International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies

CENTERING GRASSROOTS ACTORS IN NETWORKING FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN EAST AFRICA

Doris M. Kakuru, Annah Kamusiime, Kylee Lindner et Jacqueline Assiimwe

Citer cet article

Résumé de l'article

Violence against children (VAC) is both a global and local concern that has resulted in several child protection initiatives by formal and informal networks in East Africa. The dominant narrative on networking for VAC prevention and response significantly focuses on the functionality of formal networks and ignores grassroots networks. We conducted research to explore the functionality and corresponding impact of diverse networks that work to prevent and respond to VAC in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Study participants were VAC network leads at grassroots, subnational, and national levels, and network funders. Data were collected using interviews, document review, and focus group discussions. We found that scholarly literature illuminates the role of formal networks at the expense of grassroots networks, which are ignored and minoritized in literature. This may contribute to a disparity between the funding of grassroots and formal networks. Yet, grassroots network actors are VAC first responders and are instrumental in child protection work. We contend that it is vital to center grassroots networks in VAC policies, programs, and research in order to achieve sustainable connections between networks, communities, and funders, and to empower communities to protect children from abuse.

CENTERING GRASSROOTS ACTORS IN NETWORKING FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN EAST AFRICA

Doris M. Kakuru, Annah Kamusiime, Kylee Lindner, and Jacqueline Asiimwe

Abstract: Violence against children (VAC) is both a global and local concern that has resulted in several child protection initiatives by formal and informal networks in East Africa. The dominant narrative on networking for VAC prevention and response significantly focuses on the functionality of formal networks and ignores grassroots networks. We conducted research to explore the functionality and corresponding impact of diverse networks that work to prevent and respond to VAC in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Study participants were VAC network leads at grassroots, subnational, and national levels, and network funders. Data were collected using interviews, document review, and focus group discussions. We found that scholarly literature illuminates the role of formal networks at the expense of grassroots networks, which are ignored and minoritized in literature. This may contribute to a disparity between the funding of grassroots and formal networks. Yet, grassroots network actors are VAC first responders and are instrumental in child protection work. We contend that it is vital to center grassroots networks in VAC policies, programs, and research in order to achieve sustainable connections between networks, communities, and funders, and to empower communities to protect children from abuse.

Keywords: violence against children (VAC), child protection, grassroots initiatives, community empowerment, networks and networking

Doris Kakuru PhD (corresponding author) is an associate professor in, the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, 3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2. Email: doriskakuru@uvic.ca

Annah Kamusiime MA is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Social Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Programs Director at Nascent Research and Development Organization, P. O. Box 25382, Kampala, Uganda. Email: annahkamusiime@yahoo.co.uk

Kylee Lindner BA is a master's candidate in the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, 3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2. Email: kyleelindner@gmail.com

Jacqueline Asiimwe LLM is the Chief Executive Officer of CivSource Africa. 18 Balikuddembe Road, Naguru. P. O. Box 4310, Kampala, Uganda. Email: jasiimwe@civsourcea.com

In this article, violence against children (VAC) refers to "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse" (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC], 1989, Art. 19). It is estimated that half of the world's children suffer from violence each year, resulting in over 40,000 deaths (World Health Organization, 2020). Over the past decades, there have been global efforts to address VAC. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the CRC both call for the elimination of VAC. Target 16.2 of the UN Agenda 2030 for SDGs (UN, 2015) focuses on ending "abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children". Additionally, two general comments on the CRC, No. 8 and No. 13 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, 2011), address the need for children to enjoy the right to freedom from all forms of violence including corporal punishment and other cruel forms of punishment. The African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC; 2017) launched Africa's Agenda for Children 2040, which promotes ending all forms of VAC. Within East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda), there appears to be evidence of commitment to child protection demonstrated by relevant child-focused legal and institutional frameworks. All three countries are state parties of the CRC (1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organization of African Unity, 1990). The East African region also has a rich and active network of child-focused civil society organizations focused on preventing and responding to VAC.

Networks have been described as coalitions, alliances, communities of practice (CoPs), collaborations, associations, and partnerships (Brinkerhoff, 1999; Engel, 1993; Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Padron, 1991; Plucknett et al., 1990; Younis, 2017). They are portrayed in scholarly literature as existing in a formal, structured manner and as cross-sectoral collaborations among actors sharing a common concern (Brinkerhoff, 1999; Cummings & van Zee, 2005; Engel, 1993; Plucknett et al., 1990). They comprise a range of actors — organizations, institutions, and individuals — who build relationships for many reasons, including sharing knowledge and learning from each other's experience, achieving convergent objectives, and generating synergistic effects (Younis, 2017). Mizrahi and Rosenthal (2001) and Younis (2017) used the concept of "coalition", by which they meant a group of organizations whose members commit to an agreed purpose and to shared decision-making in order to influence external institutions or targets. In such a group, however, each member organization maintains its autonomy. In agreement with these views, the Skat Foundation Resource Centre for Development (Egger, 2004) associated networks with institutionalized partnerships between institutions or organizations, which may even be legal entities. Therefore, the dominant conceptualization of networks acknowledges that formal networks are those comprised of organizations registered and recognized by governments. They are often characterized by institutionalization and standardized decision-making procedures. There is, therefore, an institutionalized and structured notion of networks and networking in scholarly literature.

The available literature privileges formal and prominent networks over informal or non-registered networks and actors. Informal networks comprise ties between individuals and groups of individuals who collaboratively work within their communities, families, and family systems to prevent and respond to VAC spontaneously in an unstructured manner. Cummings and van Zee (2005) noted a continuum of increasing formality in terms of structure in which CoPs are highly informalized and networks are highly formalized, with significant variations in between.

In this article, we extend this discourse by exploring the functionality of networks (or coalitions) that are not formal organizations. We follow the broader perspective of networks adopted by Zijderveld (2000) as "a set of reciprocal, usually informal, often rather anonymous bonds between actors. They are set up and maintained to promote private interests, and usually lack a fixed, vertical hierarchy of power" (p. 121). Thus, we explore individuals operating in all sorts of spaces, the internal influences that exist in networks, how networking happens, and forms of networks that seem to remain unrecognized, undefined, unstructured, and informal. Our aim is to center grassroots network actors and their status as frontline responders to VAC.

Past research has discovered that in many communities, grassroots initiatives have significantly supplemented government and NGOs' social protection efforts (see Asingwire et al., 2015; Awortwi, 2018; Awortwi & Aiyede, 2017). Grassroots VAC initiatives assume a strengths-based approach to child protection and nurture the capacity of families and neighborhoods to address issues at the community level (September, 2006). These initiatives can be seen as a kind of informal networking in which community members join forces to address a common issue. Despite the intricate web of overlapping systems, research evidence demonstrates that home-grown initiatives have an inherent sense of community ownership, which may improve interventions as survivors receive relevant and culturally appropriate services that fit with community priorities (Castro Félix & DuPree, 2014). According to Wessells (2015), implementing community-driven approaches to child protection is very important, especially since expert-driven interventions decrease community ownership. Limited community ownership undermines the cultivation of accountability and trust between child protection actors and community members.

It is well documented that survivors of violence typically seek help through informal networks before involving formal networks and resources (Goodman et al., 2016; Johnson & Sloth-Nielsen, 2020; Kyriakakis, 2014). Kyriakakis (2014) examined help-seeking patterns of Mexican immigrant women with experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) and found that survivors were more likely to reach out to informal supports than government establishments. Kyriakakis suggested that informal supports could play a vital role in the intervention process for survivors of violence. Concerning IPV, Goodman et al. (2016) argued that these informal supports and networks generally have more impact than formal organizations. This could be attributed to the cultural relativity and local knowledge of informal, community-based supports (Castro Félix & DuPree, 2014; McLeigh et al., 2017). Such grassroots initiatives are being increasingly encouraged by civil society actors as a viable alternative to and support for formal welfare services. Awortwi

(2018) discussed the fact that social protection in Africa largely depends on non-state service providers and grassroots actors.

Although these initiatives add significant value, they are not adequately supported and lack the necessary resources to carry out their work (September, 2006). Previous researchers have asserted that when not adequately equipped for the task, informal supports can do more harm than good (Goodman et al., 2016; Spilsbury & Korbin, 2013). On the contrary, there is a growing body of scholarly literature that recognizes the importance of informal grassroots networks in supplementing government community development efforts (e.g., Awortwi, 2018; Castro Félix & DuPree, 2014; Goodman et al., 2016; Johnson & Sloth-Nielsen, 2020; Kyriakakis, 2014; Walakira et al., 2017). Apart from these opposing views, thus far, limited attention has been paid to centering and illuminating grassroots actors' voices in research, policy, and practice as far as preventing and responding to VAC in East Africa is concerned. Hence, in this paper, our goal is to demarginalize and illuminate the voices of the VAC grassroots network in East Africa. We discuss the interconnectedness and functionality of informal networks and how their effectiveness could increase with more recognition and support.

Theoretical Framework: Community Empowerment Theory

As community ownership is inherent in grassroots initiatives, our study was informed by empowerment theory. Page and Czuba (1991) defined empowerment as "a multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives" (para. 1); it is a process that includes both individual efforts and community involvement (Rappaport, 1987, as cited in Loizou & Charalambous, 2017). We chose to focus on the broader idea of community empowerment. In a study conducted by Rowan et al. (2015), participants' help-seeking patterns were observed in relation to IPV. Rowan et al. found that while self-empowerment did not significantly increase women's help-seeking patterns, community empowerment increased such patterns by 23%, suggesting that informal community supports increase the likelihood that women experiencing IPV will seek help (p. 11). A sense of community can increase the availability of social supports and community networking and can allow community members to act in meaningful roles (Christens, 2012). Community empowerment can contribute to individual psychological development, community development, and, ultimately, positive social change (Christens, 2012). Therefore, we situate this article in the concepts of empowerment theory, which holds that empowered individuals can act as vehicles toward better-empowered communities that uphold child protection.

Methodology

Study Design and Participants

We utilized an exploratory qualitative research approach (Brown, 2006) with various methods of data collection, which generated in-depth perspectives around networking for prevention of VAC, including 28 individual interviews, a document review, and 10 focus group discussions (FGDs). The study population comprised VAC network leads at national, subnational, and grassroots levels. It included individuals involved in VAC prevention and response. The specific networks and actors who participated in the research were identified through the document review process and interactions with FGD participants. We collected more secondary data during the process of conducting FGDs and interviews.

We used a bottom-up approach to select study participants, starting with VAC frontline duty bearers and volunteers at the grassroots level. These provided us with information about actors at the district level, who in turn advised the team on national level participants, including their funders. FGD participants were selected using purposive (Bernard, 2017; Tongco, 2007) and snowball (Naderifar et al., 2017) sampling techniques. Following Tongco (2007), we recruited people who could provide us with information based on their experience and knowledge of VAC prevention and response work at the grassroots level. We asked the identified people to refer us to others who were also invited to participate in FGDs. The key criteria for inclusion were: being a grassroots actor actively involved in preventing or responding to VAC, and residing in one of the study sites. FGD participants included parish chiefs, child protection officers, religious leaders, local council representatives, head teachers, and representatives of community-based organizations (CBOs) and associations.

Individual interview participants were VAC network representatives (leads, hosts, and chairs) and VAC network funders at the district and national levels. The funders were those who were currently funding, or had previously funded, VAC interventions of the participating networks. They were purposively selected based on desk review and FGD data.

Data Collection

Data collection began with a desk review to locate gaps in the literature and identify existing networks for potential participation in the study. The documents were gathered from both online sources and physical sources. Thereafter, we designed the research tools, translated them into local languages, and pretested them in each country. The desk review informed the next phase, in which primary data collection took place.

Our primary data collection began with FGDs at the grassroots level, which we conducted with key community influencers and individuals who are involved in VAC prevention and response work every day. FGD group facilitators used a guide that had been developed collaboratively by research team members in the three countries. All FGD participants provided written consent. We audio-recorded the FGD sessions, also with consent, and took field notes. The FGDs were used to

generate qualitative data that produced deeper insights into VAC networking at the grassroots level. FGDs also helped the study identify key VAC actors and networks at the subnational and national levels.

This was followed by data collection using individual interviews conducted in person and on the telephone, with follow-up email discussions. We obtained written consent from all interview participants before they were interviewed. Interview data were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed. The interviews provided information on how networking happens within the interview participants' networks, and on VAC network funding sources and priorities. Table 1 provides a summary of the different categories of study participant.

Table 1. *Data Sources*

Primary data collection methods	Total number		
	Tanzania	Kenya	Uganda
Focus group discussions	4	3	4
Interviews with grassroots network leads	2	3	1
Interviews with subnational level network leads	3	3	3
Interviews with national level network leads	4	3	3
Interviews with VAC network funders	1	0	2

Data Analysis

All FGDs and interviews were audio-recorded, and access to data was restricted to only members of the research team. The audio files were transcribed and anonymized by members of the research team. Data were coded using ATLAS.ti and NVivo (version 11), then categorized into emerging themes based on the study's objectives. We chose a thematic data analysis procedure using an iterative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby data collected from the desk review were analyzed to inform the subsequent FGD phase. Similarly, FGD data informed the interview phase.

To ensure trustworthiness, all data were handled by at least two research team members who discussed any identified discrepancies in the interpretations until they reached a consensus. All arguments were supported and checked with the relevant literature. We also engaged in peer debriefing to discuss the perceived meanings that the field notes, the data, and the themes conveyed (Connelly, 2016). Additionally, in an effort to ensure completeness, we engaged in data and researcher triangulation (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). We accomplished this by diversifying each research team members' data sources and interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

We obtained ethical clearance from research bodies in all three countries (Kenya: # 277079; Uganda: SS 5124; Tanzania: 2020-033-NA-2019-439) and ensured anonymity throughout the data reporting and sharing. We removed all identifying data from the transcripts and reports. All of our participants consented to the data collection, recording, and storage procedures.

Findings

Conceptualization of Grassroots Networks and Networking

Throughout our analysis, we explored the issue of networking as a function versus networking as an organizational form. Networking as a function means intentionally working together to prevent and respond to VAC. Networking as an organizational form entails the formalization of networks by fulfilling the requirements of governments such as registration, a physical premises, and a constitution. We found that participants thought networking as a function was more beneficial for child protection. Moreover, the findings revealed that while some formal networks may be fully active, others are active only intermittently. They operate effectively when conditions are conducive but go dormant when they are not. For example, some formal networks are only active when they have a funded project. We also encountered some formal networks that were not active at all, but existed in name only.

One FGD participant observed that "similar to a netted dwelling of an African bird, ties between networks can be intertwined and messy". Grassroots VAC networks were described as interconnected webs involving multiple entities, including individuals such as religious leaders, community elders, social workers, women's groups, youth groups, local leaders, clan and family heads, community influencers, community-based associations and groups, and staff who link with government institutions to prevent and respond to VAC. We found that grassroots actors engage in unplanned collective action based on what is effectively an unwritten child protection code of ethics; they have a spontaneous operating style and no formalized governance structure. Our data show two major categories of grassroots network: loosely structured and unstructured.

Loosely Structured Grassroots Networks

These are informal collaborations that lack the qualities of formal networks. For example, they are not registered and have no recognized organizational structures; however, they have a clear purpose, well-demarcated operational areas, and partners. Loosely structured networks comprise village child rights committee members who collaborate with local police, community groups and committees, and local government and CBO officers to address VAC. Such actors are well versed in their child protection mandate and are commonly known as stakeholders (see de Bruin Cardoso, 2019). Within these collaborations, responding to VAC follows an informally defined referral pathway that includes all child protection stakeholders in the area. That is, whereas the working relationship between local government child protection officers, CBOs, police, local leaders, and individual activists may not be formalized, the referral and reporting structures are relatively

stable. For example, a local leader of a village or a police officer attached to a specific police post is mandated to serve in their area of jurisdiction. Although some elements of formality are absent in loosely structured grassroots networks, their lack of registration status does not mean that they are unfocused or uncontrolled. Moreover, grassroots networks are guided by national regulations; for example, legislation that benefits children, as well as the national constitutions of the three countries.

Such unstructured networks have functionality but no formal existence. These networks are more visible at the grassroots level, whereas formal networks operating at national and district levels are more visible to donors and the public. However, the work of unstructured networks has the potential to create more immediate tangible and lasting impacts than the VAC prevention advocacy work and lobbying for VAC policy formulation and implementation engaged in by formal networks. While these are important contributions, their impact on grassroots actors is not immediate, but delayed and indirect. Our analysis, therefore, shows a discrepancy between networks as a function and networks as an organizational form.

Unstructured Grassroots Networks

Unstructured grassroots networks comprise individuals who collaborate to prevent and respond to VAC. This occurs through following an informal referral pathway or a tacit protocol. For example, when a religious leader or a neighbor learns of a VAC case, they may report it to the village committee chairperson, the women's representative on the local council, or the police. Whoever receives the report uses their discretion to decide how to move forward expeditiously. Individuals in such an unstructured grassroots network only collaborate informally, based on mutual understanding and a shared goal to serve their communities through boosting child protection efforts. The modalities of operation of such an informal network may be implicit — members operate in an impromptu and somewhat random manner — but they are well understood.

The relationships and unstructured silent ties among individual community members, families, and community groups serve as the starting point for either responding to violence or attempting to prevent it. When these ties between grassroots actors are absent or poorly maintained, perpetrators of violence may find opportunities in the missing connections to abuse children. Our data, therefore, show that grassroots networks are uniquely situated in the child protection landscape.

Unstructured grassroots networks in the three countries use social cohesion, social capital, and social ties to fulfil their desire to have a positive effect on their communities. The interconnections that exist are based on where one lives in these countries. All three are characterized by high levels of volunteerism, and their VAC prevention and response depends on the work of individuals and of groups. Between loosely structured and unstructured networks, there might be other types, as yet undefined, along the continuum of informality from highly informal unstructured grassroots networks to loosely structured grassroots networks that display some structured features.

Formation of Grassroots Networks

In our quest to understand how networking happens, we started by investigating why and how networks are formed. We found that whereas formal networks at subregional and national levels are formed out of actors' desire to produce synergies by working together, grassroots networks emerge organically. Our findings show that neighbors often network to protect children from violence. Unstructured grassroots network actors have a tacit surveillance system to identify potential perpetrators and survivors of VAC. Hypothetically, for example, if one observer suspects that an adolescent girl is pregnant, it may spark a covert investigation by the neighbors. They may choose not to involve the girl's parents, especially if it is not clear that they will cooperate. On confirming that the minor is pregnant, the neighbors can alert the police to intervene, since sexual relations involving a person under 18 are prohibited by law. Another hypothetical example: if a person in the village were suspected of harboring intentions of defiling a child, neighbors could monitor their interactions to ensure that it did not happen. Grassroots network actors also report VAC cases to the authorities and provide witness accounts. In such scenarios, the interconnections at the grassroots level usually emerge organically, with many cases of spontaneous collaboration. However, these efforts are not always effective. Our data show that in areas where the unstructured grassroots networks are not very strong, some perpetrators are able to bribe their way out of legal trouble: many actors who belong to weak networks also serve as arbitrators in clan and village courts.

Grassroots network formation can also be driven by individual volunteerism. For example, some communities in Uganda have formed child protection committees that oversee establishing children's rights. In these and other grassroots networks, the actors are sometimes appointed by community members, creating an informal code and underlying trust that implies a strong sense of community accountability. Membership in these informal networks is open to those who want to serve and are in good community standing; in some cases, members are nominated by the local leaders. Thus, there are high levels of volunteerism and commitment, and these actors view child protection as a calling.

Analysis of our findings shows that, normally, the pioneer volunteers are people currently raising children or who have grandchildren. Their volunteerism is rooted in the spirit of *ubuntu* — the African concept meaning "humanity" or "I am because we are" (Mbiti, 1972). They know that if all children can be protected, their children will also be safe. Grassroots VAC networks, therefore, are formed out of community reciprocity and connection as a means of child protection. They rely on local knowledge of child protection, which grassroots actors have accumulated over time. Grassroots networks also have a contextualized understanding of harmful cultural practices that perpetuate VAC and how to interrogate them when necessary. Additionally, the formation of grassroots approaches to addressing VAC draws on community norms of collective support, with collective resource pooling, investment of time in VAC prevention, and response activities providing a bulwark against VAC.

Our findings reveal that the collective efficacy built by actors in grassroots networks to prevent and respond to VAC is guided by shared norms and values, mutual trust, and a willingness to cause a change in their communities. In so doing, grassroots actors endure challenges. For example, they report experiencing pushback from some conservative parents and guardians who still believe that corporal punishment is effective and justifiable. During one of the FGDs, a community leader lamented, "Some schools and parents still believe in the biblical saying that when you 'spare the rod, you spoil the child'…." In some communities, grassroots actors report being labelled "child spoilers". They also report having been betrayed by people who conspire with VAC perpetrators to dismiss reported cases.

Funding for Grassroots Networks

We asked grassroots network actors how they funded their activities and found that they were self-funded. For example, they used their own telephones to network and strategize daily, paid for their own transport to networking meetings and events, and invested a lot of time in doing VAC-related work. Additionally, they sometimes sponsored survivors in a variety of ways, such as by purchasing groceries, clothes, and school requirements for neglected children in their communities. Although grassroots networks are primarily funded from individual actors' own sources, a few grassroots networks have received financial and logistical support in the past from government departments or local NGOs implementing child protection projects in their areas. For example, at one time Terre Des Hommes and the Oak Foundation funded loosely structured grassroots networks in East Africa.

In light of the scarcity of funding for grassroots initiatives, we sought to identify tipping points for philanthropic support in regard to preventing and responding to VAC in East Africa. We found that in Kenya, funders were beginning to show more interest in community level networks than national level networks. Based on discussions with a range of participants, the approach of funding through CoPs at the grassroots level stood out. CoPs are groups of people who share a concern or passion and regularly interact to learn how to do it better (Wenger, 1997). CoPs are not always known as such: they may be referred to as "learning networks" or "thematic groups". The membership of grassroots networks differs from that of CoPs, in that CoPs typically involve practitioners focusing their efforts on a specific subject field to further their knowledge and improve their community (Cummings & van Zee, 2005).

Discussion

We conducted this research in East Africa to understand how grassroots networks are formed and how they function. We found that networking is fluid. Scholarly literature has historically privileged formal networks over grassroots networks. Networks are commonly described in standardized, institutionalized terms (e.g., Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001; Younis, 2017). but our data show that such descriptions exclude grassroots networks. In comparing CoPs to networks, Cummings & van Zee (2005) found a continuum of increasing formality in terms of structure:

CoPs are highly informalized and networks highly formalized, with many variations in between. Although this definition is more inclusive, it too excludes grassroots networks. Our findings concur with Zijderveld's (2000) definition of networks as informal, undefined, non-hierarchical bonds between actors, which is more inclusive.

We found that formal networks are formed from strategically planned and intentional efforts by actors who share a common vision or concern. Grassroots networks, on the other hand, emerge organically out of the actors' need to address a specific VAC concern that is impacting their communities. Guided by the spirit of *ubuntu*, their actions arise from the need for community reciprocity and collaboration. The study findings suggest that grassroots networks are formed because there is a gap in child protection service delivery that must be filled if children's rights are to be realized. Our research findings confirm past studies (Asingwire et al., 2018; Awortwi, 2018; Awortwi & Aivede, 2017), which found that grassroots initiatives are formed to fill a gap left by governments and NGOs.

Our data analysis also shows that grassroots network actors face several challenges in executing their work. We view these challenges as interfering with community empowerment and suggest that a community where grassroots workers must take on personal economic strain in order to protect children is not fully empowered. Despite these challenges, grassroots networks display continued resilience even when formal networks have "switched off" because their funding has run out or their projects have closed. Our findings suggest that grassroots initiatives are crucial in VAC prevention and response, and are sustainable in the long run. Therefore, our study findings are congruent with those of Goodman and colleagues (2016), September (2006), and Wessells (2015), who contended that grassroots actors are key players in child protection.

Our study also found a web of connections between formal and grassroots networks. These linkages have advantages for VAC work at the grassroots, including the fact that some formal networks, such as MenEngage Tanzania[1] and Improve the Youth Uganda[2], build the capacity of grassroots actors working to prevent VAC. Conversely, the formal sector also gains from collaborating with grassroots networks. While the multiplicity of VAC actors can be seen as a demonstration of a general commitment to child protection, it can give rise to a fragmented and often confusing web of networks (Johnson & Sloth-Nielsen, 2020). Our findings show that the disconnect between formal and grassroots VAC actors have sometimes left informal actors feeling voiceless and exploited. One community leader noted, "The big organizations sometimes request us to put our names on their grant applications but when they get the funding, they ignore us. This makes us feel used." Our results suggest that formal networks seem to be making efforts to connect with grassroots actors because of the importance of the grassroots actors in the child protection landscape.

---

[1] https://menengage.org/country/tanzania/

[2] https://www.facebook.com/improvetheyouthug/

We also found that grassroots actors invest their resources of money and time into VAC work without expecting any reimbursement. Despite their low incomes, they serve as on-the-ground philanthropists who provide clothing for children in need, feed the hungry, and even help bury the dead. There is evidence that grassroots networks have a positive impact in their communities and we did not find evidence of harm. Our findings, therefore, contradict those of past scholars like Goodman et al. (2016) and Spilsbury and Korbin (2013) who have asserted that informal networks can do more harm than good unless adequately trained.

Another of our findings concerns the nature of network functionality. Our analysis explored forms of networking beyond the structured forms. We found that grassroots networks that were unrecognized in government records and marginalized in the scholarly literature were actually instrumental in VAC prevention and response in East Africa. We contend that while the existence of structured networks is important, simply having a structure is not enough to guarantee a network's ability to function. We found some registered networks that were considered to exist but were not working; as a participant said, they are "nets-not-working" rather than "nets-working" (FGD participant, Uganda). Such inoperative collaborations are what Savage et al. (2010) associated with collaborative inertia: a state of lack of progress among partners. We concur with Awortwi (2018, p. 905) that grassroots networks do not have a legal identity, but base their work on collective action. Therefore, our findings are incongruent with the conventional ways in which networks are understood: many authors see them exclusively as formal arrangements (e.g., Brinkerhoff, 1999; Cummings & van Zee, 2005; Engel, 1993; Plucknett et al., 1990). Our research supports the growing body of literature that recognizes the vital work of grassroots initiatives (Awortwi, 2018; Castro Félix & DuPree, 2014; Goodman et al., 2016; Johnson & Sloth-Nielsen, 2020; Kyriakakis, 2014; Walakira et al., 2017). The findings of this research suggest that funders would do better, when deciding which groups to support, to prioritize networks' functionality and their capacity to create the desired impact on the well-being of children instead of focusing on their formal "existence".

Given the disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were compelled to modify some of our initial research procedures. The lockdown in Kenya and Uganda caused difficulties in securing meetings with some of the targeted participants. We remedied this limitation by conducting some telephone interviews and one anonymized video conference interview, then following up by email as needed. Additionally, we further reviewed secondary sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Thus, the perspectives of some funders — specifically, the funders in Kenya — were collected through secondary data. As a result, our findings are not generalizable. More research involving all potential categories of actors, such as local governments at subnational levels, is required.

Conclusion

This article, based on a study of VAC networking in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, has aimed to illuminate the existence of grassroots actors in the child protection ecology and their representation in academic literature. We found a web of grassroots networks involved in VAC work that had been invisiblized and marginalized in practice, as well as ignored in social science research and literature. The efforts of grassroots VAC network actors are not properly recognized by their governments — local, subregional, and state — or by funders. Although grassroots network actors endeavored to gain control over child protection in their communities, they were neither facilitated nor empowered. Sufficient support and due recognition are vital to achieving fully empowered communities that can contribute to child protection in meaningful and sustainable ways. We recommend that philanthropic efforts should be directed at strengthening grassroots connections instead of supporting expert-driven interventions that are likely to result in lessening of community ownership. Future research could investigate strategies that would allow formal VAC networks to collaborate more effectively with grassroots actors and that would encourage funders to synchronize their priorities with those of the intended beneficiaries.

References

African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). (2017). *Africa's agenda for children 2040: Fostering an Africa fit for children*. https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/agendas/africas_agenda_for_children-english.pdf

Asingwire, N., Muhangi, D., Namara, R. B., & Kemigisa, M. (2015). *Governance, performance and sustainability of non-state social protection services in Uganda* [Research working paper no. 010]. Partnership for African Social and Governance to (PASGR). https://www.pasgr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Governance-performance-and-sustainability-of-non-state-social-protection-services-in-Uganda-Asingwire-et-al.pdf

Awortwi, N. (2018). Social protection is a grassroots reality: Making the case for policy reflections on community-based social protection actors and services in Africa. *Development Policy Review*, *36*, O897–O913. doi:10.1111/dpr.12364

Awortwi, N., & Aiyede, R. E. (2017). *Politics, public policy and social protection in Africa: Evidence from cash transfer programmes*. Routledge.

Bernard, H. R. (2017). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Brinkerhoff, D. W. (1999). State-civil society networks for policy implementation in developing countries. *Review of Policy Research*, *16*(1), 123–147. doi:10.1111/j.1541-1338.1999.tb00844.x

Brown, R. B. (2006). *Doing your dissertation in business and management: The reality of research and writing*. Sage.

Castro Félix, A., & DuPree, A. S. (2014). What we have learned about grassroots philanthropy: Lessons from Mexico. *The Foundation Review*, *6(*4), 44–64. doi: 10.9707/1944-5660.1225

Christens, B. D. (2012). Targeting empowerment in community development: A community psychology approach to enhancing local power and well-being. *Community Development Journal,* *47*(4), 538–554. doi:10.1093/cdj/bss031

Connelly, L. M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *MEDSURG Nursing*, *25*(6), 435–436. PMID: 30304614

Cummings, S., & van Zee, A. (2005). Communities of practice and networks: Reviewing two perspectives on social learning. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, *1*(1), 8–22.

Curtin, M., & Fossey, E. (2007). Appraising the trustworthiness of qualitative studies: Guidelines for occupational therapists. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, *54*(2), 88–94. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1630.2007.00661.x

de Bruin Cardoso, I., with S. Long. (2019). *Strengthening referral pathways for children and adolescents affected by sexual violence*. Catholic Relief Services. https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/4c_strengthening_referral_pathways.pdf

.Egger, U. K. (2004). *International networks for knowledge sharing: Lessons learnt?* Skat Foundation, Resource Centre for Development. https://skat-foundation.ch/book/international-networks-for-knowledge-sharing/

Engel, P. G. H. (1993). Daring to share: Networking among non-government organizations. In C. Alders, B. Haverkort, & L. Veldhuizen (Eds), *Linking with farmers: networking for low-external-input and sustainable agriculture* (pp. 131–150). Practical Action Publishing. doi:10.3362/9781780445328.010

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative results.* Aldine.

Goodman, L. A., Banyard, V., Woulfe, J., Ash, S., & Mattern, G. (2016). Bringing a network-oriented approach to domestic violence services: A focus group exploration of promising practices. *Violence Against Women*, *22*(1), 54–89. doi:10.1177/1077801215599080

Hayes, B. E., & Franklin, C. A. (2017). Community effects on women's help seeking behaviour for intimate partner violence in India: Gender disparity, feminist theory, and empowerment. *International Journal of Comparative and Applies Criminal Justice*, *41*(1–2), 79–94. doi:10.1080/01924036.2016.1233443

Johnson, A. K., & Sloth-Nielsen, J. (2020). Safeguarding children in the developing-world: Beyond intra-organisational policy and self-regulation. *Social Sciences*, *9*(6), 98. doi:10.3390/socsci9060098

Kyriakakis, S. (2014). Mexican immigrant women reaching out: The role of informal networks in the process of seeking help for intimate partner violence. *Violence Against Women*, *20*(9), 1097–1116. doi:10.1177/1077801214549640

Loizou, E., & Charalambous, N. (2017). Empowerment pedagogy. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *31*(3), 440–452. doi:10.1080/02568543.2017.1314396

Mbiti, J. S. (1972). African religions and philosophies. *Philosophy East and West*, *22*(3), 339–340.

McLeigh, J. D., Katz, C., Davidson-Arad, B., & Ben-Arieh, A. (2017). The cultural adaptation of a community-based child maltreatment prevention initiative. *Family Process*, *56*(2), 393–407. doi:10.1111/famp.12193

Mizrahi, T., & Rosenthal, B. B. (2001). Complexities of coalition building: Leaders' successes, strategies, struggles, and solutions. *Social Work*, *46*(1), 63–78. doi:10.1093/sw/46.1.63

Naderifar, M., Goli, H., & Ghaljaie, F. (2017). Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education*, *14*(3), e67670. doi:10.5812/sdme.67670

Organization of African Unity. (1990). *African charter on the rights and welfare of the child* [CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990)]. https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38c18.html

Padron, M. (1991). Networking and learning. *Reflexion*, *1*(1).

Page, N., & Czuba, C. E. (1999). Empowerment: What is it? *Journal of Extension*, *37*(5), 1–5. https://archives.joe.org/joe/1999october/comm1.php

Plucknett D. L., Smith N. J. H., & Ozgediz S. (1990). *Networking in international agricultural research*. Cornell University Press.

Rowan, K., Mumford, E., & Clark, C. J. (2015). Is women's empowerment associated with help-seeking for spousal violence in India? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *33*(9), 1519–1548. doi:10.1177/0886260515618945

Savage, G. T., Bunn, M. D., Gray, B., Xiao, Q., Wang, S., Wilson, E. J., & Williams, E. S. (2010). Stakeholder collaboration: Implications for stakeholder theory and practice. *Journal of Business Ethics, 96*(1), 21–26. doi:10.1007/s10551-011-0939-1

September, R. L. (2006). The progress of child protection in South Africa. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 15*(1), S65–S72. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2397.2006.00446.x

Spilsbury, J. C., & Korbin, J. E. (2013). Social networks and informal social support in protecting children from abuse and neglect: Community ties and supports promote children's safety. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *37*(Supp.), 8–16. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.10.027

Tongco, M. D. C. (2007). Purposive sampling as a tool for informant selection. *Ethnobotany Research and Applications*, *5*, 147–158. https://ethnobotanyjournal.org/index.php/era/article/view/126

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2006). *Convention on the rights of the child: General comment no. 8*. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/gc8.pdf/

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2011). *Convention on the rights of the child: General comment no. 13*. https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/crc.c.gc.13_en.pdf

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1989). https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx

Walakira, E. J., Kikulwe, D., Luwangula, R., Riley, M., Bukenya, B., & Ddumba-Nyanzi, I. (2017). System strengthening to improve alternative care for neglected and child survivors of violence in Uganda: Critical areas for consideration. In D. Kaawa-Mafigiri & E. Walakira (Eds.), *Child abuse and neglect in Uganda* (pp. 253–270). doi:10.1007/978-3-319-48535-5_13

Wenger, E. (1997). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Wessells, M. G. (2015). Bottom-up approaches to strengthening child protection systems: Placing children, families, and communities at the center. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *43*, 8–21. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.04.006

World Health Organization. (2020). Global status report on preventing violence against children 2020. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240004191 [accessed 15 January 2021]

Younis, M. (2017). Evaluating coalitions and networks: Frameworks, needs, and opportunities. Center for Evaluation Innovation. https://efc.issuelab.org/resources/29445/29445.pdf

Zijderveld, A. C. (2000). The institutional imperative: The interface of institutions and networks. Leiden University Press.