

Localizing Child Protection at Community Level

How to Shift Power and Increase
Community Ownership

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[Read the full report here](#)

A Practice Brief

The era of localization presents both key challenges and opportunities in community-level child protection. This brief highlights how shifting power to communities and generating high levels of community ownership is fundamental for localizing child protection effectively and sustainably. It explores how child protection practitioners are key players in supporting a localized, evidence-based, community-led child protection approach.

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Localization and the Role of Practitioners

In humanitarian and development settings, children (people under 18 years of age) often comprise half or more of crisis-affected populations and face diverse risks such as attack, losses, gender-based violence, family separation, trafficking, and recruitment into armed forces and groups, among many others. Through localized action, communities help to prevent these risks, and use their understanding of the context, problem-solving abilities, and strengths and resources to protect children. Localized efforts appreciate that local actors are often crisis first responders, who can provide contextualized, low-cost, effective support for vulnerable people.

Although donors launched the movement to localize humanitarian and development work globally, practitioners have key roles to play in operationalizing localization. Child protection practitioners can help by ensuring that localized efforts shift power to local actors, enable effective child protection, and help to strengthen child protection systems. Recognizing the importance of community-level child protection, which is essential in protecting large numbers of children and implementing a socio-ecological approach, practitioners can support effective community action on behalf of children. Although localization efforts focused initially on funding local actors, it is increasingly recognized that shifting power also requires that local actors have greater autonomy and hold the power to make key decisions. This creates a significant opportunity for child protection practitioners to support community autonomy and decision-making, thereby helping to address the need for increased community ownership.

The Challenge of Community Ownership

In community-level child protection, practitioners face key challenges such as how to enable child protection approaches that fit the local context and are effective and sustainable. However, the main challenge is the relatively low level of community ownership achieved by most child protection programs. Low levels of community ownership in child protection stem largely from the asymmetry of power—the privileging of Northern actors—in humanitarian and development systems. Notably, most child protection programs are driven by outside experts, who identify the main child protection issues, choose the intervention, and lead the program implementation and evaluation. To add to this, it is usually Western NGOs which hold the money and the power to make the key decisions, including whose knowledge to rely on. This expert-driven approach, which often regards communities as beneficiaries or as implementing partners, marginalizes the community's own understanding of the local context. It also provides little space for community agency, sense of responsibility for children's well-being, and community ownership.

As a result, if an NGO from the global North implements a program to reduce and prevent violence against children in an Asian or African community, community members will not likely see the program as their own but as an 'NGO project.' Additionally, because outsiders determined or guided the intervention approach, which likely originated in the global North, it may fit poorly with the local context. As a result, community people do not see the intervention as their own, and they will not pour their energy into making it effective. After the funding has ended, the community will likely abandon the programmed efforts to protect children.

What is Community Ownership?

In child protection, community ownership refers to the extent to which communities have strong concerns about children's issues, see themselves as having the primary responsibility for children's protection and well-being, and take self-motivated action to protect children.

Community ownership is both an ongoing process and an outcome. As a process, ownership develops over time in cycles with several elements. The cycle begins with collective caring based on community members' awareness of and concern about the risks or harms facing children. Collective caring sparks a sense of collective responsibility for addressing the harms to 'our' children. In turn, the sense of responsibility motivates the community to exercise its agency, plan how to address the risks to children, mobilize itself, and use community resources to take action to reduce the identified risks to children. Their sense of collective responsibility leads them to reflect on their progress and adjust their action plans as needed. The cycle then repeats as people learn about how children are faring amidst community action, take responsibility for making the action more effective, strengthen community agency by bringing more people into the community action, and so on. Throughout, communities use their creativity and problem-solving ability to address the selected risks in a contextualized manner.

As an outcome, the community sees the issues facing children and the work to address them as their own. Collective ownership is often expressed in 'our/we' narratives such as 'This is our work.' This community ownership is an intermediate result that drives further community efforts to protect children. Community ownership leads people to pour their time and energy into the work to protect children, thereby contributing to its effectiveness. Because the work is motivated internally by concern about children and a felt sense of responsibility, the work relies much less than expert-driven approaches on outside expertise and resources. Animated by local responsibility taking, community-led action tends to be more sustainable.

Participation differs from community ownership. Participation in an expert-driven program typically results in low or moderate levels of community ownership, since community people see that the experts hold the power and make the key decisions. The people tend not to see the issues or the work as their own. In contrast, when the community holds power and participates in making key decisions, the community takes a high level of ownership.

A Community-Led Approach is Essential for Strong Community Ownership

To address these challenges, it is essential to use a community-led child protection approach (CLCP). In CLCP, communities decide through an inclusive, collective process which harms to children to address and how to address them. Having developed plans, the communities then mobilize and implement their plans to protect their children. Although the communities are usually supported by facilitators from within or outside the communities, communities themselves own and guide the decision-making, action, and outcomes for children. Because community people feel responsible for children's protection and well-being, they periodically step back and reflect on their work, often with facilitator support, identifying accomplishments and challenges and making corrective steps to improve the benefits for children.

CLCP can be challenging for practitioners since it requires time to build trust and to enable learning from children's lived experiences and the extensive dialogues that lead to whole community decisions. CLCP is less controllable since communities themselves decide which issues to address and how. These features can be difficult for practitioners who operate within strict donor timelines and requirements to demonstrate rapid results. Encouragingly, donors are increasingly supporting nondirective approaches such as cash transfers in humanitarian settings, and they may support a nondirective approach such as CLCP as a means of advancing localization. Although CLCP is slower and less controllable for practitioners than are expert-driven approaches, the ownership and other benefits of CLCP outlined below make it more impactful and worth the investment in time.

A community-led child protection approach has been tested in multiple countries using robust designs and methods, including ones that elicited children's narratives and made them central in planning. The studies demonstrated the many benefits of CLCP:

Contextualized approach. CLCP shifts power to communities, which use their agency and capacities for decision-making, mobilization and action to protect children. Having in-depth understanding of the local situation, communities address contextually relevant harms to children using approaches that fit their culture and context. Funds to support CLCP may flow directly to communities or to local or international actors who support communities.

Effectiveness. CLCP has consistently proven to be effective in reducing community-selected harms to children such as teenage pregnancy (Sierra Leone), sexual exploitation and abuse of girls (Kenya), and early marriage and school dropout (India). Children's voice, agency, and leadership contributed significantly to CLCP's effectiveness in all three countries.

Ownership. CLCP generates high levels of ownership, which boosts effectiveness and sustainability. Ownership develops through community responsibility-taking, agency and decision-making, community mobilization and self-reliant action, and collective accountability. Communities describe their initiatives to protect their children as 'ours' and say things such as 'There is nothing for us without us'. The meaningful inclusion and participation of many different community people, including from highly vulnerable sub-groups, in decision-making and action strengthens whole community ownership and social cohesion.

Community satisfaction and scalability. Communities consistently liked CLCP because it is ‘theirs’ and they take pride in supporting their children. In Kenya, CLCP spread spontaneously by word of mouth to different communities. CLCP was successfully integrated into NGO operations in both India and Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, with support from UNICEF and the Government, NGOs scaled up CLCP with promising results in multiple districts.

Application in humanitarian and development settings. Although CLCP has been tested mainly in relatively stable settings, it is a good fit with humanitarian settings that are not acute emergencies. These may include relatively safe settings such as areas in conflict-affected countries that have not been affected directly by fighting, or places where displaced people (including refugees) of common background live. Adaptations of CLCP to humanitarian settings should recognize the need for a slow process.

Recommendations for Practitioners

- 1. Prioritize the use of CLCP as a means of shifting power to local people and enabling high levels of ownership.** While expert-driven approaches remain valuable, especially in acute emergencies, they often achieve low ownership and sustainability. CLCP shifts power to local people by enabling inclusive decision-making, planning and action on behalf of children.
- 2. Recognize the difference between community-based child protection and community-led child protection, ensuring that the latter demonstrates fidelity to CLCP principles and enables high levels of community ownership.** Community-based approaches are expert-driven, not community-led. Although the two approaches are complementary, strong community ownership arises from community-led approaches that feature community agency, responsibility taking, and decision-making at all stages.
- 3. Use an initial learning process that brings forward children's voices and lived experiences, lays the foundation for community ownership, and enables understanding of community power dynamics.** Since community ownership builds on collective caring, it is essential to use open-ended, qualitative methods that invite narratives about children's lived experiences. This enables learning about power dynamics and a whole community approach.
- 4. Create greater space for community agency, action, and accountability on issues of child protection.** Communities need time, flexibility, and opportunity to develop and implement their own planning, action, and accountability processes. Rushed decisions often reflect mainly the influence of powerful people and limit children's voices. Communities should work according to their own timeframe, with collective readiness and mobilization developing from within.
- 5. In adapting CLCP to diverse settings, including humanitarian settings, use a flexible, holistic, community-owned approach that adheres to CLCP principles, with attention to documentation and pilot testing.** CLCP respects community knowledge and needs for dignity and agency in diverse humanitarian contexts. Because extensive learning about humanitarian applications is needed, it is a priority to document different approaches through case studies and pilot testing, enabling collective learning and practice strengthening from diverse contexts.