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LEARNING BRIEF

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REVIEWS



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For All Children



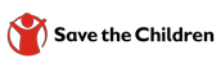
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JOFA Project Thematic Review: Joining Forces support to district child protection bodies

Joining Forces for Africa (JOFA)



ChildFund
Alliance



Terre des Hommes
International Federation



BACKGROUND

At the proposal phase, JOFA partners were leading or strongly involved in the Child Protection coordination committees and mechanisms at the national, regional, and district levels in their respective countries. In particular, the partners recognised the important role that district organisations and bodies play in providing child protection services to children, families, and communities. The project highlighted the importance of supporting district protection and response systems, particularly by strengthening existing identification, reporting and referral mechanisms; Child Protection services; and specialised services (e.g., child helplines and alternative care services). In addition to these responses, the project aimed to enhance risk communication and community engagement plans.



The knowledge and skills of formal and informal child protection actors across JOFA project target areas were steadily advanced through various training sessions and ongoing support and mentoring. These training sessions included topics such as case management, community-based psychosocial support, and standard operating procedures (SOP) for identification, reporting and referrals of child protection cases, among others. Country teams

also provided support to the coordination mechanisms at the national and sub-national levels and participated in the development of national standards. In some cases, the project was also able to offer material support for ongoing transport and operational costs to child protection services providers to enable them to consistently and confidently fulfil their role within the child protection systems at the local level.

INTERVENTIONS: A CROSS-COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

ETHIOPIA



In the target sites in Ethiopia, the JOFA team worked closely with community-based child protection structures in host communities and refugee camps to strengthen and support child protection systems.

The team also ensured the direct involvement of children in these systems through structures such as Child Clubs and Child Parliaments. Members of the child protection workforce were trained on the identification, reporting and referral pathways for child protection cases and child protection risks and related social protection measures associated with COVID-19.

Capacity strengthening and refresher training was also provided to service providers (such as government social workers, para-social workers and other child protection service providers) regarding revised community-based case management SOPs, confidential

reporting mechanisms, and psychosocial support.

The JOFA team in Ethiopia provided technical and financial support for coordination meetings at the district level with the newly established Child Protection Taskforce, including stakeholders from various child-focused agencies or departments (e.g., Women and Children's Affairs, justice and police stakeholders, as well as education and health actors) to review the new SOPs.

The team also provided support to three regional helplines. One JOFA partner staff member shared that there was an improvement in the timeliness of child cases reported in the community, along with improved and impactful collaboration between key government structures such as education, justice, police and social and women's affairs.



KENYA

In Kenya, the JOFA project worked with Area Advisory Councils (AACs), set up to advise local administrations about child welfare-related issues. With the enactment of the new Children's Act in Kenya in 2022, the name of these councils changed to Children Advisory Councils (CACs), although the composition remained similar.

These councils are comprised of stakeholders from relevant government institutions, religious institutions, NGOs, CBOs, and other associated entities. The project earmarked resources to provide financial and material assistance to district Child Protection bodies, to assist with the expenses associated with meetings, the costs of movement (e.g., fuel and vehicles), as well as office items such as stationery and supplies.

The JOFA team provide a range of virtual and distance training to help local actors better understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to child protection. Training, for example, explored existing child protection mechanisms, appropriate responses, and child protection issues related to COVID-19.

One JOFA partner staff member shared, "We've helped them to convene these meetings over time, and address children's issues over time." Importantly, JOFA partners were also able to follow the identified issues upwards to different levels or agencies of government. Having different stakeholders at the table was valuable to provide multiple perspectives towards addressing issues or challenges that were raised.



The project also provided capacity strengthening for child protection actors on the Guidelines for Child Protection Case Management and Referral, and relevant SOPs for Child Protection. One JOFA partner staff member shared that in Busia, this work "improved coordination, maximised the utilisation of the existing resources, and enhanced the case management process."

JOFA partners worked towards the establishment or revival of the Community-Based Child Protection Mechanism at the local level, which was reported to have contributed to the prevention of violence against children and the identification and reporting of violence against children from the community to the country level. In Busia, the team helped to jointly develop the County Integrated Referral Pathways, which was reported to have improved the case management process and increased the uptake and utilisation of the existing child protection services and service providers.

JOFA partner staff reflected that their work with district child protection bodies contributed to a better understanding within these bodies of their roles and an improvement in their functionality. Some district child protection bodies were now leading sensitisation work around child protection issues in their communities, and properly documenting child protection cases in the Child Protection Information Management System online. There were also reports of stronger referrals from actors at the community level to the justice system.

 MALI

In Mali, before the JOFA interventions, local government actors were in place to intervene in child protection-related cases, but there was a limited understanding of their mandate and roles. At the community level, while there were some child protection mechanisms in place, these were generally not well organised.

One of the activities under JOFA was a needs assessment of the training needs of social workers (both government and civil society) responsible for child protection interventions.

Based on this needs assessment, the JOFA team planned and implemented capacity building training, including case management training, in line with national standards.

These state and civil society social workers and child protection actors were also involved in all child protection training held at the community level to ensure that they were informed of the community mechanisms in place and the community recognized social workers and other actors as integral

partners in their shared responsibility to ensure child well-being. JOFA project staff engaged closely with government social workers for their feedback and input on JOFA interventions and took on some of their suggestions to improve programming and case management systems.

The project has also worked to support the policies and action plans of institutional case management networks of Bamako, Ségou, Niono, San and Bandiagara, networks that cover all the communes within them, rather than just those in which JOFA activities are implemented.

In Mali, JOFA partner staff highlighted the importance of working closely with government child protection actors in a participatory process from the very beginning of the JOFA interventions. Intentional joint planning between JOFA project teams, social workers and other actors was reported to have increased participation, fostered collaboration, and improved overall project efficiency by harmonising the agendas.





SENEGAL



In Senegal, the JOFA team worked in close collaboration with the Comité Départemental de Protection de l'Enfance, or Departmental Child Protection Committees (CDPE) from the beginning of the project. Intentional collaboration with the main government entities tasked with child protection ensured project activities were supported. Positive working relationships and capacity building strengthened sustainability prospects for improved child protection structures and processes, starting at the local level. JOFA partner staff shared that prior to the project, different child protection actors were using different forms or methods of reporting. Therefore, JOFA project activities prioritised the establishment of SOPs, and standard tools and forms for reporting cases of abuse or neglect from the village and community level up to appropriate levels of government. During these project activities, JOFA teams directly engaged key stakeholders such as village committees, civil society child protection actors, and the CDPE. Children were also consulted on these tools for reporting child protection concerns, which were also adapted to be child friendly and accessible for children.

The JOFA project provided training and capacity strengthening to a wide variety of frontline child protection actors at both the district and community levels, including formal and non-formal stakeholders. While government social workers received significant training under the JOFA project,

other stakeholders were also included in this training, such as facilitators from the Welcome Centres (which provide refuge for girls who have run away from their village to escape human rights violations such as early marriage or female genital cutting), security or defence stakeholders, and community workers who provide sexual and reproductive health advice to women and girls. Participants were trained on child protection fundamentals, including how to identify, report, and refer concerns using the new SOPs and standardized forms. Part of the training also entailed mapping the various civil society organisations and stakeholders working in child protection, which resulted in increased collaboration between different child protection actors. The standards used in the training were defined at the national level, with contributions from the JOFA Alliance, and then implemented at the local level by JOFA partners in various communities.

JOFA partner staff in Senegal noted tangible improvements in the functioning of community-based child protection committees throughout the project. They also shared that beyond the actual training, there had been substantial benefits from gathering all child protection actors together (particularly different CSOs or NGOs) to improve networking, service harmonisation, and referrals amongst different organisations, especially those working with specific populations or needs.



UGANDA

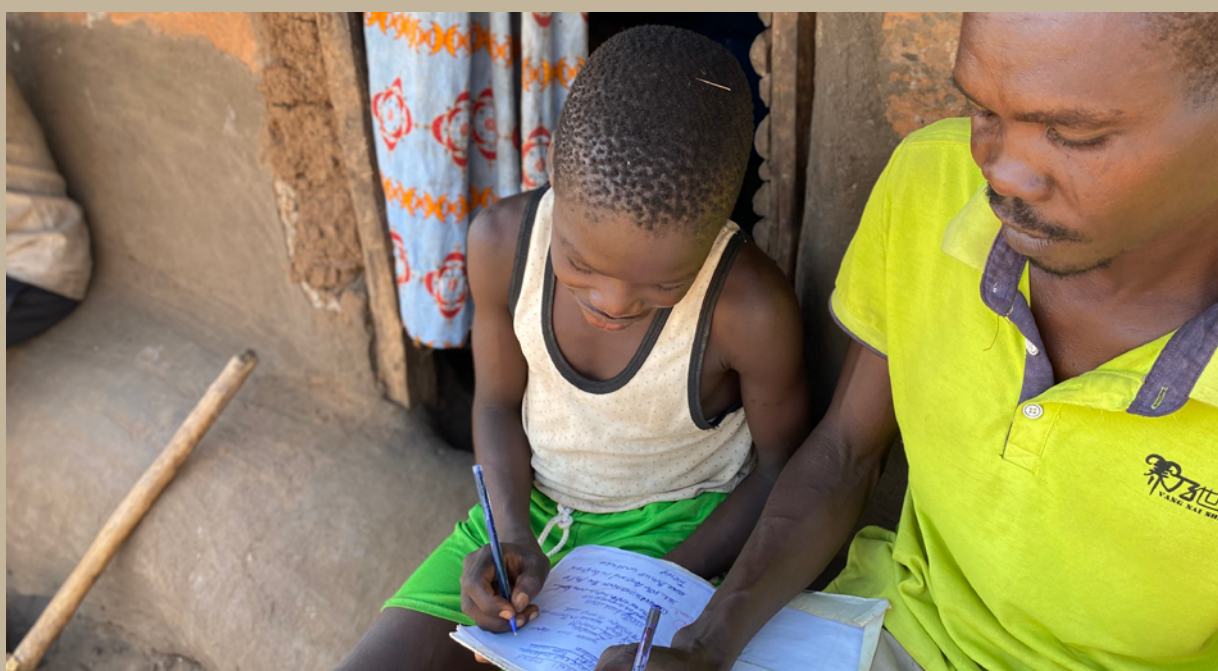
In Uganda, the JOFA team worked closely with a range of government, civil society and community stakeholders to strengthen child protection systems at the community and local levels. In particular, the project worked closely to provide financial, material and child protection capacity building support with the Community Development Offices, Probation and Social Welfare Offices (mandated to respond to children's issues at the district level), Children and Family Protection Offices, Uganda Child Help Line, and Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. It also worked with other stakeholders who play a role in child protection, such as religious, traditional and community leaders.

JOFA project staff cited the value of good working relationships and the overall strong engagement with these stakeholders: "We have been working with them to encourage them that they have a role to play in child protection, encouraging them to integrate this into their day-to-day work."

The team also worked with police stakeholders to support them in case management. JOFA project teams mapped

out different service providers in target locations and developed standard referral pathways to support child protection actors making referrals during case management. JOFA also facilitated Child Wellbeing Committee meetings, during which different partners were brought together to discuss child protection issues and structures and confer with each other regarding difficult cases.

In project sites in Kampala, where there are substantial child protection challenges related to street-connected children, child abuse, poverty, and other issues, not all children are able to access referral points. Part of the work undertaken through JOFA in Kampala was the establishment of two action centres in two divisions that host the toll-free National Child Helpline, accompanied by sensitisation work regarding national child protection policies and reporting and referral pathways. The team undertook sensitisation work in communities, places of worship and other locations. One ChildFund staff member shared that after these project activities people were able to access this hotline, and that children started calling in themselves.



DRIVERS OF EFFECTIVENESS IN JOINING FORCES PARTNERS' SUPPORT TO DISTRICT CHILD PROTECTION BODIES

The JOFA project's support across countries to bolster district child protection bodies took different forms, but its effectiveness has been driven by some common factors including (1) close collaboration and coordination with both formal and informal child protection stakeholders, (2) working in a participatory manner, and (3) targeted support and capacity strengthening of existing child protection structures.

Close collaboration and coordination with both formal and informal child protection stakeholders

Across different JOFA countries, the importance of close collaboration and coordination with both formal and informal child protection stakeholders was highlighted as a key factor driving the effectiveness of this work. This involved engaging grassroots and community-level stakeholders (including religious and traditional leaders when appropriate), various sectors within government with a child protection role or function, and children themselves. One JOFA partner staff member reflected, "You cannot achieve it all alone. This work needs good coordination among the project team and others."

Working in a participatory manner

Related to this, various staff members highlighted the importance of working in a participatory manner with child protection stakeholders to help build buy-in, understanding

and support for project activities and goals, and facilitate sustainability. The engagement of different stakeholders at different levels, from the community level upwards, also made it possible for JOFA project teams to identify child protection issues at the local level and work towards finding solutions that involved multiple levels or sectors of governance from the ground up, closer to actual child protection



challenges, rather than from the top down. In Mali, JOFA partner staff shared that the intentional joint planning between JOFA and social workers enabled more participation, stronger collaboration, and the harmonizing of agendas for more efficient engagement and implementation.



Targeted support and capacity strengthening of existing child protection structures

The provision of targeted support and capacity strengthening of existing child protection structures such as the AACs/CACs in Kenya, and the CDPEs in Senegal is an example of the project's emphasis on improving or strengthening child protection systems, in order to provide long-lasting and more sustainable benefits beyond the timeframe of the project.

One JOFA partner staff member shared that providing training to local child protection actors “on their roles and getting them to accept their roles and know their mandates and boundaries was helpful in avoiding conflict and overlap. This has been very, very key.” Several JOFA team members across countries were confident the systems in place as a result of the JOFA project would continue to function well into the future.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

The main challenges and barriers included (1) managing high expectations, (2) politics between NGOs, (3) harmonisation of partner tools, and (4) limited funding and resources.

Managing high expectations

One of the challenges some project teams faced in their work to support district child protection bodies was managing the high expectations of some bodies or structures. In Kenya, for example, a staff member shared that the limited government funding for the AACs/CACs meant that there were high demands on the project team, including some requests that were not possible for the project to meet. A JOFA project staff member in Uganda shared that,

“Structures have a lot of expectations when the project comes in – there is a need to address these demands and expectations very clearly at the start about what the project can and cannot do.” Having staff on JOFA teams with experience working with the different structures was identified as an important factor in managing these relationships and expectations.

Politics between NGOs

In some settings, JOFA partners also faced some challenges with managing what one stakeholder referred to as “NGO politics,” related to the support of local level and district child protection bodies. In Mali, for example, some challenges arose at the beginning of the

project regarding the “competing agendas” or priorities and plans of existing social workers and their involvement with other NGO-led programming and state-mandated activities, making it difficult initially to connect with social workers. To resolve this, the JOFA project undertook joint planning sessions with social workers to harmonize the timing and planning of priority activities and ensure that social workers could readily participate in JOFA activities. In Kenya, one JOFA partner staff member shared that overlap or competition has been a consistent challenge: “You feel that you train them, and then you hear one month later that another NGO is training them.”

Harmonisation of partner tools

The coordination and collaboration with different actors and partners were, as noted above, a key driver of the project’s effectiveness supporting local and district child protection bodies. It did, however, raise challenges in some settings as to how to harmonise SOPs and referral and case management tools among different actors who may have already had their own tools and processes in place, and who were at times attached to those tools and processes.

Limited funding and resources

Some JOFA partner staff members noted the enormity of child protection needs, relative to the limited budget of the project, and the underfunding of various child protection stakeholders including government departments or agencies. This meant that even where district child protection bodies were functioning, there were still barriers to completing referrals and effective case management. In Senegal, child protection workers were limited in their ability to proactively visit villages to exchange with village protection committees and monitor child protection cases. In one JOFA country, a staff member shared, “There were some concerns that we raised with authorities, but they didn’t have the funding. Some of the issues couldn’t be responded to.” In Uganda, for example, the financial support provided to police and child protection officers was minimal, which at times affected case management because some cases could not be supported in a timely way as police or officers tried to find resources from other sources. The importance of complementary programming related to budget advocacy was highlighted as an ongoing strategy to address these challenges.



KEY LESSONS

1. Addressing the **expectations of district child protection bodies** (and other key child protection stakeholders) regarding what the project can or cannot provide or address is a critical step at the beginning of such interventions.

2. **Participatory engagement, along with joint planning, coordination and collaboration amongst a range of child protection stakeholders is important** to avoid duplication, promote buy-in, and build the prospects for sustainability. The engagement of different sectors and actors is also useful for bringing a variety of perspectives to the table, which can help coordinate and therefore strengthen child protection responses.

3. Working to **strengthen existing district**

child protection structures such as the AACs/CACs in Kenya and the CDPEs in Senegal, is a useful approach as it is likely to build and strengthen capacity and systems beyond the lifespan of the project.

4. Part of the value of the JOFA project approach was being able to **follow up on issues raised at the local or district level**, taking them upwards to different relevant levels of government.

5. Some staff suggested that **Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms should be at the forefront of community sensitisation and feedback sessions**, where they can identify issues, suggest community-led solutions, and develop actionable recommendations.





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