

# A Common Responsibility

The role of community-based child protection groups in protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation

Discussion Paper



**Save the Children**

# **A Common Responsibility**

**The role of community-based child protection groups in protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation**

**The International Save the Children Alliance is the world's leading independent children's rights organisation, with members in 28 countries and operational programmes in more than 100. We fight for children's rights and deliver lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.**

Published by  
International Save the Children Alliance  
Cambridge House  
Cambridge Grove  
London W6 0LE  
UK

First published 2008

© International Save the Children Alliance 2008

Registered Charity No. 10768220

This publication is copyright, but may be reproduced by any method without fee or prior permission for teaching purposes, but not for resale. For copying in any other circumstances, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher, and a fee may be payable.

Typeset by Grasshopper Design Company  
Printed by Page Bros (Norwich) Ltd

Printed on recycled paper

# Contents

Abbreviations and glossary	iv
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Communities in action</b>	<b>3</b>
Focusing on child sexual abuse and exploitation	4
Prevention	4
Response, rehabilitation and reintegration	8
<b>2 What we have learned</b>	<b>11</b>
Supporting community empowerment	11
Sustainable and coordinated support	11
‘Do no harm’ as a key priority	12
Attention to representation and diversity	13
The need for children’s participation	14
The value of links with the national child protection system	15
The importance of long-term commitment	16
<b>3 Conclusions</b>	<b>18</b>
Endnotes	19

# Abbreviations and glossary

## Abbreviations

CPC	Child protection committee
CWC	Child welfare committee
IDP	Internally displaced person
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

## Glossary

*Child:* any person under the age of 18 years.

*Child protection:* measures and structures to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence affecting children.

*Community-based child protection group:* a grouping of local people, sometimes volunteers, that aims to ensure the protection and wellbeing of children in a village, urban neighbourhood or other community –

for example, a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) or a temporary settlement.

*Child sexual abuse and exploitation:* the imposition of sexual acts with sexual overtones, by one or more persons, on a child.<sup>1</sup>

*Child sexual abuse:* refers to the immediate abusive act against a child and forms the basis of the exploitation of the child; it includes indecent touching, penetration and sexual torture, as well as indecent exposure, using sexually explicit language towards a child and showing children pornographic material. People sexually abusing children may have an emotional or professional relationship with the child, where they exploit their position of trust and power, and the child's lack of knowledge, love, trust and dependency. Children may, however, be sexually exploited by abusers and third parties having a commercial or other exploitative interest in the child.

# Introduction

Protecting children from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation is everybody's responsibility. Families, communities, governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) together play a vital role in realising children's rights to protection. Children can also play an important role in protecting themselves from abuse and exploitation, in accordance with their evolving capacities.

Community involvement in child protection is vital, even when adequate protection services and structures exist and are operating effectively. Adults and children in a community are best placed to identify local protection issues and to develop the most appropriate solutions in cooperation with service providers. The attitude and behaviour of communities towards children can also lie at the heart of protection violations – for example, through their attitudes towards the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. In order to fulfil children's rights to protection, an effective child protection system must engage and transform such community perspectives, working with the community itself.

Yet in many countries around the world, there is little or no local or national government capacity and commitment to protecting children and, as a result, children's rights are violated on a daily basis. This lack of commitment is reflected through inadequate resources, a poorly qualified workforce, and limited local services to meet children's needs. In such cases, governments (who are often the main duty-bearer) do not fulfil their responsibility to protect children, which instead falls almost entirely on the community in which children live. In some

cases, children have only themselves to rely on for protection.

Community-based child protection groups are therefore at the forefront of efforts to address child protection in many places, and they are increasingly recognised by governments and NGOs as vital in the establishment of an effective and comprehensive national child protection system.

## Save the Children's experience

Save the Children has been supporting community-based approaches to child protection for many years. We work in more than 30 countries, in partnership with more than 1,200 community-based child protection groups.

Our experience in supporting these groups shows that communities do have the will and capacity to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children. This is demonstrated in the many examples where communities are already improving children's wellbeing. Our experience also highlights the important role that children themselves can play, demonstrating the benefits of engaging with, informing, and mobilising children, and ensuring their active role in community efforts to keep all children safe.

However, we have learned that there are a number of challenges facing community-based child protection groups. In order for them to be effective, and for communities to act in the best interests of children, there are a number of good working practices that should be adopted.

This discussion paper aims to:

- share Save the Children's experience of how community-based child protection groups can be effective in preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse of children
- highlight the challenges we have encountered in supporting this approach in a range of contexts
- suggest ways in which such groups can be supported to increase their effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

The paper provides a range of examples of community-based child protection groups that focus on sexual exploitation and abuse. It also looks at other examples of groups working on a broader range of child protection issues, where relevant lessons have been learned.

This paper is intended to encourage debate about the role of communities in caring for and protecting children, including children's own initiatives and actions, and how NGOs, donors and governments can better support this role.<sup>2</sup>

## What is a national child protection system?

Community-based child protection groups are a vital component of a broader child protection system that operates at community, district, state and national levels. To be effective, community groups need to be integrated and coordinated with the national child protection system at all levels.

The precise form that a country's child protection system takes will vary according to context, needs, resources and other factors. However, there are some common components:

- A legal framework and policy development process based on the rights of the child
- Budget allocations to and sustainable investment in child protection services and groups
- Coordination, multi-disciplinary working and accountability – eg, coordination between administrative levels and sectors
- High-quality services for children, families and care-givers – eg, preventive, psychosocial, medical, legal and other services
- Skilled workforce and human resources – eg, screening, qualifications, training, support and assessment

- Promotion of non-violent attitudes and values – eg, awareness-raising campaigns and media
- Knowledge and data – eg, statistics on incidence of key protection issues
- Active involvement of children in protecting themselves from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence, and in demanding accountability from adult duty-bearers for the fulfilment of children's rights to protection – eg, consultation, and access to key civil rights such as information, expression, association and decision-making
- Independent monitoring – eg, establishment of a children's ombudsperson
- Partnership between government and civil society
- Political will and commitment to child protection.

For further information on national child protection systems, see *Why Effective National Child Protection Systems are Needed*, International Save the Children Alliance, 2006.

# I Communities in action

Community-based child protection groups are a grouping of people, often volunteers, who aim to improve the protection and wellbeing of children in a village, urban neighbourhood or other community – for example, a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs), a temporary settlement or migrant community.

Community-based child protection groups are widespread and are increasingly being scaled up in many parts of the world. They are known by a variety of names – for example, orphan and vulnerable children committees, child protection committees, child welfare committees, community care committees, and anti-trafficking committees. Despite having different names, these groups are mostly very similar, with the common aim of protecting and caring for vulnerable children in their communities.

Although there are important similarities, the groups can vary significantly in terms of size, membership, structure and focus. Most groups have 8–20 members, but the status and skill of the individuals involved can vary significantly. In some community groups, members are all volunteers who have no professional training or skills related to child protection, but are usually parents themselves or interested in child protection issues. In other contexts, community groups are more mixed and may include volunteers, community or religious leaders, representatives from an employers' association, members of a school management committee, local government representatives, teachers, police, health workers, lawyers, social workers and other professionals.

Many groups aim to be representative of the community that they support, and choose members to reflect a level of diversity, often making special effort to include men and women, girls and boys, the poorest families, people affected by HIV and AIDS, people with disabilities, people from minority ethnic groups, and others.

The evidence from our review suggests, however, that on balance, many community-based child protection groups are unlikely to be truly representative. There are a number of reasons for this, including the opportunity cost for the poorest to dedicate time to child protection work instead of earning an income, attitudes towards the role of women and children in decision-making, the invisibility of individuals with disabilities, and the fact that many professionals who are chosen to participate in the groups are likely to be from the least vulnerable groups.

Children can play an important role in community-based child protection groups. The most common ways that children engage in such groups are:

- children talking to members of the adult group to refer cases or highlight new risks or vulnerable children
- a representative from a children's group attending meetings of the adults' group
- a representative from the adults' group visiting the children's group
- children and adults forming one group together.

Community-based child protection groups work on a comprehensive range of child protection issues, from child trafficking and the needs of child-headed

households, to preventing the recruitment of children as soldiers. Some groups focus on a single issue – for example, anti-trafficking committees in India. But most take a broader approach, and identify a number of priority child protection issues to work on, as well as responding to individual cases as they arise. There are also a small number of examples where community-based child protection groups have identified individual members to focus on particular protection issues – for example, in Uganda.<sup>3</sup>

Most community-based child protection groups are initiated with the support of an external agency, such as an NGO or other organisation. Sometimes this mobilisation builds on a community group that already exists, but often, child protection groups are newly created. The level of external support they receive varies according to context and the range of partnerships they have built. For example, supporting agencies may provide groups with bikes, stationery, rice or food, money, t-shirts or other resources, but this is not always the case. However, all supporting agencies provide community-based child protection groups with some form of training and capacity building.

Despite the informal and voluntary nature of most community-based child protection groups, our review shows that they engage in a wide range of activities, including prevention, response, rehabilitation and reintegration. These activities and their effects on children are discussed in the sections below.

## Focusing on child sexual abuse and exploitation

Community-based child protection groups can work on a range of child sexual abuse and exploitation issues, including: child trafficking; exploitative or abusive child labour; early marriage; gender-based violence; child prostitution; sexual abuse and exploitation within schools; and sexual abuse within the family, among others.

Sexual abuse and exploitation has been reported by some communities as an especially complex issue to

deal with. This may be because of difficult decisions about formal reporting and engagement with the law enforcement and judicial system, and the social implications in terms of attitude and stigma. However, there are a number of community-based child protection groups that include a specific focus on sexual abuse and exploitation, for instance:

- Anti-trafficking committees in India are tackling the issue of child trafficking for the purposes of exploitative forms of labour such as domestic work and false marriage, both of which can lead to sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> Activities they have been successful in include: prevention work; raising public awareness about traffickers and what constitutes trafficking; identifying and supporting particularly vulnerable children; monitoring the whereabouts of traffickers; and ensuring that all children are enrolled in school and therefore less likely to be at risk of being trafficked.

Active participation by children's groups has been vital to their success. In one location, a particularly innovative approach to prevention has been to rehabilitate traffickers and engage them in the community committee and prevention work. In terms of response work, community groups have faced more significant challenges – in particular, the issue of how to overcome stigma and discrimination.

- In West Africa, selected women have been trained and supported to be gender-based violence focal points within a community, for issues of sexual abuse and exploitation. These women are demonstrating the capacity to: respond to individual cases; assess a child's needs and wishes; undertake sensitive referral; and provide practical support to child victims where services do not exist.

## Prevention

Many of the activities that community-based child protection groups undertake are aimed at preventing sexual abuse and exploitation:

- awareness raising and community mobilisation on children's rights, child protection and care issues, and the benefits of children's participation

- increasing children's life skills
- monitoring and acting as watchdogs for child protection
- identifying vulnerable children and families
- support to care-givers and members of the extended kin network around positive parenting practices
- supporting the community in livelihood, social protection and education provision
- advocating to local and national government for better service delivery, policy improvements and effective implementation of laws and programmes for child protection.

This section looks at activities around awareness raising, livelihood support and protection for children on the move, and how these affect the protection of children.

### **Increasing awareness, improving attitudes and changing behaviour**

Mobilising communities, including children, to identify, acknowledge and discuss local protection issues is a prerequisite for prevention work, and awareness-raising is one of the primary responsibilities of any community-based child protection group. For issues of sexual exploitation and abuse, which are commonly seen as taboo or very sensitive, facilitating communities to begin to talk openly is critical.

Sexual abuse and exploitation is associated with a complex combination of factors, including the socioeconomic and political context. Many factors are linked to cultural attitudes and beliefs, including those around power and inequality related to age, gender, ethnicity, disability, class, HIV status and social status.<sup>5</sup> The process of setting up community-based child protection groups, as well as the direct awareness-raising work that such groups subsequently undertake, can have a positive impact on community attitudes and awareness.

One of the key roles of community-based child protection groups is to ensure that the issue of child protection is visible, and that children and families know where they can go for help if they experience or become aware of sexual abuse or

violence. Perpetrators of sexual abuse and exploitation of children often go unpunished because of inadequate police and judicial systems, and weak mechanisms for reporting and resolving cases; but community attitudes and the reputational risk to the children and families affected may also be a factor. Children who experience abuse and exploitation, or are aware of it happening to other children, may be unwilling to disclose for fear of stigma, reprisals, lack of trust in familial, community and institutional support, and because they may not themselves regard it as abuse.

Community-based child protection groups therefore have the potential to act as a focal point within a community – a place for children and parents to safely report cases of abuse, a place to seek help, a group to provide response and rehabilitation support, and a place to resolve cases, whether through formal reporting (where this is in a child's best interests) or through an appropriate local response.

An important outcome of establishing community-based child protection groups is increased awareness among the adults within a community of their own responsibility for protecting children. For example, in discussions in one village in Myanmar (Burma), community members talked about how raising awareness on child protection issues had helped them to start taking responsibility for the protection of all children in their community, and not just for their own – for example, through trying to support a child to go to school when the child's own family could not afford to send them. One member of the child protection committee said: "In the past, if a child didn't go to school, people didn't think it was their business. But now they do, and they talk to people involved so that the child can go to school."<sup>6</sup>

Engaging with communities at the grassroots level can help address the real causes of sexual exploitation and abuse, and increase vigilance at the community level. An empowered community group can be very influential in changing community practices and putting in place prevention systems. For example, in West Africa, local protection groups are undertaking prevention work in villages to

support children to find other solutions to their problems, instead of migrating to other areas, which puts them at risk. These groups also provide children with information and contacts in case they do decide to migrate.<sup>7</sup>

Children's awareness of their own rights is also important. Children who have access to information can organise and express themselves, and have control over their own decisions – for example, on migration or marriage – and are less likely to be abused and exploited. Children who are aware of their rights, and of child protection issues, can play a role in identifying and assisting other children at risk – for example, in providing support and advice to peers.

A key role for community prevention work is to empower children to better protect themselves without giving them sole responsibility for their own protection. Community-based child protection groups, including children, are facilitating this role through:

- awareness-raising activities with children to highlight risks in the local community, and through finding practical ways to minimise them
- informing children of how to identify potential abusers in a community
- working with local social workers to identify the information needed by children, and in finding engaging ways to get messages across to children
- highlighting places that children can go to for help, including an accessible reporting procedure
- supporting life-skills training around sexual relationships and HIV and AIDS, and in leading resilience-building activities.

The impact of this prevention work can be very significant, particularly where it leads to changes in risky behaviour. For example, in Gobirawa, Nigeria, girls would initially travel far from their homes to sell things, which carried some risks. However, sessions run by the local child protection committee raised their awareness about the risks associated with this practice, and as a result, some girls began selling outside their homes and working in pairs instead, to provide better protection.<sup>8</sup>

While there is some evidence that community-based prevention can change community attitudes and behaviour, it is also apparent that there are many challenges in ensuring that these positive changes are widespread. In many of the cases that we reviewed, the impact in terms of changing attitudes is still mostly found within members of the community-based group. Changing the beliefs and customs of a whole community is more difficult, and relies on effective and long-term mobilisation, which engages with traditional authorities such as local leaders, parents, teachers, children, and other important stakeholders.

### **Social protection and livelihood support**

Sexual abuse and exploitation is associated with poverty and unemployment, among other things. Therefore, social protection and family support has important links with child protection. Community-based child protection groups can have an important role in supporting the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation through targeted family support, and by directing social protection to the most vulnerable children and households in the community. In Bangladesh, for example, a community-based child protection group is working to create alternative livelihood options with women engaged in prostitution, with the aim of preventing their children, a second generation of girls, from also entering into exploitative work.<sup>9</sup>

Community groups, including children, are often best placed to identify local protection risks and the children most vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation. In Mozambique, for example, community groups have proposed and applied for cash grants for initiatives to protect the most vulnerable children.<sup>10</sup> The grants have provided communities with the dignity of choice, and have encouraged innovation in targeted prevention initiatives – for example, teaching vulnerable children livelihood skills, fulfilling basic needs, and encouraging school enrolment. Children's committees have played a vital role in selecting initiatives for grants, and can reject any proposal that they do not see as improving the lives of children.

## Community protection for child migrants and children at risk of trafficking

Community involvement in protecting and supporting children on the move, particularly during their travel, can be very important.

Community-based child protection groups can:

- promote better understanding of the different reasons why girls and boys move, and where they move to
- provide awareness raising and education at places of origin, to prevent unsafe migration and to ensure safe migration
- promote protective networks and act as positive intermediaries
- monitor and protect the situation of migrant children in local communities.

There are a number of examples of community groups improving the protection of child migrants and those at risk of trafficking:

### Preventing trafficking of children in India

Large numbers of children are trafficked from West Bengal for the purposes of child labour, the sex trade and marriage. Anti-trafficking committees have played an active role in preventing child trafficking in Save the Children's child domestic work project in West Bengal. These groups have engaged in raising awareness of trafficking in their communities, monitored the movement of known traffickers within their villages, and also targeted the prevention of trafficking of vulnerable children by ensuring that *all* children in their communities are enrolled in schools. As a result of these interventions, more than 2,600 trafficked children have been removed from exploitative work and reintegrated back into schools over the last four years.

*Community based Child Protection Mechanisms: Save the Children's experience in West Bengal, Save the Children, 2008.*

### Raise Awareness Campaign in Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina

The Center for Latin American Migration Studies (CEMLA) Raise Awareness Campaign operates across the triple cross-border of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina. Along with migration and education authorities, communities have set up a prevention campaign to stop the trafficking of children for sexual exploitation purposes. Children and parents were given information on how to act in dangerous situations, and how to inform the local authorities about suspected cases of trafficking or abuse. The strategy brought together local authorities and groups of children to develop self-protection guidelines.

### Community-based registration of internal migrants in Myanmar (Burma)

Village rules in Myanmar (Burma) have included the registration of internal migrants. Being registered has enabled migrant families and their children to receive services and protection. In Northern Shan State, for example, registration has meant that child protection committees can monitor the working conditions and salaries of migrants. In one township in Mon State, the child protection committee, with Save the Children's support, has persuaded the medical officer to provide immunisation to migrant children, and has helped them enrol in school.

*Impact Assessment Report, Cross-Border Project Against Trafficking and Exploitation of Migrant and Vulnerable Children, Save the Children Myanmar (Burma), 2007, unpublished.*

## Response, rehabilitation and reintegration

Effective response activities for children affected by sexual exploitation and abuse ideally require the availability of multi-sectoral services and legal support, in order to meet children's multiple and long-term needs. However, where services and referral mechanisms are absent, community-based child protection groups are often the first point of contact for individual child protection cases. Community groups have the capacity to provide a range of emotional and practical support in the absence of professional services, and there is evidence that they are already supporting individual cases on a variety of issues such as violence, trafficking and child labour. The main activities they engage in are:

- identifying vulnerable children and families, often through children's clubs or young people's organisations, which are better placed to reach out to children and initiate actions to address abuse

- identifying locations or borders where children are at high risk of sexual assault or trafficking
- setting up practical referral groups, appropriate to the context
- referring cases to available local services (sexual and reproductive health services, other medical, legal, judicial, psychosocial, etc.)
- providing targeted, contextualised and individual care to children affected by sexual abuse and exploitation through mediation, counselling, informal education provision and other practical actions
- facilitating local resolution of abuse and exploitation cases where this is appropriate and in the best interests of the child.

Sexual exploitation and abuse of children, and the stigma attached to reporting such abuse, is a complex issue. Community groups report that they find intervening in such issues a challenging task, which requires a greater level of support and training for committee members than some are receiving. In addition, there is a wider concern that

## A successful example of a community-based referral mechanism: a case in India

Kavitha is an eight-year-old girl from a poor migrant family, living in a slum settlement. One day, while waiting for her mother to return from work, she was sexually harassed by an older man. Kavitha managed to escape and told her mother what had happened. Her mother was afraid to tell anyone, as the man was rich and influential in the area, but she finally reported the incident to a member of the local child protection committee (CPC).

Following the report, the CPC member immediately called three other members, and together they went

with Kavitha and her mother to the police station to make a formal report. They also helped Kavitha get medical attention. As a result of the report, the abuser was sent to jail. As well as supporting the family to report the incident, the CPC members provided social support and protection so that Kavitha could continue her education. Apart from CPC members, no one else was told about the incident, to maintain confidentiality.

Source: Save the Children, Hyderabad Office, India.

members of community groups do not always know how to respond in the best interests of children to support cases of exploitation and abuse. There are a number of challenges facing community volunteers in terms of their response:

- lack of trust in, or recognition of, the community group from other community members
- a community may be divided by ethnicity, history, culture or tradition, making it difficult to mobilise groups together
- maintaining confidentiality and reducing stigma
- assessing whether or not it is in the best interests of a child and their family to formally report a case to the police or local leader
- assessing whether local resolution of cases is in the best interests of the child, and opposing the traditional community practice where it is not
- a lack of local services to which children can be referred for help and support
- the presence of the perpetrator within a community, and the potential power imbalance
- the time and commitment required of an individual volunteer to adequately support and see through a complex case without financial or managerial-level support
- lack of psychosocial support for community volunteers who themselves have to deal with cases that may be upsetting.

Where the perpetrator of child sexual abuse or exploitation is within the family (or even another child), the challenges for community members to intervene without placing the child at further risk are particularly acute. In many cultures, the family is viewed as a closed and private unit, in which other community members do not have the authority to intervene. In addition, there can be high levels of denial within a family that the child sexual abuse or exploitation is taking place.

The challenges to community intervention are particularly significant where a child has no other sources of care, and may be at risk of running away from the community to live on the streets, or being placed in institutional care if the perpetrator is confronted – situations which carry additional dangers. As well as putting the child concerned at risk, community intervention may put the volunteers

themselves at risk of violence or discrimination within their own community.

There are some examples where communities have acted on individual cases successfully, such as in Angola, where a child protection committee's intervention led to a grandfather being jailed for eight years for abusing his granddaughter, without any negative consequences for the girl.<sup>11</sup> However, this is an area where more learning and good practice is urgently required.

These challenges are not easy to overcome, even for trained social work professionals. However, through supporting community-based child protection groups, we have learned that it is possible for communities to take on this responsibility if they are adequately supported. Such support involves visits from professional and trained staff (agency staff or statutory services, where available), peer support and refresher training on issues around sexual exploitation and abuse.

Community-based child protection groups can also support rehabilitation and response of children who experience sexual exploitation and abuse, by:

- supporting activities to build resilience
- supporting rebuilding of livelihoods
- undertaking family tracing and assessment
- mediating in the community for successful reintegration of children
- providing follow-up and ongoing support to reintegrated children.

There is some evidence that this type of support is effective. For example, in one project in Sierra Leone, the community welfare committee supported income-generation projects for different groups of beneficiaries: vulnerable girls at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, girls engaged in commercial sex work, boys and girls from children's clubs, and child heads of household. As a result of the support, 47 out of 55 girls who had previously been engaged in commercial sex work were able to quit, and half of the participants returned to education.<sup>12</sup> By involving different groups of children, the stigmatisation of children involved in the project was also mitigated.

## Community-based protection groups in humanitarian contexts

The mobilisation of community-based child protection groups appears to be increasingly common as part of the child protection response in a humanitarian context. Humanitarian situations can introduce new risks to children's protection, which demand extra vigilance at community level – for example, trafficking of separated or displaced children. In these situations, government structures and systems have often broken down, or did not exist anyway, and community groups are supported to fill the void.

Many of the challenges faced by community groups in emergencies are similar to those in

development contexts. But there are some additional considerations:

- Traditional community structures may have broken down, affecting power dynamics and trust.
- Community members may be too engaged in rebuilding their own lives and livelihoods to be able to contribute time to the protection group.
- Referral pathways and support services may have broken down.
- Government may be the cause of the humanitarian situation, and may be very hostile to the creation of community mechanisms or community empowerment.

## 2 What we have learned

Community-based child protection groups can have a positive impact on children's protection and wellbeing. However, there are a number of important lessons that we have learned about how best to support these groups. They are more effective when the following good practices are adopted.

### Supporting community empowerment

In order to be sustainable, the goal of any organisation, agency or government authority supporting community mobilisation must be to establish a sustainable, long-term means of addressing child protection concerns, rather than a temporary group that relies on a few committed volunteers. Preferably, it should be built on existing informal structures in the community. However, establishing such a group is challenging and resource-intensive, and is best achieved by ensuring ownership by the local community and empowering it to take action.

Our experience suggests that community-based child protection groups are more sustainable when they are owned and driven by the community.<sup>13</sup> There are some good practices which support this:

- A gradual and sustained period of mobilisation that allows communities to build ownership of protection issues. One-off or short-term mobilisation activities are found to be less effective.
- The development of groups and attitudes that embed child participation in community protection.
- Facilitating community members to identify priority local protection issues and map vulnerable groups of families and children, rather than suggesting or imposing them externally, based on an organisation's priorities.
- Facilitating community members to identify local solutions and to map local services and referral pathways.
- Ensuring that staff who are mobilising communities around child protection are themselves well trained and know how to promote community empowerment, rather than their own organisation's priorities.

### Sustainable and coordinated support

Whether material or financial support to community groups should be provided, and by whom, is a complex issue. There is a case for providing financial support at the start to allow community groups to get off the ground and to demonstrate impact, which is very important for mobilising the wider community. However, there is also evidence that providing material support can lead to community dependency on an external agency, and that when support is withdrawn, groups may lose members or close down completely:

*In Côte d'Ivoire, while protection committees had been essential in reaching over 3,000 vulnerable children, there was a concern that their work would not continue once funding from Save the Children came to end, and there was a perception within some committees that they were agents of Save the Children, rather than their own communities.<sup>14</sup>*

There is evidence to suggest, however, that decisions around providing financial support to community volunteers must be coordinated between agencies, particularly in a humanitarian context, where many agencies are operating in close proximity.<sup>15</sup> Differences in the level and type of support provided by different NGOs have caused rivalry between community-based child protection groups, and also perpetuates the expectation that the community is working for an agency instead of for itself.

Our experience suggests two options for mitigating dependency and promoting sustainable support:

- to seek government funding for community groups, rather than for external agency support. This is already working on a small scale in some locations in South Africa, India and Sierra Leone, but we are yet to see whether this is viable on a national scale or in the longer term
- to support community groups to identify and mobilise their own internal resources – for example, by extending livelihood support to help committees raise their own finances, teaching community groups skills that can generate income, and supporting the identification of other local support – for example, private sector resources.

## ‘Do no harm’ as a key priority

Ensuring that community-based child protection groups do no harm to the children that they aim to protect is a principle of obvious and paramount importance, but it becomes even more critical and challenging in the case of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Community protection groups undertake a variety of activities with the aim of protecting children, and the breadth and intensity of their work relies on their time, availability, individual capacities and dedication. This means that assuring the quality and appropriateness of community interventions is often difficult. Given the challenges facing community protection groups, which are often made up of volunteers, and scarce resources for training and support, it is not surprising that with the best

intentions, interventions might have unintended or harmful impacts:

- In India, a child protection committee’s intervention when a 15-year-old girl was found talking to a boy led to stigmatisation and difficulties for the girl within the community.<sup>16</sup>
- In Nigeria, elders in one village stopped children going to the dam to seek work because of risks of exploitation and abuse. However, this meant that 18 boys who earned a living through collecting sand from the river bed were forced to stop working, and were left unemployed without support to find alternative livelihood opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

These examples point to the importance of community-based child protection group members being clear about their role, and understanding the need for confidentiality, respect and sensitivity. In order to ensure that community interventions are always in children’s best interests, and to mitigate the effects of committees’ possible lack of professional skills and knowledge, the following good practices can help overcome these challenges where communities are attempting to respond to sexual abuse and exploitation:<sup>18</sup>

- Child protection background check on all volunteers, whether through a formal criminal records system or consultation with community leaders, other community members and children
- High-quality and formalised preparation and training for community-based protection groups that is adapted and appropriate for the local context. Training should not be a one-off workshop, but should be ongoing and relevant to participants’ skill levels
- Facilitating local identification of the protection issues in the community, so that community members can identify their own roles in addressing abuse and exploitation
- Clear definitions of roles and responsibilities, including the limits for child protection groups
- Close follow-up, coaching, and case review from trained agency staff to support community volunteers
- Regular monitoring, including self-monitoring by committee members and external monitoring by agency staff or government statutory services (where these are available)

- Regular dialogue and consultation with children about the performance of the committees, and how adults in the community can meet their responsibilities to protect children in their best interests.

In places where there is no provision of basic services for children's protection, community-based groups have a very important role to play in providing support for children. However, there will always be a limit to what community volunteers can take on.

## Attention to representation and diversity

How members of a community-based child protection group are selected can affect the way that they work, and what they are able to achieve. Issues of power and discrimination within a community are very important, as they can drive control over decision-making and the allocation of resources. This issue is particularly important where community groups are linked with government structures, or are associated with some material incentive or gain.

Our review suggests that there is no one ideal make-up of community-based protection groups, as it often depends very much on local dynamics. However, it is important that groups are representative of the most vulnerable, and will act in the best interests of children.

In terms of tackling sexual exploitation and abuse, it is important to involve both girls and women in these groups, as they are most likely to be victims of abuse. However, the presence of boys and men can be important in raising awareness of the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, and to promote positive values.<sup>19</sup> It is also important to consult with all groups of children, including young children and those with disabilities, who may be particularly vulnerable.

There is evidence that involving community leaders and other influential people in the selection of individuals for community-based groups is helpful for establishing support, credibility and interest in

the group. However, it can introduce a political dimension to groups, or reinforce discrimination and inequality. Therefore, it is important to consult with a broader range of community members, including children.

The process of how participants are selected is important. A number of reviews have found that community-based child protection groups are more effective where adult volunteers are self-nominated, or where the selection process involves children, so as to ensure that those participating are doing so for the interests of children, and have credibility with local children. For example, in West Africa, instead of simply accepting individuals put forward by the community structures, which are often male-dominated, the programme devised a selection process whereby girls from the community are involved in selecting gender-based violence focal points.<sup>20</sup>

The selection process is very context-specific and needs to be based on a detailed understanding and participatory assessment of the local situation. For example, in India, a detailed stakeholder analysis was undertaken that identified the specific roles each stakeholder could play in the community-based child protection group.<sup>21</sup>

Ensuring that community protection groups are inclusive is a significant factor in enabling their success. However, there remain issues of power, even within groups, that require a longer programme of capacity and confidence building to overcome:

*"The chairman is always the one speaking and leading the meeting. Three men... are the out speakers."*

(woman CPC member, Nigeria)<sup>22</sup>

Selecting community members is a careful process that needs to balance encouraging buy-in from influential individuals, with ensuring that the most vulnerable are represented, and that the work of the group is focused on the interests of children. Ensuring representative membership may still not be enough to build equal participation within a community group. Therefore, close monitoring and support to track power dynamics is required.

## The need for children's participation

Good practice for children's participation needs to focus on how participation can be meaningful, safe and ethical.

Evidence from across Save the Children's community-based protection programmes shows that children play a very important role in ensuring

effective protection within communities. This is important because children can have a different perception of what are the key vulnerabilities at local level, and they are able to reach out and identify other vulnerable children in the community. Children can also gain confidence and skills in expressing their views, which can further their own self-protection.

## The importance of children's participation in Honduras

In Honduras, children's participation was identified as key to raising the issue of commercial sexual exploitation at the local level, and in engaging communities more widely. Children joined local networks and were provided with training in the identification of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. They learned how to respond to suspected cases, and how to assist other

children who have fallen victims to the crime. The boys and girls participating became important advocates for the prevention of these types of abuse in their communities.

Source: *Commercial sexual exploitation of children in Honduras*, Save the Children UK, 2007.

## The importance of peer groups in South Africa

In South Africa, some community care forums work with older children (aged 6–18 years), to support younger peers (aged 0–6 years) on issues of child protection. This provides support for younger children and is an empowering activity for older children. Older children provide support to younger peers by:

- leading awareness-raising activities
- identifying younger children who are at risk

- providing practical care and protection for younger children, including listening and talking with a child who has been abused or exploited, providing information, and referring a younger child to a responsible adult
- mentoring younger children.

Source: Information from Save the Children UK programme in South Africa.

Despite the importance of child participation, the degree to which children are meaningfully participating in community protection groups varies widely, and is often insufficient or unstructured. For example, a recent inter-agency review in Uganda found that less than one-third of child protection committees reported that children were participating in their activities.<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, adults often report that they do not know how to engage usefully with children, and children report that their participation is also constrained and tokenistic.

Supporting child participation involves systematic work with both adults and children, so that traditional barriers can be overcome. Adults need to be prepared to listen to children, to share information with them, and to seriously respond to children's concerns and suggestions. Children also need to be empowered to speak out, express themselves, and play an active role in the development of safe communities.

There is mixed evidence regarding whether children should be involved directly in community-based protection groups or indirectly, through parallel children's clubs and committees. This area requires further research and analysis. While there is overwhelming support for children's direct participation in groups, there are also challenges:

- ensuring that children do not take on adult roles that are inappropriate or could put them at risk, particularly on complex issues around sexual abuse
- ensuring that children's participation in community-based work is not too much of a burden, drawing them away from school or other important activities
- ensuring that adults are well prepared enough to respond positively to children's views and input.

Save the Children's experience in supporting children's participation in community-based protection groups suggests that it is important that the children involved understand the different roles of adults and children. In child protection committees, for example, while children may be members and even leaders, and bring their views

and ideas to the committee, it is ultimately the adults who have the responsibility for ensuring that appropriate action is undertaken.

## The value of links with the national child protection system

In order for community-based child protection groups to be effective and sustainable, wherever possible, they should link into local and national government structures. At the local level, community-based child protection groups should be one component of the community child protection system, linking with other service providers including health services, social work services, education services and police, among others.

A key role for community protection groups is enabling children and families to access preventive and responsive services. This is more easily achieved if communities are able to work with, and refer cases to, government services, including medical, social, police or judicial services. In supporting community-based protection groups without linking into existing local and national government, there is a risk that agencies can create a parallel system, rather than facilitating the creation of an integrated national system.

There are a number of ways in which communities and civil society can interact with and influence the national child protection system:

- by complementing government action in fulfilling children's right to protection
- by lobbying government and advocating to ensure that the child protection system is adequate and of high quality – for example, advocating for appropriate legal frameworks, child-friendly and accessible services, and lobbying against discrimination and corruption in the police service and judicial system
- by sharing experiences and showing government what is needed and what works at the local level
- by involving children in developing and monitoring national plans and policies, so that they are more informed by the views of girls and boys.

Community-based protection groups are interacting with local and national government in a range of ways, representing a spectrum from informal engagement to a formal relationship:

- community-based groups keep local authorities informed of their work through ad hoc relationships with individuals in different government departments or institutions
- representatives from statutory services are members of a community-based group
- representatives from community-based groups attend statutory district or sub-district level child protection meetings, and work with local government authorities
- community-based groups are recognised as a formal part of the national child protection system, and are mandated by the government.

While no one model has yet been identified as the most effective, there is evidence that it is better to have a formal and clear relationship between community groups and the national child protection system, as opposed to an ad hoc relationship. For example, in South Africa, members of community care forums have explicitly requested the creation of specific forums where they can communicate with government providers about children's issues.<sup>24</sup>

There are clear potential benefits to a system linking community-based groups to local and national structures, including the potential for material support, greater authority and recognition by communities and more effective referral groups. However, there are also challenges. Our experience shows that in order for linkages between government and community-based groups to be effective there must be:

- capacity at local and national levels to provide adequate support to community-based groups
- political will to engage with community groups for the best interests of children.

## The importance of long-term commitment

Interventions to facilitate community empowerment and mobilisation around protection issues are not a one-off activity, but take time and require long-term support, whether from NGOs or the government. Community-based child protection groups are more likely to act in the best interests of children and to be sustainable if they are put in place over a period of time, and with regular, high-quality support. Where disaster or conflict has eroded traditional

## Formalising the role of community-based protection groups: India and Sierra Leone

The Integrated Child Protection Scheme in India mandates the establishment of state- and district-level child protection units. Save the Children is advocating for the scheme to link up with, and involve, community-based child protection groups, so that every community can be linked up with protection and other services.

The Child Rights Act, passed in Sierra Leone in 2007, mandates for child welfare committees to be created and active in every village and chiefdom. The Act sets out in detail how the committees should be composed and the legal responsibilities of such committees, and it describes how the village- and chiefdom-level committees must report and formally feed up to the Ministry of Social Welfare.

support groups, the challenge of rebuilding community support and action for the protection of children can be a long and extensive process. Meeting this challenge, therefore, requires long-term commitment from agencies, donors and governments.

Transforming a community's attitudes, knowledge and skills in tackling issues of child sexual abuse and exploitation does not happen overnight, or after one community meeting. For example, in India, the duration of support provided by Save the Children to village-level protection committees was linked to the target of making a village 'trafficking free'. In practice, this took between one and two years before the programme could move to supporting new villages, and even then a coaching centre was

established to provide ongoing mentoring.<sup>25</sup> The issue of training, coaching and capacity building is a very important one, and evidence suggests that community groups are more effective when they receive repeated and high-quality training.

Children who are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation often require long-term support and follow-up. It is, therefore, important that the community members who are themselves supporting these children are also provided with sustained support, in order to be able to provide an effective response. As this paper has already highlighted, where community-based groups are dealing with complex and sensitive issues such as sexual abuse and exploitation, regular field presence of supporting organisations is critical.

# 3 Conclusions

The key learning points from our review of how best to support community-based child protection groups are as follows:

- Community-based child protection groups are a vital part of child protection systems. They have a particularly significant role to play in settings where other child protection services and groups are weak or non-existent.
- To be sustainable, community mobilisation should empower and facilitate communities, including children, to identify protection issues and local solutions to sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Community groups are effective in helping to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly around the issues of child trafficking and child labour.
- Providing effective response, rehabilitation and reintegration for individual child protection cases is more challenging, but can be successful with high-quality and regular support, training and review, to ensure that interventions are always in the best interests of children.
- The selection of community volunteers is important for promoting diversity, rather than reinforcing discrimination. Careful selection and ongoing monitoring is required.
- Children's participation is vital for effective community response, but needs specific attention. Ensuring that children and adults are adequately prepared for children's participation is essential to make it safe and meaningful.
- Community-based child protection groups should be integrated into a national child protection system where it exists, and not become a parallel structure. Adequate resources and government commitment are required to make these links effective.

There is much that we still need to learn about the process of implementing and sustaining community-based child protection groups. There is an urgent need for robust evaluation of the potential long-term impact of community-based approaches to protection, given the investment already made and the potential for scaling up and replication.

In particular, the following questions require further investigation:

- What is the long-term impact of informal community-based protection groups on the wellbeing and protection of children?
- What factors are associated with effective community-based approaches?
- What needs to be done to strengthen children's participation in community protection groups?
- How can community-based approaches to protection be sustained?
- How can we ensure that knowledge and experience from the community-based groups influences the development of the national child protection system?
- What is the most effective model for linking community-based protection groups into a national child protection system?

# Endnotes

## Glossary

<sup>1</sup> This is taken from the global submission by the International Save the Children Alliance to the UN Study on Violence Against Children, *10 Essential Learning Points: Listen and Speak out against Sexual Abuse of Girls and Boys*, International Save the Children Alliance, 2005

## Introduction

<sup>2</sup> The case studies and learning in this paper are drawn from a review of evaluation and assessment documents for current and past programmes and projects, which the International Save the Children Alliance is supporting

<sup>3</sup> *An Inter-Agency Review of Child Protection Committees in Acholi, Lango and Teso Regions in Uganda. The Way Forward*, commissioned by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Child Protection Sub-Cluster in Uganda, 2007

## I Communities in action

<sup>4</sup> Information from personal communication with State Programme Manager, West Bengal Office, Save the Children

<sup>5</sup> *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Honduras*, Save the Children UK, 2007 [http://www.crin.org/docs/Save\\_UK\\_Honduras.pdf](http://www.crin.org/docs/Save_UK_Honduras.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *Impact Assessment Report, Cross Border Project Against Trafficking and Exploitation of Migrant and Vulnerable Children*, Save the Children in Myanmar, unpublished report, 2007

<sup>7</sup> Information from personal communication with Claire Feinstein, consultant and child participation expert

<sup>8</sup> *Child Protection and HIV and AIDS Impact Review*, Save the Children UK in Nigeria, 2007

<sup>9</sup> Information from personal communication with Save the Children Norway in Bangladesh

<sup>10</sup> *Better Choices for Children. Community Grants in Mozambique*, Save the Children UK, 2007

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication with Adelino Sanjombe, Protection Project Officer, Save the Children in Angola

<sup>12</sup> *Lessons Learned Addressing GBV in West Africa. Focusing on sexual exploitation and abuse affecting children in conflict-affected areas*, Save the Children UK in West Africa, 2008

## 2 What we have learned

<sup>13</sup> This learning is drawn from a range of programme documents, including *Community Based Approaches to Child Protection in Emergencies. Review and analysis of Save the Children UK's experience to date*, Save the Children UK, unpublished report, 2005

<sup>14</sup> This information is drawn from Save the Children UK Côte d'Ivoire project documents

<sup>15</sup> This evidence is drawn from a number of sources, including *Foundations for the Future Phase II External Evaluation Report*, Save the Children UK, unpublished report, 2008, and personal communications with a number of Save the Children personnel

<sup>16</sup> *Global Impact Monitoring Report: Child Protection Project in Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari Districts of Tamil Nadu, India*, Save the Children Tsunami Rehabilitation Programme, 2006

<sup>17</sup> *Child Protection and HIV and AIDS Impact Review*, Save the Children UK in Nigeria, 2007

<sup>18</sup> These lessons are drawn from a variety of sources, including *Lessons Learned Addressing GBV in West Africa. Focusing on sexual exploitation and abuse affecting children in conflict-affected areas*, Save the Children UK in West Africa, 2008, and personal communication with Save the Children personnel in South Africa

<sup>19</sup> *Protecting children. Community attitudes to child sexual abuse in rural Mozambique*, Save the Children UK in Mozambique, 2007

<sup>20</sup> *Lessons Learned Addressing GBV in West Africa. Focusing on sexual exploitation and abuse affecting children in conflict affected areas*, Save the Children UK in West Africa, 2008

<sup>21</sup> Information from personal communication with State Programme Manager, West Bengal Office, Save the Children

<sup>22</sup> *Child Protection and HIV and AIDS Impact Review*, Save the Children UK in Nigeria, 2007

<sup>23</sup> *An Inter-Agency Review of Child Protection Committees in Acholi, Lango and Teso Regions in Uganda. The Way Forward*, commissioned by the IASC Child Protection Sub-Cluster in Uganda, 2007

<sup>24</sup> Information from personal communication with Child Protection Adviser, Save the Children UK programme, South Africa

<sup>25</sup> Information from personal communication with State Programme Manager, West Bengal Office, Save the Children



**Save the Children**

## **A Common Responsibility**

The role of community-based child protection groups  
in protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation