

Bottom-Up Learning About
Child Protection Systems:
A View of Community-Based Mechanisms
From Inter-Agency Research in Sierra Leone

The Columbia Group for Children in Adversity
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Context

- Community-based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs) are important parts of national child protection systems.
- Effective national systems have supportive relations or linkages within and across different levels.
- Thin evidence base—have we mapped CBCPMs adequately in mappings of national systems? Which CBCPMs do people actually use, and how they are linked with and supported by formal aspects of the national child protection system?
- In Sierra Leone, Child Welfare Committees are mandated by law at chiefdom and village levels, as is reporting of criminal offences to Family Support Units.
- But, how functional or effective are the linkages between communities and aspects of the formal system? Can we strengthen the linkages working bottom-up?

Rapid Ethnography of CBCPMs

- Sites: Bombali and Moyamba Districts
- Objective: National Research Team learns about existing grassroots, functional CP mechanisms of any kind
- National Research Team
- Building trust
- Methods:
 - Participant observation & living in villages
 - Group discussions—risks, pathways, outcomes
 - In-depth interviews: Government, NGO workers, and local people
 - Timelines: childhood, markers, roles
 - Body mapping: learning from younger people
- Limitations—time, skill levels, prevalence

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

Out of School Children

- *We want the children to go to school, but some of the people here do not send all their children to school, rather they give them work to do.*
- *Girls make man business their problem. They end up leaving school. Some leave mostly because of pregnancy.*
- *Boys go to dance dance and stay out late when they should have been studying. They feel tired, don't pay attention in school, and fail exams.*
- *She'll [a young girl] say, "I'm leaving school." The friend will say, "Why?" She'll say "My head is not here, they (teachers) are beating me. (I'm not focused, I don't want to be there. I'm being beaten."*

Teenage Pregnancy

- *...one of the things that make night in this village is early pregnancy because when children start to grow breasts she will attract the men, and the men will convince them to get sex with them ...*
- *when a child or girl goes to bondo and comes out it is not easy for that child to continue her school again because they will think that they are now big.*
- *Some parents give their children to men because of poverty. They will see that the girls are so small but they will make the man to tamper with the girl.*

Typical Response Pathway for Teenage Pregnancy

Girl misses period



Girl tells mother



Mother tells girl's father



Perpetrator identified



Negotiation between families of the girl & the perpetrator



OUTCOMES: Perpetrator's family supports girl during pregnancy
and pays for her education afterward
Girl is obliged to marry the perpetrator

Heavy Work

- Divergent views: children were much more likely than adults to view heavy work as painful and harmful.
- *Children work for parents. ...Me, I get sick. I am in pain. Your body does not look good... You are thin, the body ages fast....The child dies earlier and people will say he died of witchcraft.*
- *Some of the children will stop going to school because of the heavy work. We get tired and we are not able to learn in class. We just go and sit in class. At times we sleep without listening to the teacher.*
- *We the parents are the one disturbing our children, because of the type of work we are giving them to do. They are not able to learn.*

Maltreatment of Children Who Are Not Living with Their Biological Parents

- *At times, it happens like this. I am married and have my own children, about 10, then my brother dies, so I inherit his children. I will help, but I will take care of my own children better.*
- *I: When children are sent to attend Secondary School in other towns, what happens to them?*

R6: The people who are to take care of them (caregivers) will not take proper care of the child and so the child will end up in the street to find food and other things

R2: The girls will go after men for money in order to buy food .

Child Beating

- *If I want my child to do something for me and the child refuses, I too will do something that will pain the child. We beat such stubborn children.*
- *The children without mother or father are usually flogged and this discourages the children. They are beaten for any little thing they do.*
- *We beat rice at school for the teachers. Sometimes if you don't beat, they will flog you.*
- *...some people like to beat the children and this is not good because if people always beat the child then the child will not be happy.*

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.

Family Support Units (FSUs)

- *I: When girls become pregnant do you report the case to the FSU?*
- *R: Yes, it happens sometimes when the man responsible for impregnating the girl is “tehun” (disobedient). It happens to my daughter and I took the matter to the FSU who charged the matter to magistrate court. The man was released from prison only last year.*
- FSUs are active around cases of sexual abuse, cruelty
- Chiefs report or want to report criminal offenses to the FSUs
- Child protection workers and FSU members tell a different story than do community people

Obstacles to the Use of FSUs

- People in most villages do not report to FSUs
- Poor Access
 - FSU members lack transportation and funds for accommodation
 - Village people cannot afford time away from farming, travel long distances to the FSU, or make repeat trips
- Other obstacles identified by local people
 - ‘Our village is a family.’ Reporting brings social isolation.
 - Preference to go through the chief
 - No perceived family benefits of reporting to FSUs
 - Perceived inaction
 - Fear of mistreatment or disrespect

Child Welfare Committees (CWCs)

- Most people said they do not report harms to children to CWCs
- Chieftom-level CWCs had been established and had received training
- Although some people said the CWCs were effective, the overwhelming majority said that they were struggling or used mostly in chieftom headquarters towns
- Challenges cited frequently
 - distance
 - inconsistency of preparation & action
 - strain of extensive volunteering without compensation

Some Implications

1. A significant disconnect exists between the formal child protection system and community-based child protection mechanisms. Formal systems are out of touch with people's lives. This disconnect weakens both the formal system and the CBCPMs.
2. The imposition of international concepts of child protection and child rights, has had harmful effects. Government systems are often seen as imposed and are not 'owned' or frequently used by community people.
3. Children and adults held somewhat divergent views regarding child protection risks and satisfaction with response pathways and outcomes.

Some Recommendations

- Prioritize the development of effective linkages between CBCPMs and the national child protection system. Make community-owned linkages the focus.
- Avoid imposing outside concepts and mechanisms.
- Take a slow, non-didactic approach that emphasizes mutual dialogue and problem-solving and builds on local understandings and social norms. Test different approaches.
- Include systematically the views and voices of girls and boys at all stages of learning about and strengthening CBCPMs and national child protection systems.

Inter-Agency Action Research

- Learning about community mechanisms
- Feeding information back to communities
- Defining outcomes
- Action research—communities themselves identify gaps and develop interventions that strengthen linkages with the formal system
- Comparisons, population-based measures of risk reduction and well-being over two years
- Strategic linkages

Questions

- How can bottom-up approaches strengthen/complement efforts on systems mapping and developing effective national child protection systems?
- How can we effectively link communities and formal aspects of national child protection systems?
- How is social change part of efforts to build effective national child protection systems?