



THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY - INSTITUTIONAL BASED CHILD PROTECTION

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Abstract:

The fundamental role of the community-based child protection committees and networks is to protect children within our communities. This section thus considers what is meant by the term 'child protection' and what contributes to the protection of children. The goal of child protection is to promote, safeguard and fulfil the right of children to protection from abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect. Provisions for protecting children are necessary to ensure that more children can live in a supportive and caring environment that promotes their development and the realization of their rights. 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. 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. 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.

Introduction:

Child Protection is about protecting children from or against any perceived or real danger or risk to their life, their personhood and childhood. It is about reducing their vulnerability to any kind of harm and protecting them in harmful situations. It is about ensuring that no child falls out of the social security and safety net and, those who do, receive necessary care, protection and support so as to bring them back into the safety net. While protection is a right of every child, some children are more vulnerable than others and need special attention. In addition to providing a safe environment for these children, it is imperative to ensure that all other children also remain protected. Child protection is integrally linked to every other right of the child. Failure to ensure children's right to protection adversely affects all other rights of the child.

The Constitution of India guarantees children equal rights as citizens and equality before law. It also mandates the States to make laws that specifically promote the rights and welfare of children. The State Governments are responsible for framing child protection policy to ensure safe and secure environment for all children especially for vulnerable children, opportunity for development, prevention and protection from all forms of violence. Further, it is the duty of the State Governments to provide all the children within the state the right to survive, be protected from abuse, neglect and exploitation, enjoy fully the development rights and participate in decision that affect them according to their age and level of development.

The essence and the principles of a State child protection policy should reflect in the working environment of all the stakeholders, State and District offices dealing with children including child care institutions. It is the duty of every State/UT to train its staff dealing with children and sensitize the community on child protection issues.

Therefore, keeping children safe is everyone's responsibility. Organizations and professionals who work with children are required to ensure that their policies and practices reflect their responsibility towards children. A child protection policy which drives its source from State policy provides guidelines for organizations and their staff to create safe environments for children. It is a tool that protects both children and staff by clearly defining what action is required in order to keep children safe, and ensuring a consistency of behavior so that all staff follow the same process.

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.

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 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:

Community-Based Referral Mechanism: A Case in India

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 mobilize 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.

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

Child Protection at the Community Level:

Community-Based Child Protection Committees and Networks can be involved in a range of activities for children, depending on the context and environment. Many community groups are often involved in some or all of the following activities (specific choices about what activities are most relevant will typically depend on a need assessment of the local context):

- Identifying the types of risks confronting children or the ability of families and the community to provide care for and meet the needs of children.
- Identifying vulnerable children and trying to understand the reasons or causes of their vulnerability. This may also involve keeping a simple register of children experiencing protection concerns and the reasons why; or in an armed conflict or emergency situation, identifying children separated from their families and linking them to family-tracing activities.
- Mapping out the resources or services that can provide support to children and families.
- Referring or helping children and families access local services by bringing them to the attention of service providers or groups who can help address their needs, such as access to welfare support, medical attention, food, shelter and education.
- Acting as a focal point for reporting child protection concerns, including physical or sexual abuse, violence or exploitation.
- Coordinating activities within the community in support of child and family welfare.

- Engaging in discussions with children and families on the issues that affect them on an ongoing basis and working with the community to find or develop appropriate solutions.
- Supporting and promoting the genuine participation of children in decision-making that affects their lives – in part by modelling good practices of communication between adults and children and respecting the views of children.

Conclusion:

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.

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