

Chapter 6.

Supporting the Community Planning Process

Following the learning phase, communities will have a heightened awareness of various harms to children that need to be addressed.

This awareness, however, may not translate into inclusive action, as community elites may guide discussions and plans for action. An inclusive process is needed in order to unlock the greatest potential for change and to bring forward the views of girls, boys, marginalized people, and others who are not usually at the center of power.

Also, community action alone may not be enough to address harms that require collaboration between communities and formal actors in the child protection system. In this context, outside agencies may contribute to children's well-being by playing a facilitative role.

The purpose of this chapter is to increase understanding of how to support an inclusive community planning process in which communities decide which harm(s) to children they want to address and how they will do so. Its objectives are to:

- emphasize the importance of deep engagement and relationship with communities in enabling community decisions to work with an agency (or agencies) and its facilitator;
- outline how to support contextualized processes wherein communities engage in inclusive dialogue and decision-making to select which harm(s) to children they want to address through community-led action; and
- explore different models wherein communities decide which actions or steps they will take to address the harm(s) to children that they have selected and how they can collaborate with government actors and service providers.

Key Question for Practitioners

How can we co-create with communities a process in which communities decide which harm(s) to children they want to address and which actions they will take to address those harms?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC 1–9; Training: TRN 2–5, 10; Management: MGM 3, MGM 4, & MGM 6–11.

Deciding to Work Together

The process of deciding to work together may occur organically in the context of providing feedback from the learning phase to the community. During the collective reflection that accompanies the feedback, community people naturally ask themselves, “What are we going to do about these harms to children?”, and they often ask agency workers, “Will you continue to support us?” The latter question is complex and could carry hidden expectations for financial support or even for a donor-beneficiary relationship in which the non-governmental organization (NGO) leads and takes the key decisions.

A useful, honest strategy at this stage would be to (a) express your interest in continuing to learn from and accompany the community in its efforts to support vulnerable children, and (b) say that in the coming weeks, you (the outsiders) will ask to talk with community leaders and discuss further a community-led process for moving forward together.

This approach creates space for deepening the community-outsider relationship and would likely be seen as respectful and supportive. It avoids making false promises or implying that outsiders will now lead the process. In some contexts, it can be very important to state that you do not have large sums of money or wish to bring in outsider approaches.

Alternately, you could go to the community again and ask whether outside accompaniment, co-learning, and support would be useful following the learning phase. You cannot assume that there will or should be an affirmative response to this question.

Indeed, in the next rounds of discussion, it can be useful to help everyone (including yourself) to question whether collaboration is appropriate and what the expectations are regarding collaboration. If community people show little interest in collaborating, or if inappropriate expectations are apparent (e.g., the community leader demands that the outsiders will give the community material aid as is typical NGO behavior in the area), then there will be insufficient grounds for collaboration.

Either way, more discussion is needed in order for both sides to make an informed decision about whether it makes sense to collaborate and how. These discussions are about potentially deepening and enriching the relationship, and they may have significant impact on the depth of the relationship.

What is outlined below is not a recipe but a set of indicative steps for enabling a constructive discussion with communities. The steps assume that the facilitator has been part of the learning phase and is well known to the community leaders and people.

Indicative Steps for Enabling Discussion About Whether to Collaborate

1. Follow the local norms by meeting first with the Chief or leader of the area, recalling the main harms to children that the community has identified.
2. Discuss steps that the community is already taking or has already tried in addressing the main harms to children. Ask: “What are the next steps for the community in addressing these harms?” This often leads to a mention of wanting outside help, which opens the door for discussion about possible collaboration. Keep the emphasis, though, on what communities can do and what local capacities and resources they can use.
3. If the leader is open to collaborating, repeat the process with community people, engaging with people who are positioned in different ways. Usually, it is possible to do this within a week or two, without taking up too much of community members’ time.
4. Meet with different community people outside of any large meetings that are held, inviting reflection on the possibility of collaborating as the community addresses a particular harm to children.

Key messages that the NGO can send during the discussions include:

- Outsiders cannot fix the problems—only communities can do that. We support self-help and the power and action by community people.
- We, as outsiders, can help communities to address self-selected harm(s) to children, yet our role is facilitative only. We are not the “experts” who will lead an intervention. We can help the community to engage with each of its members to choose which issue(s) to address, decide how to address them, take its own actions, and help evaluate the actions. We want to learn from the community and document their work on behalf of vulnerable children.
- We work in a distinct way that engages many local people in dialogue and decision-making, drawing on the strengths of everyone in the community.
- Our role as outsiders is short-term. There are many communities that my organization is concerned about, and we will need to move on to other communities. After you get started, we will be able to check in with you from time to time and may be able to provide information or help you make connections with relevant government or NGO programs that may help to strengthen your efforts.
- We do not provide large sums of money, which tend to create interventions and processes that are not sustainable. Communities have taught us that they can achieve their own

solutions using mostly their own resources, and we would like to support this kind of process.

If there is mutual interest in collaborating, it is valuable to describe the slow, dialogue-oriented process envisioned and to ask questions that invite reflection on how it is best if everyday people rather than community leaders drive the process. It can be useful to do this using local idioms or referring to examples that fit the local context (for example, “Does it take all the people to raise healthy children?”, or “Can a single farmer/fisherman feed a village?”).

Such questions invite reflection on the importance of everyone in the community working together to address harms to children. From there, you could outline the various stages of the work: selecting which harm or harms to children to address, planning the action, and so on. Throughout, it is vital to stress the importance of the full participation of different people, including teenagers and children.

If there is interest in collaborating, it is useful for the community to define its roles and responsibilities, and for the external facilitator (if applicable) to define what they are prepared to commit to doing and the limitations of their role.

Since the outsider role is facilitative and time-limited, an important NGO responsibility is to support local people in their planning and action, with regular reports and updates given to the community leader. For communities, the main responsibilities are to share their views openly, participate fully at each stage, and work collectively for the benefit of the children in the community.

It is useful to reiterate once again that this is not an NGO “project.” The community itself enables, defines, and leads the work, with light support from the NGO facilitators and, if action research is being done, from the data collectors. Alternately, the community might decide to identify its own, internal facilitator, who is trained and backstopped by the NGO.

Although this process of deciding whether and how to collaborate is highly contextual, it is useful to identify some benchmarks for this process and also some things to avoid.

Key Benchmarks:

- Community decides to collaborate with the outside group.
- Community accepts the facilitator’s presence in the community or designates its own, internal facilitator.
- Clarification of the facilitator’s roles and responsibilities, with clear emphasis on community leadership, decision-making, and power.

What to Avoid:

- Raised expectations.
- Promises of money and monetarizing the process.

- Working only through the community power elite.
- Making the facilitator the focus and initiator of activities.
- Creating or strengthening dependency on outsiders.

Communities Select Which Harm(s) to Children to Address

The community-led process begins with the community itself defining which harm(s) to children it is most concerned about and intends to address.

This decision has significant implications for children’s well-being and also enables genuine community ownership. As the communities themselves take stock of what is most damaging to children and decide which harms to address, they increase their motivation and take responsibility for addressing the issues collectively. In most cases, it is useful for the facilitator to help the community focus initially on manageable tasks that can be completed relatively soon. This initial success helps to build the community’s confidence and ability to take on more challenging tasks.

Like most aspects of community-led work, the process is as important as the actual decisions taken. In keeping with a social justice perspective, inclusivity is a high priority. If the discussions and decisions are dominated by the community power elite, or if many people are left out of the discussions altogether, significant numbers of community members may not see the process as “theirs.” Not feeling ownership of the process, they may have little desire to get involved, even if they are invited to participate in the discussions.

This can be a significant loss for several reasons. If, for example, girls are excluded, the community will likely not learn about girls’ views and the distinctive harms that they face. As a result, the community will be less likely to select the harms that girls see as most important, and the subsequent actions are not likely to be sensitive to girls’ views or issues. Such a flawed, gender-blind process of decision-making would demean girls and help to cement male-privileging values and practices that enable ongoing harms to girls.

Similarly, if the process leaves out people with disabilities, it will not learn about the situation of children with disabilities or be able to benefit from their views, agency, and creativity.

Promoting Inclusive Dialogue and Decision-Making

When asked how can the community make a decision, local people often answer along the lines of: “We will have community meetings that everyone attends, and the community will discuss the issues and make a decision.”

To stimulate awareness about how inclusive community meetings are, the facilitator should ask many different people questions such as the following:

- Does everyone come to community meetings? Who does not come?

- Why do some people not come to community meetings?
- Do girls usually speak up at community meetings? Why not?
- Can boys speak up at community meeting? Why not?

As people discuss such questions, they become more aware that community meetings are not friendly spaces for children to speak up, nor are they fully inclusive. For example, who is excluded from the community meeting in the picture below?



Next, by asking questions such as: “Would it be useful for children to be able to participate in discussions of harms to children?”, and “What could be done to enable girls/boys to have a greater voice in discussions of harms to children and which harm to address?”, the facilitator invites individuals and groups to develop options for having a more inclusive process.

Since the question about options is open-ended, community members are free to make many suggestions. Without favoring particular options, the facilitator helps the community to think through different options with careful attention to feasibility and inclusivity.

Particularly if the community seems uncertain about how to enable everyone to have a voice in the discussion and decision-making, it can be useful for the facilitator to share various approaches that other communities have used, inviting discussion of them, too. This is not an imposition of other approaches since the community still holds the power to decide how it will go about enabling an inclusive process.

In a spirit of co-learning across communities, the approach used in Sierra Leone (see Tool MGM 2 in the companion Toolkit) intermixed community meetings, small group discussions, and home

visits. The small group discussions were conducted privately with groups of ten or so girls, boys, women, men, and elders, respectively, with the general points from these discussions fed back to the community, without personal identifiers.

Small group discussions create a safe space to talk among peers. This allows girls, for example, to speak openly about issues that they would not otherwise discuss if men or boys were present. The aim is not to bring a “right answer” back to the next community meeting but to share with the community the options that have been suggested and enable a discussion of these options.

Home visits are advantageous since they may include people such as a blind child who stays mostly at home or very poor people who work extra long hours and have little time to attend meetings.

Such visits, however, need to be respectful, supportive, and focused on the views of the participants, without judgment. Developing informal guidelines through participatory dialogue for making home visits could help to ensure that the home visits are safe, ethical, and constructive. Throughout the discussions, the emphasis should be on community dialogue and decision-making. This approach is consistent with the spirit that we all stand to learn from community insights and problem solving.

However, there are many different ways of enabling full participation by people in the community who are typically marginalized, and the approach used in Sierra Leone is not intended to be prescriptive.

A different means of enabling meaningful child participation was used by ChildFund in northern Afghanistan in 2002. Here, ChildFund facilitators enabled a process of child-led risk mapping, in which children drew pictures of their village and identified the places that were dangerous for children. When the children presented their findings via role-plays to their villages, they showed how young children sometimes died from falling into uncovered well holes. Without any NGO encouragement, community members became concerned about the problem, identified pieces of wood, and used the wood to cover the holes that had posed a threat to young children.

This community-led process was galvanized by children’s sharing their lived experiences in a creative means of role-plays. To their credit, the children managed the power relations with adults well by demonstrating respect for their elders throughout the process.

When it comes to enabling inclusive participation, there is no “one-size-fits-all” option, and the local community should take the lead in deciding how to bring forward diverse voices and views.

A key step is to work according to community time. It may take several cycles of large community meetings followed by smaller discussions before agreement is reached on how to enable inclusive decision-making. Or the community may decide to work initially via large group meetings, taking subsequent steps to bring in a wider diversity of people.

Multiple obstacles can arise in developing inclusive community dialogue and decision-making. If movement to include the views and voices of children occurs too quickly, it can upset the local norms and the balance of power between children and adults. Similarly, efforts to include

marginalized people can evoke backlash, particularly if there are strong norms related to caste and religion.

As these complexities suggest, the path to an inclusive decision-making process entails slow, social change and requires a patient approach. A good strategy for managers and facilitators is to discuss these and related complexities with respected community members who, together with mentors, can help the facilitator to navigate difficult issues in a contextually appropriate manner.

One issue that warrants attention is whether the community leader should participate directly in the community dialogues. The leader's participation is valuable, since he or she may bring forward good ideas and people may expect him or her to play a central role in the discussions. Also, the leader's participation could legitimate the process, which is critical for its success.

A significant concern, however, is that the leader's participation could control or limit the discussion of different ideas. After all, the leader is a very powerful person and is often seen as being very knowledgeable. To disagree publicly with the leader would be inappropriate. People who disagree might stay silent due to concerns about coming under criticism or about what might happen if they fell out of favor with the powerful leader.

As a result, it will likely be difficult to have a fully honest, open discussion among community members if the leader participates in open discussions.

To manage or prevent this potential challenge, it is useful to talk with the leader in advance of the first full community discussions. Having put the problem before him or her, we can then ask for their advice in handling it.

In Sierra Leone, this led a Paramount Chief to exclaim with a laugh that “no one would disagree publicly with the Paramount Chief!” Appropriately, the Chief then suggested that he would not participate directly but instead would receive regular reports and updates on the state of the discussions and planning. This approach simultaneously recognized the authority of his position and also allowed for an inclusive process.

Generating Ideas About and Prioritizing Harms to Children

Once the community has worked out how to it wants to enable an inclusive process, the facilitator may begin asking questions that help the community to select a harm or harms to children to address through community-led action.

This will likely be a slow process that can take several months, since the issues are complex and the community is just getting into the swing of having highly inclusive dialogues. The process also must unfold in two steps, with broader discussion followed by narrowing down and prioritization of the harms to children to be addressed.

The first step is for diverse community members to generate ideas about the main harms to children. Valuable questions for facilitators and community members to ask might include:

- What were the main harms to children that the community identified during the learning phase?
- What makes these harms so important to address? Why are they of concern?
- Have things changed since the learning phase? Are there additional harms to children that have become more important?

These and related questions help participants to think through what they see collectively as the main harms to children and why those harms are significant or very concerning. Frequently mentioned among the latter are the damage to or suffering of children, limits to their well-being and healthy development, or burdens placed on family and community.

Over time, the discussions develop an ecological perspective, without it being named as such. By inviting the views of many different people and enabling the exploration of ideas without lapsing into debates or efforts to find the “right” answer, the facilitator enables an inclusive process, helps diverse people to participate, and promotes enjoyable discussions in which people learn from one another.

Not infrequently, the inputs from small group discussions by girls or by boys are eye-openers since they remind adults of the gendered nature of the harms and the very different positions of girls and boys. Typically, it takes several cycles of community discussion followed by small group discussions to reach this point.

The second step is then to help the community to narrow down and prioritize the harms to children that might be addressed. Here the facilitator might help the community think about why it is valuable to focus on one harm or a small number of harms and what considerations might help the community to create a shortlist of options. Valuable questions to ask can include:

- Why is it important to focus on one harm or a small number of harms to children?
- What might happen if the community tried to address all the harms to children at the same time?
- Out of all the harms discussed so far, what are the top three harms to children that might be considered further? In other words, what is our “shortlist”?
- Are some harms easier to address than others? Could it be valuable to start with a focus not on the most challenging harm but on harms that the community can likely address effectively?

This second step may be slow in part because there may be divergent views about the most important harms to children. To build an inclusive process, it is essential to take time and make sure that different points of view receive adequate attention. If particular people feel marginalized at this moment, they will likely step back from or even withdraw from the process, thereby weakening its inclusivity.

It may also take time for communities to get past a focus on poverty as the overarching harm to children. To aid this process, the facilitator may stimulate reflection on the fact that in some poor families, children do well, and in some relatively well-to-do families, children fare poorly.

Over time, though, experience shows that communities will slowly reach agreement on the top two or three harms to children, from which the community will select one or several harms to address.

It is valuable for communities to have the freedom to decide whether they want to address a single harm to children or multiple harms to children. In Sierra Leone, communities selected a single harm to children (teenage pregnancy) since the action research aimed to test the effect of a single community action. Yet in many situations, communities may decide to address multiple harms that they see as being interconnected.

For example, in Kenya, the communities selected “early sex” as the harm to children to be addressed. Early sex was a priority in part because it related to early consensual sex, sexual abuse and exploitation of children, and early pregnancy. Similarly, some communities in India chose “child marriage” as the harm to be addressed, and they recognized that child marriage was interconnected with “school dropout.”

A strength of a community-led approach is that communities often do not think in terms of the divisions inherent in the humanitarian system. Instead, they take a holistic approach in their actions to address harms to children. In this respect, we have much to learn from communities.

At the same time, it is important to encourage communities (and ourselves!) to be realistic and to not set themselves up for failure. Considerations of possible community actions often find their way into discussions of which harm to address. This can be helpful in keeping an eye on what is practical to accomplish.

For example, in a recent planning discussion in tribal communities in India, a community felt strongly that alcoholism was one of the biggest harms to children, and people wanted badly to address it. However, when they spontaneously asked themselves how they could address it, they realized they had no feasible means of reducing deeply ingrained, widespread alcoholism. This did not decrease their desire to address it, but they learned through dialogue that it would be better to collectively address harms to children that they can likely address in an effective manner.

Similarly, it is useful to help communities recognize that if they try to take on too many harms at once, their chances of success will probably diminish. In light of limited local resources and other constraints, communities are more likely to succeed in their action if they do not take on too much at once and start with harms to children that practically can be addressed through community action.

A good practice in community-led work is to help communities achieve early wins by focusing initially on harms to children that the communities stand a good chance of addressing in an effective manner.

Community Facilitation

In a community-led approach, the facilitator aims from the start to work themselves out of a job. After all, it is communities who should facilitate dialogues, manage disagreements, consider different options, and make decisions about which harm(s) to children to address and how to address them.

In this regard, a key task of the facilitator is to help community members learn facilitation and mobilization skills. An effective facilitator does this first by modeling the process. In addition, the facilitator invites community members to do things such as facilitate group discussions, coaching and encouraging them as they go. Often, people who already are skilled facilitators come forward and help to move the community process along.

In a whole-community approach, however, it is useful to spread the facilitation responsibilities out and to avoid any particular individual or sub-group having too much power.

One way of doing this is to organize workshops in which different community members practice their skills of facilitation and mobilization and receive constructive feedback from other community members. Subsequently, the participants may become active as facilitators of small group discussions, home visits and other outreach activities, and even large group discussions. Build the capacities for community facilitation is an important part of community-led work.

As discussed below, community facilitation relates closely with issues of community oversight of its planning and action. That is, as the planning progresses, the community may deliberately assign a small number of people the task of facilitating the planning process and development and implementation of community action plans.

Inter-Community Collaboration

Inter-community collaboration is an excellent means of enabling co-learning and collective action on a wider scale. In addition, district or provincial authorities are typically more interested in collaborating with groups of communities (e.g., neighborhoods in urban areas, or villages in rural areas) than with single communities.

As usual, inter-community collaboration is best not imposed from outside but chosen by the different communities involved. If a community decides it would like to work alone, this decision should be respected.

However, if the inter-community path is to be taken, it should be recognized that the collaborative approach adds complexity in that multiple communities will need to agree on which harm(s) to children to address and which action should be taken.

A useful strategy is to begin inter-community discussions after the individual communities have created their respective shortlist of options and had developed an inclusive process. This timing gives individual communities the space they need to develop an inclusive process, but occurs before they have become fixated on addressing one particular harm to children. Such fixation can impede the inter-community process, which requires flexibility and willingness to compromise.

Another useful strategy is to have only a few communities collaborating with one another, since it is easier to gain agreement among three communities than it is to gain agreement among, for example, ten communities. In the community-led work in Sierra Leone, three communities in a similar area collaborated on the community planning and action. In Kenya, two adjoining villages collaborated on the community-led work.

To stimulate thinking about the potential value of inter-community collaboration and how to achieve it with regard to having multiple communities select a single harm to children to address, the facilitator may ask questions in each community like the following, enabling inclusive dialogue about them:

- How do communities here work together on different tasks or issues (for example, planting, water, transportation, etc.)?
- Do the harms to children that you have identified also affect children in nearby communities? How?
- What benefits could there be to having several communities collaborate in selecting which harm(s) to children to address and then deciding together what action to take in addressing the harms(s)?
- Are there particular communities you would like to collaborate with?

If there is keen interest in inter-community collaboration, the facilitator could then ask how, practically, this might occur. In the discussions that follow, communities might decide to have a cross-cutting planning group that plays a facilitative role.

In Sierra Leone, for example, a group of three communities formed an Inter-Village Task Force to help facilitate the selection of a single harm to children that all three communities would choose together and subsequently address together. This approach is described in greater detail in Tool MGM 3 in the companion Toolkit. However, it is not a recipe to be imposed on communities, which should be free to create their own process.

The outcomes of this phase of work should be an inclusive process, the selection of the harm(s) to children to be addressed through community-led action, and, if chosen by the communities, an agreement to collaborate with other communities. This phase also has more specific benchmarks to be met and things to be avoided, as outlined below.

Key Benchmarks:

- First community discussions are followed by a mixture of community discussions and small group discussions.
- The community takes steps to hear views of girls, boys, women, and men through means such as sub-group discussions on harms to children and priorities for action.
- Individual communities develop their “shortlist” of harms to children that might be addressed.

- Facilitation skills are developed and used by community members.
- Communities decide whether and how to collaborate with other communities.
- Communities select the harm(s) to children that they want to address through community led action.

What to Avoid:

- Not creating space for slow, inclusive dialogue.
- Rushing the process.
- Facilitator leads the discussion toward a particular harm or harms to children.
- Men and boys dominate the discussions.
- No participation by marginalized people.
- Tokenistic participation by children.
- Decisions are taken by the community power elite.
- Excessive or singular focus on poverty reduction.
- Trying to take on the most difficult issue(s) initially.

Community Action Planning

Having selected which harm(s) to children they will address, communities can turn next to thinking more systematically about how they want to address those harms through community-led action.

Most communities already have experience in collective action planning, as they regularly take decisions about issues such as where and how to farm, how to help provide education and clean water for their children, how to deal with crime-ridden urban neighborhoods, and so on. Of course, the communities are free to develop their own action plans and planning processes.

Community Planning Group

Communities frequently decide to select particular community members to help enable the planning process. The work of this community planning group is facilitative rather than directive—it does not act as the decision-maker. The group calls meetings, encourages full participation, enables dialogues that explore different community actions and their strengths and weaknesses, and helps the community decide which actions to take and how. The planning group works according to the wishes of the community.

If, for example, the community have decided previously to use planning cycles of community meetings, small group discussions, and home visits for the identification of the harm(s), and the community wanted to continue using this approach, the community planning group would continue to use these cycles in the action planning phase.

If the community decides to form a planning group, a key issue to help them consider is who should belong to it. The community might decide that the planning group members should be the people who had played a significant role in the community-led selection of which harm(s) to children to address. Or the community might decide to use a different approach. For example, it might decide that the members of the community planning group should not only be good facilitators but should also have a strong interest in addressing the particular harm(s) that the community has selected.

An important consideration is whether the members of the planning group represent the wider community. If, for example, all the planning group members were male, women and girls would feel disempowered. Similarly, if the planning group consisted only of adults, children and teenagers would feel disempowered.

Community reflection on these issues could be stimulated by asking questions such as:

- How should members of a planning group be selected—should they be the most popular, or are other qualities important? Should they be all men, or all women? Should children be involved?
- How will the planning group work? Will they help to continue full community discussions, small group discussions, and home visits? Or should they work in some other way?

If the planning involves inter-community collaboration, it could be useful to help communities think about the above questions with multiple communities in mind. If the communities decide to have a cross-cutting planning group, they will need to think how the members of the inter-community planning group would be selected and how the group would work with the individual communities in enabling a participatory process of planning the inter-community action to address the selected harm(s) to children.

Action Criteria

As part of the community planning process, it can be useful to help communities think about whether there are criteria or qualities that the community action should embody (see Tool MGM 6 in the companion Toolkit). For example, communities may decide that they want their actions to endure over time and have long-term effects on behalf of children, or to engage many different parts of the community.

Some key questions that communities might consider include:

- Looking ahead to the community action you are planning, how would you like the community-led action to be?

- Would the action be undertaken by a small group of people, or would many different community members be involved?
- Would the action be short-term—for example, something that is useful for children only in this school year? Or would the action continue longer and help children across different school years?
- Would the action benefit only boys, or only girls? Or would it benefit both girls and boys?

If an outside NGO is supporting the community planning and action, the NGO may have criteria that need to be met if it is to fulfill its obligations to donors, board members, and so on. Three commonly used criteria are low cost, sustainability, and linkage of the community process with formal stakeholders.

It is important, however, to avoid imposing these criteria, which could disempower the community. A useful strategy in this regard is to help communities reflect on these three criteria.

For example, community members can be asked whether most NGO projects continue beyond their period of active funding. Typically, community people answer this in the negative. The facilitator can then ask whether the harm(s) to children that the community wants to address is likely to continue over time.

Having answered this issue in the affirmative, the community members can reflect on how they want the community actions to benefit children over longer periods of time. In this process of reflection and dialogue, communities may embrace the sustainability criterion as being within their own interest.

Once communities embrace the importance of sustainability, it is a short step to helping them to see the benefits of using a low-cost action approach. Impoverished people are quick to realize that expensive approaches such as building schools will not be sustainable if there is a shortage of qualified teachers and little support from the Ministry of Education.

Consistency with children's rights is also an important action criterion. After all, it would make little sense to support a community action that violated children's rights. Few NGOs would be supportive if the community had decided to address a harm such as sexual abuse of girls by encouraging or compelling girls to marry at a very early age.

Fortunately, there are steps that the facilitators and community people can take to avoid this kind of situation. One way is to have the facilitator ask questions that help to raise awareness of the problems inherent in forcing girls to marry at an early age and to explore alternative actions that are consistent with child rights. Without lecturing people about child rights and imposing the child rights approach of the NGO, the agency facilitator could ask whether marrying girls at an early age could cause harm to them.

The ensuing discussion alone would not by itself change a norm of early marriage, if such a norm were present. However, the discussion would likely help to raise ideas about how early

marriage harms children physically and psychologically and to enable dialogue about different points of view on the issue.

The sharing of divergent viewpoints can also help community members to see that not everyone agrees with the practice of early marriage. This divergence of views makes it natural for the community to ask whether there are ways of addressing the problem of sexual abuse of girls. If there are and the discussions generate significant community agreement, then the action planning process would have regained its consistency with child rights.

This consistency can be achieved even without naming child rights per se. As this example illustrates, it can be useful during community discussions of which harm(s) to children to address to blend in preliminary discussion of what the community could do to address the harm(s) to children.

The third action criterion of linkage and collaboration with formal stakeholders is highly important in strengthening wider systems of child protection. Throughout the child protection sector, it is well recognized that communities are not islands and need the support of higher-level government mechanisms in handling matters such as criminal offences against children.

In many countries, however, local people may initially see the government as not helpful or corrupt, as an obstacle, or even as a threat to people's well-being, and their inclination to collaborate with government services may be correspondingly low. These concerns warrant attention since it will not help communities to plan to work with a particular Ministry, only to find out that that Ministry lacks requisite capacities or are unlikely to be a good partner on the action.

To help stimulate community willingness to collaborate with government actors, it may be useful to share with communities the example from Sierra Leone.

Here, having selected teenage pregnancy as the issue to be addressed, communities wanted the Government to help by, for example, providing contraceptives. As a team, the facilitators and mentors worked via UNICEF to determine whether the district-level department of the Ministry of Health could be reliable partners in providing contraceptives. Having received an affirmative answer, they visited the district authorities and began discussions that eventually led to government-community collaboration. The communities were happy with this process since it was not imposed, and the collaboration helped them to address a problem—teenage pregnancy—that they had selected and that they had been unable to address successfully on their own.

This example illustrates the important role of the mentors, who were vigilant behind the scenes, scoping out whether and how various action options might find government support, or not find such support.

Government actors may also take steps to increase community willingness to collaborate with them. For example, district officials might invite communities to think through how they would like to address a widespread problem such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage, or HIV and AIDS. Although this is a government-led selection of the harm(s) to children to be addressed through community-led action, relatively high levels of community ownership may be achieved since the problems are widespread and may already be of considerable concern to communities.

Action Planning Process

The action planning process should be as inclusive as the selection process has been. This stage may even provide opportunities for engaging more people since interest frequently builds when concrete actions are under discussion.

At all levels, it is important to discuss questions such as the following:

- How can parents get involved in the planning and community-led action?
- How can neighbors help support the community-led action?
- What role can schools play in the community-led action? How can faith communities support it?
- What do communities already do that helps to address the selected harm(s) to children?
- What resources do we have as communities that can help to address the selected harm(s)?
- Have people here heard of steps and actions that are not currently being used here but that could possibly help to address the selected harm(s) to children?
- What can we do to learn about the latter steps and actions?
- What can children themselves do to help address the selected harm(s) to children?

Iterative discussion of these and related questions will likely raise numerous action options. From there, the process becomes one of narrowing down and enabling the selection of one or more achievable options.

Through ongoing dialogue at multiple levels, the communities should come to see particular options as better than others and as having greater applicability across all three communities. As the dialogues continue, the need for capacity building may become apparent, even for planning purposes.

For example, in the Sierra Leone discussions of how to address teenage pregnancy, people said things like: “We’ve heard of Marie Stopes—we need something like that here.” Such comments helped communities to identify partners, in this case the NGO named Marie Stopes, that could train people on how to prevent teenage pregnancy. In the initial visit, community people had learned about the potential importance of family planning and subsequently discussed how this could help the communities achieve their goal of reducing teenage pregnancy. Eventually, after the community action had been planned and included family planning, sexual and reproductive health, and life skills, the communities selected Marie Stopes to help train peer educators on the family planning aspects of the action.

In order to succeed, the action planning process needs to focus on what is practical or feasible. If the action tries to do too much, it will likely fail. On the other hand, if it does too little, it may not make a sufficient difference in improving children’s well-being.

To encourage people to strike an appropriate balance, it can be useful to invite local people to think in terms of their daily activities. If a business person tries to sell too many things, they may be less successful than someone who sells particular things that people know them for. People trust the product and see them as the “go-to person” for those items. But if they try to sell too many different items, they might not sell as effectively as they would have through a focus on particular items.

Discussions about keeping the action practical and not trying to do too much can help to enable feasible, community-led actions. In general, it is wise to move in relatively small steps that enable the community to succeed. Having achieved success in addressing one issue, the community may feel more confident and then go on to address a wider array of issues.

Throughout the process of action planning, the mentors, who have extensive practical experience, can help communities to think through how to avoid taking on too much.

The action planning ends when the community members feel that they have achieved an appropriate level of agreement and are ready to move onto taking action steps to address the selected harm(s) to children.

By this point, the community members will have a plan in mind for moving forward, and this plan may be oral and informal or in written form. Particularly in communities that have low levels of literacy, there will probably not be a written plan, which may fit with the traditions of oral communication. Rural communities already make decisions about when, where, and how to plant their crops, and they do so in a systematic manner but without written plans. Similarly, urban neighborhoods may discuss how to address problems such as extreme poverty without developing written plans.

Yet some communities may want to have a written plan that spells out in simple terms the “who, what, when, and where” of the community action, as in an action matrix (see Tool MGM 11 in the companion Toolkit). NGOs often favor written plans since written documents are the means by which plans are communicated.

Although written plans can be useful, it is important to keep in mind that if most community members are illiterate, the use of a written plan can shift the power toward the people who are most literate and who are most likely better off. Written plans can also limit flexibility by implying a level of finality. The community may be more accustomed to taking an oral plan as a “work in progress” that is to be revised as they take action and learn better ways of moving forward.

Written plans can also stifle creativity, as communities may have the custom of communicating their plans by means of song, dance, proverb, and other modalities.

NGOs should therefore give communities space to develop plans that are useful to the community people and should not have to answer to the NGO requirement of written plans. If written plans are developed, they should be primarily for the community members. At the end of the day, a significant number of community members should agree on and feel ownership of the plan, seeing it is their considered way of taking action to address the concern(s) they had selected.

This sense of ownership of which harm(s) to address and of the planned actions to address those harms tends to generate high levels of motivation to take collective action to prevent and respond to the selected harms to children.

It is useful to identify benchmarks and things to avoid during this planning phase:

Key Benchmarks:

- Collaborative, highly inclusive process for deciding which steps or action to take in addressing the selected harm(s) to children.
- Community develops flexible action plan that fits with the broad action criteria.
- Community identifies and is willing to allocate its own resources to the action.
- The action plan is gender-sensitive.
- Girls and boys contribute regularly to the action planning.
- Agreement is reached with community-selected formal stakeholders who will collaborate with the community on the action.

What to Avoid:

- High-cost, unsustainable actions.
- Actions that fail to build on local strengths.
- Actions that are too big or complex and have little chance of success.
- Excessive action complexity (for example, having too many components).
- The community facilitators shift to being the planners.
- Plans and decisions are made by a handful of people in the communities.
- Linkages or collaborations with the government that are unrealistic or not likely to work.