

Chapter 5.

The Learning Phase

How we first enter into and engage with a community can set mutual expectations about the respective roles of the outsiders and the community and about who holds the power.

Most often, child protection workers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) visit communities, establish a modicum of rapport, explain their purpose, and then conduct an assessment of the child protection issues in the community. Typically, the assessment focuses more on risks and deficits than on community strengths. Based on the findings, the NGO workers design an appropriate program and invite the communities to partner on its implementation. This top-down approach concentrates power in the hands of the NGO, does little to build collective agency and resilience, and quietly casts the community into a position of dependency.

A useful way of turning this around and creating a foundation for community-led work is to enter the community in a more respectful manner that focuses on deeper learning about community resilience, views, and strengths as well as risks to children.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the initial learning phase that sets the stage for community-led work. Its objectives are to:

- outline an approach that builds trust, positive relationships, and community agency right from the initial engagement;
- show how an open, grounded approach to learning goes deeper than most rapid child protection assessments and helps enable a community-led approach; and
- emphasize the importance of feeding findings back to the community in a way that prompts reflection about what local people can do to help address the harms to children.

Key Question for Practitioners

In working with communities on child protection, what is potentially lost by asking mostly pre-packaged questions, and what do we potentially gain by asking more open-ended questions?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1–8; Learning: LNG 1–5.

Initial Entry into the Community

Even before the learning phase begins, how we engage initially with the community has significant implications for the power dynamics and relationship with the community. To enter into a community in a respectful manner, we should adhere to local norms and expectations. For example, in a Muslim country, the norm may be to meet first with key imams and the *shura*, the group of male community elders.

In the first meeting, it is essential to greet the local leaders in the appropriate manner, and to dress and behave in a way that local people will see as respectful.

Introductions and Stating Our Purpose

A necessary step is to explain to the leaders who “we” (the visitors) are, including not only our name but also any agency affiliation. How we introduce ourselves, though, can bring complex power dynamics into play.

If, for example, we say, “Hello, esteemed Chief, my name is Mary Smith and I work with Defend the Children [a hypothetical international NGO]...”, that statement could trigger power dynamics and game-playing that are not conducive to a community-led approach.

This introduction fails to create a level playing field since Defend the Children, like most international NGOs, will be wealthy by local standards and staffed by well-educated people. Wanting to attract this wealth, the Chief might begin playing the familiar game of saying: “We villagers are very poor and uneducated, and we need your help.”

Indeed, he might make the village situation look worse than it really is and downplay what the community is doing to support children. The Chief might even have heard about some good projects the NGO has run in the area and might express his hope that it will run such projects here.

With the emphasis on what the NGO can do, it can be difficult to have authentic discussions about the community and its children or to lay the foundation for community-led action. It is important to manage this challenge in an honest manner that focuses on learning and avoids an emphasis on a particular NGO.

For example, in community-led work in Malawi, Save the Children entered the community as part of a district-wide AIDS committee.¹⁸ In the community-led work by the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity/Child Resilience Alliance in Sierra Leone and Kenya, we introduced ourselves as being part of a “Children’s Learning Group.” This was appropriate since learning about children was our initial objective and there was no promise of action or support. Also, multiple agencies such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, and World Vision were involved in the learning phase.

¹⁸ Donahue & Mwewa (2006).

This approach helped to manage expectations and keep the focus on the community. Maintaining that focus had much to do with how we stated our purpose and the use of open-ended, participatory methodologies for the purposes of learning about the community.

In stating our purpose, it is useful to use a broad, respectful framing that recognizes the community's agency, resilience, and ability to support their children. If we take a deficits approach that focuses only on problems of children or risks, it can imply that we are judging the community. An exclusive focus on risks limits the learning, which ought to focus on both strengths and risks.

It is also useful to speak in local idioms rather than use the technical vocabulary of child protection. Technical terms keep the focus on us and position ourselves as experts, thereby beginning a top-down process.

A stronger approach is to learn from key informants in advance of the visit how local people speak of the problems that we refer to as "child protection issues" and to use the local terms for them. Alternately, you could ask about "harms to children and what is done about them." The phrase "harms to children" seems to resonate with people in different countries and often fits with local discourse.

The box below offers a sample of how to state your purpose in a way that embodies these points.

Sample Initial Statement of Purpose

"Thanks for receiving us today. We have come to learn about the children of this village and all the good things that people do to take care of their children and keep them safe. We are part of an interagency learning group that includes global agencies such as Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision, and UNICEF.

"We will not be coming with surveys and fancy equipment. Instead, we would like to sit and talk with different people, including children, in a respectful way to learn about their views of children, what things harm them, and how the community supports them. Our approach will be very participatory, and we think people here will enjoy teaching us about what they do.

"We will not be providing or promising any aid or support for people. Our focus is on learning, so we can help to inform the work of different agencies and the government. In a spirit of learning, we promise that we will feed back to the community what we have learned and give people a chance to correct anything we might have gotten wrong.

"Our learning is not limited only to your village. It is being carried out in several districts. We wanted to work in all districts, but we could not go everywhere. We'll be happy to say more about the learning but first wanted to hear your initial thoughts on whether this learning work is appropriate here and also to respond to any questions you might have."

This statement sets an appreciative tone by asking to learn about all the good things that people do to care for their children. In addition to being respectful, this wording positions the community people rather than the NGO as the experts. The statement also communicates that there is something like a teacher-student relationship between the community and the outsiders. This, too, helps to position the communities as the experts, thereby placing the community in a position of power.

Variations of this statement have proven useful in Sierra Leone, Kenya, and India. However, it is not intended as a universal entry script, as it is always important to use an approach that fits the local context and to avoid reliance on universalized approaches.

Of course, actions can speak more loudly than words. If the outsiders arrive in large vehicles with NGO or UN logos, wear expensive clothing or seat themselves in ways that seem to place them above the community leader, these nonverbal cues can signal that the outsiders hold the power and are not ready to come down to the level of the people.

To manage the nonverbal aspects, it is useful to talk in advance with people who know and respect the community and who can advise on local norms and how to demonstrate respect and humility.

Initial Meetings with Other Key Community Stakeholders

It is respectful to have similar meetings and discussions with other community leaders such as elders, lower level chiefs, imams or pastors, and heads of women's groups and youth groups. Bringing all the main leaders on board serves to legitimize the work and also builds trust. Often this needs to be an iterative process of meeting first with the male leaders and elders and asking for permission to talk with women, children or youth, and others.

But the initial community stakeholder meetings should include more than the recognized community leaders. After all, if you met only with the recognized leaders who are part of the community power elite, that could be seen as a signal that the outsiders only want to meet and hear from relatively powerful, well-off people. Unintentionally, this perception could quietly marginalize people who are not part of the power elite.

A useful strategy for managing such perceptions is to meet first with community leaders and shortly afterwards with people who are not at the center of power. This can be done, for example, by taking a transect walk—that is, by walking along an imagined straight line all the way through the community and stopping and talking with the people, including very poor people, you encounter.

Even if done in the manner of an informal greeting and chat, this can help observe how people live and learn about the situation of children. Also, local people will be watching. If the encounters are respectful, other people will more likely be open to talking with the outsiders.

Doing this in a sensitive manner requires giving attention to which times are likely to be convenient for talking with an outsider. If the poorest people have been out farming or selling all day, it could be best to stop by in the evening, or very early in the morning. Adjusting our timing

to the needs and situation of local people helps to build trust and to open the door for developing relationships and learning in a systematic manner about the community.

An Open, Grounded Approach to Learning

To enable deep listening about the local context, it is important to take a slower approach to assessment than is typically used and to adopt the attitude that “we don’t know what we don’t know.” After all, local people may have views and categories that do not fit outsiders’ understandings. Even their view of who “children” are may differ considerably from that of outsiders.

Orientation of the Learner

The learner should adopt a non-extractive, reciprocal orientation. If the learner comes to a community, acquires information from them, and then leaves with no follow-up, local people will likely feel frustrated and exploited. Such feelings undermine trust and are poor starting points for community-led action.

A better approach is one that establishes a sense of give and take. The community will give information, and in return the learner will use the information in ways that aim to benefit the community. Alternately, the community will provide relevant information about the situation of children, and in return the NGO could provide information about services and resources that community members could access and that are not seen as related to the facilitator.

This kind of reciprocal approach builds trust, keeps the focus on the community, and sets the stage for deep listening and learning about the community.

A process of deep listening and learning requires empathy, curiosity, humility, and a willingness to background our own preconceptions, thoughts, and analyses regarding the situation (see Tool FAC 3 in the companion Toolkit).

For example, if you are talking with local women who say, “Girls sleep with men who give them small items or money”, an empathic orientation is not to judge them but to want to learn more. You might do this by asking questions such as: “How old are the girls?”, “What kind of small items?”, “How is this practice viewed by the girls?”, “Is it usual or normal for most girls, or mainly for a sub-group of girls in the area?”, and “How do you feel about this practice?”

This open-minded, listen-and-learn orientation represents a sharp departure from the more typical “expert orientation” taken by people who conduct child protection assessments. Yet this approach enables us to understand the practice as it is seen through the eyes of local people.

The learning process also helps to build trust since it communicates quietly that local people are not to be judged but have views and practices that are worth learning about.

Of course, this approach does not tacitly condone the ill-treatment of girls. It is out of a commitment to child rights that we want to learn about girls sleeping with men who give them

small things or money. Quite often, we learn that different people in a village or neighborhood hold divergent views about such practices and whether they are good for girls, families, and the community. These diverging views can help to animate very rich follow-on discussions that fuel thinking about how the community could change such a practice.

The key, however, is that decisions to condemn such practices must come from the community itself. As always in community-led approaches, the decisions about what are significant harms to children and which harms to address must come from the people.

Learners should also have a resilience orientation. When we take a deficits approach of asking only about the bad things that happen to children, it is easy for community members to feel that they are not being respected for all the good things they do for children. A deficits approach can also portray people as victims or as unable to solve their problems. Such portrayals can disempower local people. In addition, since effective action builds on existing strengths, it is essential to document those strengths during the learning phase.

Learners should therefore approach their task with a genuine interest in learning about both risk factors and protective factors.

Asking Open-ended, Elicitive, Questions

A good way to listen deeply to local people is to ask very open-ended questions that are likely to elicit the participant's own understandings and views and to invite discussion.

For example, asking open-ended questions such as: "Are there harms to children that occur in this village/neighborhood?", or "What worries or concerns you about the safety of children in this community?" create a large, open space that invites the speaker to identify harms to children. This is critical because it does not pre-judge what the important child protection issues are but focuses on the views of the listener.

Because this approach is designed to elicit or bring forth the speaker's own views, it potentially puts the learner in a position to learn about harms to children that have previously not even been on their radar.

For example, after the war in Sierra Leone, the discussions about harms to children who had been recruited sometimes led people to say things such as: "That girl is not clean, and she cannot eat off the same plate as other people." Follow-up, probing questions and girls' narratives indicated that the speaker saw the formerly recruited girl as being spiritually polluted from being around dead people in the bush. The phrase "cannot eat off the same plate as other people" meant in the local idiom that that she could not interact freely with other people, as normal interactions could invoke bad spirits for community members or family members, causing sickness or death. This point had implications for the girl's stigmatization and also for her reintegration and protection.

This process of asking open-ended questions followed by probing questions is important also for the ongoing learning process of facilitators (see Tool FAC 6 in the companion Toolkit), who ideally would be part of the initial learning effort.

Flexible Yet Systematic Learning

The process described above of asking open-ended questions followed by probing questions requires considerable flexibility on the part of the learner. To a large extent, the learner follows the respondent's lead, going where they want to go.

This is a significant shift from the more typical approach of asking a set series of questions, either in a questionnaire or in a structured interview or discussion.

The flexible approach, however, is far from aimless, and it is important to be clear about the questions that the learning effort seeks to answer. The box below, for example, shows some of the key questions that the initial ethnographic learning phase in Sierra Leone and Kenya had set out to answer. These questions may or may not be asked directly, yet they should be at the back of the learner's mind as things they need to learn about. When the opportunity arises, the learner asks a question that fits the context and is timed to fit with what the respondent has been discussing. Via observation, the learner also obtains other useful information.

Key Questions, Ethnographic Phase

1. How do local people understand:
 - Childhood and children's development?
 - Girls' and boys' normal activities, roles, and responsibilities?
 - The main child protection risks or sources of harm to children?
 - The processes or mechanisms used by families or communities to support children who have been affected by various protection threats? And the outcomes of those mechanisms, and how satisfactory these outcomes are in the eyes of different stakeholders?
2. How do child protection risks vary by gender and age?
3. Whom do girls or boys turn to for help when a particular threat arises?
4. Who are the natural helpers and what networks do they have?
5. What are the indigenous, "traditional" mechanisms of protection?
6. What child-focused committees exist in communities and/or Chiefdoms/districts? How are they perceived by local people? What are their roles, responsibilities, and functionalities?
7. How are very sensitive/complex issues addressed?
8. What are the linkages between community mechanisms and the national child protection system? How do communities perceive the government mechanisms that may exist? What gaps occur in these linkages?

Living in the Area

Trust is the foundation for effective learning, as local people will not speak or act freely if they do not trust the learner or they have concerns about being judged. One of the best ways to establish trust is for the learner to actually live in the community for a period of time.

After several weeks, the learner mixes and talks with many people, developing relationships and collective acceptance. As local people relax and see the learner being comfortable and respectful among the community, they in turn feel more relaxed and willing to speak openly and share more deeply about their culture and practices.

Living in the area, the learner observes when children go to school (and who does not go to school), when people go to their farms or to the market or to the mosque or church, when girls and women rise and what they do, when the men wake up and what they do, when and how people socialize, and so on.

This knowledge illuminates the rhythms and patterns of everyday life. It also enables us to time learning activities so that they are respectful, do not conflict with people's ability to work and earn money, and include people (for example, children who work on the streets) who may not be present in their community during normal working hours.

Living in the area also enables a first-hand understanding of the context. If the learner lived in a house that was typical of the homes in the area, they would experience directly what it means not to have running water and what is required to obtain access to water, health care, and other necessities.

Diverse Methods

Learning through the use of diverse methods is essential since each method has its strengths and weaknesses. By combining methods that complement each other, it is possible to capitalize on their complementary strengths and mitigate against the drawbacks of any one particular method.

Particularly valuable are open-ended, participatory methods that help to unlock people's agency and lay the foundation for subsequent community-led work. A collection of the participatory tools used in the Sierra Leone work is found in Tool LNG 4 in the companion Toolkit. Of these, two particular methods—narrative methods and participant observation—are discussed below.

Narrative methods recognize the importance of language and the fact that people are natural story tellers and makers of meaning. As people narrate their lives and experiences, they communicate rich information about their values, personal views and motivations, and understandings of their social world and their place within it. Narrative methods are highly useful in helping us to learn about local people's perceptions, understandings, values, and struggles.

For example, if a learner were to ask a Kenyan woman, "Who is a child?", she might answer, "The child is someone who cannot do things for herself and has to rely on other people such as

parents to do most things.” This suggests that the speaker does not think of children in terms of age but in terms of being dependent on others.

Probing questions and flexible follow-up discussion could help to clarify what it means for people not to be dependent, whether dependent people are children even if they are 40 years old, and so on. This process can provide rich insight into the woman’s understanding of who is a child and the boundaries between childhood and adulthood.

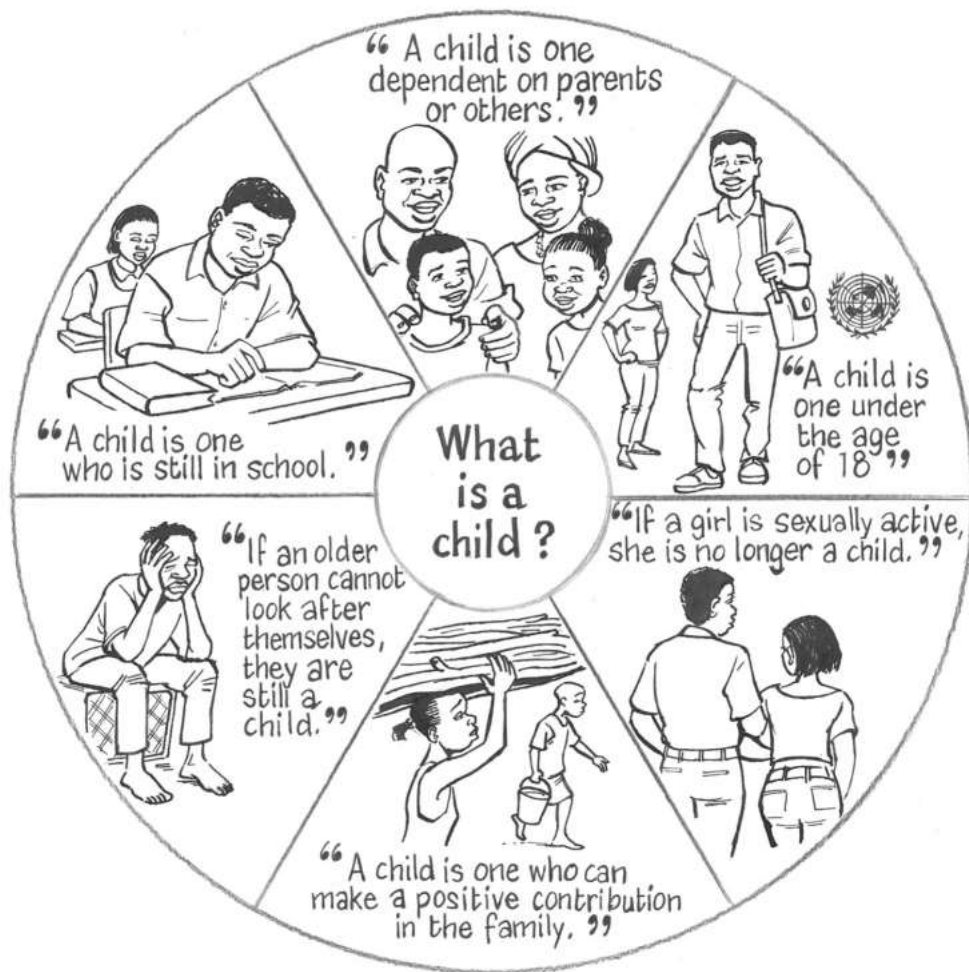
More than most methods, narrative methods also help to illuminate local conceptual distinctions. For example, if a mother is asked what she thinks of child-beating, she might say, “This is the way children learn how to obey their parents and elders. If we do not discipline the child, he will not learn proper behavior.” However, she might add, “Child-beating is not the same as cruelty. Some parents really hurt their children, even burning their hand in the fire. This is cruelty, and we have laws against that.”

Such narratives indicate that the mother does not believe that all forms of physical punishment are good for the child, and if the beating or physical punishment is severe then it falls outside of everyday “child-beating” and into the category of “cruelty.”

Narrative methods help us to learn about these categories, which may differ from outsiders’ categories. Narrative methods may also illuminate areas of struggle or uncertainty. For example, a mother may say initially that child-beating is necessary but then amend this by saying, “I’m not sure that beating is really good for children. Some parents are asking, ‘Is there a better way of disciplining our children?’”

Such reflections offer a window on the people’s subjective struggles and areas of emerging change. If many people in an area ask such questions, it might indicate that the time is ripe for work on social norms change.

Narrative methods may also be used to learn about which harms to children local people see as most important. For example, the ethnographic tools used in Sierra Leone and Kenya include group discussions, in which local people identify various things that they see as harms to children and then rank them according to which ones they see as being most important or significant. This process paves the way for the post-learning work, in which the community as a whole decides which harm or harms to children it wants to address.



In using narrative methods, a key priority is to capture what people say verbatim. As discussed above, recording terms such as “heavy work” or “eating off the plate with others” is critical for capturing what people have actually said and understanding their views.

Not helpful is the tendency for interviewers to insert or inject their own terms by naming “heavy work” as “child labor.” The meaning of “child labor”, which is an internationalized term, may be very different from what the respondent had actually meant.

Whenever it is possible and appropriate, the learning team should work to capture key terms in the exact form used by the speaker. This often entails the use of digital recorders, with careful attention given to adhering to principles of informed consent and confidentiality. If the use of recorders is ethically inappropriate, as can occur, for example, in a conflict setting, it can be valuable to instead train the learners how to take notes in shorthand or how to work with a colleague who can focus on note-taking, with assurances given that no names or personal identifiers will appear in the written records.

CAPTURING LOCAL IDIOMS AND MEANINGS



Of course, narrative methods have significant limitations. If we wanted to know how much violence against children actually occurs, narrative methods might not yield the most accurate information. Parents may underestimate how often or how severely they beat their children, since factual information about that could threaten their image of being good parents who care for their children and avoid cruelty.

Because there is often a gap between what people say and what they do, it is useful to use participant observation to complement narrative methods.

As the name suggests, *participant observation* is a method in which the learner makes observations as they participate with local people in their daily activities. These might include, for example: farming, washing clothing, going to school, going to the mosque, eating meals with family, doing chores, or children playing with other children.

In these contexts, you might actually observe a teacher beating a child, other children bullying a child, a girl and boy helping their parents, teenage girls talking with each other in a supportive manner, and so on.

Such observations depict everyday life with a directness and a richness that is sometimes not apparent in narratives. The combination of participant observation and narrative methods may give a more accurate picture than would be attained by either method alone. For example, narratives might give the impression that child beating is not such a bad or stressful thing, yet direct observation of parents disciplining their children may paint a very different picture.

To ensure the quality of the data, it is vital to have an experienced learner/researcher act as a mentor who checks the data collection process and the data quality. By making regular field

visits, even unannounced visits, the mentor can observe how the learner interacts with people and adheres (or does not adhere) to the learning principles. The mentor should offer observations and supportive advice that helps the learner improve their skills and do a better job.

The mentor should also check on a daily basis some of the written records of interviews or group discussions, reviewing them against portions of the digital recordings for accuracy and giving advice as needed to the learner. Without such a checking process, the intense demands of learning and field realities can tire learners, leading to data losses and decrements in the data quality.

A key part of the learning phase is to contrast different points of view according to gender, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and other related factors. This approach not only avoids homogenized portrayals of community views, but also illuminates how our positioning in the community influences our understanding and views.

If done well, this type of analysis can clarify how, for example, the lived experiences of girls differ from those of boys, and the gendered patterns of risks and protective factors. This information helps to illuminate power dynamics and shows that it is too general to speak of “harms to children.” Such information is an important part of the foundation for children’s full participation and subsequent inclusive community action.

A useful strategy in the learning process is to engage children and other community members in the learning, making the process one of co-learning. For example, we can train teenagers to learn about harms to children through means such as photography, drawing, group discussions, use of electronic media, and so on.¹⁹

The engagement of children in guiding the learning process provides rich information about children’s lived experiences and helps to illuminate issues that may be more salient to children than to adults. Moreover, a child participatory approach draws on children’s creativity and sets the stage for high levels of child participation throughout the community-led process.

Community Discussion and Reflection

Although community members have participated in the learning process, different people may have taken part in different activities and may not have the “big picture” that comes from a collective sharing and discussion of the overall findings.

An important step, then, is to have a process of collectivization in which the community as a whole discusses and reflects on the findings. This process is fundamental for the purposes of validating the key findings. After all, it is possible that the learning effort has been limited or even gone off track.

¹⁹ A full discussion of these methods is beyond the scope of this Guide. For useful resources, see the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (2012) and Skovdol & Cornish (2015).

A whole community discussion can help to ensure that the findings are comprehensive, accurate, and interpreted in an appropriate manner. This process offers valuable opportunities for communities to reflect and begin to mobilize themselves for action to address the harms to children that the learning phase had identified.

Preparation, Sharing, and Validation

In preparing to feed information back to communities, careful attention should be given to how the information will be presented.

For example, if local people have low rates of literacy, it would be more appropriate to feed the main findings back verbally in simple terms, rather than by means of a sophisticated written report. The verbal presentation could be coupled with a “light” written summary report that the community leaders could keep to think through.

To enable a respectful, participatory process, it is important to have a meeting with significant numbers of community people, including children, with the leader’s support. We can ask the leader if it is a good idea and acceptable to have a community meeting that everyone knows about well in advance and in which the findings will be shared. If the leader has felt respected throughout the process, they will likely not only approve such a meeting but will also advise on how to make it successful and best prepare for it.

The objectives of this community discussion of the overall findings are twofold. The first is to share the findings with community members in a respectful manner and in a spirit of co-learning. The second is to check the accuracy of the findings.

The feedback and validation will be most enjoyable for community members if it is done in a highly participatory manner.

For example, in Sierra Leone, one of the mentors (David Lamin) fed the findings back to the community by asking questions at the group meeting, such as: “Now, what are the main things that harm children here?” After community members had called out many items, the mentor then reminded people of all the good things they had taught the learners, noting the key harms to children they had identified. People could see the convergence of ideas or the lack thereof, and they commented accordingly. Fortunately, there was a high level of convergence in this case.

The same process was then repeated with questions such as: “Who is a child?” and “What supports children’s well-being here?” As people chanted out responses, there was animated discussion. In the end, the findings of the learning phase were validated by the community.

This validation is more than a means of checking accuracy. Since local people appreciated the findings and the respectful feedback process, some people said things such as, “This research has given us a fuller picture of our children and what harms them or helps them.” This was the beginning of a process wherein people internalized the findings, not only seeing them as accurate but also taking them on board and owning them.

Community Reflection

The feedback session creates a fertile space for community reflection that ultimately paves the way for community-led action.

Often this happens spontaneously. For example, during the course of validating findings, someone might ask a question such as: “What are we going to do about these [harms to children]?”

This question is important because it invites thinking about action by the community itself. Such a question reflects a sense of community ownership. The community members see particular harms to children as the community’s problem and responsibility.

If the question does not arise spontaneously, the mentor or facilitator could ask a general question such as: “Can anything be done to address these problems [or a specific problem]?” Now the question is what the community itself will do about it, which is the subject of our next chapter.