Section 4: Note to Users

The tools in this section invite managers and other users to reflect critically on their agency's approach to engaging with communities and to consider a more community-led approach.

It also recognizes that many managers will have a host of practical questions about things such as qualities to look for in facilitators, the phases of engaging with communities, and the kinds of benchmarks one can use to tell whether one is on a productive track, among others.

Recognizing that there are no "final" or universal answers to these questions, the tools in this section seek to give illustrative examples that stir the imagination and invite one to think how it might go in a particular context.

Managers also may find it useful to have a more in-depth look at an example of community-led work, together with tools that were used to support it. For this reason, this section includes a case study from Sierra Leone and some of the tools used as part of the community-led work.

It is important to recognize, though, that there is no one-size-fits-all in regard to community-led approaches. The Sierra Leone example and tools are best seen as illustrations and should not be seen as prescriptions for how to do community-led work.

MGM 3. Enabling Inter-community Collaboration: A Sierra Leone Example

Inter-community collaboration offers numerous advantages, not least of which is the opportunity for co-learning by peers working in different contexts. Collaboration across communities can also serve as a means of scaling up a community-led approach.

Whether to enable inter-community collaboration and how to enable it are questions that are best answered not by outsiders but by communities themselves. As is true of most matters pertaining to community-led child protection, the context is critical, and communities themselves should be in the driver's seat. In an urban setting in which one neighborhood feels that it is too different from other neighborhoods or is in too conflictual a relationship to enable effective collaboration, a community might elect not to collaborate with other neighborhoods or communities.

If, however, different communities are open to collaborating, they should decide how to collaborate, and which processes would enable the collaboration.

This tool outlines the approach for inter-village collaboration that communities in Sierra Leone developed. It is not intended to be a prescription for different settings but serves as one useful example of how communities may enable productive collaboration with each other on their planning and action in support of vulnerable children.

The Formation of the Inter-Village Task Force (IVTF)

In Sierra Leone, communities decided to work together after individual communities had begun to discuss which harm to children they wanted to address. This timing was likely beneficial since the discussions heightened awareness of the situation of children in the wider area as in the village itself. Also, the discussions pointed out the complexity of the harms, and this may have increased people's desire to learn how other communities saw the question of harms to children and were thinking of how to address them.

When the communities indicated their desire to collaborate, the facilitators asked how, practically, that could happen. Discussions at community level rapidly noted the challenges of distance, time, and cost that might be involved in bringing together entire villages for discussion with other villages. Various community members in each village suggested that maybe there could be a small group of people from different villages who could help move the planning forward. Because each village already worked with small groups of girls, boys, women, men, and elders, respectively, it was natural for communities to raise and support the idea of a cross-village planning group that included members of each subgroup from each village.

This cross-community group—called the Inter-Village Task Force (IVTF), consisted of 15 people—5 from each community. The 5 people from a particular village were representatives who had been selected from their respective small groups. Thus, each village had a teenage girl, a teenage boy, a woman, a man, and an elder represent them on the IVTF. This afforded each

village an equal voice and ensured diversity and representation of each of the five subgroups. Consistent with its facilitative role, the IVTF was a forum where each community shared its views, learned from each other's views, and attempted to find areas of agreement, which would then be shared back to each community. The IVTF could suggest which harm to children to address, although the individual communities continued to hold the decision-making power.

To maintain equal power, it was agreed that the IVTF should meet in a place that is readily accessible for all three communities. If the communities are far apart, it can be useful to rotate the meetings across villages, paying small transport and food costs while the host village provides sleeping accommodation if needed. The importance of symbolism should not be underestimated, since perceptions that one village is favored in the process could have presented a significant obstacle to the work of the IVTF. Both the facilitators and the IVTF members in Sierra Leone team managed these expectations successfully and reminded everyone that the IVTF had a facilitative role, all three villages were equal partners within it, and individual villages held significant power.

Planning Discussions and Cycles

In the initial IVTF meeting (which usually lasts a full day), both the facilitator and a senior mentor were present. The meeting opened with a prayer and greeting from the host community with wishes for a productive collaboration in support of vulnerable children. Following introductions, the facilitator set the stage by welcoming the members from all three communities and thanking everyone for their spirit of collaboration. From there, the main tasks were sharing, co-learning, and finding common ground. The first substantive discussion gave equal time to each community to discuss its context and what people saw as the top main harms to children that could be addressed via a community-led intervention. In the afternoon, there were open discussions of similarities or areas of agreement. By identifying common ground, these discussions began to lay the foundation for agreement and collaboration. It was natural, however, for people from each community to focus first on pressing the views of their own community. Yet the facilitator and the mentor kept the focus on areas of agreement and built on expressed views about the importance of flexibility and collaboration. This approach helped the communities to settle on a common harm to children to be addressed.

To reach this point, there had been sufficient time for the completion of several planning cycles, where each cycle consisted of a full community meeting and subgroup meetings in each village followed by an IVTF meeting. This iterative process enabled the IVTF to help the communities to move forward together, yet it also kept the individual communities highly empowered and feeling ownership for the process and decisions taken. By about the third cycle, the IVTF narrowed down to two harms to children, and communities were supportive of this "shortlist."

When it came time to choose between the two alternatives, there was a divergence of views between the IVTF and one of the communities regarding which harm to children should be selected and addressed collectively. Additional diplomacy helped to overcome such challenges, and the facilitator spent extra time in that community in hopes of enabling full discussion. It was important that the facilitator avoided imposing on the community by pressing it to accept the wishes of the other two communities. In one case, this required slowing down and inviting the

IVTF members and others to help find a solution that balanced the value of collective action with respect for the rights of each community to make its own decisions.

The Sierra Leone facilitators also found that it was useful to help community members identify overlaps or connections between the two short-listed harms to children. Often this happened as community members began thinking ahead about possible community actions to address the harm to children. For example, if the one community wanted to address out-of-school children while the IVTF favored addressing teenage pregnancy, it was useful for the facilitator to highlight the learning phase findings that teenage pregnancy is one of the primary causes of children being out of school. In this respect, it made sense for community actions that aim to address out-of-school children to have elements of helping to prevent teenage pregnancy. This approach helped to build agreement across all three communities. During this process, the facilitator reminded everyone that the detailed intervention planning lay ahead and that the insights from the current dialogues would be fed into the subsequent planning discussions. As this example suggests, it can be helpful during these discussions to keep an eye on what is practical to accomplish.

Through this iterative process, the communities in both regions of Sierra Leone chose to address the problem of teenage pregnancy. Many such pregnancies stemmed from sexual abuse, and the girls who became mothers at a young age not only had to drop out of school but also suffered economic hardship that led them into sex work. A key to the planning process at this point was its inclusivity. Through the subgroup discussions and home visits, care was taken to ensure that the voice of each child was heard in the discussions of which harm to address.

Planning the Community Action

After the communities, working with the IVTF, had decided to address teenage pregnancy, it seemed clear that working via the IVTF was potentially useful and could be extended to facilitate the planning of the community action. An important prelude, however, was to ask communities whether the IVTF membership needed any adjustment. After all, individual Task Force members could have changing circumstances such as a family illness that could have made it difficult for them to continue. In addition, teenage pregnancy is a problem that involved and affected young people. A natural question to ask is whether the IVTF composition needed to be reconfigured to allow, for example, increased inputs from children. In reflecting on these questions, the IVTF and the communities decided to add an additional female and male youth leader from each community. Thus, the IVTF included 7 people from each village, with a total of 21 members. That nearly all the previous members continued indicated the keen interest and excitement that the process was generating.

As the IVTF met to begin planning action by all three communities to address teenage pregnancy, the facilitators helped them to reflect on their facilitative role and the importance of enabling all three communities to reach agreement on a single intervention. The facilitators stressed that general agreement rather than universal consensus was needed. IVTF members were invited to think back on the importance of the planning cycles that included a mix of IVTF discussions and community planning discussions, with the latter including full community

meetings, small group discussions, and home visits. This reflection led the IVTF to choose to continue using this iterative approach in planning the community action.

As the action-planning discussions began at community level, particular ideas came forward about what actions would help to prevent teenage pregnancy. One idea was that girls needed the confidence and life skills needed to say "No!" to sexual advances or harassment. Another was that children and parents needed better understanding of puberty, pregnancy, pregnancy prevention, and issues associated with sexually transmitted infections. Still another was that teenage pregnancy could be reduced by providing better education and building schools in villages that had no secondary schools.

During these discussions, the facilitators helped the IVTF to take into account the action criteria (see tool MGM 6), which included things such as low cost, sustainability, and linkage with formal stakeholders. Although the criteria came from the action research team, they were not imposed on the IVTF or the communities themselves. For example, the facilitators stirred discussion of sustainability by asking whether most NGO projects continued beyond their period of active funding. Typically, IVTF members answered this in the negative. The facilitator then asked whether the harm to children they want to address is likely to continue over time. Having answered this issue in the affirmative, the IVTF members reflected on how they wanted the communities' intervention process to benefit children over longer periods of time. In this manner, communities embraced the sustainability criterion as being within their own interest. Once communities embraced the importance of sustainability, it was a short step to helping them to see the benefits of using a low-cost approach. These discussions also helped the IVTF to consider which actions were feasible. Impoverished people were quick to realize that expensive approaches such as building schools would not be sustainable if there are shortages of qualified teachers and little support from the Ministry of Education.

The IVTF members also reflected on the potential value of linking with and collaborating with formal stakeholders, which is crucial in a systems-strengthening approach. Having selected teenage pregnancy as the issue to be addressed, communities wanted the Government to help by, for example, providing contraceptives. The IVTF moved this process forward by asking the facilitators and mentors whether this was possible. This question led the facilitators and mentors, in collaboration with UNICEF, to enquire whether the district level Ministry of Health could be reliable partners in providing contraceptives. Having received an affirmative answer, they visited the district MoH and began discussions that eventually led to collaboration with the communities. The IVTF and the communities were happy with this process since it was not imposed, and the collaboration could help them to address a problem—teenage pregnancy—that they had not succeeded in addressing on their own.

Throughout the planning discussions, the IVTF facilitated the process but did not direct it. Among its most important tasks was to enable an inclusive planning process. IVTF members did this by encouraging many community members to participate in the dialogues and in planning how to address teenage pregnancy. Each IVTF meeting was followed by a cycle of whole community discussion, small group discussions, and home visits. The cycles continued until the communities seemed to have achieved a general agreement on the outline of the action they wanted to take.

At that point, the facilitators and mentors invited the IVTF to have a two-day workshop for the purpose of developing a working plan for the action that could then be shared with communities, subjected to any final revisions, and approved at local levels. This working plan consisted of an intervention matrix (see Tool MGM 12) that spelled out each action element (family planning, sexual and reproductive health, and life skills). For each element, there was a corresponding objective and rows of the matrix that defined the who, what, when, and where of the associated activities that would help to achieve the objective. In other words, for each objective, participants defined what steps will be taken or activities implemented, who will do them, approximately when they will do them, and any other information concerning the how. The draft plan was shared with the respective villages, and minor adjustments were made to the action plans. The process ended with the three villages and the IVTF agreeing to the action plan.

Enabling Community-Led Action

With the communities having decided which action they would take to address teenage pregnancy, the next step was for communities to decide how to organize themselves for implementing the action. Since the IVTFs had already been formed for planning purposes, the facilitators asked the communities whether the IVTFs would be useful for facilitating or overseeing the community action. Importantly, there was no pressure from the facilitators to have the IVTFs continue. Indeed, the facilitators were open to other possible processes the communities might have developed as a means of enabling the community-led action. As it was, the communities liked the approach of carrying on with the IVTF, which they themselves had formed, and they wanted the members of the IVTF for each village to facilitate the action process in their respective villages.

An important question was whether the IVTF membership should remain the same as it had been during the action planning. This question was important because members of the IVTF did not initially volunteer for a long-term post. Also, it was possible that the circumstances of some IVTF members had changed (e.g., due to an illness in the family), making it difficult for them to continue on. Since the action process was usually more time-consuming than the planning process had been, it was respectful to give people space to make their own decisions about whether to continue.

Further, the nature of the action raised questions about the composition of the IVTF. Since the intervention involved high levels of activity by teenagers, it made sense to ask the community whether it wanted to reconfigure the IVTF membership to take that into account. The communities decided that since the intervention aimed to prevent teenage pregnancy, it made sense to add additional female and male youth leaders to the IVTF. Thus, each village had seven rather than five members on the IVTF, with four of the seven members being young people. This arrangement made sense to the communities, which recognized the central role of young people in pregnancy prevention. Elders accepted this shift because they saw young people as taking responsibility for achieving community-defined aims.

As the communities implemented their self-designed action, the IVTF members encouraged full participation by different people in the communities. They also worked closely with the Peer Educators who had been trained by NGOs on issues of family planning, sexual and reproductive

health, and life skills. Across the villages, the IVTF helped to monitor how the community action was going and whether adjustments were needed. For example, if contraceptives were not available to people in one community, the IVTF members in that community could bring the situation to the attention of all three communities and also the facilitator and mentor. The mentor played a key role in working with the Ministry of Health to make sure that the supplies of contraceptives were maintained.

Over time, the IVTF members and the Peer Educators realized that the inter-village monitoring and coordination would likely be more effective if each village had a focal point as the main point of information. This change, however, did not diminish the important role played by the IVTF. Not only did the IVTF help to promote and coordinate the community action but it also provided a useful means of collective reflection and making any needed adjustments. Over a year after the community action had begun, the IVTF played a key role in taking stock of how the action was working, what challenges it faced, and what, if any, adjustments were needed. This type of self-reflective, local evaluation process is important for enabling ongoing community-led action.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that the IVTF is not a "silver bullet" approach that will work well in all circumstances. The essence of a community-led approach is that communities themselves must be free to decide how to organize themselves and conduct their collaborative action. Collectively, we have much to learn from different communities and groups thereof about how communities can effectively take action together on behalf of vulnerable children. Thus the IVTF approach is only one of many possible approaches, and it is offered here in a spirit of co-learning.