisms weaken (Machel 1996; Norman et al. 2012; Pinheiro 2006; Rubenstein and Stark 2017).

Extensive policy responses to and research on violence against children is available in high-income countries, but considerably less has been done in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) (The World Bank 2024) due to resource constraints and less extensive evidence for effective interventions (Pundir et al. 2020). In addition, a gap in evidence on effective interventions to address violence against children in humanitarian settings hinders humanitarian actors' ability to effectively prevent this violence and to respond to their needs (Stark and Landis 2016). Principles, guidance and quality standards exist, such as case management and alternative care, that guide child protection actors in responding to the harms that children face (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action 2019). In recent years, a greater focus has been placed on the prevention of harm in order to improve sustainability, increase cost-effectiveness, avoid the high costs resulting from inaction, and adhere to the ethical responsibility to prevent harm to children before it occurs (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action 2021; UNICEF Office of Research—Innocenti 2022).

The important role of communities in prevention is well recognised in the child protection sector (The Alliance for Child

Protection in Humanitarian Action 2019, 2021). Community-level approaches that have commonly been used by local, national or international agencies external to communities tend to be situated in the community but are generally not led by the community. In these approaches, community members are involved as beneficiaries, participants or volunteers while the implementing agency holds the power to decide what harms to address and how to do so. Whereas such approaches may have relevance in certain contexts, they lack contextual relevance and sustainability and maintain the power imbalance between the implementing agency and the community (Ellermeijer et al. 2023; Wessells 2009). Guidance and evidence are lacking on effective approaches that shift power to communities and grant them leadership regarding the planning and implementation of community child protection actions, specifically in regard to humanitarian action.

Community-led development is defined as 'an approach in which local community members work together to identify goals that are important to them, develop and implement plans to achieve those goals, and create collaborative relationships internally and with external actors, all while building on community strengths and local leadership' (Veda et al. 2021, 10). The relevance of using a community-led approach has been demonstrated in other sectors (Ayala et al. 2021; Ryan et al. 2020; Venkataramanan et al. 2018). Although such approaches have not yet been widely used by child protection actors, several studies have shown promising results (Inter-Agency Core Group 2021; Kostelny et al. 2020; Stark et al. 2014; The Columbia Group for Children in Adversity 2011; Wessells et al. 2014). They point to the importance of slow-paced facilitation, the meaningful participation of children and alignment with formal aspects of the child protection system.

In response to the global imperative to address violence against children, and acknowledging the crucial role communities play in preventing such violence, a community-led child protection approach was developed (*Seeds*). The approach operationalises lessons from promising community-led approaches to date and aims to fill the existing gap in guidance and evidence on how effectively to shift power to communities. *Seeds* is intended to apply across LMICs and humanitarian contexts and builds on the intrinsic motivation of community members to keep children safe. It takes existing community strengths as a point of departure and builds on what the community is already doing to protect children. Implementing agencies merely play a facilitating role while community members collectively identify the child protection concerns to address, decide how to take action using their own structures, practices, resources and processes, and then monitor and evaluate their actions. Because these initiatives are locally owned and managed by the community using their own ideas, creativity and motivation to keep children safe and well, they have the potential to be contextually relevant and more sustainable, allowing for communities to take ownership of the process.

The primary aim of this paper is to describe the iterative process by which *Seeds* was developed. We begin by presenting the *Seeds* approach, as well as its core characteristics.

TABLE 1 | Detailed description of final version of *Seeds*.

Phase 1: Community entry and building trust	This phase focuses on building trust with the community. After establishing initial contact and introducing <i>Seeds</i> to the community, mutual expectations, limitations, and boundaries for collaboration are discussed. Ultimately, an initial decision is reached to collaborate on a shared child protection interest, to be addressed through an inclusive, community-led child protection process.
Phase 2: Learning	This phase focuses on a process of collaborative learning, by the community and implementing agency, and reflection about how concepts of children, childhood, child harms and child protection are understood locally. Participatory, inclusive methodologies are used to generate a wide range of perspectives and nuances on child harms and why they occur, as well as any local ways of protecting children, and any existing resources or capacities that can be mobilised. Findings are discussed by the community for their reflection and validation.
Phase 3: Action planning	Based on learning from phase 2 and the vision of the community regarding how they would like to see its children protected, community facilitators, supported by a community coach, facilitate an inclusive community process during which risks to children are prioritised, and an action plan to address these is developed and validated.
Phase 4: Action plan implementation	A kick-off activity starts the implementation of the action plan, which is led by the community. Community facilitators follow up with the community on a regular basis as to how implementation is progressing, to discuss possible challenges and review whether the implemented action still contributes to the vision of the community.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Phase 5: Community reflection on progress and change	The community reflects on the progress of the implementation of the action plan namely, whether and how the priority risks are being addressed, what might need adjusting, and any notable change on the lives of children. This phase builds on existing ways of discussing community issues; no parallel mechanisms are set up.
Phase 6: Exit from the community	The implementing agency and the community decide together whether further collaboration and support is desired or whether the community feels confident to continue without further support. This decision, along with other logistical considerations, determines whether the external agency withdraws or continues to work in the community.

2 | Part One: The *Seeds* Approach

2.1 | Framework of the *Seeds* Approach

Seeds consists of the following six phases: (1) community entry and building trust, (2) learning, (3) action planning, (4) action plan implementation, (5) community reflection on progress and change and (6) exit from the community. During the six-phase cycle, communities may decide to go back to the learning phase (phase 2) or the planning phase (phase 3) if they see this as beneficial for the process and outcomes. See Table 1 for details.

2.2 | Actors Involved in *Seeds*

The following groups of actors are involved in *Seeds*: (i) community members, (ii) community facilitators and (iii) community coaches. Community members include all children and adults, as individuals or organised in networks. This includes 'natural helpers,' who play an important role in the lives of children in an informal way, and other trusted members of the community with particular skills, legitimacy and recognition, who are motivated to protect children. Community facilitators are community members who are identified by the community and trained and supported by a community coach to implement *Seeds*. *Seeds* activities are scheduled at a time that fits with community facilitators' agendas, ensuring minimal conflicts with their income-generating activities, care of their families and any other roles they play in the community. Community coaches are staff members of international, national or local agencies, often external to the community, who support and work alongside community facilitators to facilitate

community dialogue and action pertaining to child protection. Community facilitators and community coaches go through a capacity strengthening process prior to their involvement in *Seeds*. This process focuses mainly on skills for effective facilitation, such as being humble and engaging in deep listening, respectful communication and trust building. The capacity-strengthening process includes formal training, an exchange of experience with other practitioners, and on-the-job learning. The term used for community facilitators and community coaches is adapted to the context of implementation.

2.3 | Theory of Change

A Theory of Change for *Seeds* (see Figure 1) was developed, outlining the pathway of change over the lifespan of the approach (Anderson 2004). The long-term outcomes that *Seeds* aims to work towards are (i) strengthened system at community level; (ii) enhanced protection of children from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation; (iii) children's increased sense of protection; and (iv) communities demonstrate a strong sense of ownership over collective actions to protect children.

2.4 | Core Characteristics of *Seeds*

1. *Seeds* is a prevention approach. Prevention is defined as 'identifying and addressing trends or patterns of risk within the population, as opposed to identifying individual cases for service provision' (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action 2021, 5). By implementing *Seeds*, patterns of risk within the community are identified and

addressed through community-led action (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action 2021). The approach attempts to address the root causes of harms facing children, aiming to reduce incidences of violence (Breitborde et al. 2010).

2. *Seeds* aims to strengthen the protective environment for children in the community by using a strengths-based approach, building on existing structures, practices, resources and processes in a contextually relevant manner.
3. The approach is community-led, meaning that communities are 'in the driver's seat' and take key decisions concerning which risks to children to address, the actions to implement and the resources and processes to use as a starting point when doing so (Child Resilience Alliance 2018a). Power is in the hands of the community rather than that of the implementing agency.
4. Implementing agencies use a facilitation approach when implementing *Seeds*. This approach combines skills for the effective facilitation of community-led action as defined by the Child Resilience Alliance (Child Resilience Alliance 2018a) with additional skills used in the coaching practice (Stober and Grant 2010). These skills, such as being humble, engaging in deep listening and respectful communication, showing empathy, creating a vision, and engaging someone/a group in a systematic process of setting goals and developing solutions for facilitation goal attainment, have strong linkages with participatory action research (PAR), which is grounded in the work of Paulo Freire (1990).
5. The facilitation approach requires a shift in mindset for child protection practitioners who are used to different

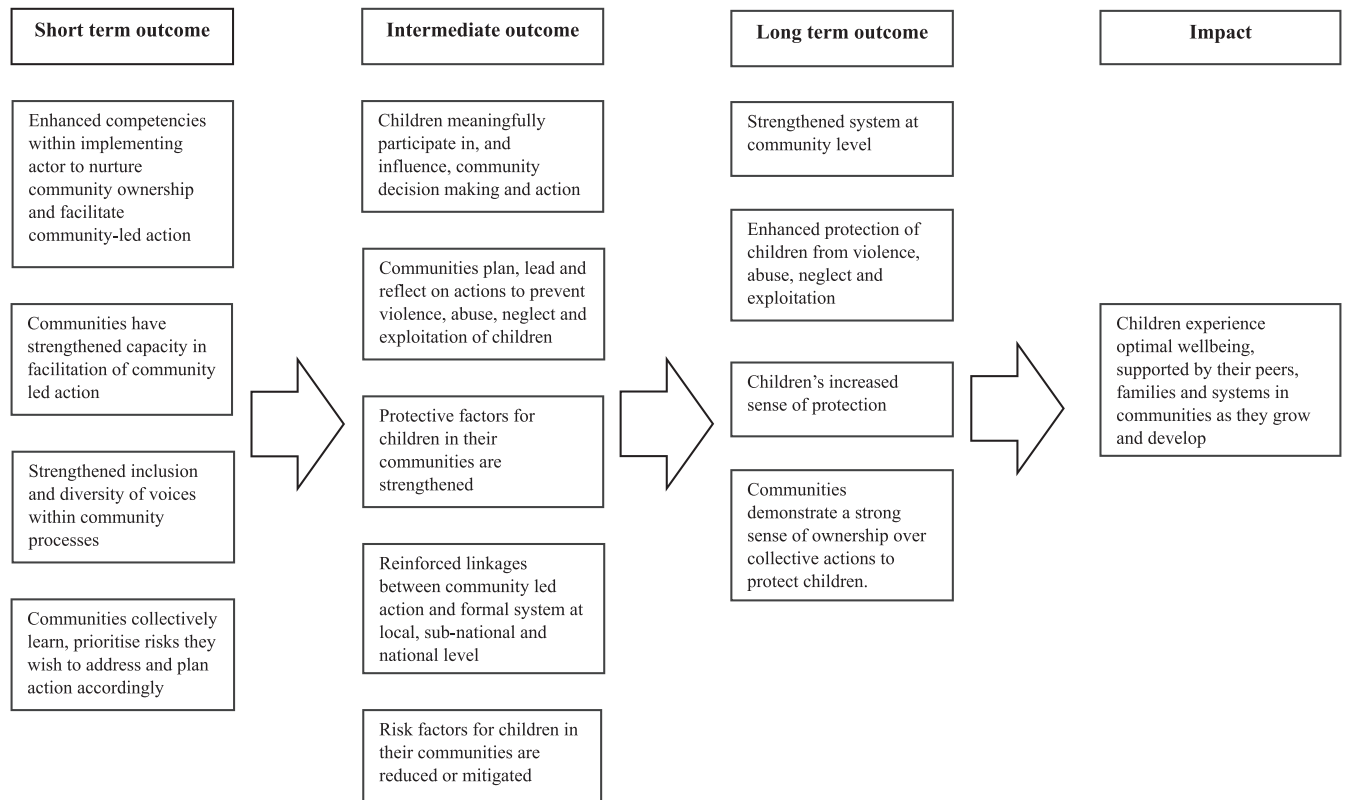


FIGURE 1 | *Seeds* Theory of Change.

ways of working. An important part of the learning path for community coaches, who play a supportive rather than an advising and teaching role, focuses on unlearning common ways of engaging with communities through reflections on the benefits of community-owned approaches and on facilitation skills.

6. *Seeds*-related activities aim to be inclusive, while considering and balancing power dynamics in the community and enabling the safe and meaningful participation of children. This aims to facilitate the involvement of all the social layers in the community, including children and other often marginalised groups, building on their agency and strengths to inform the community-led action process to keep children safe (Wessells 2015).

3 | Part 2: An Iterative Process for the Development of *Seeds*

A systematic approach for the development and evaluation of complex interventions guided the development of *Seeds* (Skivington et al. 2021). The iterative development process included the following phases: (1) a systematic review of the literature, (2) formative work in Uganda and Lebanon, (3) field testing of *Seeds* in Sri Lanka and (4) a feasibility study in Colombia and review by technical experts.

3.1 | Phase 1: Systematic Review of the Literature

3.1.1 | Methods

A systematic literature review process started in 2017, almost a decade after an inter-agency review of the evidence on community-based child protection mechanisms (Wessells 2009), to synthesise more recent evidence and learning on community-level child protection in LMICs. Five databases were searched, using search terms that captured community-led child protection approaches in LMICs. In total, 1549 published articles and 1745 grey literature resources were identified. The articles were screened using the following predefined inclusion criteria: (a) they focused on LMICs as classified by the World Bank; (b) they addressed community-level work for the prevention and response to violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation; (c) eligible publications included peer-reviewed journal articles, books and dissertations, as well as guidelines, manuals, training resources, evaluations and reports identified through grey literature searches; (d) only articles written in English were considered and (e) no restrictions were placed on the publication date. Following the screening process, 38 published articles and 204 grey literature resources were analysed (Ellermeijer et al. 2023).

3.1.2 | Outcomes

Our review highlighted three main findings (Ellermeijer et al. 2023): First, a practice-research gap was identified regarding community-level approaches to child protection overall and more specifically in humanitarian settings. The identified literature provided limited information about effective approaches,

and a significantly higher percentage of published papers focused on LMICs (78%) compared to humanitarian contexts (19%). This division was almost equal in the grey literature, indicating that community-level approaches are implemented in both contexts, but evaluations in humanitarian action are less likely to be published. The papers mainly included reports on process and output indicators rather than an evaluation of outcomes at the child, family and community levels. Second, the importance of targeting different socio-ecological levels when implementing community-level approaches was highlighted, recognising that child protection prevention and response looks beyond the influence of caregivers, and therefore includes the broader neighbourhood, community and cultural contexts. The literature included in the review recognises the significant role of extended families, communities and cultural and traditional leaders in providing care to children, raising awareness and validating actions to prevent and respond to harm. Third, recommended strategies were identified, such as establishing links with existing processes and structures, supporting inclusivity and carrying out careful negotiations of possible tensions between traditional mechanisms and rights-based frameworks that can be used by implementing agencies.

3.2 | Phase 2: Formative work in Uganda and Lebanon

3.2.1 | Methods Formative Work in Uganda

A three-day workshop was organised in Uganda in 2017 to kick-start the development of a community-led approach. Eight child protection practitioners working in a variety of contexts (including Lebanon, Palestine, Sri Lanka and the Democratic Republic of Congo) and with experience in implementing preventive approaches in communities were invited. The main focus of the workshop was the development of a theory of change and determining key phases of the approach.

For the development of the community-led approach, teaching from studies in Sierra Leone and Kenya conducted by the Inter-agency Learning Initiative on Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Child Protection Systems was used (Kostelny et al. 2020; Stark et al. 2014; The Columbia Group for Children in Adversity 2011), as well as information from action research conducted in India by the Inter-Agency Core Group (Inter-Agency Core Group 2021).

3.2.2 | Outcomes Workshop in Uganda

The approach developed during the workshop outlined a number of phases: (i) a rapid ethnography and context analysis, (ii) a process of community mobilisation and (iii) facilitation of community action. The rapid ethnography approach was chosen since it is suited to explore and create deep insight into risks facing children and existing protective factors within the context of a community. Using a combination of qualitative methods, it aims to provide findings over a shorter period of time, making it fit for use in both LMICs and humanitarian contexts (Vindrola-Padros 2021). During the workshop, a list of rapid ethnography themes and questions was drafted. The rapid ethnography was

combined with an analysis of the socio-economic and political context in which the approach would be implemented. These analyses would be followed by a process of engaging community members to prioritise harms to children and to identify already existing structures, practices, resources and processes to address these through the implementation of community-led action.

The team of child protection practitioners concluded that the approach should consist of a generic step-by-step process that could be contextualised and implemented across LMICs and humanitarian contexts. The role of the implementing agency was defined as facilitator of a process led by the community. The following key actors were identified as possibly relevant to the implementation of the approach: (a) a *community coach*: someone working for the implementing agency who trains, provides support and gives ongoing advice to the so-called community champions; (b) *community champions*: community members who draw on their skills and relationships with and knowledge of their community to coordinate the implementation of the approach; and (c) specific *community agents of change*: people from the community who have intrinsic motivation to address child protection risks and will support a process of change in the community.

3.2.3 | Methods Study in Lebanon

Following the workshop in Uganda, a qualitative study was conducted in Lebanon to review, assess, and select relevant questions and methodologies to be included in the rapid ethnography. The study was conducted in 2018 in the Bekaa (Baalbek), an area affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted to determine whether the predesigned list of rapid ethnography questions was relevant and adequate. Rapid ethnography questions were organised by category, with examples including the existing child protection system, knowledge about child protection and social norms and beliefs. During the interviews, participants were asked to provide feedback on the relevance of these categories, the appropriateness of the rapid ethnography questions within each category, and the best ways to gather input on these topics from children. The KIIs were conducted with a convenience sample of caregivers ($n = 10$), community leaders ($n = 7$) and youth ($n = 6$). Professionals working closely with children ($n = 11$) (e.g., teachers and social workers) were purposively identified to take part in the KIIs as well. Following the KIIs, six focus group discussions (FGD) were held with the same participants, asking about the relevance of the included questions, the relevance of question categories, possible probing questions and how to best collect information from children on the topics included in the rapid ethnography. A team of child protection practitioners discussed the results of the KIIs and FGDs and jointly developed the rapid ethnography process ready for field testing in Sri Lanka.

3.2.4 | Outcomes Study in Lebanon

Based on the results of the study in Lebanon, the rapid ethnography tools and procedures were finalized. Main and probing

questions were formulated in different categories (e.g., child protection risks, child protection system, supports and services, community structures, etc.), both for children and adults. A number of participatory methodologies (i.e., community mapping and the problem tree method) were agreed upon to collect information from members of the community.

3.3 | Phase 3: Field Testing of *Seeds* in Sri Lanka

3.3.1 | Methods

A field test of the new approach, now called *Seeds*, was implemented in two communities, Paramankirai and Savatkaddu, in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, from 2018 to 2019. The aim of this qualitative study was to preliminarily assess the feasibility of *Seeds*. Data were gathered on the various components of the approach, including the training of community coaches and community champions, the rapid ethnography and the development and implementation of a community-led action plan. All elements of the approach were implemented but in a shortened timeframe, which allowed for important learning to take place over a 3-month implementation process. Data were collected, with a purposive sample, through KIIs and FGDs. KIIs were organised with the community coach ($n = 1$) and community champions ($n = 4$), asking for reflections on their roles overall and in specific implementation phases, their relationships with other actors involved in *Seeds*, the support received during implementation, and overall feedback on the *Seeds* process. FGDs were organised with community members involved in the implementation of *Seeds*, including agents of change ($n = 4$), children ($n = 20$), youth ($n = 10$), caregivers ($n = 20$) and community leaders ($n = 4$). Questions were asked to gauge their general impressions of *Seeds* activities, locations and ways in which activities were facilitated. Through daily feedback forms, detailed information was collected from training participants ($n = 6$) on the training content and methods. In addition, they were asked to fill in a final training evaluation. The qualitative data collected during the study were analysed using thematic analysis, and results were discussed with an interagency group of child protection practitioners to inform changes to the *Seeds* approach.

3.3.2 | Outcomes

The main learnings from the field test included (a) the need to pay attention during the recruitment process of the community coaches to the personal characteristics relevant to the required facilitation skills (e.g., empathy, being humble, asking probing questions and listening), (b) the need for the identification of community champions to be led by the community rather than the community leaders and (c) the need to strengthen the transition between the various phases of *Seeds*. A fluid process seemed needed as a connection between phases did not happen naturally.

Two further important learnings came up during the field testing. First, it proved challenging to implement a community-led approach in communities that had previously received humanitarian aid. Community members expected monetary rewards

and other benefits at the start of the *Seeds* implementation. This is in contrast with the community-led approach to child protection, which, for sustainability, builds on already existing capacities and resources in the community and does not include remuneration or the transfer of funding or materials. Second, effects were seen from the government administration being present at the central, provincial, district, division and village levels in the area where the field test was conducted. As a result, when discussing existing structures, practices, resources and processes for the development of an action plan, community members often referred to the responsible government officials rather than looking at their own strengths, connections and abilities to keep children safe. This indicates there is a need to reflect on the ownership of communities in the protection of their children, which is a key issue in a community-led process.

3.3.3 | Refinements of Seeds Approach

Based on the results of the field test, a number of changes were made to the approach. First, the different phases of *Seeds* were simplified, including the language used in questions and methodologies as part of the rapid ethnography. Second, the context analysis, which was initially implemented alongside the rapid ethnography, was taken out as this was considered the first step of all programming and not unique to *Seeds*. Because of the collaborative nature of the learning process between the community and the implementing agency, the rapid ethnography was renamed as the learning phase. Third, the connection between the different phases was strengthened by adding (a) a step in which the rapid ethnography results were fed back to the community for validation and prioritisation of risks to address, (b) a discussion of protective factors in the community and (c) a practical step facilitating the development of a community action plan. Fourth, changes were made to the actors involved in the implementation of *Seeds*. The community coach builds up the skills of, and works side-by-side with community members on the community-led action process. These community members were renamed community facilitators instead of community champions, referring to the facilitation skills which are considered central to the community-led process. The role of agents of change was broadened to community members more generally, targeting different socio-cultural groups in the community. Fifth, discussions on the duration of the implementation of *Seeds* were held to allow for community familiarisation with the community-led method of working instead of the agency-led way of working and for community reflection on their strengths and the existing efforts of the community to keep children safe.

While *Seeds* was field tested in Sri Lanka, the Child Resilience Alliance launched a guide and toolkit to support a community-led approach to child protection (Child Resilience Alliance 2018a). The guidance was initiated by and based on the work of the Interagency Learning Initiative on Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Child Protection Systems, which includes the above-mentioned learning and promising practices in Kenya, Sierra Leone and India. The development of *Seeds* was seen as well aligned with these and was able to incorporate several of the practical tools and learning presented in the guidance and toolkit.

3.4 | Phase 4: Feasibility Study in Colombia and Review by Technical Experts

3.4.1 | Methods

From 2021 to 2022, a 4-month-long feasibility study was conducted in two communities, Fortuna Alta and Alaska, in Usme, a locality in Bogota, Colombia. The aim of the study was to assess the feasibility of the *Seeds* approach and the evaluation procedures. Given the aim of this study, the sample included in the study was not based on power calculations but was assumed to assess sensitivity to change. The study followed a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected, with standardised questionnaires, from adolescents ($n=25$) and adults ($n=46$) on the following three outcomes: (i) children are adequately protected from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, (ii) children have an increased feeling of protection and (iii) community attitudes and behaviours positively changed on child protection issues. Qualitative data were collected on constructs such as acceptability, implementation, coverage, demand and practicality from adolescents ($n=18$) and adults ($n=17$) using KIIs and FGDs. Research participants were purposefully selected. The qualitative data collected during the study were analysed using thematic analysis, and results of the mixed-methods study were discussed during a sense-making session with researchers and child protection practitioners. The results of the study are described in a separate paper (Ellermeijer et al. under review for publication).

3.4.2 | Refinements of Seeds Approach

Based on the results of the feasibility study and with a team of experts from various specialist backgrounds (e.g., child participation, accountability and child safeguarding), final changes were made to the approach. First, the existing content of the approach was restructured into six rather than three phases, and substeps were added under each phase to facilitate the flow of the process. The introduction of *Seeds* to the community was deepened, including a discussion of mutual expectations, the limitations of the collaboration and the boundaries in the collaboration of the community and the implementing agency. Furthermore, the opportunity and time to take an informed decision to work together was added throughout the introduction and learning phase, giving communities time to reflect on and decide if they want to engage with the implementing agency. This component also allows the community and the implementing agency to stop the collaboration if there seems little interest and/or if expectations seem unrealistic, and therefore the potential for successful collaboration is insufficient. An exit phase was added to the process during which the implementing agency and the community discuss together whether further collaboration and support is desired or whether the community feels confident to continue without further assistance. Second, the guidance and tools included in the approach were further simplified, ensuring ease of use by the actors involved in the *Seeds* implementation. Most of the changes were made to the learning phase, where various topics and methodologies are presented, aiming to support learning within the community about a range of perspectives on child risks and why they occur, as well as on any local ways

TABLE 2 | Overview of iterative process to develop *Seeds*.

Phase	Method/activity	Key learning
1	Systematic review of the literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A practice-research gap on community-level approaches exists overall, and more specifically in humanitarian settings. It is important to target different socio-ecological levels when implementing community-level approaches because of the varying roles of caregivers, neighbourhood, community, and cultural context in providing care to children, raising awareness, and validating actions to prevent and respond to maltreatment. A number of recommended strategies were identified that can be used by implementing agencies.
2	Practitioner workshop in Uganda and qualitative formative study in Lebanon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The role of the agency implementing <i>Seeds</i> was defined as a facilitator of a process led by the community. A number of key actors were identified as relevant to the implementation of <i>Seeds</i>. The rapid ethnography methodology was finalised, including main and probing questions and participatory methods to collect information.
3	Practice run in Sri Lanka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A need was identified to sufficiently focus on the personal characteristics of facilitation skills of the community coach in the recruitment process. The selection of community champions should be led by a group representing the community rather than a community leader. There is a need to strengthen the transition between phases of the approach.
4	Feasibility study in Colombia and review by technical experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The existing content of the approach was restructured to six rather than three phases and substeps were added under each phase. The materials of the approach were further simplified, ensuring ease of use by the implementing teams. A separate section on reflective practice was added. The minimum recommended period for implementation of <i>Seeds</i> is 6 months, allowing for trust to be built between communities and implementing agencies, and between an inclusive group of community members involved in the development and implementation of community-led action.

of protecting children and any existing local resources or capacities that could be mobilised. Community coaches and facilitators can consider using these methodologies, but they are invited as well to use context-relevant methodologies in the process. Third, a separate section on reflective practice was added, which is used throughout the *Seeds* implementation, inspired by the work on the topic conducted by the Child Resilience Alliance (2018b). Reflective practice is a way in which professionals reflect on what they are doing, while they are doing it, using it afterwards to strengthen their professional practice (Redmond 2006). Teams of implementing agencies may need to ‘un-learn’ common ways of engaging with communities as they are asked to put themselves in ‘someone else’s shoes’ throughout the *Seeds* process. Individual one-on-one and group reflections, using a variety of methodologies and related tools, were, therefore, added as a key part of *Seeds*. Fourth, the implementation in Colombia lasted 4 months, which was considered too short to allow for trust to be built between communities and implementing agencies and between an inclusive group of community members involved in the development and implementation of community-led action. For that reason, it is recommended that the *Seeds* approach is implemented for at least

six months, ideally longer. See Table 2 for a summary of the learning per development phase.

4 | Discussion

This paper describes the iterative process by which a community-led approach to child protection (*Seeds*) was developed and initially tested over a multiyear period. This process resulted in a six-phased approach that puts communities ‘in the driver’s seat’ to identify harm to children, formulate and implement action, and reflect on progress and impact. Based on reflections on the development and testing of *Seeds* to this point, four themes emerged, which are further explored in this section.

First, child protection programming should be more explicitly geared towards reaching ownership at the community level (Binet et al. 2022; Ellermeijer et al. 2023; The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action 2019; Wessells 2009). Outcomes of a community-led approach, such as the enhanced protection of children from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, and children’s increased sense of protection, as described

in the theory of change earlier in this paper, are hypothesised to have higher chances of sustained effect if owned by communities. To continue learning from community-led approaches to child protection and improve programming accordingly, it is important to (i) further explore what is meant by community ownership in relation to community-led action, (ii) explore key elements or mechanisms of change in approaches that positively facilitate ownership, (iii) search for and/or develop ways to measure ownership and (iv) learn about the relationship between community ownership and sustainability.

Second, *Seeds* requires an understanding that goes beyond a narrow professional definition of child protection. Communities often define child protection differently from child protection agencies. Risks facing children, identified and prioritised by the community, may, therefore, extend beyond a narrow child protection focus, demand flexibility of implementing agencies, and require the involvement of other types of capacities to address them. This can be illustrated with an example of participatory action research conducted in Sierra Leone, under the Inter-agency Learning Initiative on Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Child Protection Systems, where communities selected teenage pregnancy as a priority issue to address (Wessells 2015). The community-led action included activities concerning family planning, sexual and reproductive health and life skills, which were supported by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) with expertise in sexual and reproductive health and youth leadership, rather than child protection only (Wessells 2015). Given this broader perspective, the community-led action process that *Seeds* aims to establish may be seen as a generic approach with relevance to other sectors if the child protection focus is removed. *Seeds* does not provide answers but supports implementing agencies in facilitating an inclusive action process led by the community. To allow for this shift in power, the mindset of implementing agencies and their staff should support and enable this change. The skills that are the basis for this facilitation approach are universal and can benefit staff in other sectors to achieve a similar process of change.

Third, community-led approaches, such as *Seeds*, can make an important contribution to the direction of the localisation agenda. The relationship between local, national and international actors has been a long-standing concern (Barakat and Milton 2020). As a correction to power imbalances, localisation was presented as a core principle in the Grand Bargain initiative by parties to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 (Elkahlout et al. 2022). There is no unified definition of localisation, which can take on numerous forms (Elkahlout et al. 2022; Roepstorff 2020). Definitions of localisation regularly focus on the strengthened leadership of local authorities and the empowerment of local and national actors to act as decision-makers (Roepstorff 2020). Baguios et al. (2021) formulated the shift of power to local actors as the goal of localisation. Localisation is presented as a journey with locally-led practice as the destination (Baguios et al. 2021). However, even child protection programming that is fully implemented by national and local actors does not necessarily or automatically place community processes at the centre of action and/or challenge existing community power structures. In shifting power from international to national or local actors, an inclusive community-led process can play a part in disrupting existing unequal power structures

at the level of the community. Further analysis of the relationship between community ownership, community-led action and localisation will help to strategically position community-led work in the broader ongoing discussion.

Fourth, the applicability of community-led action, specifically in humanitarian responses, should be further explored and researched. In some humanitarian settings, community-led action seems very challenging or may not be possible; for instance, where a sense of community is lacking, in locations of active conflict where trust is challenged, or during rapid onset emergencies where the scale of child protection risks is often overwhelming, the response timeframe is short, and the focus lies on providing lifesaving interventions (Child Resilience Alliance 2018a). While implementation in these circumstances may initially be driven by implementing agencies, these agencies should, at the same time, seek to identify existing local processes and respect what communities already do to protect children. Communities are often the first responders in an emergency and take key actions to keep children safe before external agencies arrive.

A number of constraints were identified during the development and testing of the *Seeds* approach. First, it takes time for trust to be built between external agencies and members of the community, to implement the approach with quality, and for communities to feel sufficiently confident to continue without the support of the external agency. Funding cycles often hinder a flexible implementation timeframe that follows the pace of the community and risks a premature exit from the community. Second, community-led practice requires a way of working that is often different from what agencies are used to, particularly in humanitarian action. It is, therefore, important to introduce *Seeds* beyond merely the implementation team, for example, to Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) and safeguarding teams to create buy-in for a different way of working. Third, facilitating an inclusive approach can be challenging in contexts where the participation of children, women and people from other often marginalised groups is not common. Context-sensitive approaches should be used to allow these voices to be included. Meanwhile, the community facilitators may continue to engage in conversations about the inclusion of all groups in the community, using skills for effective facilitation.

5 | Conclusions

This paper describes the iterative process of the development of the community-led child protection approach *Seeds*, including a literature review, formative work in Uganda and Lebanon, a field test in Sri Lanka, and a feasibility study in Colombia and review by a team of technical experts. The paper outlines the current framework of the *Seeds* approach, the actors involved in *Seeds*, and the core characteristics underpinning the approach. The relevance of *Seeds* beyond the narrow professional definition of child protection was further explored, in addition to the potential relevance of a generic version of the approach to other sectors. The relevance of community ownership as a central theme of the approach was discussed, and the need to unpick the relationship between community-led action, community ownership and localisation was highlighted since it would allow

the positioning of community-led action in current debates in the humanitarian sector.

So far, *Seeds* has been tested in a variety of LMICs, including in protracted humanitarian contexts, as part of the iterative process described in this paper. As a next step, we are now preparing to evaluate *Seeds* to assess whether the approach is effective in these settings. For the evaluation, there are some complexities to navigate: (a) what the minimal duration of the approach, in various contexts, that allows outcomes to be reached through a community-led process should be, and (b) how to measure the impact of the *Seeds* approach on the target population and larger community when it is unclear what risk(s) communities will prioritise to address prior to the start of implementation.

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Ethics Statement

The research presented in this paper has been conducted in accordance with ethical principles. The formative study in Lebanon received ethical approval from the War Child Alliance internal ethics board. The protocol for the field test in Sri Lanka was reviewed and approved by the ethics board of the University of Colombo, but changes that were made subsequent to starting the process have not gone through a formal amendment. Ethical approval for the feasibility study conducted in Colombia was granted by the ethics board of Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá. All research was undertaken with the understanding, written consent and assent of each participant and their representative.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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