Chapter 2.
Community-Led Approaches to Child Protection

As the name implies, community-led approaches are those that are led not by a non-governmental organization (NGO) or other outsiders but by a collective, community process. Community-led approaches are grounded in the idea of "people power"; that is, the ability of ordinary people, even under difficult circumstances, to organize themselves, define their main problems or challenges, and collectively address those problems.

This view of people's power reflects the thinking of writers such as Paulo Freire,[7] who has emphasized the dignity, agency, and voice of even the poorest, most oppressed people. It also resonates with work in the tradition of liberation theology,[8] Robert Chambers' work on participatory rural appraisal,[9] Mary Anderson's Listening Project,[10] and the global wealth of participatory action research,[11] among others.

In this respect, community-led approaches are not new, and they reflect development principles that have been known for many years. Still, highly participatory approaches have so far had a marginal presence in international child protection work and deserve much wider attention. Community-led approaches reflect the fact that communities have been taking steps themselves down through the centuries to protect vulnerable children, although they have never named this work "child protection."

The purpose of this chapter is to help readers to understand what is meant by a community-led approach. Its objectives are to:

- increase awareness of how communities already take action that helps to protect children;
- boost understanding of what a community-led approach is;
- outline key principles that underlie a community-led approach; and
- stimulate critical thinking about community-led approaches.

Key Question for Practitioners

Should there be more room for more community-led approaches in the setting in which you currently work?

[7] Freire (1968).
[8] Gutierrez (1988).
[9] Chambers (1994).
[10] Anderson et al. (2012).
[11] Chevalier & Buckles (2013); Reason & Bradbury (2013); Pretty et al. (1995).

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1; Training: TRN 3, TRN 4, & TRN 5; Management: MGM 2.

How Ordinary People and Communities Help to Protect Children

The term ”child protection” may evoke images of serious violations against children and the intervention of police, social workers, or trained child protection workers.

In reality, however, most children worldwide grow up without ever having talked with police, social workers, or child protection workers. Usually, family members, neighbors, and other community members do most of the work to keep children safe. For example, imagine the following scenarios:

- A mother hears a dog barking at her crying three-year-old daughter, picks her up, and soothes her while keeping her safe.

- A flood has occurred, and a father and his daughter are stranded on a hilltop with the water rapidly rising around them. But other people from the neighboring town have a boat, rescue them, and get them to a safe place.

- A four-year-old boy in a home starts a fire while trying to cook something and is rescued by a neighbor who sees the smoke and rushes in to save him.

- A 13-year-old girl is sexually assaulted by a stranger but manages to scream loudly. Other community members come to her rescue and even manage to capture her assailant.

- An armed group has attacked and burned a rural village, killing many people. A mother, however, manages to run away and hide with her two-year-old son.

- A 12-year-old boy has started staying away from school and taking drugs. A community member talks with him and learns that the boy hated school because older boys bullied him there. The community member talks with the teacher, who takes steps to stop the bullying and reaches out to bring the boy back to school.

- A single mother has to go to the clinic for weekly medical checkups. Family members help her by taking turns watching her children during her checkups, making sure the children are safe.

These examples, which reflect the daily lives of children, illustrate how the family and community are in most cases the first line of response to threats to children's safety. Overall, it is families and communities who do the heavy lifting in enabling children's protection and well-being.

Since their job is ongoing, the work of protecting children is never completed in any final sense. New threats emerge, yet families and communities are there for their children, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In many contexts, community groups and networks take collective action to address the things that could potentially harm children. For example, a religious group in Southern Africa might observe that there are large numbers of orphaned children who are at risk of being abused sexually. Out of concern for children's well-being, the group takes steps to find safe home placements for the orphans and to help the community to impose penalties on perpetrators of sexual abuse.

In many communities, child protection occurs through the action of endogenous processes that support vulnerable children. In Afghanistan, for example, communities have a traditional structure—the *shura*—a local authority structure which consists of male elders. In northern Afghanistan, one *shura* noticed that young children were being harmed by falling into open, uncovered wells and so organized the villagers to build well-covers, thereby protecting the children.

Similarly, in Sierra Leone following the end of the war, the sexual abuse of girls—some of whom were former child soldiers—was a widespread problem. In response, Paramount Chiefs in some chiefdoms passed by-laws that imposed penalties on people who harassed or sexually assaulted the girls. In Zambia, one female chief single-handedly annulled several hundred early marriages of girls.

These and many other examples both illustrate the potential power of traditional processes and serve as a poignant reminder of the important role that civil society plays in protecting children.

Of course, child protection workers, social workers, and police are significant elements in a wider system of child protection. But ordinary people—family members and community members—are the backbone of strong systems of child protection. If they are not supported well, the protection of children at local, grassroots level will likely decrease.

In many ways, community-led child protection is about enhancing and systematizing the existing ability of communities to contribute to children's protection and well-being.

What is a Community-Led Approach to Child Protection?

Terms such as "community-led" can take on a variety of meanings. Based on experiences in different settings, there is little doubt that "community-based" and "community-led" processes are often equated. However, there is in fact a world of difference between the two approaches (see Tool TRN 3 in the companion Toolkit), as the former are top-down whereas the latter are bottom-up.

Broadly, a community-led approach to child protection is one that is driven by the community itself. Indeed, a useful guide to recognizing community-led approaches is the adage, "If it doesn't come from the community, it isn't a community-led approach." This applies to all phases of the child protection work, from the selection of the issues to be addressed to the evaluation of the action effects.

The fullest versions of community-led child protection embody all the criteria shown in the box below. However, community-led actions may be thought of as varying along different dimensions, including the extent of community power and decision-making. In the fullest community-led approach to child protection, the community selects the harms to children to be addressed and decides how to address them and what local capacities and resources will be used. This is important because the selection reflects the vision, values, concerns, and judgment of the community members. The issues selected become rallying cries that support community ownership of the issues and the community organization and mobilization to address them.

Criteria for Community-Led Approaches to Child Protection

- Community decides the child protection issue(s) to be addressed
- Community decides how to address the issue(s)
- Community decides what local capacities and resources to use
- Community designs the action
- Community implements the action
- Community conducts its own evaluation of its action
- Relatively low reliance on outside facilitators or actors
- Inclusive community participation, including girls and boys
- High levels of community ownership
- Minimal reliance on outside actors

In weaker variations of community-led approaches, which are perhaps better described as "participatory approaches" or "community mobilization approaches," the NGO decides the issue or the general contours of the issue. Based on its assessment data or its donor's priorities, for example, an NGO might decide that the issue to be addressed is violence against children, with the community free to decide which form of this violence to address.

A difficulty with this approach is that the issue of violence against children may evoke low levels of community ownership and may also contravene community social norms. Because such an approach starts with the issue being defined by the NGO, it is difficult to call it a community-led approach.

It is important as well to be clear about the meaning of "community." A community may be defined in many different ways.[12] Here, it is defined as a collective of people who live in a particular area and are willing to collaborate on the achievement of a shared goal[13] such as bringing in a harvest or, in this case, protecting vulnerable children.

In relatively homogeneous, stable communities—such as rural communities with low population movement in which residents share a common language, ethnicity, and religious preference—a community may be characterized by shared values, beliefs, identity, and social and cultural practices. However, in peri-urban or urban settings where people come and go, a community may not be homogeneous or stable, and there may not be a shared language, religious preference, and identity. Nevertheless, local people may be willing to collaborate in order to enable the protection and well-being of their children.

Essentially, community-led action happens when a group of people in a particular area recognize that it is within their collective self-interest to work together to address a shared need or concern.

When we say that community-led approaches are led by a collective community process we mean two things. Firstly, the community holds the power and makes the key decisions—it is not an NGO or the government that guides the decisions but the people themselves. Secondly, a significant number and diversity of community members either participate in or give moral support or encouragement to the decision-making and work conducted by the community.

For example, if only 5% of the residents of a community take part in a group effort to improve parenting, it would be odd to call this a community-led approach, since speaking of "a community" implies a more holistic social engagement. However, it is possible that an initiative started by a small number of community members will eventually spread and becomes a community-led action.

It is also important to remember that many communities are dominated by a small, elite group of decision-makers who may be the relatives of the Chief, or the people with the most education. These small elites may not actually speak for local people in the sense of representing their

[12] McKeown et al. (1987); Patrick et al. (1995); Zakus & Lysack (1998).

[13] It should be noted that in some geographic areas, people who live near each other in a similar area are not willing to collaborate with most other people, possibly because they fear others or because they compete strongly with others for things such as food, water, and shelter. In such settings, it seems inappropriate to speak of a "community."

interests. Indeed, small power elites frequently act in ways that advance and preserve their own interests and power, while deliberately excluding or marginalizing other people. As emphasized throughout this Guide, it is highly important to reflect continuously on questions such as: Who *is* the community? Who actually participates in or is left out of the community-led process? Who holds the power?

A collective process qualifies as community-led when a significant portion of the community makes the decisions regarding a particular task and actively encourages work on that task. From this standpoint, a community-led process is one that is run through people power, not through the power and action only of men, or formal leaders, or community elites. This point becomes even clearer in the principles outlined below.

Principles of Community-Led Approaches

The principles of community-led approaches in the box below have been derived through the reflection and work of groups and agencies who have used highly participatory approaches in many different countries and contexts, including emergency and development contexts. Reflecting the audience of this Guide, the principles focus on how external workers should be oriented and what they should do in order to place greater power in the hands of communities and enable processes of community-led action on behalf of vulnerable children.

Principles of Community-Led Action:
Putting Communities in the Driver's Seat

- Work with humility.
- Build trust, respect, and relationships first.
- Listen in an active, nonjudgmental manner.
- Build on existing community resources and strengths.
- Learn more fully about the context and community power dynamics on an ongoing basis.
- Encourage an inclusive community process at all stages.
- Enable collective agency and action—communities make the key decisions.
- Use a patient, flexible, dialogue-oriented approach.
- Build community capacities for mobilizing the community, making inclusive decisions, and taking effective action.
- Enable bottom-up collaboration and linkages between communities and formal child protection stakeholders and mechanisms.
- Enable children to be key actors in the community-led process.
- Using child rights as a guide, support social change from within the community.
- Be prepared to step outside the usual child protection "box."

Each of these principles is discussed in turn below.

1. Work with humility

Communities are complex entities, and it is important to enter them with a humility that is grounded in a spirit of listening, learning, and power-sharing. Your spirit of learning should recognize that "I am new to this community and have much to learn about it and how people here understand and care for children."

Working with humility is not a feigned role but a genuine, appreciative orientation that views local parents, community members, and children as people who have accumulated wisdom in supporting children. The spirit of power-sharing should recognize that the community has agency and can take steps on its own to improve children's protection and well-being—but only if people have the motivation, space, and power to do so.

2. Build trust, respect, and relationships first

Trust is the essential foundation for NGOs in enabling community-led work on child protection. Without trust, local people will likely be reluctant to get involved, since they may see the discussions and processes as reflecting outsider values and priorities. NGO workers can build trust by listening to and respecting local people and by taking time to build relationships.

Of considerable value is the patient approach of sitting and listening, responding, and talking in an open, respectful manner with elders, women, or youth in contextually appropriate contexts, such as an urban center or under a tree. Even where time is an issue for the NGO workers, it may be possible to continue slow, respectful discussions while assessments are being conducted.

Building relationships requires having a mutual understanding about the role of the agency. Most often, when an NGO arrives in a community, community members assume (based on experience) that the NGO has resources available for those who say and do the "right" things. In a community-led approach, the NGO needs to emphasize the central role of the community.

A useful way to do this is to discuss the limits of what NGOs can accomplish and make it clear from the outset that they are not coming in to convince people to do something in particular or to provide resources to initiate specific action. Rather, the role of the NGO is to support community action on behalf of vulnerable children.

3. Listen in an active, nonjudgmental manner

As child protection workers, we sometimes begin our engagement with communities by analyzing violations against children, using international concepts and terms, and discussing interventions according to international standards.

However, this mode of engagement puts the NGO in the driver's seat and makes it difficult to learn deeply about the community and to form a strong, authentic relationship with local people.

Having positioned ourselves as "experts" who impose our own language and questions, we tacitly judge local people and practices. This not only marginalizes communities but also makes it difficult to build trust with the community. After all, why should local people open up to us if we, the outsiders, judge local practices by outside standards?

In humanitarian work, there is a pervasive listening gap. Pressed by preconceived timetables and donor expectations and focused on implementing their own programs, NGO workers frequently do not take time to listen to local people. Even when outsiders do listen, they frequently filter what local people say through their own "expert" categories and priorities rather than taking a more empathic, open approach.

Yet empathic listening is an essential first step toward deep engagement with communities (see Tool FAC 4 in the companion Toolkit). Empathy is absent or weak when an NGO worker imposes his or her own language, assuming that they know what the important harms to children are, and spends time analyzing rather than listening in an active way.

It can be valuable to ask in an open way questions such as: "Who are considered children in this community?", "What harms do they experience?", "What do people do already to help keep children safe and improve their well-being?", and "What happens when harms to children occur?" Only by asking such questions and paying close attention to local idioms and understandings will we be in a position to understand how community people see children, child protection issues, and various protective factors.

4. Build on existing community resources and strengths

A useful step toward understanding communities and building trust is to make sure that initial learning efforts focus on community strengths as well as deficits. A deficits focus, such as one that looks only at forms of violence against children, can give a one-sided picture and tacitly judges the community or implicitly prescribes a particular solution. Taking a deficits approach can leave communities feeling disempowered and unappreciated or misunderstood.

Instead, the initial engagement with communities and learning phase should be appreciative and seek to identify existing community strengths, assets, and resources—as well as deficits. Valuable strengths may include natural helpers, female and male leaders who are seen as legitimate and as good role models, traditional or contemporary social norms of caring collectively for children, and religious groups, women's groups, or youth groups that help to support children's safety and well-being. Particularly in rural settings where traditional values and practices are strong, there may be endogenous mechanisms for managing conflict between families, promoting justice, and enabling collective harmony.

In all settings, there are non-formal social networks that make it possible to send key messages and mobilize groups of people. One of the most valuable community resources is the habit of collective dialogue, planning, and action. Community-led approaches frequently succeed by virtue of activating and building on these resources, which bring forward practical knowledge and problem-solving abilities, while also being low-cost and sustainable.

5. Learn more fully about the context and community power dynamics on an ongoing basis

The rapid assessments favored by international NGOs have value, yet they do not allow deeper learning about communities, their context, or their power dynamics. Since every context is different, it is essential to regard each community as distinct, learn fully about it, and avoid imposing a universalized approach that does not fit.

To understand and work well with communities, it is essential to learn about the power differences within the community; that is, "who is at the table" and "who is not at the table." This can be done by learning about children, children's issues, and supports for children from different sub-groups within the community, who may vary in gender, age, socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity, or other dimensions.

Such learning can help to guide efforts to enable an inclusive process. It can also help to avoid developing projects that quietly privilege the local power elite without doing enough to support the children who are most vulnerable. Ideally, the learning will be ongoing (see Tool FAC 8 in the companion Toolkit) and will intermix quantitative and qualitative methods, including direct observation of children.

6. Encourage an inclusive community process at all stages

A high level of inclusivity is one of the hallmarks of community-led approaches. If elite groups dominate community decision-making then other people may go along with activities, but there may be only modest levels of community ownership and engagement. Similarly, if only a small number of people contribute to a community action process or only particular sub-groups benefit from it, jealousies and social divisions may arise that will likely limit its effectiveness or lead the group to burn out.

In contrast, community-led approaches engage "people power" by bringing in many different segments of the community, enabling everyone to have a voice and to take part in and "own" the decision-making and action.

Although it takes time to cultivate, broad participation not only makes the approach truly a community effort but also makes it more likely to be effective and sustainable. When most people in a community contribute to choosing the issue(s) to be addressed, developing an action that builds on local capacities and resources, and making the action work, then the resulting collective motivation, sense of ownership and responsibility, and lack of outside dependence will help the action to succeed and to continue.

7. Enable collective agency and action—communities make the key decisions

In keeping with a "people power" orientation, a community-led approach puts communities in the driver's seat and enables them to make the key decisions on matters such as which issue(s) to address, how to take effective action using their own resources, which capacity building is needed, and so on.

Throughout, the role of the NGO is that of facilitator rather than expert. The NGO and its community facilitator do this by means of power-sharing and providing space for collective dialogue, problem solving, and decision-making by the community.

A useful motto for this approach is: "If it doesn't come from the community, it's not a community-led approach." The more typical project-based approach, which puts NGOs in the driver's seat, undermines a spirit of community agency and action. When communities hold the power and take the key decisions, however, they achieve a high level of collective ownership (see Tool TRN 10 in the companion Toolkit) and responsibility for the work, thereby boosting its effectiveness and sustainability.

8. Use a patient, flexible, dialogue-oriented approach

Extensive dialogue between many people who are positioned in different ways is essential for enabling a community-led approach. Compared to a quick, project-based approach, it takes time and patience to enable inclusive dialogues that help the community to agree on common priorities and a collective vision regarding which child-related issues to address and how to support vulnerable children.

Rather than following pre-established timeframes, it is important to work according to community time and to allow agreement to emerge in an organic manner. Rather than forcing agreement too early, a better strategy is to view disagreements as natural and helpful for enabling a full exploration of ideas and to allow additional time for discussion. Rather than assuming that general community meetings allow full participation, it is better to assume that the most marginalized people and children will not naturally have much voice or decision-making influence in such meetings.

A patient, flexible approach is needed in part to enable the community to invent other processes that ensure full child participation with keen sensitivity to issues of gender, social class, religion, and other possible bases of social exclusion. To work in this slow, inclusive way requires flexibility on the part of not only the facilitators but also the managers and donors.

9. Build community capacities for mobilizing the community, making inclusive decisions, and taking effective action

In developing a community-led process, it is important to build community capacities that enable effective action and that make it possible for communities themselves to implement actions on an ongoing basis. Key skills for communities include conducting dialogues without destructive conflict, mobilizing discussions and actions that include many different people, and building capacities that contribute to effective action.

Initially, an NGO facilitator may stimulate and help to manage discussions. In order for a community-led process to develop, however, the facilitator has to step back, provide space for community leadership, build community capacities for engaging different people in the discussions, decisions, and actions, and help communities themselves to run their own process without dependence on an external facilitator. Building community capacities for self-

mobilization can be useful in taking a community-led approach to scale, as communities who have learned to mobilize themselves in a more effective manner may be in a good position to help other communities learn to mobilize themselves effectively.

At every turn, community-led approaches seek to avoid the creation of parallel systems such as new committees and structures, which can undermine the considerable strengths that are already present. Capacity building should be part of efforts to build on existing resources, and the capacity-building approach, partners, and steps should also be decided upon by communities rather than being imposed by outside actors.

10. Enable bottom-up collaboration and linkages between communities and formal child protection stakeholders and mechanisms

Communities are not islands that can address the full spectrum of child-protection issues themselves. For example, most communities are not likely to have the expertise required to treat and fully support a child who has been raped and who has become suicidal. In such cases, it is vital to have functioning referral mechanisms that help children to receive the specialized mental health and psychosocial support that they need.

Many governments have a formal child protection system that includes specialized mental health supports, though often on a limited basis. Also, the formal aspects of child protection systems frequently include district-level or provincial social services and supports for children that can backstop communities and also help to build community capacities for child protection. If formal stakeholders at district and provincial level see the value of community-led approaches and work to support such approaches, they can become natural allies in efforts to take community-led approaches to scale.

In a community-led approach, linkages and collaboration between formal and non-formal systems are driven not by an NGO or outside experts but by the community itself in a bottom-up process.

This is illustrated by the case of community-led work in Sierra Leone (detailed fully in Tool MGM 2 in the companion Toolkit). Here, the communities chose to address teenage pregnancy and specifically requested the support of district-level health workers, who then provided key services and also helped to build community capacities for preventing teenage pregnancy. This bottom-up approach created a partnership in addressing an issue of common concern for both the communities and the formal actors involved. Because the partnership originated through community action, community members felt a strong sense of ownership about supporting the formal actors' involvement, and they actively welcomed health actors into their villages and heeded their advice in a way that the health actors reported as being quite unusual.

Effective linkages between government actors and communities can also contribute to the scalability of community-led approaches. In Malawi, for example, Save the Children, together with district-level personnel who worked on HIV and AIDS, helped to form Community AIDS Coordinating Committees (CACs) that reflected on how children and adults were being affected by AIDS, what they were concerned about, and what they could do. The members of each CAC used their skills to mobilize Village AIDS Committees, which used volunteer efforts and local

resources to support AIDS-affected children. As the Village AIDS Committees worked within a community-led approach, they received support from their CAC, which in turn connected with district-level structures.

This tiered system made it possible to reach a large number of villages and also to provide the backstopping the Village AIDS Committees needed. Because the process was community-led, the communities were still active five years after the funding had ended.[14]

11. Enable children to be key actors in the community-led process

Communities frequently come together around and act on children's issues, and children may be among the leaders of a community-led action. In fact, children are some of the most important resources that any community has. Even in difficult circumstances, children have agency and creativity, which they can use to help prevent and respond to harms to children.

When children become valued participants early on in the community dialogues, communities are more likely to draw on the lived experiences of girls and boys in identifying the key harms to children. When communities are ready to address particular harms to children, children may become central actors in and leaders of the community-led action.

If, for example, a community selects early sex as the issue to be addressed, it would be essential to have children playing a lead role in the community action since children are the key actors in sexual activities at an early age.

To enable a process in which children are valuable actors and change agents is very different from the "participation light" approach of many programs, in which children take part in relevant program activities but do not make key decisions about and lead important parts of the community activities.

12. Using child rights as a guide, support social change from within the community

A community-led approach is not an "anything goes" approach. Some child protection workers are justifiably concerned that certain community-led actions such as early marriage violate children's rights. To avoid such issues, it is important to support only community action processes that are consistent with the best interests of children.

A community-led approach to child protection recognizes that local social norms may consist of a mixture of risk factors and protective factors. A protective norm such as sending children to school supports children's rights and well-being. However, some norms support practices that are contrary to children's rights. In such a situation, it is valuable to view communities as dynamic and potentially open to social change.

[14] Donahue & Mwewa (2006).

By using child rights as a compass, well-trained community facilitators can help communities to reflect on various options, even without explicitly mentioning child rights. Facilitators can also support internal change agents in developing and implementing community-led options that are consistent with children's rights. Without making people feel judged or in some way put down, a facilitator can help community people think through the negative aspects of practices such as early marriage. Through dialogue and reflection, the community may come to see that it is inadvisable to "protect" girls by having them marry early.

In a community-led approach, social change is not directed by an NGO that might seek, for example, to end corporal punishment of children by teaching people about child rights and how to report violations of child rights. Instead, social change is guided by communities through the internal influences of opinion leaders, collective discussion and action by local people, and modeling by people who demonstrate different behaviors, often while respecting positive underlying values. Communities select which issues to address, thereby building on community readiness to change regarding those particular issues. In this respect, a community-led approach capitalizes on community readiness—or ripeness—for change.

Because communities select the issues and design and implement the action for addressing them, they collectively own, drive, and buy into the change process. To be sure, the social change process does not happen overnight. Yet as more and more people become involved in the community-led action, the weight of social behavior comes to lean in a new direction. As youth leaders, religious leaders, women's leaders, elders, and ordinary people model new behavior and come to expect others to engage in the changed behavior, reciprocal social expectations evolve and lead to a change in social norms.

13. Be prepared to step outside the usual child protection "box"

In the humanitarian and development arenas, child protection typically focuses on issues such as violence against children, sexual and gender-based violence, separation of children from families, child labor, and the recruitment of children into armed forces or groups, among others. As expressed in the global Child Protection Minimum Standards, there is keen interest in mainstreaming child protection by incorporating child protection aspects into work in different sectors.

Yet the "silos" that pervade the humanitarian architecture are highly visible when it comes to child protection. For example, issues such as teenage pregnancy are typically seen as health issues rather than child protection issues, unless the pregnancy has resulted from sexual abuse or exploitation. Similarly, out-of-school children are more likely to be seen as an education issue than a child protection issue, unless children have dropped out of school due to bullying or abuse by teachers.

Communities, however, usually take a more holistic approach. In the Sierra Leone case study (see Tool MGM 1 in the companion Toolkit), communities identified teenage pregnancy as one of the biggest harms to children. This was because girls who became pregnant dropped out of school, as did many boys who had caused the pregnancies. Young people saw being out of

school as "losing their future," and many pregnant girls had to engage in sex work in order to support themselves and their children.

Consistent with the theme of starting where communities are, it is vital to enable communities to define the issues and address them in ways that seem most appropriate and likely to be effective. This requires greater flexibility and a more holistic approach than NGOs and other external actors typically take.

How the principles discussed above translate into practice depends greatly on the context. The fact that each community is unique makes it unadvisable to use a cookie-cutter approach. The principles are designed to invite outsiders to learn deeply about the context and to help support communities to develop contextually relevant solutions to the issues that harm their children. In this respect, using the principles contributes to a highly contextualized approach. Urban communities may take different approaches than rural communities might, yet the process still follows the principles above.

The following chapters will say much more about how these principles translate into practice, but it is also essential to read and use the tools included in the companion Toolkit.

Critical Perspective

As valuable as community-led approaches are, they are by no means a "silver bullet" to be used in all situations. If the pressures of time and the magnitude of violations against children are enormous, as can happen in emergency settings, then a slow, deliberate, community-led process by itself may not be the best option. For example, if girls and boys are being recruited in large numbers and put into very dangerous settings, it might be more appropriate to use a top-down approach to stanch the flow of recruited children.

Even in such settings, however, it might be possible to overlay top-down and community-led approaches. One could, for example, use a top-down approach in order to provide immediate action and support, while also using a slower, community-led approach to help generate community solutions and preventive steps over the longer term. This is an area that requires much more attention in the future.

Community-led approaches may also cause unintended harm in particular contexts. In a war zone where spies and fears pervade all social levels, some people or authorities might see the group discussions and meetings that are usually the backbone of community-led processes as a form of political organizing or recruitment. Such perceptions could lead to violence against the perceived organizers and the children involved, thereby violating the humanitarian imperative to "Do No Harm."

In areas of armed conflict or strong political tensions, then, care must be taken to decide whether it is safe and appropriate to use a community-led approach. Of course, this same point applies to other modalities of child protection support as well.

It is also important to view critically the idea of community. Community-led approaches presuppose a sense of community, yet "community" may be contested or even nonexistent in particular contexts. Community-led approaches may be inappropriate or very challenging to implement in settings where there is little sense of community or deep divisions and tensions exist between groups in the same setting. In urban contexts with highly fluid populations and frequent movements, neighbors may not know each other or may view others as competitors for scarce resources such as housing, food, and water. Amidst very low levels of social cohesion, there may be too little community spirit and sense of commonality of purpose, values, and identity to make it feasible to implement community-driven approaches.

Similarly, if a community had significant ethnic or religious divisions and active hostilities between sub-groups, it would likely be very difficult to enable peaceful dialogues, mutual respect, and the highly inclusive process that community-led approaches call for. On a practical level, so much time could be given over to managing the tensions and divisions and ensuring a relatively equal power distribution across groups that relatively little attention could be devoted to addressing the actual child protection issues.

In any particular community, there may be underlying dynamics of power or economics that are not evident initially, but which may preclude enabling a community-led process to work well. Practically, there are times when it may be necessary to cut our losses and withdraw.

Other significant obstacles to community-led approaches can arise from the humanitarian architecture, which includes donor demands for immediate results and strict adherence to preconceived timetables, logframes, and results frameworks. Some managers may feel that their agency has no choice but to comply with rigid donor demands, which frequently drive top-down approaches. Management demands within an NGO can also require adherence to standardized approaches with fixed inputs, outputs, and achievements.

Despite these pressures, it is important to step back and remember that our greatest accountability is to the people who have been affected and are in need of support. If community-led approaches are more sustainable and generate better results than top-down approaches do, we must have the courage and the humility to admit the limits of current top-down approaches and change our way of engaging and working with communities.

We should also take the necessary time and effort to educate donors and policy leaders about the value of community-led approaches. In an era of the Sustainable Development Goals, donors are increasingly concerned about sustainability. A useful selling point for community-led approaches is that they tend to be more sustainable.

Last but not least, we need to strengthen the base of evidence regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of community-led child protection processes. There are relatively few systematic studies using robust designs and measures, and until dozens of such studies have been conducted and subjected to peer review it is too soon to promise the unmitigated success of community-led child protection processes.

At present, we are in a situation not unlike that which exists with regard to climate change. Our knowledge of climate change is highly incomplete, yet we know enough to see the need for

immediate, concerted action. The same is true with regard to community-led child protection. We need to continue doing the research to strengthen and guide our approach, and at the same time we need to act urgently. We need to test how to apply the approach on a larger scale, and how to work in different contexts.

With this in mind, we now turn to the more practical aspects of community-led approaches.