Policy Brief: The Efficacy of Child Rights Clubs in Uganda

Since 2008, the Bantwana Initiative of World Education has been supporting 5,000 highly vulnerable children with an integrated package of livelihoods, child protection, and psychosocial (PSS) support in four underserved districts in western Uganda. At the center of this program is a strategy that activates children, schools, communities, and households to reduce the risk of violence against children principally through Child Rights Clubs (CRCs). CRCs increase children’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities, generate constructive dialogue between children and adults regarding issues of abuse, neglect, and expected behavior norms, and equip children with information and support to report cases of abuse. At the same time, CRCs give children a platform to express their opinions, thoughts, and concerns, and activate schools (patrons, teachers, and principals), communities (PSS volunteers), and homes (caregivers) to advocate on behalf of children’s basic rights.

Currently, Bantwana supports 46 in-school and 15 out-of-school CRCs that engage 2,301 children. These children reach 15,000 community members through dance, drama, and discussion in schools and communities, public radio programs that showcase stories told by children and engage communities in dialogue, and quarterly Youth Forums that are jointly facilitated by District Youth Counselors and CRC members. CRCs have improved children’s understanding of rights and responsibilities and how to report cases of abuse, improved relationships between children and adults who care for them, and strengthened advocacy efforts and protection mechanisms in schools and communities to address abuse when it occurs.

Case studies and action research reinforce the effectiveness of Bantwana’s integrated approach to improve child well-being

Findings from action research conducted by Columbia University in collaboration with Bantwana in 2012 suggested that although improvements in caregiver capacity to meet basic needs are highly correlated with increases in household assets, children’s psychological well-being is more strongly correlated with support from community volunteers than financial gain.

Results from Bantwana’s Western Uganda program 2010 psychosocial support (PSS) case study reinforce the notion that livelihoods interventions are effective entry points for building trust and rapport with caregivers. Such interventions enable PSS volunteers to introduce discussion on sensitive issues including HIV, sexuality, the detriments of early marriage, and children’s rights and responsibilities. Findings suggest that improved intergenerational understanding and communication between children and caregivers resulting from PSS volunteer support is an important factor in reducing risks of violence and violation of children’s basic rights.
Background

Since 2006, the Bantwana Initiative of World Education has been providing comprehensive, integrated care to orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in high HIV prevalence countries in Southern and East Africa. Given the high vulnerability levels of children that Bantwana supports, child protection is a key intervention across all programs. Despite improvements in global and national laws and policies that protect children's basic rights, children continue to experience violence, often at the hands of the very adults charged with their protection – at home, in schools, and in their communities. In recent surveys across Tanzania, Swaziland and Zimbabwe\(^1\) one in three young women report that they had been sexually abused before the age of 18. In a recent survey on violence against children in Uganda\(^2\), more than 90% of children interviewed reported experiencing violence at home or at school. Bantwana works directly with children, parents, teachers, and community leaders, all of whom are the ultimate drivers and stewards of meaningful change for themselves, their families and their communities.

Over half of Uganda’s population of 35 million is below the age of 16, and eight million – or 51% of all children – are considered moderately or highly vulnerable. Due to high rates of poverty, high HIV prevalence, civil strife in neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo, and the high incidence of child labor in numerous mines and tea plantations in the region, Western Uganda has the second highest percentage of ‘critically vulnerable’ children in Uganda. Many of these children live with elderly relatives or guardians and, increasingly, in child-headed households.\(^3\) Consequently, school dropout rates are high, child labor is a primary concern of local officials, the incidence of sexual abuse and violence against children is on the rise, and HIV and STI transmission remain prevalent. Adolescent girls are twice as likely to be HIV positive as boys\(^4\) and are more likely to drop out of school due to teen pregnancy and early marriage.

The Bantwana Plan for Children

Since 2008, the Bantwana Initiative, in partnership with nine community-based organizations (CBOs), has been providing an integrated package of child protection, livelihoods, and psychosocial support services to 5,000 children and families in four highly underserved districts in Western Uganda.\(^5\) The integrated model:

1) builds the capacity of caregivers and households to improve household income through participation in community-led savings and loan groups and market-linked income generating programs; 2) builds children’s understanding of their rights and responsibilities and the skills and confidence to report incidents of abuse; 3) sensitizes teachers, government officials, community members, and

Child Rights Clubs Build Children’s Courage

“Each time I share my story of sexual abuse with other people it gives me courage to overcome trauma and stigma and also builds more confidence to accept what happened to me.

Though it is still hard to deal with, at least I can now interact with other children and share my experience. I am sure the club will continue to inspire me…."

- 14-year-old CRC member during storytelling competition in her district

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\(^1\) National Violence Against Children Surveys: Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, 2009.

\(^2\) Violence Against Children: Voices of Children and Adults, Raising Voices/Save the Children, 2005.


\(^4\) Uganda Demographic Survey, 2011.

\(^5\) Kabarole, Kyenjojo, Kasese, and Kyegegwa.
The overall goals of the program are to reach highly vulnerable children and families with a high quality package of integrated support⁶; build the capacity of local partners to improve and expand delivery of integrated services; and strengthen linkages and referrals between both government and community-based child protection providers to improve services and child abuse reporting systems and services. Bantwana’s Western Uganda Program (WUBP) supports livelihoods interventions in 1,193 households supporting 4,893 children; 61 child rights clubs engaging 2,301 children and reaching 15,000 community members; and, 145 Bantwana-trained psychosocial volunteers (81 women and 64 men).

These services complement and reinforce one another and harness the influence and support of schools, government officials, local leaders and volunteers to raise awareness, provide direct services to children and caregivers, and effectively deploy resources. To ensure that national policies and laws governing protection and services for vulnerable children are translated at the local level and that child protection challenges facing communities feed into and influence national policy discussions, Bantwana is an active member of two major policy committees.⁷

The issue of violence against children is controversial for adults. Results from broad-based interviews conducted with adults and children in Uganda⁸ paint a complex and widely divergent understanding of socially acceptable behavior towards children. Many adults expressed concerns that child rights threatened the deference and obedience they expect from children and that the dialogue around children’s rights had never been explained in a way that parents or guardians realized could improve adult-child relationships and their interaction with children. Still, 90% of children reported an experience with violence at the hands of adults they knew at home, at school and in their communities. While specific experiences differed between girls and boys and between younger and older children, almost all children talked about the

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⁶The services in the integrated package were identified as critical needs after an in-depth needs assessment and are designed to reinforce one another in a way that improves the overall wellbeing of the child and family/guardian.

⁷The OVC Working Group within the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MGLSD), and the Program Learning Group of Child Protection in Crisis. The MGLSD is the primary ministry responsible for overseeing policy and service provision for OVC in Uganda. The Program Learning Group of Child Protection in Crisis is a multipartner, global initiative to strengthen knowledge, collaboration and action for Child Protection supported by USAID and the Oak Foundation.

⁸Violence Against Children: Voices of Children and Adults, Raising Voices/Save the Children, Uganda 2005.

⁹IBID.
negative impact that violence had on their self-confidence and their trust in adults who were supposed to protect them.⁹

**Child Rights Clubs**

Anchoring Bantwana’s child protection approach, CRCs place the child at the center of a strategy that builds children’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities and understanding about how and where to report abuse while actively sensitizing and engaging schools and communities to promote and advocate for children’s rights. Developed for both in- and out-of-school children, CRCs take place bimonthly, and are led by Bantwana-trained peer (older students) and/or adult facilitators (school patrons and community volunteers). Child rights clubs:

- Increase children’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities and build their confidence and understanding about how to report incidents of abuse and advocate for themselves and their peers;
- Engage children in role plays and skill-building exercises around child rights and protection themes;
- Facilitate school-wide and inter-school child protection events, including music, dance, drama, sports, mural painting, school gardens, and savings clubs;
- Support district-level youth forums that engage district and traditional leaders and community members around issues of child protection and advocacy led by CRC and district Youth Council members;
- Support CRC member participation in radio and media programs and story competitions to broaden the reach and engage community members on issues of child protection; and,
- When appropriate, participate in joint trainings with key child protection actors in schools and communities to strengthen referrals and service linkages for reporting and follow up on cases of abuse and neglect.

Child rights club activities are complemented by PSS volunteer home visits that reinforce children’s rights and responsibilities with parents/caregivers and children. In addition, income generating activities and links to community-led savings and loan groups provide CBO partners an entry point for
additional PSS, referrals, and livelihoods support to households.

A key innovation in Bantwana’s child protection programming is the child protection booklet, “Protecting Ourselves and Each Other: A Child Rights and Protection Resource” (2009), and its companion piece, “Protecting Ourselves and Each Other: A Call to Action” (2012), which were developed by and for children with support and guidance from CRC school patrons. These booklets guide child protection discussions in child rights clubs, and are shared with community members and local government officials by CRC members through quarterly youth forums, call-in radio shows, and other public events. They are also widely shared with government child protection staff (probation officers, community development officers, social workers, etc.), schools, implementing partners, and at the national level, committees and working groups in which Bantwana actively participates. Protecting Ourselves and Each Other was recently cited by the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD) as a best practice in child protection, and government officials called for universal distribution to all schools throughout the country. The Child Protection Booklet is now widely used by communities and CBOs, as well as national policy makers to facilitate meaningful dialogue around child protection.

In Tanzania, where Bantwana leads a comprehensive OVC service delivery program in the northern region, the USAID Mission requested development of a Child Protection Booklet for the Tanzanian context. Using the Western Uganda booklet as a model, this has now been developed and will be launched and disseminated in March 2013.

Child rights clubs have given children a platform to share experiences and report abuse to responsible adults, and communities have taken greater ownership of child protection cases. The clubs have strengthened protection mechanisms, and linkages between CBOs, community volunteers, schools, and districts have generated promising results for improving reporting mechanisms and follow-up. Both children and adults recognize the importance of children’s direct involvement and leadership in raising awareness of child protection through sharing stories, participation in district-level meetings, and reporting. Advocacy has also improved safety in schools and reports from teachers and children suggest that corporal punishment has been reduced. Child participation in school governance has increased, and protective relationships between teachers and children, between children and caregivers, and community child protection actors, has also improved. Furthermore, there is a greater awareness of the differentiated vulnerabilities and needs of girls.

Improved awareness and collaboration between district probation officers, CBOs, PSS volunteers, and schools has increased the number of abuse cases that are reported and investigated. Over the ten-month period from March 2012-January 2013, child rights clubs, PSS volunteers, and CBO partners reported 199 child protection cases involving a range of issues from dropping out of school, sexual abuse, early marriage, child labor, child neglect, and physical abuse. Club members have reported and followed up on 48 cases reported to patrons. With this follow-up, some children who would have dropped out of school were able to return to school and receive counseling services for ongoing support.
LESSONS LEARNED

• Creating space for open discussion between adults and children around children’s rights and responsibilities is critical for child rights clubs to be effective. The discussions build improved understanding and alliances across generations and are important for effectively engaging adult influencers in communities and schools. Misconceptions of children’s rights and widely divergent adult views of the role and appropriateness of punishment in child rearing must be addressed openly and sensitively. These conversations should be mindful of cultural norms and practices to avoid alienation and build empathy and mutual cooperation between adults and children. The inclusion of responsibilities alongside discussions about rights helps to strike this balance within communities.

• Children’s direct participation in child protection awareness raising and action has been key for protecting children’s basic rights in school, at home, and in communities. Calls for equipping children with the knowledge and skills to protect themselves and take action on behalf of other children are common among child protection policy makers and advocates. Yet, few models exist that meaningfully and effectively engage children. Bantwana’s CRC approach has not only built the capabilities of children but has created a place for children to share their experiences, express their opinions, and engage in meaningful discussions with adults in ways that have shifted adult attitudes about acceptable treatment of children. Teachers, community members, district officials, and caregivers report that hearing children’s stories of violence and abuse helped them reconsider their own attitudes and practices and take action on children’s behalf.

• Continuous sensitization of communities about children’s rights and responsibilities and the impact of violence on children’s development are critical for forward progress. Ongoing interaction with community leaders by CRCs and their patrons, and follow-up on individual cases that engage communities and parents/guardians in discussion are critical to changing attitudes and behavior over time. Systemic and cultural change happens slowly, and constant pressure and engagement of key players – children, teachers, community
leaders, district officials and social welfare and law enforcement staff – are required to make durable progress and to improve the safety of children in the long-term.

• Building linkages between government and civil society to improve service delivery and strengthen child protection reporting mechanisms is critical for durability. Bantwana’s efforts to strengthen collaboration and cooperation between formal (government) and informal (CBO) service delivery and child protection mechanisms has been critical to expanding services and increasing reporting and follow-up of abuse and neglect. Bantwana will continue to strengthen these linkages through regular youth forums, call-in radio shows, active participation in district meetings, and, enhanced training for PSS volunteers. Linkages will improve reporting and case follow-up, and will be coupled with ongoing advocacy efforts with the government to deploy adequate resources for district staff to follow up on child protection cases and to eliminate the corruption that undermines justice for children.

CONCLUSION

Bantwana’s integrated approach has clearly improved awareness about child protection and strengthened mechanisms for reporting abuse. Bantwana’s Western Uganda child protection activities have 1) increased child protection awareness and action; 2) increased self-confidence and knowledge among children who have internalized an understanding of child rights and responsibilities; 3) improved communication and empathy between children and adults; 4) improved community awareness, advocacy and action on behalf of children; and 5) strengthened cooperation and partnerships between government, communities, school, and households for improved child protection advocacy and services.

While Bantwana celebrates these achievements, real challenges to progress still remain. District capacity remains weak and under-resourced; entrenched norms and cultural acceptance of violence against children remain obstacles to reporting and prosecution; gender imbalances and beliefs about sexual entitlement by older youth and adult men remain threats to adolescent girls; corporal punishment is still commonly used in schools and at home; and HIV continues to contribute to increased levels of child vulnerability.

At the national level, Bantwana is working with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and MGLSD to advocate for the inclusion of child protection and life skills in all schools as a core skill for all children in Uganda. It will continue to play an active and visible role at the national level to ensure that best practices and lessons from WUBP are fed into country wide policy and programmatic discussions. Together with the MOE and MGLSD, Bantwana will continue to identify model schools, district probation officers, children, and households whose advocacy and leadership can serve as a role model for others. At the community level, Bantwana is supporting leadership of local institutions like the Kaborole Research Center in Western Uganda to facilitate and advocate for increased support, action, and stronger child protection reporting mechanisms through the recently launched Child Protection Program Learning and Advocacy Network (CP-PLAN). It is also establishing Centers of Excellence in three key technical areas of livelihoods, child protection, and PSS to ensure the availability of local technical expertise over the long-term. Bantwana upholds activities that strengthen collaborations with Ugandan child protection advocates through joint initiatives at community and national levels.

Above all, Bantwana continues to find meaningful ways to build children’s ability to advocate for themselves and ensure that their voices, leadership, and ideas are heard, shared, supported, and nurtured. The ultimate goal is that children may grow, thrive, and contribute to a strong Uganda, where all children are protected and safe from harm and are aware of and guard their basic rights.
SUCCESS STORY: 
KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Rita Kangume, a 12-year-old student at Kyembogo Primary School, is not afraid to speak boldly and report child mistreatment to her parents and teachers. As a member of the Bantwana-supported child rights club at her school, she now understands her rights and responsibilities and is confident to act when she sees children being mistreated.

Rita lives with her mother and five siblings in Kirinda village in Western Uganda. Her father passed away when she was very young. “We grew up in a bad situation and we used to suffer a lot due to poverty,” she recalls. High HIV prevalence, border conflict, and poverty put significant stress on families throughout Western Uganda, which can lead to high rates of child abuse and neglect. Since 2008, Bantwana and its nine local partners have provided critical service to children and families through an integrated program of child protection, economic, and psychosocial support.

One such effort was the development of Protecting Ourselves and Each Other, a booklet on child rights and responsibilities for children, teachers, caregivers, and other community members that promotes greater understanding of child rights violations and provides information on how to address abuse. The booklet includes activities that can be used by child rights clubs in schools, as well as activities that engage the community in dialogue on child protection. When asked what inspired her to participate in writing the booklet, Rita said she did not want to see other children suffer from the same forms of abuse she used to witness in her neighborhood. “I specifically drew a picture about punishment so that the parents violating children’s rights in my village could see it and realize that hurting children was wrong.”

Before joining the child rights club, Rita says she was fearful. She felt she could not express herself to others. She believes that participating in the child rights club has given her the confidence to report any form of abuse to her parents, teachers, or community leaders. “I felt good when I saw the picture in the book.” She continues, “I was delighted to see similar information in the booklet because it gave me a picture that other children out there have the will to address issues that concern children. I believe children who are seeing this book will be able to learn and report such kind of abuse without fear.”

Rita’s teachers and peers have noticed a remarkable change in her behavior as well. “She used to disrespect teachers and her parents,” says Barbra Namara, a member of the child rights club at Kyembogo Primary School. “She used to get punishments and most of the kids used to disassociate themselves with her due to fear of being punished. But you can’t believe it that now Rita is a changed person and the best student in the school. She discusses freely in the club and everybody loves her bright ideas.”

Mugisha Kato Francis, the head teacher at Kyembogo Primary School confirms that—like Rita—most children in the club have improved their public speaking. They speak with greater confidence and report on children who are frequently absent from school. “The club is greatly helping us in the school,” Mugisha says. “We plan to support the program and continue to fight against any form of abuse that violates children’s rights.”

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