

# Analyzing the Impact and Effectiveness of Community-Level Interventions in Safeguarding Children in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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**Abstract:** *This systematic review covers low- and middle-income community-level child protection literature. The study provides implementing agencies with the finest research and practical methods to support community-level processes, practices, structures, and resources. Many database searches were done using particular terms to locate community-level child protection methods in low- and middle-income countries. The search yielded 1,745 grey literature and 1,549 published works. Following predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 204 grey literature and 38 published publications were screened. The review suggests several strategies for implementing agencies, including (1) ensuring community-level ownership to increase sustainability, (2) considering different socio-ecological levels when implementing community-level interventions, (3) being inclusive, and (4) carefully negotiating potential tension between traditional mechanisms and rights-based frameworks. This evaluation also highlights a practice-research gap in community-level initiatives and humanitarian situations. Further study on child, family, and community outcomes is needed to extend the data. Community-level solutions' applicability and effectiveness in humanitarian situations should also be studied to guide sector implementation.*

**Keywords:** Child protection, Community-level interventions, Low- and middle-income countries, Systematic review.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Child abuse has major global effects. Violence in families, schools, care institutions, workplaces, and communities can lead to mental and physical health issues, poor academic performance, substance abuse, suicidal behavior, reproductive and sexual ill-health, and violence and delinquency. Child abuse is a big concern during humanitarian situations. Although governmental authorities are responsible for children's safety, humanitarian aid and international development groups respond to protection risks.

Due to the large number of practitioners utilizing community-based child protection mechanisms without strong evidence, an inter-agency review was done in 2009. Community ownership is crucial to long-term child safety, the research found. Community action is better positioned to help at-risk children, can reach large groups of children, and is generally low-cost, making it more sustainable. The analysis found that external parties own most of the programs. The first assessment was nearly a decade ago. Since then, the Inter-Agency Learning Initiative on Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Systems has conducted several studies and developed a Guidance and Toolkit for community-led child protection; the World Health Organization has launched the INSPIRE seven evidence-based strategies for ending child violence and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019). The 2019 Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action included a community-level approach standard to recognize the important role communities play in preventing and responding to child risks. The 2009 research defined 'community-level' as community-based procedures and bottom-up community-led and directed initiatives.

## II. METHODS

The stages described by Khan et al. (2003) were adhered to in order to conduct a systematic review of the literature. This review's methodology was recorded on PROSPERO.

### Search strategy

In order to find relevant studies, two search rounds were conducted. Initially, PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts, and AnthroSource databases were searched to find published publications. Second, websites of networks pertinent to the review's subject matter were searched for grey literature. Lastly, as a component of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, a request for the sharing of pertinent resources was made to members of the interagency Community-Level Child Protection Task Force. The published literature databases were searched again in January 2022 using the same search tactics as when the first search was carried out in 2017.

### Inclusion criteria

The studies that were included in this review had to meet certain requirements. Firstly, they had to be published in peer-reviewed journals, books, dissertations, guidelines, manuals, training materials, evaluations, reports, or any other publications found in the grey literature search. Secondly, they had to focus on community-level work on prevention and response to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The World Bank defines LMICs as those with a gross national income per capita of \$12,695 or less. Thirdly, the studies had to be written in English and focus on community-level work on prevention and response to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Finally, there could be no date restrictions.

### Screening

From the designated databases, 1,549 published papers in total were located. There was a four-step screening procedure involved in reviewing these. Reviewers used both manual searching and bibliographic management tools to first check for duplicate categories. After 638 duplicate articles were found, 911 articles were left to be evaluated further. When databases weren't compatible with Rayyan, the citations and abstracts of these articles were converted to Microsoft Excel files. Secondly, articles were filtered by title and abstract by two reviewers (AG, RE). At this point, 751 items were eliminated because they did not fit the inclusion criteria. Third, each featured piece was checked through to the end. Out of the remaining papers, 112 were eliminated due to not satisfying the inclusion criteria, and fifteen articles were not accessible in full text. The fourth phase in the process was cross-referencing these research. The papers found via cross-referencing and published articles found by searching through grey literature have to pass the same screening procedure as previously mentioned. For analysis, a final dataset consisting of 38 published papers was included.

### Data extraction and analysis

How can outside players connect positively with community-level child protection organizations, institutions, procedures, and systems? The team designed an Excel data extraction tool for charting. Three reviewers collected data from published research and another team from grey literature. Information was extracted from training papers identified by another reviewer. Information obtained for the primary and secondary review questions addressed external actor interaction with community-level structures, risks handled by community structures, inclusive community engagement, and sustainability. Data extraction was cross-reviewed to ensure consistency. Cross-checking was done on 20% of published publications and 10% of grey literature. After then, three reviewers analyzed journal data, and two more joined the examination. the grey literature dataset

### Results

Review studies include qualitative (22), quantitative (8), mixed (2), and no data (6). The publications span 28 countries, predominantly in Africa (14). Asia (6), South America (3), Oceania (2), Middle East (1), Caribbean (1), and North America (1) get less research. Religion (2 studies), child-friendly surroundings (1 research), and armed conflict (1 study) are thematic, not country-specific. African grey literature dominates (n = 90), followed by Asian (n = 64) and Middle Eastern (n = 11).

The search focused on LMICs, including 31 publications on development and 7 on humanitarian problems. The social reintegration of young mothers from armed groups in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda (McKay et al., 2011) and children's optimism in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are explored in these seven articles operating Aceh, Indonesia, community-based methods functions of kid-friendly places community-based child protection mechanisms

as the cornerstone of war-affected child prevention efforts; local faith leaders' role and experience in promote child protection in flood-affected Malawian communities; and an evaluation of school-based peace education and a community-based intervention to change harmful social norms and practices in Afghanistan. Almost as many grey literature publications (82) concern development as humanitarian situations (84). Table 1 includes reviewed papers' attributes.

### **Communities' internal systems of care**

Studies show families and communities are crucial to child protection. 'It takes a village to raise a child' refers to societies where families, kinship groupings, and communities nurture children. According to studies, Papua New Guinea considers child health and abuse social concerns. Here, older children, important adults, and extended relatives care for kids.

Intervention by outside agencies in community structures, practices, resources, and processes

Many studies have studied how external agencies and communities protect children. Idris, a community-based grief group that collects fees and provides assistance, is described by Muriuki et al. (2013) and Stuer (2012). The agency assists national organizations with capacity-building and technical assistance. The national organization thereafter provides technical support and resources to the Idris, which assists chosen families.

PAR included armed young mothers, according to McKay et al. (2011). Social humiliation and isolation force mothers to lose their children and struggle with community reintegration. PAR helped young women identify problems, develop solutions, and evaluate outcomes. Agency staff worked hard to form parent groups to identify capacity development gaps and provide training to transfer over leadership. Staff frequently guided or 'facilitate excessively', therefore they had to be encouraged to allow young mothers make important decisions and steer their own activities.

Reid et al. (2014) outline a PAR-based social mobilization and child sexual abuse awareness campaign in Trinidad and Tobago. After the community rejected the agency's centralized strategy, decentralization was used to reach more people with community-shaped content.

### **Child protection issues effectively addressed by community-level structures, practices, resources and processes**

Community-level child protection risks are underreviewed. About 30 child protection threats to children's safety, development, and well-being are covered in gray literature. Top dangers were child labor, marriage, trafficking, and physical punishment. Project evaluations emphasize process and output indicators above child, family, and community outcomes.

Many struggle with sexual abuse, aggressiveness, and exploitation. Shame and stigma prevent young victims from getting therapy and reporting family breakdowns or known offenders. Community members may report child maltreatment depending on their beliefs on systematic violence. Sexual misdeeds may be hidden due to cultural taboos. Hutchinson et al. (2015) showed religious leaders distrust external child protection actors and avoid working with them on sensitive topics like sexual abuse. Leadership may help community members assist sexual assault survivors.

### **Meaningful participation of children**

Participating in community processes helps kids understand and address child safety issues. McKay et al. (2011) demonstrate that child protection agencies interpret 'meaningful participation' differently. It may be "low-end" engagement, such as providing children with information, engaging them in consultation or community-level organizations, or collecting opinion via agency-directed focus groups or surveys. According to Wessells (2015), good facilitation may aid inclusive community planning and empower children's agencies to safeguard children. McKay et al. (2011) recommend training and mobilizing adults to respect children's opinions and promote age-appropriate community involvement, including decision-making. Skovdal et al. (2008) suggest include children in community-level decision-making to improve effectiveness. Neglected children in Sri Lanka change their mothers.

### **Sustainability**

Sustainable interventions frequently depend on volunteer, community-led effort with high motivation and local resources. Local ownership occurs when communities recognize community-level organizations as their own and assist

them nurture children. Muriuki et al. (2013) say communities that own child protection concerns have superior breadth, depth, coordination, and sustainability. While community mobilization may cost more and take longer to provide benefits than direct assistance, not doing so would prolong dependent on external agencies. Agency-led community-level organizations' resources, authority, and decision-making are generally controlled by external technical specialists, therefore community ownership is minimal to moderate. Local informal groups may identify and help at-risk youngsters following an intervention.

### **III. DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to synthesize the literature on community-level child protection in LMIC and identify effective strategies for humanitarian agencies to engage with community-level structures, practices, resources, and processes.

The review found (1) a practice-research gap in community-level interventions generally and specifically in the humanitarian sector, with few evaluations focusing on outcomes for children, families, and communities; (2) the importance of socio-ecological levels in community-level interventions; and (3) several recommended strategies for implementing agencies to engage with

#### **Practice-research gap**

Community-level child protection strategies in humanitarian settings seem to have a practice-research gap. Child protection and community-level child protection evidence requires improvement. Despite the growing number of studies on community-based child protection, the literature provides little information on effective approaches and focuses on process and output indicators rather than child, family, and community outcomes. Many publications concentrate on development contexts (78%) rather than humanitarian ones (19%). In gray literature, this divide is roughly equal. This shows that humanitarian settings use community-level methodologies, but assessment papers are few. The humanitarian-development border is blurring, and operating in 'silos' may not be acceptable amid prolonged and recurring crises. External participation with community structures is not addressed in all materials, although only two grey literature papers describe engagement below one year. All other reports extend interaction beyond 1 year. The three publications that specify involvement length report 3–9 years. Following the humanitarian program cycle (Inter-Agency Standing Committee IASC, 2015), community-level activities may concentrate on persistent crisis and development settings rather than quick onset events, which were not included in the literature.

#### **Socio-ecological framework**

The review stresses socio-ecological dimensions in community-level initiatives. Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach stresses neighborhood, community, and cultural factors in child safety prevention and response. Social ecology must be addressed in humanitarian situations with changing needs, community-level structures, practices, resources, and processes. The literature evaluation highlights extended families and communities' child care importance. Child protection issues are handled jointly. Traditional and cultural leaders prevent and respond to mistreatment. Families and children prefer community leaders to child protection services. Religion and religious actors may guide, raise awareness, denounce, and promote child protection.

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit's localization agenda emphasizes families, communities, local leaders, and religion. Summit promises detailed local and national actors' humanitarian response improvements. Continuous dialogue and equal engagement by international, national, and local stakeholders place affected people at the center of a response. Community participation methodology typology by external agency External agencies lead and ask communities to engage in community-level child protection systems, according to Wessells (2009, 2015). The child protection sector may benefit from the global localization strategy and actual measures to promote community ownership of protection actions amid humanitarian situations.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations should be addressed in this systematic study. First, only English literature was reviewed. The reviewers did not check the websites of Child Protection Area of Responsibility and Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action members, according to procedure. This choice was made due to time limitations, the huge number of resources

previously discovered, the general call to CCP TF members to share resources, and the declining identification of unique resources. This divergence has little impact, say the authors. Third, owing to the limited number of research, variety of study kinds, and limitations in utilizing study quality to report findings, all papers were included to uncover viable techniques for agencies to promote community-level initiatives. Last, researchers reported many process and output metrics but few child, family, and community outcomes. The assessment revealed a lack of community-level research.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This systematic review on community-level approaches to child protection showed a practice-research gap, stressed the importance of socio-ecological levels, and suggested several strategies for implementing agencies to work with community-level structures, practices, resources, and processes. For instance, community ownership increases an approach's sustainability; integrating with existing procedures and structures; being inclusive; and carefully balancing friction between conventional methods and rights-based frameworks. Grey literature demonstrates increased attention to and usage of community-level techniques, even in humanitarian situations, but the small number of published assessments prohibits us from forming conclusions about successful approaches. Expanding the evidence requires further research on child, family, and community outcomes. Community self-mobilization around children's challenges, community ownership, and inclusion of community-level methods should be evaluated for efficacy and durability. Research on community-level techniques' applicability and efficacy in humanitarian circumstances is badly required. This data is crucial for sector implementation.

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