



# SCALING UP POSITIVE PARENTING PRACTICES IN UGANDA: RESEARCH EVIDENCE FROM AN INTEGRATED COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVE FOR REDUCING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN LIRA DISTRICT, NORTHERN UGANDA

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Article abstract

Community-based action research is increasingly gaining traction in development work, partly because of its benefits in contextualizing societal problems and “handing over the stick” to the communities; that is, researchers listen, question, and learn as the experts (the community members) identify their problems and define the change they desire. This research approach, therefore, empowers communities and is a shift from traditional research where the researcher presupposes that deductions about a phenomenon are to be made outside the natural environment. This research paper documents the use of participatory learning and action approaches in designing, implementing, and monitoring interventions to prevent violence against children in post-conflict northern Uganda, a region that suffered through the Lord’s Resistance insurgency from 1987 to 2006.



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**Keywords:** violence against children, community-driven, participatory learning and action, parenting

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Violence against children (VAC) is a global public health concern with a wide impact on the overall well-being of children. VAC, which includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, has significant health consequences such as depression, suicidal behaviour, sexually transmitted infections, risky sexual behaviour, and even death (Clarke, 2016). A 2015 study by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in Uganda found that 59% of young females in Uganda, and 68% of young males, reported having experienced physical violence (p. 27); 34% of young females and 36% of young males reported emotional violence (p. 39); and 35% of females and 17% of males reported sexual violence under age 18 (p. 15). The same study found that more than 1 in 10 girls and 1 in 20 boys had experienced all three types of violence in childhood (p. 43). In school settings, common perpetrators included teachers, peers, and intimate friends (MGLSD, 2017). Previous research has indicated that, although VAC has lasting negative consequences, it is predictable (Fang et al., 2017; Hillis et al., 2016) and preventable (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016).

Numerous studies have been conducted about various aspects of VAC including its causes (Balume Johnson, 2020; Bukuluki et al., 2017; Ezekiel et al., 2017; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2021), children's experiences of VAC (Nyangoma et al., 2019), and the repercussions of VAC on children and families (Copeland et al., 2021; Fernandes de Magalhães et al., 2020). However, apart from Roygardner et al. (2020), there is a dearth of studies on the role of community-led initiatives in reducing VAC. To fill this gap, the AfriChild Centre for the Study of the African Child (Makerere University, Kampala), in conjunction with the Mailman School of Public Health (Columbia University, New York), undertook a study in 2015 of parenting practices in three districts of Uganda — Lira, Ibanda, and Kampala — to enumerate and understand risks and protective factors for VAC in Uganda and generate qualitative evidence augmenting the Uganda Child Wellness Survey carried out by Boothby et al. (2017). Negative parenting practices that ranked highly included lack of concern for their children's future (neglect), lack of protection, lack of care, neglect of health, and poor nutrition. Positive parenting practices included providing care (including adequate nutrition), investing in their children's future, engaging in productive enterprise, and protection of children (Boothby et al., 2017).

Despite several efforts by government and non-government actors to improve child well-being and protection, research-based evidence shows that many children still suffer different forms of violence and abuse that affect their growth and development (Boothby et al., 2017). Government of Uganda initiatives aimed at increasing access to education include Universal Primary Education (UPE)<sup>1</sup> and Universal Secondary Education (USE)<sup>2</sup>. The National Child Policy (Government of

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<sup>1</sup> The UPE policy, aimed at poverty reduction and improving human capital development, was introduced by the government of Uganda in 1997. With this policy, government committed to provision of free primary school education to all children and abolished all fees levied by public schools.

<sup>2</sup> The government of Uganda introduced the USE policy in 2007 following 10 years of successful implementation of UPE. This policy aimed to increase access to quality secondary education for economically vulnerable families.

Uganda, 2020) was put in place to streamline operations concerned with the well-being of orphans and other vulnerable children. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (Government of Uganda, 2016) aimed to integrate early childhood development activities to promote the holistic development of children. In 2018, the government launched the National Parenting Guidelines (Government of Uganda, 2018). However, realization of the desired positive outcomes for all children has been delayed: there is still a gap between the policies that have been put in place and their implementation (Africhild, 2018; Ejju, 2021).

Lira District in Northern Uganda faces a high level of poverty, which has limited the ability of many parents to provide for their children's basic needs (Boothby et al., 2017). Also, due to psychological trauma caused by war, many parents do not give adequate time to guiding their children (Khamis, 2016; Olema et al., 2014). Some parents continue to use corporal punishment, which is seen as an easy option for disciplining children (Ayo, 2016). Some previous studies have recommended scaling up government and civil society initiatives to prevent VAC (Chiang, 2021). However, others have found that such top-to-bottom decontextualized initiatives based on Euro-Western methods of gathering empirical evidence may not produce a lasting impact (Mannell et al., 2021). In Uganda, efforts to strengthen child protection and promote child well-being have often been top-down initiatives in which the government, along with humanitarian agencies and other non-government actors, came in as “experts” to determine which kinds of intervention to implement in addressing community challenges, the designated front-line responders being viewed as inadequate (Child et al., 2014). This undermines the principle of community ownership since the community does not fully participate in the process of identifying problems and arriving at their own solutions. In essence, such approaches undermine the self-reliance and sustainability of development initiatives (Wetmore & Theron, 1998).

The complexity of VAC in Ugandan communities necessitates the adoption of approaches that are sensitive to the unique needs of local contexts and that allow community members to actively participate in developing solutions to address their problems. Participatory learning and action (PLA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) are powerful tools for collective consultation and empowerment of communities regarding the issues and interventions that shape their lives (Thomas, 2004). PLA is an approach for learning about and engaging with communities in which local people are seen as experts because they are the ones who understand their communities best: researchers “hand over the stick” by listening to, questioning, and learning from discussions led by the experts — the community members (Thomas, 2004). PLA approaches have been used in low-resource settings (Bozalek, 2011; Mukherjee, 2002) and in various sectors such as health (Prost et al., 2013), education (Bozalek, 2011), development (Thomas, 2004), and agriculture (Defoer et al., 2000). These approaches are gaining in popularity; they are flexible and recognize the paradigm shift to learning from the field, learning to respect and recognize Indigenous knowledge and experience, listening to alternative perspectives, appreciating other people's realities, and hands-on learning (Pretty et al., 1995). They resonate with the global South context (Thomas, 2004), where practices are deeply rooted in sociocultural value systems and wider

inequalities between rich and poor, between men and women (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006), and in the relationship between privileged development partners and the ostensibly dependent communities they serve (Madsen Camacho, 2004). PLA approaches are effective in tapping into the unique perspectives of the rural poor on the nature and causes of issues that affect them (Thomas, 2004), and in addressing potential paradoxes in the development field, such as balancing community autonomy, respect and scientific rigour (Buchanan et al., 2007; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

In this paper, we describe a project, conducted in 2016 and 2017 by AfriChild Centre in partnership with Lango Child and Community Development Federation (LACCODEF), that adopted PLA approaches to implement and scale up positive parenting practices in Barr sub-county in Lira District. This project was conducted to fill the gap left by previous research findings (Bukuluki et al., 2017; Nyangoma et al., 2019), which were not focused on using positive parenting as a strategy to reduce VAC. The study aimed at building on existing positive parenting practices in the community, with the full engagement and leadership of community members. Recognizing existing gaps in the translation and implementation of policies in Uganda, the project intervention was based on the assumption that a community-led approach would increase active participation, leading to better outcomes and increased ownership of the interventions and outcomes by the communities.

The parenting interventions implemented included livelihood strengthening through the adoption of modern farming technologies, school-based student clubs, and the use of the Start Awareness Support Action (SASA!) approach. The SASA! approach (Abramsky et al., 2016) is a proven tool for developing effective community-wide advocacy to prevent primary and secondary intimate partner violence and VAC. To ensure sustained outcomes, the project worked with local councils' child protection committees, Village Health Teams<sup>3</sup>, and sub-county child protection committees. Through this project, the researchers attempted to explore the role community-led initiatives play in promoting positive parenting approaches as a response to VAC in Uganda. The project was guided by three objectives: to actively engage the community in scaling up positive parenting practices, to engage households in socioeconomic initiatives as an approach to positive parenting, and to scale up the SASA! approach in order to promote positive parenting practices. It was theorized that the attainment of these objectives would lead to the realization of a community that is knowledgeable, empowered, and actively practising positive parenting, and thus contribute to a reduction in VAC.

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<sup>3</sup> The Village Health Team is a health structure established by government of Uganda in 2001 to strengthen community linkage to primary health care.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This project was guided by the social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which was described by Kohli et al. (2015):

[The model] emphasizes two key concepts: (a) individuals are nested in a multi-level environment, and (b) these levels interact to produce outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The four-level framework of factors that affect the individual include (1) personal; (2) microsystem, which describes the immediate setting (e.g., family, home, peer groups) and interpersonal relationships; (3) exosystem, which includes institutions and social structures (e.g., work, neighborhood, social networks); and (4) macrosystem (i.e., the cultural, historical and political context). (p. 277)

The rights-based approach was embedded in this ecological model to holistically address multipronged drivers of VAC observed in the intervention community.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted qualitative PLA approaches to guide implementation, documentation, and learning because they promote innovativeness, dialectic learning, and sustainability (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). PLA thus empowers communities to identify issues that affect them, envision desired change, enumerate local resources for addressing common challenges, and formulate strategies by which changes can be sustained.

#### ***Study Area***

The interviews were conducted in four parishes of Barr sub-county in Lira District: Onywako, Alebere, Abunga, and Ober. These were selected because the researchers had previously interviewed participants from the same parishes during the project's baseline study (Boothby et al., 2017). This was specifically important in determining the relevance of the intervention.

#### ***Study Participants***

The participants comprised parents, pupils, out-of-school children, teachers, sub-county officers, community advisory board (CAB) members, and project implementation staff. A CAB is a group of 10 to 12 members nominated by the community to oversee implementation and monitoring of project activities. A total of four CABs were formed, one in each parish and one at the sub-county level.

Altogether, 164 participants were purposively selected based on their lived experiences and their position in society. Since the project utilized farmer groups as the entry point, all parents who were members of such groups in the four parishes were eligible to participate. In each parish, the researchers worked with local leaders to identify potential participants from the farmer groups. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) for parents were constituted per parish, along with one FGD



for male pupils and another for female pupils. Because comparatively few out-of-school children were available for an FGD, they were drawn from all four parishes to create one group for males and one for females.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

A total of 26 FGDs were conducted, 12 with parents, eight with pupils in primary school, two with pupils who were out of school, and four with CAB members. We chose to use FGDs because the method provides for the expression of a diversity of views and experiences. Also, the researchers were able to facilitate discussions about selected topical issues, while study participants shared experiences based on their knowledge of their communities, and their beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

Key informant interviews were conducted with the community development officer and a senior administrative secretary from the sub-county, four teachers, and two project staff. The key informants were chosen for their knowledge of VAC issues and the previous interactions between their offices and the project through the research conducted at Barr sub-county by Boothby et al. (2017) in 2015.

### ***PLA Approaches***

The study adopted PLA approaches during the design, implementation, and learning phases. The approaches used included: problem and solution analysis, stakeholder analysis techniques, community visioning, participatory monitoring, and evaluation.

During intervention design, the participating local community members (parents and children) were engaged in gender-specific groups to highlight the root causes of VAC (problem tree analysis), rank their community problems (priority-ranking exercise), and identify potential solutions to the root causes of the VAC (solution tree analysis).

To guide implementation, the participating community members identified the resources available in their communities that could be utilized to address the problem (by Venn diagramming), collectively drew a “picture” of the change they wanted to see at the end of the project (community visioning), and discussed how they would monitor progress (participatory monitoring and evaluation).

### ***Analysis***

The study produced 31 transcripts from interviews of parents, children in school, children out of school, opinion leaders, and key technical staff within the district. Upon receipt of the transcripts, we reviewed them for completeness. Reviewed transcripts were formatted and went through a de-identification process in which each transcript was given a unique identifier that would ensure that sources of information were concealed. Also, any text with identifying information (e.g., names) within the body of the transcripts was removed before coding and analysis. After the first three transcripts had been read through, a codebook was composed. This formed the preliminary sub-thematic areas, which were refined as further transcripts were coded

and new themes were identified. Coding and analysis of these data was conducted with the help of Atlas ti.8.0. After a preliminary analysis of a sub-sample of the transcripts, the coding structure for each theme was reviewed, and the codebook was refined through comparison and categorization of its properties and dimensions. During the analysis, integrating insights from a variety of sources and interpretations enabled the researchers to build a deeper picture of such study variables as perceptions of child well-being, parenting practices, and violence, and to identify protective and harmful parenting practices and underlying drivers of VAC. The output from the analysis included word query reports for each node, word maps, and word clouds. Trustworthiness was achieved through frequent team debriefing sessions, peer scrutiny, triangulation, and iterative questioning of data and themes (Shenton, 2004).

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The research was approved by the Mildmay Uganda Research and Ethics Committee (REC#: REF 0806-2015) and the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology. With the help of local guides, the research team identified children and adult participants to take part in the study. Parental permission and assent forms were translated and administered to guardians and children respectively based on their language preference. Parental permission was obtained for children to participate in the interviews. All children gave their verbal assent to being included in the study. Additionally, the study team worked with the sub-county officer in those cases where a referral to relevant government service providers within the district was indicated.

## **Results**

### ***Approaches for Problem Identification***

PLA approaches were used in the identification of community needs and solutions. Communities participated in identifying, prioritizing, and designing their interventions to address the problems raised. This process was conducted at the community level with parents, children, and local leaders. Meetings with stakeholders were conducted at the parish level (4 meetings) and village level (16 meetings) to identify and rank priority parenting challenges and design ways of addressing them.

### ***Four Approaches for Problem-Solving***

#### ***Community Advisory Boards***

People in the community were invited to nominate CAB members. The CAB was the first community structure established under this project. A total of five CABs were formed: four at the parish level and one at the sub-county level. Each parish CAB comprised 10 to 12 respected and trusted community members, such as religious, cultural, and opinion leaders. The parish CABs participated in identifying and mobilizing parents to take part in different project activities such as enumerating approaches to be used, identifying role-model parents and survivors of child abuse, and making appropriate referrals. They also participated in the monitoring of project activities,



attended review meetings, and provided feedback on the progress of the project. At the sub-county level, the CAB comprised sub-county officials (community development officer, parish chiefs, and community representatives) and was responsible for advocacy, biannual joint monitoring and review, and provision of technical support to parish-level CABs. The CABs at parish level also participated in identification of role-model parents who would act as champions of change for this project. We documented all CAB activities throughout the project. Our analysis shows that CABs were very useful: they made it possible for the project team to work with parents in ways that supported the protection of children's rights and were likely to contribute to a long-term reduction in VAC in the community.

#### *Application of SASA! by Role Model Parents*

First, parents from the community listed the qualities they regarded as typical of a good parent. The attributes they identified included: showing love to children, not beating or abusing children, talking over any concerns with the child, advising children if they have done something inappropriate, teaching children to respect other community members, making sure that children are in school, living in harmony with household members and the entire community, and having the respect of the community. During FGD engagements, parents were then asked to identify two individuals within their communities who possessed the desired qualities of a good parent. The nominated parents were independently approached and asked whether they would be interested in sharing their parenting experiences with other parents.

These role model parents used the Start Awareness Support Action (SASA!), a rights-based approach to raise awareness and advocate for actions in the community (Carlson, 2013). "Sasa" is a Swahili word meaning "now". The SASA! approach was developed by Raising Voices, an activist organization dedicated to ending violence against women by raising awareness and promoting action (Abramsky et al., 2012). In our study, SASA! was adopted to raise awareness and champion action to end child abuse in the community, emphasizing that "now" is the time to stop abusing children and promote children's rights through positive parenting. The SASA! approach is personal and proactive, and starts with raising awareness at the individual level. It works through engaging individuals, families, and community members. The SASA! approach was promoted by the role model parents who engaged community members at every interaction or meeting to pass on positive parenting messages. It was not necessary to mobilize people to do SASA! since they were already meeting at their different events. The role model parents shared parenting information informally through churches, village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), markets, and home visits.

#### *Application of SASA! by School Peer Support Groups*

The peer model is anchored in the rights-based approach that emphasizes creating awareness of the rights and responsibilities of both children and duty bearers. First, pupils, with the guidance of their teachers, identified those pupils they felt could encourage the sensitization of their peers. Teachers and administrators provided guidance on the content and planning platforms to be used

in the sensitization effort. Through peer support groups, using school-based structures like clubs, debates, assemblies, and music and dance sessions, the designated pupils used the SASA! approach to promote children's rights, build the self-esteem of fellow students, and empower themselves as agents of change. Participants' comments about the SASA! school peer support groups included:

Here in the school, the teachers are always organizing debates, drama, and songs on children's rights and children are mobilized to take part in them. (FGD\_PEERS\_PS\_01)

Teachers assist pupils to draw work plans and also do translations of words that learners are unable to explain to fellow learners. (FGD\_PUPILS\_PS\_02)

Some parents, police, and health workers are sometimes invited to facilitate the [children's rights] sensitization process in the school. (FGD\_PUPILS\_PS\_02)

However, peer support groups often found it difficult to identify the best ways of comprehensively articulating children's rights concepts to both children and duty bearers. We found that some children used their knowledge of children's rights to avoid carrying out their responsibilities within the school and at home. In other cases, the increased agency of the children created a rift between them and their parents. Some parents viewed children as disrespectful, while children saw themselves as exercising their rights, as revealed by one participant:

It creates disharmony between parents and children. This is because some children do not want to do some of their responsibilities and they think that their parents are mistreating them ... (FGD\_PEERS\_PS\_01)

This comment implies that promoting positive parenting as a strategy to prevent VAC was misunderstood by the children. Some children, for example, would refuse to engage in household chores or school activities because the SASA! approach discourages the use of corporal punishment by parents and teachers, not all of whom have learned more appropriate methods of securing children's cooperation.

### *Household Socioeconomic Strengthening*

Households were engaged to identify viable farm enterprises and supported to undertake modern farming practices to improve yields and generate household income. In each parish, the households were part of the existing farmer groups formed to collectively acquire, through training provided by the government, skills applicable to modern farming practices. Three community groups from each parish, for a total of 12 groups, were identified by the CABs. The participants from each community group also identified land where each group would establish a demonstration garden to act as a field school for farmers where they could develop modern farming skills and routinely meet, with the support of an agricultural extension worker, to share experiences. The farmer field school activities were linked to VSLA activities to enable members to routinely save specified amounts of money and also acquire small loans to advance their household enterprises. To improve the nutritional status of children and thus boost their well-being,

kitchen gardens were established at the household level and supported using the knowledge and skills acquired from farmer field schools. Each household was supported to establish a kitchen garden for income generation and improved nutrition; their performance was monitored by the CABs. Below are some quotations from our discussions about how household economic strengthening was beneficial for VAC prevention:

Holding community meetings and talking to parents through community meetings organized to sensitize parents on child care and support. (FGD\_PARENTS\_02)

We also carry out follow-up on children in schools to find out from the teachers if our children are having some problems within themselves and the community responds by providing advice to children. (FGD\_PARENTS\_03)

Advising children by talking to them during family time, school PTA [parent–teacher association] and SMC [School Management Committee] meetings to address those problems. (FGD\_PARENTS\_03)

The above excerpts from our FGD data show that household economic strengthening can be a useful approach to sensitize parents about child protection as a strategy to prevent VAC in their communities.

### ***Relevance of Approaches to Preventing Violence Against Children***

#### *Intervention Resonance*

The children liked messages that raised their awareness of children’s rights and responsibilities. The information shared through the peer support groups was viewed by children as educative (new ideas) and empowering (more awareness of the availability of services and how to access them in case of child abuse). As one peer support group member commented:

Children’s rights and responsibilities is a very interesting [topic] because learners say it helps them to know their rights and are aware of what they can do and can’t do. They can now report cases of abuse to anyone that they were taught to report to. (FGD\_PEERS\_PS\_01)

It was reported that neighbouring community members had started visiting the farmer groups to learn how they are practising modern farming and to discuss other topics from the program. Comments from parents included:

The tools have been very useful because the communities in those areas are informed and they get the information on child care and protection and also they participate in the discussions organized. (FGD\_PARENTS\_02)

Advice [is provided] to parents to carry out agricultural activities because this is the treasury of the rural people so that they can have enough food to support children’s nutrition. (FGD\_PARENTS\_02)

Our findings, therefore, show increased participation of target groups in project activities and the uptake of available child protection services within the community.

#### *Feasibility of Delivery and Flexibility of the Approaches*

The approaches identified can be effectively implemented by existing structures within the community such as churches, schools, and farmer groups. Members of the various child protection structures were instructed in PLA approaches and in the monitoring and support supervision of community-led activities. Below are some excerpts from participants:

Through the churches, many children and their parents have been reached and advised accordingly. This is because many of them attend church functions since they are believers who find the church useful for meeting their demands and providing solutions for their problems. (FGD\_PARENTS\_02)

Making follow-ups on issues of child protection within the community has strengthened the structures to take action against child protection violation issues through referring cases, discussions, and providing advice. (FGD\_PARENTS\_03)

Our findings, therefore, demonstrate that such community-led approaches are feasible for delivery of the VAC prevention initiatives.

We also found these approaches to be flexible for parents and CAB members. The strength of community-led interventions arises from leveraging the goodwill of the target population. Our findings demonstrate that communities not only understand the challenges they are faced with but also have the capacity to address them. Our approach allowed community members the flexibility to take the lead in identifying problems, ranking them, identifying potential solutions, and deciding how the desired change can be achieved:

Accessing churches, group meetings, CPCs, schools, community groups, etc. has been very easy for community members. This is because you can choose who to talk to in case you have problems instead of being forced to talk to someone you do not want to talk to. (FGD\_PARENTS\_02)

During the training, facilitators allowed the community members to talk about [their] children's fate.... and people came out with all those problems faced by children. So talking about the problems helped them to identify child protection issues within the community. (FGD\_PARENTS\_01)

Community-led initiatives for VAC prevention are more flexible than conventional government-led child protection systems under which parents or caregivers report cases of VAC to a designated authority. Our project shows that this flexibility is crucial to the effectiveness of the community-led approach.

The CABS and the various groups agreed on what changes they would like to see in their communities, developed activities to be implemented, and made work plans to guide the implementation of proposed activities. During their weekly meetings, the groups agreed on what activities needed to be implemented, the roles assigned to group members, and what should be reported on at the next meeting. This flexible approach allowed for the active participation of all group members regardless of education or socioeconomic status. The knowledge received was applied by the target communities, especially in regard to parent involvement in school-related activities. Some parents shared their experiences of escorting children to and from school, paying school fees on time, and attending school meetings. There was a general increase in knowledge about parenting, including an appreciation of parental responsibility in holistic child upbringing and fulfilling children's physical, emotional, and psychosocial needs. One participant said:

Yes, the tools are useful because after training ... parents are encouraging children to continue with their education especially girls who in the past were not encouraged or sent to schools, they were only prepared to be married off by their parents. (FGD\_PARENTS\_04)

Because we utilized community-based structures and indigenous knowledge in addressing child protection challenges faced by the communities, the intervention was low in cost, with a high likelihood of sustainability. Our findings suggest that, if scaled up, this intervention is likely to reach more beneficiaries and generate meaningful impact at the community level.

### ***Changes Attributable to the Intervention***

After the intervention, schools integrated topics on children's rights and child protection into the school curriculum, with topics being discussed during debates, in drama, and in songs based on children's input and ideas, and directly taught in classes where they were accessible to all children. As well, information on good parenting practices was passed on through the schools to parents and other community members.

Farmers' groups (VSLAs) integrated project interventions into their daily program activities. During their meetings, a member led the discussion on positive parenting and provided feedback to the group at their next sitting. This was done freely without facilitation.

The establishment of kitchen gardens was seen to improve the nutrition of children and their families and also produced household income that could be used to meet household basic needs. Knowledge and skills in kitchen gardening were provided to 400 households, along with the inputs needed to start. As one participant put it:

It is helpful because, after the sensitization program, communities can operate kitchen gardens well as a result of the knowledge that they got from the group. (FGD\_PARENTS\_02)

As a result of the intervention, there is increased agency at the community level as evidenced by enhanced reporting of VAC. We found that action was being taken against parents who failed to protect their children against abuse. For example, parents responsible for school absenteeism have been summoned before local leaders for reprimand. Community child protection structures were strengthened: the CABs, role model parents, and school peer support groups have increased awareness of VAC, and the reporting of cases of child abuse has consequently improved.

The intervention also enhanced the agency of children in terms of negotiating with adults to protect their rights and in identifying and reporting any cases of abuse perpetrated against fellow children in the community. One participant noted:

Community members are aware of children's rights policy and are respecting these rights and taking up their responsibilities of providing children with basic needs.  
(FGD\_PARENTS\_04)

Our findings show that not only was the intervention beneficial for VAC prevention but also for responding to VAC. By engaging community members in CABs and activities to improve their livelihoods, stronger relationships were developed between parents and children, and also parents' understanding of child protection improved. Additionally, there was enhanced interest among community members in responding to VAC within household and school settings.

## Discussion

This paper documents the attempt to use community-led initiatives that tap into the power of PLA approaches and positive parenting practices to reduce VAC in Lira District in Northern Uganda. Children and women remain more vulnerable to violence in our societies than men (WHO, 2016; Cunningham & Baker, 2007; Ez-Elarab et al., 2007), largely due to their sociocultural marginalization. Research evidence indicates that, although violence against vulnerable groups in our societies has devastating effects, it's also predictable (Fang et al., 2017; Hillis et al., 2016) and preventable [WHO, 2016]. VAC also remains highly gendered, with girls experiencing more effects of violence than boys do (Yarnell et al., 2014). Moreover, Yarnell et al. (2014) suggested that girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys because of the investment required (school fees, buying school uniforms, books, pens, and menstrual pads). In other cases, girls are married at about the same time as they transition to secondary school. This pattern of abuse has also been reported by similar studies (Uganda Bureau of Statistics & ICF, 2018; Performance Monitoring and Accountability, 2020, 2017, 2018).

Using a systematic process to understand the root causes of VAC enables communities to identify lasting solutions. The VAC prevention intervention reported in this study was implemented as a comprehensive community-driven intervention in an attempt to harness existing yet underutilized resources for improvement of child protection (Jamshidi et al., 2014). As in the INSPIRE strategy initiated by WHO (2016), this approach has the potential to generate impactful



solutions to VAC in low-resource settings like those found in Uganda and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings indeed confirm that the multi-level environments inhabited by children interact to produce VAC (Stoebenau et al., 2019; Deb & Modak, 2010).

Key to the success of such community-led interventions are community engagement and the contextualization of approaches in development work (Melton & McLeigh, 2020; Banks et al., 2017). As in other post-conflict communities, the recovery context cannot be downplayed when designing child protection programs in Northern Uganda. Local communities will not remain mere recipients and passive players in the development fields: they have lived the problems identified and therefore have a deeper appreciation of their magnitude and the complexities that arise in addressing them than outsiders do. Therefore, the contribution of community-driven initiatives to the realization of SDG Target 16.2 (“end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children”); SDG Target 5.2 (“eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation”); and SDG Target 16.1 (“significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere”) becomes critical (WHO, 2016, p. 9).

During the implementation of this intervention, discourse on children’s rights was more challenging than expected due to the disconnect between parents’ and children’s perspectives. The concept of children’s rights and, essentially, human rights, was largely seen to be a Western concept in the communities. This perception is held by a broad spectrum of community members including the young, the old, in-school and out of school children, men, and women. This view of children’s rights as foreign continues to undermine advancement of child protection programs in Uganda (Ashukem, 2019; Katsui & Kumpuvuori, 2008; Olafsen et al., 2019), in Africa generally (London, 2017), and throughout the Third World (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Ife, 2012; London, 2017). To break through such strongly held beliefs, there is a need to integrate human rights with community engagement (London, 2017). Indeed, because community engagement activities were used as an entry point in our intervention, the attempt to integrate children’s rights issues with community engagement generated interest and the active participation of target groups. Though this paper presents qualitative evidence on use of PLA approaches to prevent VAC, we recognize that this study was conducted within a limited scope and does not provide any quantifiable measurements for inference.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed at preventing VAC by scaling up positive parenting practices. Community-led PLA approaches were adopted to elicit active participation and to empower communities. We recognize that VAC is deeply rooted in our sociocultural systems with its causes and consequences complexly intertwined with other societal challenges. Local communities are pivotal in the identification, design, and implementation of comprehensive, workable, and sustainable programs that address both the root causes and the risk factors associated with VAC in those communities.

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