



STRONG COMMUNITIES FOR STRONG FAMILIES

How strong social networks support children
and their families in sub-Saharan Africa



SOS CHILDREN'S
VILLAGES

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Photo: P. Hahn

PREFACE

The work of SOS Children's Villages to strengthen families in the community is in transition. It has become clear through our direct support to families that assisting their most vulnerable members has to be anchored in the communities where they live, and should ideally be implemented through community-based partners. The words of one of our family strengthening programme coordinators interviewed for this publication give a good example of how this works in practice: *"Our burials, they bring a lot of people together. So whenever there is a burial, they [our community partner] ask for a moment to speak about issues of children. They speak from what are the core needs of children. So you would see in parishes where we've been for the longest time, there is a definite change. People are more interested in the education of children."*

This is how we want our family strengthening activities to be: well-rooted in local structures and initiated by communities who feel responsible for their members and supported by our staff, who can offer their know-how and competence as well as access to training and additional information. This attitude ensures that SOS Children's Villages can later withdraw from its engagement, secure in the knowledge that support for the community's most vulnerable members will be continued.

To reach that level of understanding and practice and to make projects work in this spirit and be sustainable as a result: this is the objective of our family strengthening activities. These activities complement our work in alternative childcare because it is our deepest conviction that the best place for a child to grow is in his or her own family. Only if the family is unable to care for the child, or if this compromises the

child's well-being should alternative care options, such as the care of an SOS family, be considered.

In working with the community we face many challenges; some are similar, some differ according to the location, the environment, the structure of the community and the attitudes of its members. We want to know how these challenges can be overcome. This is why we started the "Strong Social Support Networks Project" and spent time interviewing 58 key staff and community partners in 10 countries across sub-Saharan Africa. In this publication we share the main results of this research and our recommendations, which are based on lessons learned, promising practices and challenges our programme staff and community-based partners experience in working towards a strong community-based social support system for vulnerable children and their families.

I believe this report provides valuable input into our work, and hopefully for the work of other organisations and donors – for the good of those children and families who are among the most vulnerable and who deserve a chance for a better life.



Richard Pichler
CEO



Photo: N. Nassar

Vulnerable children and families need a strong social support network that acts as a safety net to effectively and sustainably respond to the situation of children and families at risk. In order to find out more about how SOS Children's Villages works with different stakeholders to strengthen social safety nets in communities, 58 interviews were conducted with SOS Children's Villages staff and representatives of local partner organisations in 16 locations in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The aim was to learn from their experiences and to get to know what works in empowering communities, in achieving local ownership of family strengthening activities, and in being sustainable.

The experience presented in this report is a 'promising practice' snapshot of SOS Children's Villages' work in relation to community development and sustainability – but does not represent a complete picture of the organisation's family strengthening work. It shows how SOS Children's Villages empowers communities who in turn support vulnerable children and their families. As a piece of qualitative research, the results are not fully comparable, but are indicative of issues and trends.

Children and their families participating in the programme, as well as other individuals in the community were not interviewed, as the focus of the research was on operational, 'how to' aspects of strengthening and building social support networks. The perspective that children and families have on central components of community empowerment such as participation, local ownership, and their role in a community-based social support system should be the subject of further research.

To get the full picture of SOS Children's Villages' family strengthening work, further research would also be required on how families are empowered to provide quality care and protection to their children.

KEY FINDINGS

› Creating networks of social support in communities is the basis for community agency

Strong social support networks that identify and address the needs of vulnerable children work best when community stakeholders – such as schools, clinics, government authorities, self-help groups, local leaders, NGOs, universities and business owners – cooperate, share their resources and expertise and actively inform people about where and how to access social support services. These networks also have a critical role to play in sensitising communities to child rights and protection issues. In many places however, SOS Children's Villages still plays the role of community support hub – connecting community members to the services they need.

Where programmes build on readily available local assets – such as women's self-help groups, faith-based organisations or home-based care groups – collective community knowledge and competence to take care of vulnerable children and claim support from duty bearers improves. This results in easier access by children and their families to more comprehensive services.

A pre-condition to successful engagement with formal and informal community structures is to recognise their dynamics, power relationships and local understanding of key concepts such as child vulnerability. Engaging with community-based groups on a regular basis, for example through site visits and experience and knowledge exchange meetings, builds a good basis for creating community agency. It is effective in mobilising partners and in developing strategies to claim individual and collective rights from the government and other duty bearers. When building a social support system it is critical to complement state services and not to undermine them by developing parallel structures.

Working hand-in-hand with community leaders is another success factor, as is integrating local traditions and religious beliefs as long as they do not compromise the healthy development of children. SOS Children's Villages must furthermore build on traditional coping mechanisms and support systems, according to the local context. Where programme interventions spring from the community's own needs that are identified by the community itself, local ownership and the potential for their sustainability are nurtured.

› Community-based organisations need to be supported to assume a leading role in providing support

Community-based organisations (CBOs) are SOS Children's Villages' main partners in its family strengthening work. These groups are focal points in direct service provision to vulnerable families. Community volunteers regularly visiting children and their families offer counselling and other support and implement individual family development plans (FDPs).

In some cases intense capacity building is needed to prepare CBO partners for greater community responsibility – with high CBO demand for training on organisational development, proposal writing, financial management and monitoring. Training in child protection, on children's rights and in utilising the FDP is also needed. At the same time, it has been found that some CBOs simply need opportunities for knowledge sharing and mentoring support to boost their motivation and confidence.

› Network approach means a broader role for SOS Children's Villages

The research shows that a 'network approach' requires a significant shift in how SOS Children's Villages works, moving from sole ownership and control over how programmes are designed and implemented, to shared ownership and responsibility. The role of SOS Children's Villages is in many cases a dual one. On the one hand the organisation must be active in linking service providers, facilitating partnerships and supporting measures that mobilise stakeholders to form independent connections. On the other hand, as a member of the social support network, SOS Children's Villages may need to continue to provide direct support to families. However, direct support from SOS Children's Villages should only take place where it is clearly best placed to do so, for example when the organisation is providing specialist expertise, or when no other stakeholder exists to provide the necessary support.

› Strengthening families requires shared responsibility of community stakeholders in social support networks

The direct support and capacity building offered to families who are participating in a programme follows the development of a family development plan (FDP). Through the FDP the benefits for children can be tracked, parental skills improved, and incomes monitored. In this way, the duplication of services can be avoided. However, the FDP is frequently regarded as problematic by the families involved. There are language barriers to its use (the FDP is mostly in English), with the format considered too complex, in particular for illiterate persons. To ensure it works well, the FDP needs to be 'owned' by the family and hence requires better adaptation to local contexts.

According to SOS Children's Villages' internal programme guidelines, families should become self-reliant in the care of their children

within three to five years. This seems overly ambitious in many contexts. In any event, a clear plan for the gradual phase-out of support to individual families is important and must be well communicated.

A particular challenge for SOS Children's Villages relates to those families who are not capable of reaching self-reliance. Especially for them, strong social support networks should be in place to provide them with ongoing support.

› Staff and volunteers are key to mobilising families and communities

Seeing the main responsibility of supporting children and families with community-based organisations has required a major attitudinal shift for SOS Children's Villages and its CBO partners alike. More than in the past, SOS programme staff require skills and expertise that enable them to empower communities and to act as facilitators and capacity builders.

Most CBOs rely on volunteers. It is important to strongly recognise the volunteers' knowledge and capacities and build on the support systems they already have in place. Partnering with SOS Children's Villages in most cases leads to an increase in the CBO's child support standards and an expansion of the support offered to vulnerable children and their families. While support and capacity building to volunteers and the CBOs they work with are essential to ensure the quality and continuity of care for vulnerable children, this support must not disrupt functioning support structures or act as a disincentive to their commitment. There is the need to consider how volunteers can be incentivised and how CBOs can be best supported to work as effectively as possible with families and the community on a long-term basis.

› Children's participation is a critical factor for programme success

The participation of children and young people increases the relevance of SOS Children's Villages' programme response and should be actively pursued at all stages of family strengthening work. However, understanding the importance of children's participation needs to be anchored at programme level, amongst both SOS Children's Villages staff and local partners. Collaboration with existing networks such as child protection committees is a good basis for strengthening children's rights and interests.

› Greater attention is needed on gender dimensions of the family strengthening work

Local knowledge gaps regarding gender mainstreaming amongst the staff of SOS Children's Villages and CBO partners have become obvious. The programme focus on female caregivers and the utilisation of mainly female volunteers serve to cement existing gender roles in which women shoulder the majority of unpaid and low-status work. By contrast, most decision-making positions in programmes are held by men. To balance this mismatch, both men and women should be encouraged to participate in the planning and execution of the family strengthening programme, and women should be supported to take up leadership positions (including on the boards of CBOs). At the same time, programmes should encourage the participation of fathers in caregiving roles.



KEY LESSONS LEARNT

The following key lessons learnt and recommendations are based on the practices examined in this research project and cannot be unilaterally applied to the worldwide family strengthening work of SOS Children's Villages.

A network approach provides more comprehensive social support coverage to vulnerable children and their families

- ▶ A network approach, in which partners share the responsibility for support and service delivery to vulnerable children and their families, must be prioritised and further strengthened.
- ▶ Cooperation and exchange of information and experience amongst community service providers must be expanded as this promotes knowledge sharing, improved delivery of quality services and increased opportunities for funding.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages should ensure it works with community-based organisations which are locally reputable, committed and in a potentially strong position to reach and support vulnerable children and their families.
- ▶ More time and resources are needed to deliver operationally and financially independent community-based organisations which increase the access of vulnerable children and their families to assistance from communal resources.
- ▶ More time and resources are also needed to build up successful cooperations with other partners in the community to work towards a functioning social support network.
- ▶ Detailed analysis is needed to find out in what ways network partners can best cooperate, share responsibilities and further improve their community social support system. Greater clarity is also required on how SOS Children's Villages fits into this system, both as a community facilitator and as a service provider (in cases where it is clearly best placed to do so, and where no service provision through community structures is possible).
- ▶ More attention should be placed by network members on sensitising the community to children's rights and protection issues, in order

to increase community acceptance of and responsiveness to these concerns.

Developing effective community partnerships builds local ownership and sustainability

- ▶ Partnering with local groups and structures already engaged in community work to assist vulnerable children helps to ensure a durable and locally rooted response.
- ▶ In the absence of community-based organisations and other structures to support vulnerable children, it may be necessary to support concerned community members to establish a local organisation with which SOS Children's Villages can partner.
- ▶ The work of SOS Children's Villages' key community partners should be operationally and financially viable beyond the period of support provided by SOS Children's Villages.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages needs to develop and communicate a transparent plan for the gradual phasing out of its support.
- ▶ In light of the operational and financial difficulties that CBOs encounter, no single CBO should carry the burden of providing the whole range of support that families require. Rather, responsibility should be shared by a network of service providers.
- ▶ Programme responses must be tailored to local circumstances and the needs expressed by the community, families and children.
- ▶ Programmes should build upon existing formal and informal community structures and initiatives that successfully support children and their families.

- ▶ In selecting programme locations, placing too much importance on the existence of community structures can be problematic as it can result in the exclusion of the most vulnerable communities.
- ▶ To ensure that SOS Children's Villages accomplishes its mission of reaching the most deprived communities, it should consider assisting suitable community representatives in establishing local organisations to partner with.

Greater community agency increases the potential for long-lasting change

- ▶ Interventions must derive from individual community needs, as identified by the community itself. The programme can facilitate this process by helping the community to become aware of its potential and by mobilising and connecting its members.
- ▶ Increasing community agency requires the awareness and sharing of successful initiatives that build on readily available community assets.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages needs to clearly communicate its family strengthening approach (including the period of the programme) in order to encourage local participation and avoid unrealistic expectations, including expectations of handouts.

Strengthening families works best in a shared responsibility approach

- ▶ Support to families should be based on their strengths and abilities, not just on their vulnerabilities.
- ▶ Understanding the interconnected nature of children's and caregivers' needs helps in developing holistic responses that encompass social as well as economic gaps.
- ▶ Network service providers must be prepared to offer ongoing support for those families who are unable to become self-reliant. SOS Children's Villages should avoid directly funding services to programme participants. In cases where this happens, it should only be until the families can be linked to service providers in the network or can negotiate access to these services independently.
- ▶ Achieving wider community sustainability of the programme requires ongoing sensitisation to the whole community.
- ▶ Training on topics such as child development is more effective when it addresses prevailing attitudes and the underlying causes of behaviour and practices.

Children's participation increases programme relevance for vulnerable children and their families

- ▶ The participation of local children and young people should actively be pursued at all stages of the family strengthening work, including in its planning, design, implementation and evaluation.

- ▶ A greater understanding of children's participation and suitable methods for applying it locally is required amongst local staff from SOS Children's Villages and its community partners.

The state's position as the main duty bearer of support to vulnerable children and their families needs to be reinforced

- ▶ Network strengthening efforts should support the state's efforts to improve the social support system and must in no way undermine it by establishing parallel structures.
- ▶ Areas of weak state service provision, particularly in relation to schools and clinics, must be strengthened through close cooperation and exchange.

Staff and volunteers are critical in mobilising families and communities effectively

- ▶ SOS programme staff require a range of skills and expertise to empower communities, and to act as facilitators and capacity builders. Additional training and other forms of support will be needed to adapt their experience to these roles.
- ▶ The front-line role of volunteers is currently undervalued. The reliable relationships that are built over time and their regular follow-up with families are key for responding and linking families with service providers, particularly in emergency situations. Nevertheless, SOS Children's Villages should guard against professionalising volunteers, as their role cannot be replaced by 'professionals'.
- ▶ Priority consideration should be given to ethical concerns of partnering with CBOs working with unpaid, mostly female, community volunteers. These concerns include how to incentivise these front-line volunteers, many of whom are themselves affected by poverty, to ensure high-quality support to vulnerable children and their families, as well as how to retain these volunteers and their experience and maintain service consistency.

Understanding and tackling the implications of gender are essential to effective programming

- ▶ The family strengthening work must take greater account of gender issues in its work. Gaps in local staff and partner understanding of gender and its implications must be addressed.
- ▶ The strong programme focus on female caregivers and the engagement of predominantly female volunteers needs to be examined through a gender lens – particularly the potential to reinforce gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices towards women and girls. A proposal to balance this mismatch is to include both men and women in the planning and execution of the programme and to promote leadership positions and training for women. At the same time, the programme should encourage the participation of fathers in caregiving roles.



Photo: J. Lugtigheld

SETTING THE SCENE ON FAMILY STRENGTHENING

This introductory chapter sets the scene on why SOS Children's Villages believes that bolstering community commitment and capacity is key in helping families to support the healthy development of their children in the long term. SOS Children's Villages' experience demonstrates that communities must lead the process of identifying their own needs and in designing locally appropriate and sustainable solutions for children in need of better care and protection. Communities stand ready and willing to do so, but often need encouragement and support to sustain what they do. SOS Children's Villages aims to be that community catalyst – working to stimulate and channel local commitment and know-how for the benefit of vulnerable children now and in the future.

Through its family strengthening work, SOS Children's Villages responds to the situation of children whose basic material, emotional, health and educational needs are neglected or who are abused, and whose caregivers do not have the capacity or commitment to adequately care for them.¹

Across the world millions of children are at risk of losing the care of their family. Many are left particularly vulnerable from parental care which is so poor that it compromises their development. All of these children need support to stay with their families in healthy, happy and safe situations – in other words in a caring family environment.

This research confirms that children are at risk of losing the care of their family for a host of reasons. Chronic illness, conflict, discrimination, poverty and natural disasters are often at the root of children's vulnerability to inadequate care, along with governmental failures to tackle systemic problems such as a lack of basic infrastructure, insufficient health and education provision and corruption. More visibly, the erosion of family and social values, violence against children caused by outmoded attitudes and traditions, or economic stress, create long-term harm. A shortage of community know-how, combined with community acceptance of the status quo and a passive dependency on outside support, means that poor care practice goes largely unchallenged.

In sub-Saharan Africa SOS Children's Villages has been working with families to support children who are lacking quality care, or who are at risk of losing it, by promoting the development of strong community support systems. Experience has shown that the success of this process is strongly influenced by community participation and ownership, the support of community leaders, the equitable use of community resources and a high level of cooperation between individuals and groups. By working on all of these aspects SOS Children's Villages endeavours to create lasting change for children. In brief, SOS Children's Villages assists communities to support families in need, and by doing so helps vulnerable children to thrive.

SUSTAINABILITY IN FAMILY STRENGTHENING

Sustainable family strengthening is where children who are at risk of losing the care of their families continue to be supported to grow and realise their rights within a caring family environment after SOS Children's Villages has withdrawn from direct day-to-day involvement in their community. This continued support is 'anchored' in strong social support systems, where the community fulfils its responsibilities towards the protection and care of its children, providing support from its capacities and available resources and actively claiming or securing support from duty bearers and other partners.²

Internationally, the imperative for the family strengthening approach comes from the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child which, in its Preamble, recognises the importance of a family environment for children and the need to protect and assist families to assume their responsibilities within the community context.³ The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which were welcomed by the UN in 2009, have since served to re-emphasise the need for family-based care, as well as the protection and well-being of children deprived of parental care or at risk of this happening.⁴

"It takes a village to raise a child."

(African proverb)

Despite global recognition of the fundamental role played by the family in children's development, it is clear that many families struggle to meet their children's physical and emotional needs, and are subject to social, economic and environmental forces that are seemingly beyond their control. By improving community social support to these families, along with approaches which promote family self-reliance in the care of their children, SOS Children's Villages is aiming to provide a robust model for the healthy development of children which can be sustained in the longer term without support. A family is considered to be self-reliant when its children have access to essential services, when its caregivers have the ability to provide quality childcare and when there are sufficient family resources.

ACHIEVING SOCIAL CHANGE

At SOS Children's Villages family strengthening is part of an integrated approach to promoting the healthy development of all children who have lost parental care or who are at risk of this happening. Elements of this approach include working in partnership to:

- › Assist communities to provide access to **direct essential services**, including education, life skills and other assets needed to become independent adults;
- › Support, through **capacity building** of caregivers, families, communities and others with responsibility for children to develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, resources, systems and structures to protect and care for children;
- › Undertake **advocacy** which aims to influence those responsible for the policies and practices that impact on children and which undermine their rights. As a principal duty bearer, the government is a key target. SOS Children's Villages also advocates with alternative child-care providers to promote quality family-based care for children.⁵

WHY FOCUS ON COMMUNITIES AS THE DRIVING FORCE OF CHANGE?

Communities are more than just groups of people living in the same area. They are people who have common experiences, a shared sense of belonging and identity, as well as a mutual interest in the natural resources and services that they share. This means that while individuals will have differing attitudes, capabilities and divergent levels of wealth and power, they also have a lot that unites them – and a common interest in improving their lives. This is particularly relevant in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, where raising children is not just a family responsibility but is very much of community concern too. This is why SOS Children's Villages considers communities to be key engines of change in the lives of children.

WHAT DOES SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES MEAN BY COMMUNITY?

Key community stakeholders for family strengthening work include:

- › Children and their families
- › Community-based organisations and other community groups (such as support groups and children's clubs)
- › Community professionals (teachers, social workers and health care professionals) and the services they run
- › Religious institutions and recreational facilities
- › Traditional leaders
- › Representatives from the municipal authorities and relevant government departments
- › Relevant non-governmental organisations and UN agencies working in the community
- › Local business representatives
- › Academic institutions connected to the community⁶



SOS Children's Villages believes that communities should be at the forefront of their own development, using local knowledge, skills and talents to find their own solutions to the problems that arise. When it comes to the care and protection of children, this requires community stakeholders to have a good understanding of what makes children vulnerable and what they need for their healthy development.

In every community there exists the ability and willingness amongst people to change their lives for the better. SOS Children's Villages builds on these capacities and brings in its knowledge and expertise in childcare and family development. In this process, the organisation sees its role as a facilitator to enhance capacities and create an enabling environment for community members and groups to assume ownership to bring about change in areas that affect their lives. This is why SOS Children's Villages works in partnership with community stakeholders to respond to challenges and jointly nurture community 'energy' and activism for the benefit of children.⁷ In practice this means mobilising and supporting civic-minded community members who are willing and able to help act for the benefit of their extended family, neighbours, friends and colleagues – or have already done so in the past. Thus, the purpose is to facilitate change for children by consolidating and building on existing community capacities, resources and initiatives, providing input and resources where appropriate and necessary.

THE CIVIC-DRIVEN CHANGE APPROACH (CDC)

CDC is an emerging approach to social change that SOS Children's Villages has applied in selected programmes since 2011. The CDC concept is a move away from the traditional definition of development cooperation with its focus on the transfer of money and capacities. It makes the case that citizens of a community, country or society have the capacity and power to lead change that is long lasting and sustainable. To carry out civic action, civic agency is required - the capacities, skills, imagination and energy of people working together to change society.

There are several reasons why SOS Children's Villages focuses focus on empowering the community so that the community can support vulnerable children and their families:

- Changing family realities requires different kinds of support over time. An adaptable community-based 'safety net' is in the best position to support these changing needs. At the same time, long-term care may be required for some families (such as child-headed households, or those with elderly, frail or chronically ill caregivers) which a community approach is able to provide;
- By supporting the community and the family to fulfil their responsibilities their duty towards the care and upbringing of their children is enforced. In contrast, SOS Children's Villages assuming these responsibilities risks undermining their roles, authority and coping mechanisms;
- SOS Children's Villages' community empowerment approach enables the organisation to reach more children and make a meaningful difference in their lives. It may also motivate others to address similar challenges in their own communities. Crucially, it also aims at ensuring that children continue to be supported, even when SOS Children's Villages' family strengthening activities cease.

SELECTING COMMUNITIES

In the family strengthening programme, SOS Children's Villages works in communities with:

- A high number of children who are at risk of losing the care of their family
- A lack of capacity within families and the community to respond to the situation of these children
- Community solidarity and a willingness to act for vulnerable children – as demonstrated by active community engagement through evidence of volunteerism and the development of community initiatives

BETTER TOGETHER: DEVELOPING COMMUNITY SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

In the kinds of strong social support networks endorsed by SOS Children's Villages, stakeholders assist one another, responding effectively and efficiently to the community's needs. Government bodies, schools, hospitals, churches, child protection committees, traditional leaders, self-help groups and NGOs work together, sometimes with the assistance of donors. Usually, a partnership agreement frames the cooperation. The promotion of children's rights is also a feature of a strong social support network, where children are enabled to participate in making decisions that affect their lives.

As a facilitator and capacity builder to the community, SOS Children's Villages enables those who provide community services to work together through a network in order to offer more comprehensive and better connected services for vulnerable children and their families. Adopting this approach not only leads to stronger and more accessible safety nets in communities, but reduces duplication, patchy coverage and wasteful competition for the users of these services. The strategy also has important wider benefits, most notably in reducing community reliance in the long-term on unpredictable and intermittent outside support. However, where SOS Children's Villages is best placed to provide a service needed and where gaps in services exist,

SOS Children's Villages continues to offer these services directly, in particular services in regards to its core competence in childcare, parenting and family development.

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

SOS Children's Villages is strengthening social support systems in communities so that they can effectively respond to the situation of vulnerable children today and in the future. A strong community support system exists when vulnerable children and their families:

- › Are identified by other community members, so that they can be offered support
- › Have regular contact with someone from the community whom they trust, who can support them socially and emotionally, and who can link them to community services and resources (including education and health care) and
- › Are informed of where they can find support to address their difficulties.

For SOS Children's Villages, social support systems in communities also need to ensure that children and families have access to the services and resources required for their healthy development (including active self-help and support groups) and that children's rights are protected, promoted and the voices of children are heard and taken seriously.

Finally, strong social support systems in communities require all of those who are in positions of influence to work together to provide a comprehensive and seamless 'safety net' of services needed by families to support the development needs of their children and to promote children's rights.

ADOPTING A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

Building successful and sustainable community responses requires solid foundations. SOS Children's Villages recognises how important it is to engage with communities in the right way from the beginning – which means that all of those who have an obligation towards children and a stake in their healthy development need to be involved in decision making. This is also the reason why SOS Children's Villages chooses its partners, especially its key implementation partners, carefully: working with an organisation or community structure which has local credibility and which represents community values is important. Finding the right community-based organisation to implement a programme and lead the work safeguards the investment and makes for durable assistance for vulnerable children.

In summary, the family strengthening work of SOS Children's Villages is in transition. While up to now, the organisation has been best known for its direct assistance to families, it is clearer than ever that assisting the most vulnerable in a community must first and foremost be a local responsibility. As a result, SOS Children's Villages is shifting towards a supporting role, galvanising community stakeholders to respond and assisting their efforts where necessary. At the same time the organisation may sometimes still be required to step in to support families directly, particularly in cases when SOS Children's Villages is best placed to do so or when there is no other provider. However, SOS Children's Villages is committed to a sustainable community-driven approach which works towards a phasing down of its engagement. This publication documents the lessons from its first steps.

PATHWAYS TO FAMILY STRENGTHENING: SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES FROM 1949 – TODAY

- › The first SOS Children's Village opens in Imst, Austria in 1949. In subsequent years, SOS Children's Villages becomes a pioneer of alternative childcare thanks to its family-based care model.
- › SOS Children's Villages are built in several European countries in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by villages in Asia, Africa and Latin America and later in the states of the former Soviet Republic.
- › Schools, kindergartens, social and medical centres are established. Apart from providing children a healthy family environment in SOS families, education, nutrition, health and childcare service provision begins in the 1970s and 1980s to support children, women and families in communities, mainly outside Europe .
- › The first family strengthening programmes appear in the early 2000s. Following support to families living in HIV/AIDS-affected communities in Southern Africa, SOS Children's Villages begins to focus on measures to prevent vulnerable children losing the care of their biological families. The programme is expanded to support the areas of care, education and health, building on many years of experience in the childcare sector.
- › Hotspot Africa: SOS Children's Villages has been running SOS Children's Villages programmes in Africa since the 1970s, as a result of high numbers of children without parental care. The HIV/AIDS pandemic caused an orphan crisis of unprecedented proportions. This led SOS Children's Villages to invest heavily in developing strong local communities and support networks.
- › Towards sustainable programme responses: Today, SOS Children's Villages is increasingly pursuing more sustainable approaches that focus on rooting its family strengthening work in the community, through partnerships with community-based organisations. New approaches such as Civic Driven Change (CDC) are also being tested in selected SOS programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria.

1 Adapted from: *Putting the Child First!*, SOS Children's Village Programme Policy, SOS Children's Villages International, 2009.

2 Adapted from: *Working Towards Sustainability: Community Empowerment in Family Strengthening, Guidance for programmes in Africa and Middle East*, SOS Children's Villages International, 2013.

3 For the text of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child see <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

4 For a copy of the guidelines see *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: A United Nations Framework*, published by SOS Children's Villages/ISS, 2009 Available to download from: <http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/about-us/publications/soswork/guidelines-for-the-alternative-care-of-children>

5 Adapted from: *Putting the Child First!*, SOS Children's Village Programme Policy, SOS Children's Villages International, 2009.

6 Adapted from: *Working Towards Sustainability: Community Empowerment in Family Strengthening, Guidance for programmes in Africa and Middle East*, SOS Children's Villages International, 2013.

7 For more information on the concepts behind this approach, see Biekart, K. & Fowler, A. (2012): *Civic Driven Change 2012: An Update on the Basics*, The Hague: International Institute of Social Studies. Berkhout, R., de Koster, K., et al. (2011): *Civic Driven Change: Synthesising Implications for policy and practice*, Amsterdam: Development Policy Review Network (DPRN). Fowler, A. & Biekart, K. (2008): *Civic Driven Change: Citizen's Imagination in Action, Essay 1*. The Hague: Institute of Social Studies.



Photo: N. Nassar

When a community feels responsible for its problems and is able to act upon them – with or without outside support – community agency is achieved. A community which is tackling its own issues marks a critical step towards a sustainable approach to family strengthening. To make this happen, a community – including its leaders, teachers, business owners, members of self-help groups, caregivers and children themselves – must ‘own’ and contribute to building a strong social support network for its most vulnerable members. How does SOS Children’s Villages support communities in this development? What fosters community agency, what hinders it and how can obstacles be tackled?

SOS Children’s Villages wants to support building communities which have the confidence and competence to take care of vulnerable children, raising them in a caring environment free from violence and supporting them to go to school and be healthy. SOS Children’s Villages wants to see communities where children’s rights are respected, where children are listened to and involved in making decisions which affect their lives.

In line with participative approaches such as civic driven change, the goal is that communities become agents of their own development.

WORKING TOGETHER TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY AGENCY

From the interviews it has emerged that when SOS Children’s Villages, its community-based partners and other community stakeholders such as schools, clinics, community groups or governmental authorities cooperate with one another, community knowledge and competence to take care of its vulnerable children is improved. A better understanding of children’s rights and an increased capacity to claim community members’ rights has also been demonstrated in communities where effort has been made to enhance cooperation. In Nigeria

for example, SOS Children's Villages and CBOs have worked closely with the Department of Education and Schools on 'Back to School' campaigns to re-enrol children previously expelled for non-payment of school fees.

Community ownership over its problems and its members' sense of responsibility to address them is strengthened when initiatives to strengthen the community build on local skills, infrastructure and knowledge. Similarly to the civic-driven change approach, the 'assets-based approach', with its focus on resources and strengths has proven a successful alternative to approaches which emphasise people's needs and deficiencies in some programmes (for example page 15, Ghana case study). Adopting such approaches has kept community members at the forefront of decision making and in developing and applying appropriate solutions to local concerns.

For a social support system to be strong and offer durable solutions, community members and groups, especially those children and families in need of assistance, must look for support within the community and draw on local resources.

Community meetings have proved to be a good basis for creating community agency, for mobilising partners and for developing strategies on how to claim rights from duty bearers such as the government.

The research has also found that the systematic involvement of community stakeholders in steering its programmes is fundamental to their success. Coming from the communities themselves and grounded in local realities, these stakeholders are able to identify community problems as well as those children and families in need of support. They are also in a good position to help plan support to children, their families and the community, and assist with ongoing monitoring and advice on partnerships. This approach has shown to greatly increase community control over the programme, as well as ensuring its relevance.

FACTORS THAT IMPEDE THE COMMUNITY'S ABILITY TO TAKE OWNERSHIP:

- › Awareness of the need to take action on childcare issues and child rights is often low. Child participation is rare.
- › The community is not fully aware of its potential. This is often related to a collective lack of confidence, which deters communities from initiating their own development.
- › There is often a passive acceptance of the status quo and an assumption that nothing can be changed. This is often the legacy of past initiatives by organisations which have come and gone without making a lasting difference.
- › Some families still find it difficult to change their attitudes and behaviour – even after receiving support. In some cases, graduating from the programme is perceived by families not as an achievement and a step towards self-reliance but rather as a loss of the comfort of support.
- › Previous experiences of support from SOS Children's Villages and other aid agencies lead to unrealistic expectations and little understanding that the organisation will phase out its commitment over time.
- › Low levels of community solidarity are sometimes evident and informal support structures have been eroded due to various social and economic factors – particularly in urban areas.
- › Community apprehension to ask for or claim things from their leaders/authorities, resulting from: hierarchical community structures; a lack of trust in leaders to deliver on their promises; not knowing that local government has a responsibility to support community members, as well as the unwillingness or inability of leaders to adequately support their community.
- › A loss of community interest upon the realisation that SOS Children's Villages will no longer provide certain goods or services.

In several countries the research has shown that a stronger focus on the vulnerability of children in schools is needed. In Zimbabwe, SOS Children's Villages has found that children who are struggling at school due to difficult situations at home (because, for example, they may be caring for a sick parent, don't get regular meals, or have to work) can be supported by linking teachers with local organisations which can undertake family visits and help children overcome obstacles to their learning.

"Sustainable communities ... know their situation, they know their problems and they even know their capacity. So they use all the resources and capacities they have to change their own situation."

National SOS Family Strengthening Coordinator, Ethiopia

Also in Zimbabwe, so-called street representatives have been encouraged to champion child-related issues. Following dialogue around child protection, child rights and children's needs, these local spokespersons initiated discussions on these topics with other community members. By succeeding in getting a wider range of people involved in addressing children's vulnerability, a ripple effect was created that has the potential for lasting effect. This has resulted in community pride in family strengthening activities. Now, the community also has better understanding of children's rights and what makes children vulnerable, resulting in a sense of greater collective responsibility for improving their situation.

Working hand-in-hand with traditional leaders has been important to encourage community agency efforts – often at minimal cost. In Mathanjana, South Africa, traditional leaders have become advocates for child protection in their communities following awareness-raising efforts by SOS Children's Villages staff. This belies the assumption that external financial input is always necessary for successful advocacy to protect vulnerable children.

Other activities do not necessarily require extensive finances. SOS Children's Villages supports community members to realise ideas and implement a variety of low-cost actions that improve the situation of vulnerable children. In Jos, Nigeria, community volunteers provide tremendous support to vulnerable families who would not otherwise be helped. They visit the families and assist them in responding to the plight of their children and in overcoming the challenges they face. The volunteers keep their CBO updated on child vulnerability cases in the community and advise the group on which families are in need of support.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ Addressing the vulnerability of children in communities in a lasting way requires the commitment of community groups, schools, clinics, businesses as well as ordinary community members. Building trust with and between community members is essential to provide a 'safe space' for bringing up taboo topics such as child abuse.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages should be there to support the community to take ownership of its problems and of the solutions and to build the community's capacity to consequently take action. A key role SOS Children's Villages can play is in developing community awareness of its own potential. Community members and groups should be supported to realise the potential they have to support themselves and bring about change.
- ▶ Community members should be informed in a timely way about the support they can receive from SOS Children's Villages, including that this support is time-limited. Locally based partners should play a part in the transition and be assisted to fill any potential 'capacity gaps' in providing support to the community.
- ▶ In cases where children are struggling at school because of their home situation, schools need to be prepared to assist them, for example through 'link teachers' who connect with community groups which can provide follow-up support.

DEALING WITH DIFFERING PRIORITIES

SOS Children's Villages' priorities are not necessarily the same as those of the community. When the programme is not attuned to these differing views and concerns, the community loses interest.

There are often differences in understanding around concepts such as children's rights, child participation, and of what constitutes 'family'. These differences of opinion are particularly noticeable when it comes to children's rights, which seemingly threaten accepted family structures. As a representative of a Ugandan CBO put it: "Our culture says you don't speak before the parents." Occasionally, parents are reluctant to change their behaviour towards educating their children, as well as on health, hygiene and gender equality matters – citing culture or traditions as reasons for their views.

Integrating local traditions and religious beliefs, as long as they do not compromise the healthy development of children, has proven helpful. In Kenya, for example, discussions on traditional childcare methods were a vehicle for addressing female genital mutilation and for debating alternative rites of passage.

In some cases it has been found that parents are knowledgeable about child development and children's rights, but do not put it into practice. This could be a result of economic stress, which has been specified as a reason for weakened family cohesion, or a hardening of attitudes and behaviour based on parental experiences of their own upbringing.

In addition, interviewees have noted that the focus of community attitudes and efforts often caters more for the 'here and now' than for the longer term. This can sometimes bring SOS Children's Villages into conflict with communities whose priority is simply on economic support, rather than as a means to a wider child development goal. There are several reasons why a focus on

economic support alone may be more favoured by the community; this could be because economic activities are more tangible, better understood and more easily measured. It could also reflect the view that enhancing a family's economic well-being will benefit their children. Respondents have also noted an often limited understanding of the importance and benefit of psychosocial support for children.

Adding to this is the fact that SOS Children's Villages is operating in a limited time frame. The organisation wants to make changes fast and to meet donors' requests for quick results. In many cases this leads to too little time being allocated to understanding the community, building local ownership of leading change in the community and in responding robustly to support vulnerable children and their families.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ To reach common cause with the community a learning process on both sides is necessary. SOS Children's Villages must ensure that its concepts are well understood, but also has to understand local attitudes and views and must always learn from community-based organisations which are often steeped in local knowledge and community realities.
- ▶ Children's rights and other topics need to be explained well and translated into the local context. To overcome scepticism and ensure community acceptance of the validity of child rights, SOS Children's Villages and its local partners need – as an initial step – to tackle the incorrect but pervasive presumption that respecting the rights of children means a lessening of parental powers.
- ▶ Family strengthening responses must be designed in a way that allows programme staff enough time to gain a deep insight into the factors that affect a community's capacity to better provide for vulnerable children, and in how to build community ownership and community-based actions. Reporting to donors on the outcomes of programmes should, in addition to highlighting the numbers of children involved, also include and emphasise the results of less tangible (but no less important) community strengthening efforts such as building community capacities.
- ▶ The family strengthening work should approach the family as a single entity with interconnected needs and design holistic programme responses that address child well-being, as well as the psychosocial and economic needs of family members. The opportunity to participate in savings schemes such as saving and loan associations should be provided to all families participating in the programme. Income-generating activities should only be encouraged for families who are well positioned to manage the responsibilities and risks.
- ▶ Building on existing social structures and rituals in addressing and mobilising the community (such as through coffee ceremonies in Ethiopia) is key to acceptance of the programme, as is seeking the approval of traditional community leaders. Also, efforts in these communities should keep to the local day-to-day pace of life and seasonal rhythms.

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

As mentioned previously, children's status in the hierarchies of many countries is low, making child and youth participation particularly challenging. It is also clear that children must be at the centre of com-



munity efforts to deal with their situation – as they are best placed to articulate their problems and suggest how to address them.

Respondents have noted that while children are sometimes solicited for their views and are involved in programme planning, implementation and sometimes monitoring, this usually remains somewhat piecemeal. It is recognised that significantly more work is needed to translate SOS Children’s Villages’ organisational commitment to children’s participation to its ground level activities on a systematic basis. However, some promising practices do exist. In Zimbabwe, for example, a child-led child protection committee has raised awareness on children’s rights and child protection, has identified vulnerable children in the community and has recommended them for registration.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ A greater understanding of children’s participation is needed at programme level – amongst both SOS Children’s Villages staff and local partner organisations. This needs to be both systematically applied and implemented.
- ▶ More work is needed to identify opportunities during programmatic activities where children’s voices can be heard and where they have a real chance to influence decision making in age-appropriate ways. Children can be involved in project design and implementation, and also have an important role to play in project and programme governance, for example through representation at board level in community organisations and on programme management committees. Field workers and volunteers must encourage and create opportunities where children’s voices can be heard, for example through home visits and recreational activities.
- ▶ Opportunities for collaborative advocacy (including training and campaigns) with local groups on the importance and relevance of children’s participation are needed. Children – especially girls – should also be helped to learn how to advocate publicly and develop their leadership potential.

EXAMPLE GHANA: ASSISTING THE COMMUNITY TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF ITS PROBLEMS

In line with the civic driven change and asset-based approach, programme work in the communities of Asiakwa and Chorkor are examples of how community agency has been achieved, building on pre-existing initiatives, with almost no financial costs. SOS Children’s Villages supported communities in doing a community inventory of the skills, competence, knowledge and other resources that they have.

This has resulted in several small-scale initiatives. For example, the community of Asiakwa had a church but no school. The suggestion was to use the church building – which was only used on Sunday – to start a school. As a result a community school was set up, with local people providing lessons for children.

Some communities have established ‘community scholarships’ where community actors such as churches, small businesses and individuals support vulnerable children. As a result, ten schools in Chorkor now provide scholarships to a vulnerable child each. While the numbers are small, this approach has led to the community taking responsibility for children not going to school.



Photo: F. Diakite

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY NETWORK APPROACH

A strong social support network is capable of identifying the needs of vulnerable children in a community and has the capacity and resources to address those needs. Such networks are interactive and collaborative – requiring varied stakeholders to work together to support vulnerable families more effectively. Ideally, resources, expertise and information are regularly shared and exchanged. So, how can SOS Children’s Villages help make this happen in the communities it engages with?

Respondents agree that a holistic, multi-faceted support network is important to adequately support vulnerable children and their families. In practice, SOS Children’s Villages initiates partnerships on a more individualised basis. These partnerships can be formal – with memorandums of understanding (MoUs) defining roles and responsibilities, as well as the goals and targets of the collaboration – or more informal and shorter term, for example with community leaders, community groups, but also local governments, hospitals and schools.

HOLISTIC NETWORKS AND INDIVIDUAL PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships or networks of support tend to work best when the roles and responsibilities of each partner are clearly defined. In Ethiopia, for example, clarity on who does what is promoted through workshops and site visits undertaken by SOS Children’s Villages. These encounters are not only a chance for community stakeholders (such as local authorities, businesses and individuals) to discuss support to vulnerable children, but are also an opportunity to iron out misunderstandings and fine tune joint plans for the future.

In a well-functioning social support network, people know where to go to receive a specific type of help and service providers in communities are aware of each other's activities and regularly refer people to each other. Respondents suggest that SOS Children's Villages currently plays this role in the communities where it operates – connecting people with those who can help them best. However, some community-based organisations are also starting to take on this facilitating role. This has led to improvements in the delivery of services, such as in Mathanjana, South Africa, where SOS Children's Villages and its local partner CBO collaborate with schools and clinics to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS and provide health talks for community members.

The research has shown that working through a network requires a significant shift in how SOS Children's Villages currently works, moving from sole ownership and control over how programmes are designed and implemented to shared ownership and responsibility. In some interviews, it is mentioned that partnerships often rely on interactions between individual staff members, which means that these relationships can be jeopardised when individuals move on, sometimes resulting in disruption to the continuity of community services. Building and maintaining partnerships and working collaboratively is also recognised to be a time-intensive process that can be complicated by inadequacies in service delivery structures, corruption and a lack of local resources.

While SOS Children's Villages has been successful in retaining many of its family strengthening teams by keeping staff motivation high (often through regular training and learning opportunities), it has been reported that staff turnover in other programme areas has a significant negative impact. Not only must relationships with partners be rebuilt, but trust and rapport with children and their families needs to be regularly regained.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ Creating quality partnerships between SOS Children's Villages and local community groups requires planning, development and nurture. This means, for example, a deepening and broadening of individual relationships between their respective staff, good handovers with departing staff and a leadership commitment to maintaining institutional partnerships that can survive staff changes.
- ▶ Ensuring clarity amongst partners of their roles and responsibilities is critical to the effective functioning of a network. Practical ways must be developed to enhance this cooperation, including regular exchanges with partner organisations through joint workshops, site visits and monthly status update reports, as well as formalising partnerships via the use of MoUs. MoUs can be particularly effective between SOS Children's Villages and community-based organisations, as well as with formal institutions, such as government bodies. They should be worked out together since a shared understanding and buy-in are critical. Partnerships that function well on an informal basis should be kept that way to avoid unnecessary bureaucratisation.
- ▶ Sharing successes, difficulties and lessons learned in establishing and maintaining partnerships should be encouraged locally, as well as at national or regional levels, with finances secured to make this happen.
- ▶ To retain staff and keep them motivated, SOS Children's Villages must create conditions that foster strong interdisciplinary teams and opportunities for individual staff to develop. Learning opportunities, such as exchanges with colleagues that have another programme focus in their work, from other locations and from other organisations, should be pursued. Staff should be given the flexibility to present and progress innovative ideas in working with communities.

BUILDING ON WHAT IS ALREADY THERE

Working with existing local structures to improve their delivery of social support and the sustainability of this support is a recurring theme of community development discourse. Local support structures, such as women's self-help groups, faith-based organisations and home-based care groups (which support the terminally ill and/or orphans) are present in many communities and are often the starting point for SOS Children's Villages' family strengthening work. The research findings show that children and their families tend to be better able to access more comprehensive support in cases where their local service providers are linked up to wider (national) systems of social assistance. For example, in Lilongwe, Malawi, SOS Children's Villages partnered with House of Hope, a well-established child-focused community organisation, to address the pressing health issues of a particular community. SOS Children's Villages supported House of Hope to initiate a mobile clinic to serve the needs of a population which previously had to travel long distances for health care. Malawi's Ministry of Health continues to support the mobile clinic by providing the drugs and vaccines and furthermore pays the health workers' salaries.

“A strong social support network means that various groups, individuals, stakeholders, structures in the community are working as one people with the same ambition. If there is a problem they all come together to find solutions to such a problem. They share ideas, they put their strengths together.”

*SOS Family Strengthening Coordinator,
Chorkor, Ghana*

Engaging with community structures – whether formal or informal – requires familiarity with their purpose and outlook, as well as with the community dynamics and power relations of which they are a part (see also chapter 4). Baseline studies and stakeholder analyses have proven to be essential tools to assess the situation on the ground and to identify synergies amongst the many groups and individuals with a stake in supporting vulnerable children and their families. The active support of community authorities can also increase the programme's success – not only because it is likely to result in ready community acceptance, but also because it ensures the more rapid involvement of local community groups in supporting vulnerable children and their families. As the work in Asiakwa and Chorkor (Ghana) shows, if local community chiefs or religious leaders support family strengthening efforts, others in the community will follow. These leaders are respected and credible. Lending their backing to the programme influences community attitudes, for example when it comes to children not attending school. Chiefs are therefore targeted to champion awareness-raising issues on child vulnerability and children's rights.

Respondents have declared that mutual trust is an essential component of successful partnerships. Reaching a common understanding with community stakeholders has been shown to help build trust, as has local accountability and transparent and efficient ways of working. Critical to fostering community trust in SOS Children's Villages has been its commitment to working with partners to generate solutions for vulnerable children and their families that are community-led and owned, developing community-rooted activities and solutions alongside its partners.

From the network development perspective, knowledge and experience sharing meetings and site visits are seen as fundamental to increasing network transparency and building mutual trust amongst its members. Indeed, some respondents argue that the act of regularly bringing people together to share information and learning is even more valuable than direct financial support. Other benefits of these meetings are reported to include improved outreach, a reputational boost by working together, and greater access to additional sources of funding.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ Local support structures and community initiatives, as well as capacities and resources that already exist in a community, must be recognised as the basis of sustainable social support structures.
- ▶ Sufficient time and resources must be allocated to the planning of activities to ensure that they are properly assessed. In a similar fashion, the power relations and dynamics that exist in a community must be considered in activity planning and implementation – with SOS Children's Villages needing to take specific account of how its partnerships can shift community power dynamics. The involvement of community leaders in programme activities must also be encouraged when their involvement increases community acceptance of, and participation in, activities to support vulnerable children and their families.
- ▶ In the formation of partnerships, reaching the target group and ensuring quality childcare need to be the overarching objectives. To ensure this, SOS Children's Villages must conduct proper due diligence to select and bring together partners targeting similar groups – which are rooted in the community and possibly have significant experience in the field. Whether the partners' structures are informal or formal is less relevant.

NETWORK ACTORS

Taking a network and partnership approach means sharing responsibility for supporting the needs of vulnerable children and their families. As one of many community service providers, SOS Children's Villages is learning to work alongside a variety of institutions and organisations, ranging from government duty bearers to clinics, schools, community support groups, community leaders and other NGOs.

In some locations, long-term partnerships with government authorities are in place, where the government authorities jointly provide services with other community stakeholders including SOS Children's Villages, such as trainings and financial support. In other locations it

is difficult to obtain the government's long-term and regular commitment. Support is rather provided upon request for small numbers of children and a limited period of time.

SOS Children's Villages facilitates linkages between social service providers, encourages and facilitates an exchange of expertise and builds the capacities of community stakeholders for better service provision. Where SOS Children's Villages is best placed to provide a service needed and where gaps in services exist, the organisation continues to offer these services directly, in particular services in regards to its core competence in childcare, parenting and family development.

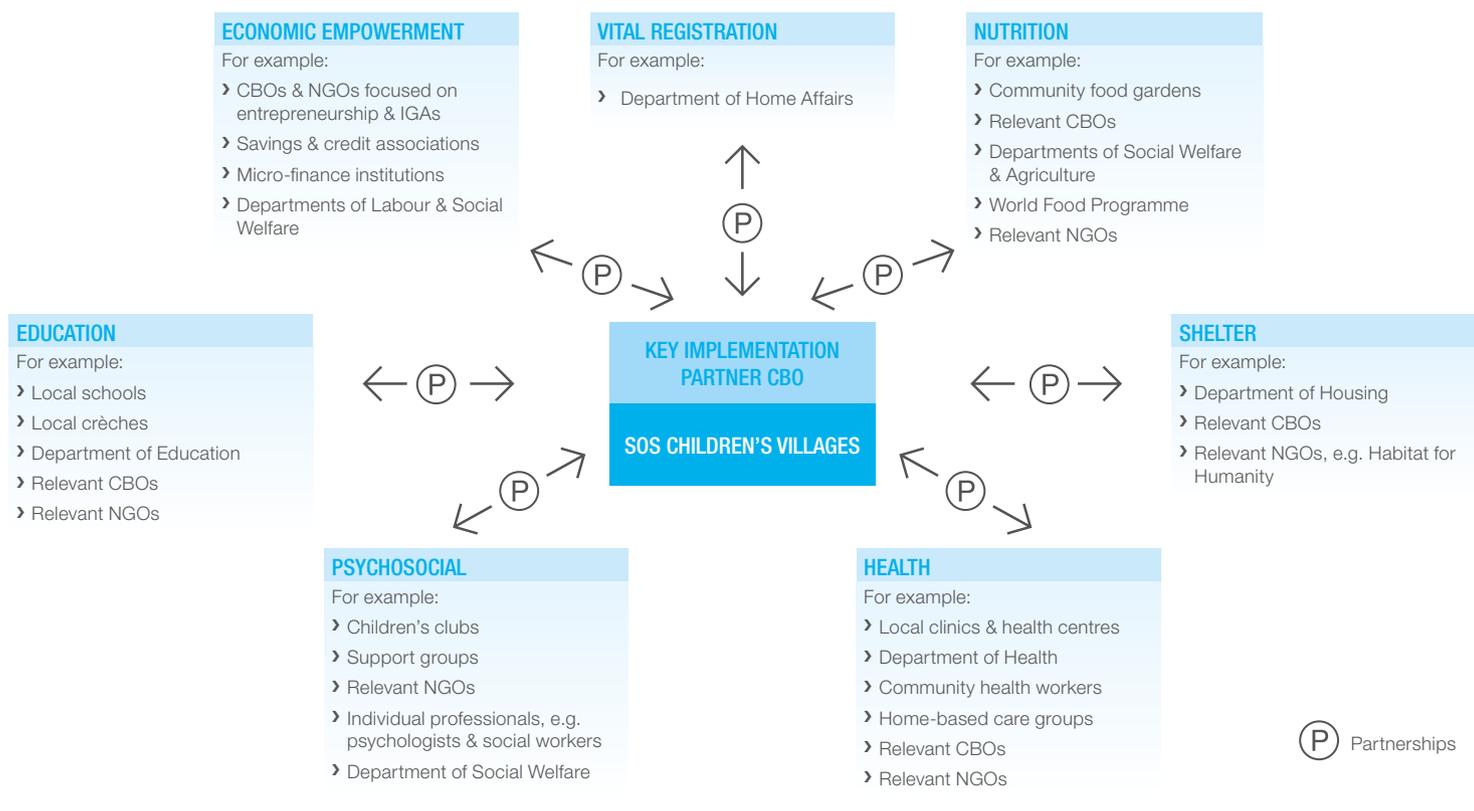
Typically, community-based organisations are SOS Children's Villages' key implementation partners and directly support vulnerable children and their families. SOS Children's Villages works to strengthen their capacities; at the same time these organisations often implement independent programmes.

Other service providers and community stakeholders such as schools, clinics, women's self-help groups, SACCOs, local leaders, business owners, universities and other NGOs play an essential role in providing services and support in strong social support networks.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ To prepare the ground for multiplying community responses to the situation of vulnerable children beyond the sphere of SOS Children's Villages' influence, community service providers, including CBOs, must be further encouraged to establish partnerships with each other. In communities where partnerships are still limited, SOS Children's Villages needs to be more active in linking up service providers and facilitating partnerships, while at the same time supporting the development of independent collaboration.
- ▶ Efforts to improve joint, collaborative and comprehensive social support systems must be pursued and the respective roles and responsibilities of community stakeholders carefully assessed. The actions of SOS Children's Villages to improve social service provision must build on what already exists and should not substitute or compete with current governmental and other efforts.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages should be at the forefront of actions that create an enabling environment for strong social support systems to thrive. A key component of this is the promotion of governmental policy and practice change to provide ever more conducive and sustainable national and local frameworks for the protection of vulnerable children and their families.
- ▶ In facilitating the development of strong social support networks, SOS Children's Villages should not forget its own role in providing direct support to families when it is best placed to do so. This can be in situations when SOS Children's Villages can bring in specific expertise, or when there is no other stakeholder to provide the required support to vulnerable children and their families.

Possible avenues for partnerships of network actors in SOS Children's Villages' family strengthening work.



Example Kara, Togo: Vulnerable children and their families receive a holistic range of support through partnerships amongst various community stakeholders, including SOS Children's Villages.

| CARE | ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT * | EDUCATION | HEALTH |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>Key stakeholders CBO + SOS Children's Villages + local community leaders</p> <p>Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > CBO volunteers conduct home visits and consult families on childcare, e.g. on positive relationships between children and parents. > SOS Children's Villages provides parental skills training to caregivers. > CBO links families to other service providers, e.g. clinics, schools, Village Savings and Loan Associations. > SOS Children's Villages conducts awareness-raising workshops about childcare and child rights amongst caregivers. > CBO and local community leaders hold awareness-raising meetings, e.g. on the importance of education. > Families that are strong enough are supported to establish income-generating activities (IGAs). <p>Benefits 105 families have become self-reliant in the care of their 180 children (2005-2012).</p> | <p>Key stakeholders SOS Children's Villages + Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs)</p> <p>Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Groups of 15 – 25 people deposit savings and provide small loans to each other. > SOS Children's Villages facilitated process. <p>Benefits Currently 7 active VSLAs, with a total of 113 members in 3 communities. 1,994,755 CFA francs (3,990 USD) of savings mobilised in one year. No more need to go through microfinance institutions that charge usurious interest rates. Increased solidarity among families; 5 VSLAs offered 13% of their savings to support vulnerable children.</p> | <p>Key stakeholders Local community school + SOS Children's Villages + UNICEF + local government authorities + CBO</p> <p>Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Expansion of local community school financed through partnership between SOS Children's Villages and UNICEF. > SOS Children's Villages facilitated and implemented project in cooperation with CBO and local government authorities <p>Benefits Number of students increased from 47 to 200 in 2012. Community school was transformed into a publically financed primary school. Quality of education improved; salaries for teachers introduced.</p> | <p>Key stakeholders Local community volunteers + SOS Children's Villages + Kara hospital + local government authorities</p> <p>Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Local health care centre established through partnership between SOS Children's Villages and Kara hospital. > Local volunteers trained to be community health workers by Kara hospital and SOS Children's Villages. > Medical supplies funded by government authorities (District Health Department) and SOS Children's Villages. <p>Benefits Access to essential health care services for more than 2000 inhabitants. No more need to walk 15km in one direction to next clinic. Reduction of harmful self-medication. Decline in maternal and child mortality.</p> |

** Economic empowerment is not a separate category of support to vulnerable children and their families but a means to an end for caregivers to have the financial needs to provide the actual care to their children. Economic strengthening is an important, but not the most central aspect of 'care'.*



Photo: N. Nassar

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS

Community-based organisations (CBOs) have a critical role to play in empowering families and communities. Recognising this, SOS Children's Villages partners with CBOs who take on the key implementation role. They are supported to develop their capacities so that they in turn can support vulnerable children – linking them and their families with relevant network service providers. How can SOS Children's Villages best support these CBOs to make this happen?

From the beginning, SOS Children's Villages' work with CBOs focuses on preparing them for taking on responsibility for supporting vulnerable children and families. At the same time, CBOs surveyed in this report are at varying stages of capacity and development – from those that have taken charge of the families' concerns, to organisations who still heavily depend on assistance from SOS Children's Villages.

It must be stated that not all CBOs are supposed to assume a key implementation role. Some continue to provide their services to support vulnerable children, families and/or the community.

SHIFTING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The findings show that handing over responsibility to CBOs to directly support children and families, to link them to other service providers and to mobilise the community to provide support has meant a big shift in thinking. CBOs are expected to take on more responsibility than they previously held. A strong understanding is in place with regards to what a CBO – in theory – should be doing. However, in practice, a degree of ambiguity remains as to how a CBO should fulfil this role. Should they, for the time being, be confined to acting as a focal point? Should they take up broader responsibilities SOS Children's Villages previously held, and if yes, how?

Complicating the picture is that SOS Children's Villages – with its greater resources and larger capacity than most CBOs – wants to do many things at the same time: strengthen local organisations, build the network, support the CBO to take over the family strengthening activities and focus on the programme becoming self-financed. This is far more than many CBOs can manage at any one time – resulting in delays to the handover time frame initially set by SOS Children's Villages. Some CBO respondents have reported that taking responsibility for everything is overwhelming – even after the capacity-building training provided by SOS Children's Villages.

WHAT ARE CBOS?

Community-based organisations are local NGOs or self-help groups, often run on a voluntary basis. They can vary in terms of size and structure; some are formally registered, others are rather informal. Their activities commonly include counselling, awareness raising and training of caregivers in relation to the care of children, children's rights, education, hygiene, how to access services from other organisations or how to obtain official documents such as birth certificates. CBOs can also organise self-help groups, for example for people who are HIV positive, and can engage in saving and loan associations or other economic empowerment activities. Frequently, partnering with SOS Children's Villages changes the CBO's focus, from an emphasis on provision of a single service to more holistic family support, including family empowerment activities.

In Meru, Kenya, SOS Children's Villages cooperates with Mushui Mothers. This community-based organisation, registered as an NGO since 2003, supports orphans and families affected by HIV/AIDS. Through their team of peer educators, social workers and health workers, Mushui Mothers counsels and educates people about HIV, accompanies patients to hospital, provides training on sexual and reproductive health and supports good nutrition. Families are able to access a saving and loan scheme to set their savings aside and initiate small income-generating projects. Since the partnership with SOS Children's Villages, a wider range of vulnerable children and families are involved. SOS Children's Villages has built Mushui Mothers' knowledge and skills on how to tackle child abuse in families and with government authorities. The group has also undergone training on how to leverage assistance from different government departments.

SOS Children's Villages' gradual withdrawal from being a direct service provider and shift towards facilitating and building the capacity of local partners to provide long-lasting support inevitably brings with it some uncertainty and confusion, both within the organisation as well as amongst partners. This ambiguity is especially acute at ground level, where decisions are made that have very real implications for the community, summed up in one programme coordinator's dilemma: "When money is available, why not use it for direct support to meet the need?"

Expectations of ongoing direct support to children and their families are inevitably created during a process that begins with SOS Children's Villages providing services which are gradually phased out or 'handed over' to community-based organisations as their capacity-building work gains momentum. Unavoidably, this transition of responsibility takes time and can take even longer for a variety of additional reasons:

- › Shortage of volunteers with the required knowledge and skills within community-based organisations.
- › Limited childcare, child development and psychosocial knowledge to support caregivers.
- › Low levels of confidence amongst CBO staff and volunteers, for example caused by limited educational attainment.

- › Availability and commitment constraints amongst CBO staff and volunteers, caused by other obligations on their time and low levels of remuneration or incentives.
- › Insufficient organisational, financial and management structures within the CBO and a lack of access to financial resources.
- › Inertia caused by the time needed to see obvious impact from the work or the benefit from building long-term institutional relationships (such as with government).
- › SOS Children's Villages is highly visible in some communities, with large branded cars and distribution of SOS-branded goods. Not only does this strengthen the notion that SOS Children's Villages is a rich and influential organisation, it also makes it difficult for partner CBOs to be recognised as focal points for support to children and their families in their own right.
- › A reluctance on the part of SOS Children's Villages to hand over control of programme responsibilities to its CBO partners, predicated on assumptions that 'SOS knows best' and unrealistic expectations in relation to the standards that CBO partners are expected to reach.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ The changing roles and responsibilities of SOS Children's Villages and its CBO partners need to be clearly defined and concretely mapped out in a participatory way. It is important to clarify what SOS Children's Villages expects from its partners and vice versa. SOS Children's Villages should also consider its visibility strategy in the field and the consequences of this strategy for its image.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages and its CBO partners need to jointly develop, discuss and agree on the parameters of their cooperation, including common milestones and time-limited support. Such discussions should also clarify the criteria for and the modalities of the hand-over plan. CBO progress towards a sustainable hand-over should be monitored through regular meetings.
- ▶ A real partnership requires mutual trust. SOS Children's Villages programme coordinators must relinquish programme responsibility to their CBO partners at all levels and should do so in a managed way which builds their capacities, in order to ensure an orderly and sustainable transition. CBO partners should be involved in strategic planning, not just implementing plans and routine tasks.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages is committed to developing interventions together with local CBO partners. In doing so, SOS Children's Villages is handing over responsibility for its family strengthening work to them. The organisation should ensure that programme services are maintained for vulnerable children and their families – whether this is undertaken by SOS Children's Villages directly (as is likely at the start of the programme, when CBO partner capacities still need building) or by partners later on.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages should provide direct support to vulnerable children and their families in situations where community partners do not yet have the capacities to adequately do so, or when no other service providers exist. Ensuring adequate provision must be carefully assessed.

BUILDING CBO CAPACITY

Some respondents note that CBOs require substantial capacity building to prepare them for additional responsibilities and to act as an effective focal point for vulnerable children and families in the community. This capacity strengthening tends to focus on operational and financial issues, particularly on trainings in organisational development, proposal writing, financial management and monitoring. It is possible that the time-bound nature of support of SOS Children's Villages encourages more emphasis on transferring these so-called hard skills (such as operational and financial know-how), rather than 'softer' but equally essential skills relating to the care of children. In some cases it is furthermore evident that trainings often take place before CBOs are ready for the particular training. Practical approaches such as mentoring and opportunities for information exchange can be more useful than formal training, especially when it comes to motivating individuals and building their confidence.

SOS Children's Villages also seeks to strengthen CBOs to become financially self-sustainable by supporting them to gain access to local funding from others – including NGOs, government, businesses and wealthy individuals – and by assisting them to set up income-generating activities (IGAs). SOS Children's Villages assists in other ways too, for example by linking CBOs to other stakeholders, including government departments, universities and clinics, and supporting them in recruiting staff.

“Before, we were not able to move forward. But now, if a child is abused, or even the caregiver is being abused, because we have been trained on legal rights, we are able to forward some cases. SOS is making it easier, because they are continuing to help us in every aspect that we request and in the problems that we are facing or that we are raising, so that we can get to the point where we will be successful as a project.”

Chairperson, CBO Mushui Mothers, Kenya

Many CBOs consist entirely of volunteers who counsel, train and monitor families. They are selected on the basis of their interest in child development, their commitment in their community and their social and communications skills. In most cases volunteers live in the communities they work in. Therefore, their in-depth knowledge of vulnerable families and informal community structures and dynamics is a real advantage. Typically, the services provided by volunteers are highly appreciated by the community and are considered to strengthen social cohesion. On the other hand, the added value of volunteers as opposed to that of 'professional staff' is often not recognised by SOS Children's Villages, community partners or even the families they work with. Volunteers themselves are often also imbued with this view.

Often it is difficult to find suitable CBO staff and volunteers. Most of them are women, in contrast to the mainly male CBO leaders. In some places SOS Children's Villages has been working to promote a greater gender balance in the governance of these organisations, for example, by encouraging women onto CBO boards.

Volunteerism is an important manifestation of community agency: people give their time and contribute to solving community problems. They are ideal community workers as they usually live nearby, have a good understanding of community issues and insight with families. Frequently, volunteers are themselves programme participants who want to support others in similar situations. At the same time, many rely on or expect incentives such as food, services, training or financial support due to their own deprived circumstances.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ In identifying a CBO's capacity needs, its competences, strengths and weaknesses must be assessed and appropriate capacity-building plans and targets developed. Allocating sufficient time for training is particularly important.
- ▶ CBO partners are often chosen because they have already been working with children, caregivers and schools. When it comes to capacity building it is important, therefore, to build on and strengthen their already functioning systems, organisational structures and ways of working with the community.
- ▶ Building on existing volunteer capacities is essential in promoting high quality childcare and in ensuring that they are confident and motivated to continuing their critical front-line work.
- ▶ The front-line role of volunteers is currently undervalued. The reliable relationships that are built over time and their regular follow-up with families are key for responding and linking families with service providers, particularly in emergency situations. This front-line role with families should be nurtured and further strengthened on a programme level.
- ▶ SOS Children's Villages should guard against 'professionalising' volunteers who form the front-line with families. This role cannot be replaced by 'professionals' just as the role of 'professionals' cannot be replaced by volunteers. For this reason those networks of service providers or partners that are best placed to provide skilled services need to be strengthened. Furthermore, consideration should be given as to how the volunteers should be trained to fulfil their specific role of being the first reference point of support for children and their families and how they can be incentivised so that the CBO continues benefitting from their knowledge and experience in the longer term. Often their real concern for families in their community and their commitment is enough.
- ▶ There is work to be done in continuing to encourage a gender balance within CBO partners, particularly when it comes to organisational leadership and governance. Training, literacy programmes and mentoring for women, amongst other things, are necessary to support this.

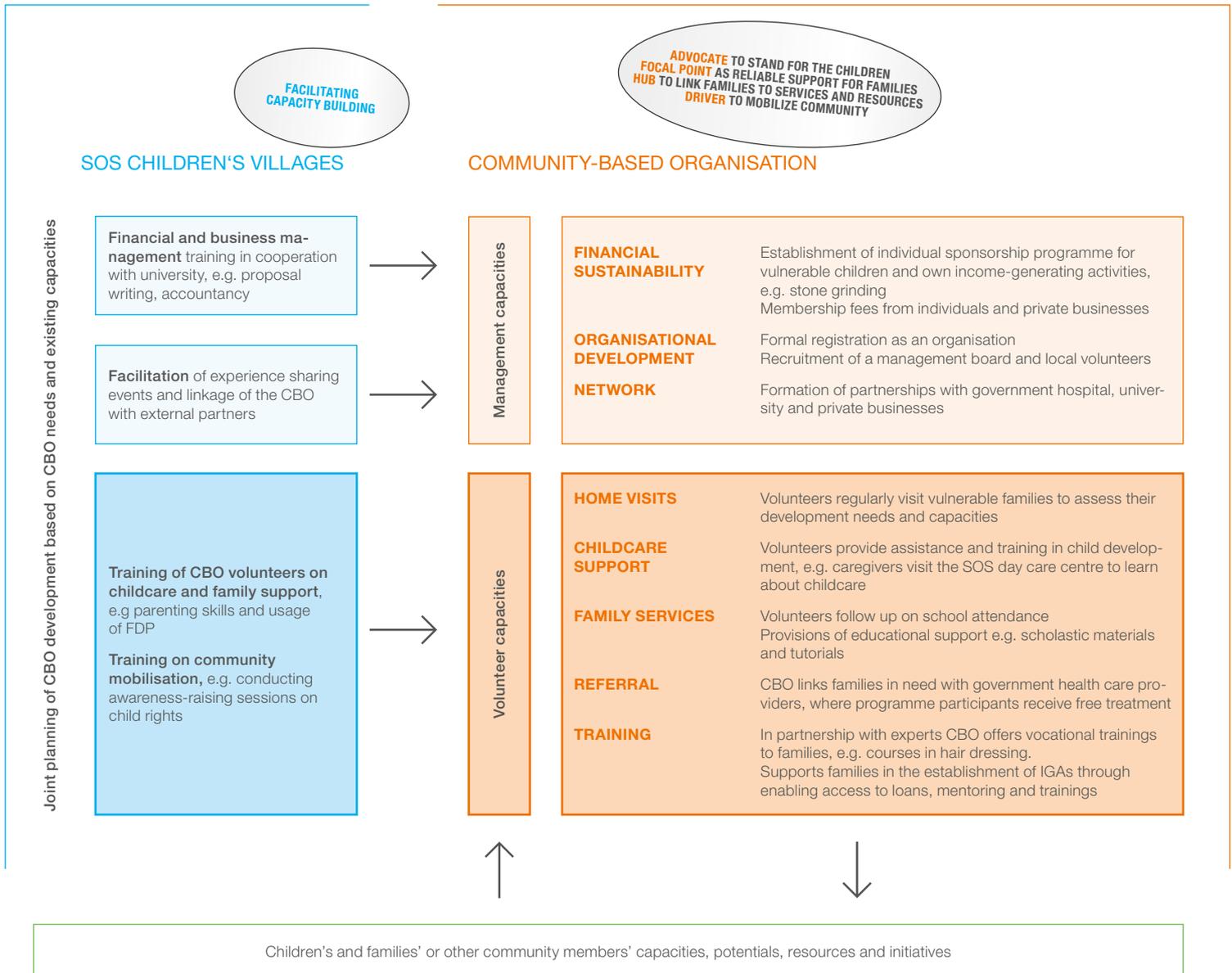
EXAMPLE BAHIR DAR AND HAWASSA, ETHIOPIA: WORKING TOWARDS INDEPENDENT CBOS

In Bahir Dar and in Hawassa, the community’s will to achieve social change has been outstanding. In Bahir Dar, respected and committed community elders who previously worked voluntarily in community funeral associations (‘Iddirs’) formed the CBO ‘Tesfa’. With support from SOS Children’s Villages, Tesfa began implementing its own programmes. Today, the CBO independently identifies community needs, requires only minimal support in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating its own programmes and is financially independent. In Hawassa, SOS Children’s Villages works with the CBO ‘Yegnaw Legna Yenage Tefsa’ Community Development Association.

As can be seen from the graph, SOS Children’s Villages supports these community-based organisations through training, experience sharing events and by linking them with other organisations and institutions. For example, the World Bank finances some of the community strengthening work, embassies support projects, and govern-

ment authorities have donated office space to the CBO to establish income-generating activities. In Hawassa, the Trading and Industry Department sponsored trainings through the CBO in hair dressing and in cobbling streets for 30 young people. The University of Bahir Dar provided entrepreneurial training to 42 young women. SOS Children’s Villages has assisted the CBOs to establish a formal management structure and provided them with relevant trainings.

Yegnaw Legna Yenege Tesfa Community Development Association in Hawassa and Tesfa CBO in Bahir Dar have begun to mobilise local resources from local businesses, individuals, government authorities and NGOs. In Hawassa, 22 children are currently sponsored and receive financial support for education, meals and other basic necessities. This number is expected to rise to 60 in the near future. At the same time, the CBOs still need support in working with different stakeholders. They also struggle with a high workload and a limited availability of volunteers. Despite this, both CBOs are now financially independent. Tesfa CBO for example has an annual budget of one million Birr (38,000 EURO).





EMPOWERING FAMILIES

SOS Children's Villages works with and advocates for families in which children are at risk of losing parental care to allow children to grow up in a secure and caring environment where they can develop to their full potential. Strengthening families can also mean preventing crises that can – in some cases – lead to the separation of children from their families. Finding common ground with local communities on how to strengthen families represents a key challenge in this area of work.

SOS Children's Villages works towards strengthening families to improve the quality of care and protection of the child by building community capacity to support vulnerable children and their families, and by improving community knowledge on child development, child rights and child protection.

The economic empowerment of families is also integral to ensuring healthy child development. Families are strengthened by supporting them to access employment, income-generating activities, saving and loan groups and financial skills. In addition, life skills such as conflict resolution, stress management, money management and running a home are also needed.

With this in mind, SOS Children's Villages seeks to build self-reliance within the family, so that it is able to fulfil its responsibility for the care and protection of its children. A family is considered to be self-reliant when its children have access to essential services, when its caregivers have the ability to provide quality childcare and when there are sufficient family resources.

In the countries where this research has been carried out, it is usually front-line CBO volunteers who identify vulnerable families based on criteria predefined by the community. A programme steering group has the final say on which families are most in need of support. These

families receive regular home visits, where volunteers counsel children and caregivers and discuss issues such as family well-being, child-parent relationships, hygiene and children's education. Alongside areas of vulnerability, family potentials are discussed, assessed and drawn up in the form of a family development plan (FDP). Through regular home visits, family progress is monitored and the development plan adapted to the changing circumstances.

Evidence is also emerging of the benefit of family strengthening work for the community at large. This includes improved social cohesion between community members as a result of efforts that bring people together. In Togo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and other countries saving and loan groups not only consist of caregivers participating in the family strengthening programme, but are open to all community members. Approaches such as this help to anchor the programme more broadly in the community, and may serve to motivate and inspire caregivers.

WORKING WITH DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL ROLES

What makes a family? Differing beliefs and conceptions surrounding family and childhood in many sub-Saharan and western countries present challenges for SOS Children's Villages, as well as some important opportunities. In the locations covered by this report, 'family' is a more expansive concept which, when it comes to children, includes the extended family and sometimes even children from the local area. In Ghana, for example, programme staff report that local neighbourhood children are sometimes mistakenly included in family development plans. It could be that the FDP's purpose and process is not properly explained to some families. At the same time, this broader understanding of family within the African context presents the prospect of finding lasting solutions within extended family structures for children who have lost parental care.

"The caregiver plus the children sit down and look what they want to be in the future; what they will contribute to that strategy; and what they need from others so that their strategy should come to reality – that's the FDP."

SOS Children's Villages co-worker,
Lilongwe, Malawi

According to respondents, individual caregivers often do not understand the importance of childcare in the context of child rights. As a result, training and awareness raising on child protection and child rights have proven to be more effective when directed not only at those involved in the programme but to the broader community. "When they [programme participants] go home, they go back to the old society, where they are confronted with [old-fashioned] perceptions and beliefs of, for example, childcare or the position of children in the family and community. These beliefs clash, causing conflicts and many fall back to old behaviour" (SOS Children's Villages programme coordinator, Ghana). On the other hand it must also be high-

lighted that with many trainings, caregivers go home and spread the word on issues relating to childcare that they learnt in the trainings with their neighbours and friends, thus creating a ripple effect.

As women in the research locations seem to be more engaged in caring for children than men, and as "support to the woman will benefit the children more than to the man" (family strengthening project coordinator, Ghana), it is mainly female caregivers who participate in the programme. In some areas, men will not participate at all, although encouraged to do so – for example in savings groups and wider community activities, especially when a female caregiver is ill. Some adaptations have been made to accommodate the fact that most participants are women; there are many women's savings groups and female facilitators are often utilised to encourage women's participation in areas where they are generally less vocal in the public sphere.

Although these interventions strengthen female caregivers and are often understood as a step toward gender equality, they may also serve to reinforce gender roles. Up to now the family strengthening work has been largely unsuccessful in encouraging fathers and other male family members to participate in the programme. It is also the case that very few men have taken up the critical role of front-line volunteers, as previously discussed.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ When engaging in family strengthening work it is important to reflect on local concepts of family and community and to develop a shared understanding of the relationships and connections. It is also necessary to reflect on how the concept of child development can be communicated in a way that is most appropriate to local customs.
- ▶ Regular home visits provide an opportunity for family mentoring on childcare matters. These visits have also proved important in the development of workable strategies to improve family practice.
- ▶ Preventing the perpetuation of gender roles and stereotypes requires a concerted effort to include and support women in decision-making positions – including those who are programme beneficiaries and those front-line programme implementers. It is imperative that both men and women are included in all levels of planning, design and execution of the programme.

THE FAMILY DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The family development plan (FDP) is used as a tool to identify and build on the existing skills, experiences and expectations of families to better support themselves and their children. It includes targets, ambitions and activities which might further help the family provide a caring home and a safe environment in which a child can develop.

The role of the partner CBO is to discuss with the families their needs and challenges as well as their assets, resources and strengths to build self-reliance, and to jointly develop the family development plan. At the same time, families must contribute to making a difference in their own lives, as identified in the plan. Caregivers, young people and

children are also involved in the development of the FDP and their needs and considerations are included.

A particular advantage of the FDP is that the benefits for children can be tracked, parental skills improved, incomes monitored and the correct allocation of resources ensured. Duplication of services can be avoided as each service delivered is tracked. At the same time, the FDP is often considered to be too complex by the families it is intended to assist. As a written document, sometimes to be completed in English, the FDP can be disempowering for those unable to read its contents.

Using this approach, family self-reliance is anticipated within three to five years – a target which some respondents regard as too ambitious. In addition, some targeted families have limited motivation to participate and others do not want to receive assistance despite being vulnerable. Some families are willing to stay the course but lack the resources; others have the money but manage it poorly. Some busy caregivers struggle to find the time to complete a family development plan, resenting the additional burden that the process represents for them.

LESSONS LEARNT

- ▶ The approach adopted in the family strengthening must be better communicated to families in order to increase their acceptance of it, and commitment to it. At the same time, in order to avoid creating programme participant and community dependency, greater clarity 'up-front' of the limited time span of the family strengthening work is necessary.
- ▶ Explaining the programme clearly is also important in helping potential beneficiaries appreciate their responsibilities in making it work best for them. There is also work to be done to ensure that beneficiaries understand the nature of the support being offered – essentially 'self-help' as opposed to 'welfare' or 'relief'.
- ▶ Assessing family capacities, knowledge and experience should form the basis of the FDP. Completion of the form is simply a structured way of encouraging discussion and reflection and, to that extent, is only a means to an end.
- ▶ Differing levels of educational attainment and local realities need to be accommodated to ensure a better understanding of the FDP itself. At a minimum, translation of the plan into local languages should be undertaken.

ECONOMIC SUPPORT OR CHILDCARE, PARENTING & PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT?

Economic strengthening is often perceived as the basis for improved care of children in programme locations. For many respondents, income poverty is the key prevailing vulnerability factor for families – and is a priority intervention upon which other family strengthening activities, such as psychosocial approaches, can build. Harmful behaviour by caregivers towards their children is often considered to result from economic stress, and poverty is frequently reported to be a barrier to accessing education and health care.

On the other hand, improved family psychosocial health and care for children are regarded as prerequisites to ensuring the success of income-generating activities and other economic strengthening measures. Families in crisis, who are unable to meet their basic needs, are not in a good position to run a business. Developing counselling, self-help groups and mutual support allows caregivers to gain confidence and recognise their strengths – providing a platform for improving life at home and their economic situation.



The focus on economic strengthening of families in the SOS Children's Villages programme represents a shift away from direct support to families and towards an approach which emphasises family self-reliance in caring for their children.

However, self-reliance has often been interpreted by co-workers and communities to mean 'economic self-sufficiency', an interpretation which has gained further credence due to the time-limited nature of SOS Children's Villages' support. Building the capacities of families requires more than resource generation and management skills; it means helping families to develop a variety of childcare and parenting skills as well as to address power dynamics within the family that enable and promote decision making in the best interest of the child.

Income-generating activities frequently feature in SOS Children's Villages' economic strengthening work. It has become clear that:

- › Families replicating successful businesses developed by other families leads to greater competition for the same customers, resulting in lower incomes for all.
- › Many group income-generating activities have been unsuccessful as a result of the differing interests and varying backgrounds and mindsets of their members. Linking individual (family) IGAs with saving and credit cooperatives has been found to be a more successful approach. Another major challenge is the limited literacy amongst many programme participants, resulting in their being more passive recipients of support than active agents of their own development.
- › Income generation projects need adaptation to the local economic situation and family context. Borrowing money



Photo: N. Nassar

to start a business might not be the most appropriate strategy for highly vulnerable families who might benefit more from simply putting some money aside in savings and acquiring skills on how to budget effectively.

► Expertise in the field of economic strengthening is needed to plan, design, implement and monitor activities and to avoid the pitfalls.

LESSONS LEARNT

- While opportunities for economic empowerment of families should be pursued whenever possible, they should always go hand-in-hand with support to caregivers to better care for their children's social and emotional development.
- Economic strengthening encompasses more than income-generating activities and savings and loans groups. It should also aim to improve, for example, family budgeting and other financial management and saving skills.
- Fostering self-belief within families and a commitment to helping themselves and others in the community is vital to the success of sustainable family strengthening initiatives.
- Integrating literacy training into family strengthening work, particularly for women and caregivers, is essential for self-reliance strategies to succeed.
- Categorising families according to their economic vulnerability, as well as social factors, may help to better define what economic strengthening support they need. However, this should not be stigmatising nor detract from empowering families and building on their strengths.

WHEN FAMILIES CANNOT REACH SELF-RELIANCE

Overall, the goal of supporting families to become self-reliant within three to five years is challenging. Despite the individual family support approach adopted by SOS Children's Villages and its community partners, some families – particularly the most vulnerable ones – struggle to achieve self-reliance. Continued support to these families, which often include households headed by grandparents, children or terminally ill caregivers, is needed. Knowing that these families have little prospect of becoming self-reliant, interview respondents frequently mentioned the need for network partners such as the community, government or community-based organisations to assume care. This is in line with the approach to anchor continued support for families in strong social support systems. However, for many this remains a daunting task particularly if a strong community network is not in place and it is not clear who should take responsibility, and how.

While this is still an open question, it is becoming clear that a strong emphasis on economic strengthening – particularly income-generating activities – is not a panacea for improving the lives of some of the most vulnerable families.

LESSONS LEARNT

- When SOS Children's Villages phases out of a programme location, it must be ensured that families who have not (yet) reached self-reliance continue to receive support. Abrupt termination of support to families must be avoided.
- Support for families who cannot reach self-reliance must be anchored in a support network within the community. It must be ensured that home visits where community volunteers regularly link up with children and their caregivers continue to be a central aspect of family strengthening work. Similarly, specific actions to root ownership and responsibility for vulnerable children and their families with community stakeholders, such as schools, community leaders, self-help groups, restaurants and businesses must be pursued.

EXAMPLE NIGERIA: SUPPORT CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT CHILDREN

In Jos, central Nigeria, child protection experts from SOS Children's Villages provided training to its local CBO partner on children's rights, child protection, sexual and reproductive health, parental skills and child participation. This training was replicated in the community with community leaders, faith-based organisations and other groups – designed to fill gaps in the knowledge and experience of caregivers on childcare and parenting-related issues. As a consequence of the training a local child protection committee was established in the community which has been working to address cases of child abuse and neglect. The programme has also been engaging traditional leaders in regular dialogue to support this local child protection committee, which has enabled the community to report cases of child abuse to the authorities.

The programme also trained children and young people on their rights and responsibilities, as well as on sexual and reproductive health issues. These trainings were also taken into schools. Follow-up activities are being developed for teachers to bring them up to the same level of knowledge and awareness as their students. As a result, caregivers have become more responsive to the care and support needs of their children. Regular follow-up household visits by programme staff and CBO volunteers ensure that improvements in care are maintained and developments are monitored.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This section provides an overview of the research methodology that led to the findings on which this publication is based.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The research was guided by the following overarching research question: **What can we learn from emerging practices in SOS Children’s Villages’ family strengthening programmes aiming to empower communities in an attempt to strengthen sustainable social support networks for children and their families and what role does SOS Children’s Villages play in this process?**

More specifically, our research interests were fourfold: (1) to draw out learning and ‘emerging good practice’ at selected programme sites; (2) to explore how social support networks can successfully be strengthened from a local perspective; (3) to facilitate knowledge sharing within SOS Children’s Villages, for the purpose of mutual learning; and (4) to share the findings with development practitioners interested in SOS Children’s Villages’ work in the field of community development and family empowerment in support of vulnerable children.

SAMPLING

During 2013, in-depth interviews were conducted with 58 field staff, representatives of community-based partner organisations and national-level advisors involved in 16 family strengthening programmes supported by SOS Children’s Villages in 10 African countries.¹ These selected programmes were considered to provide the biggest learning potential in terms of innovative approaches towards strengthening community-based social support systems. Field-based informants of SOS Children’s Villages were selected by programme staff at its respective national, regional, continental and international offices according to their level of expertise and experience. Likewise, representatives from community-based partners were added to the sample in order to provide valuable insights from the community’s perspective of working together with SOS Children’s Villages.

Children and their families participating in the programme, as well as other individuals in the community were not interviewed, as the focus of the research was on operational, ‘how to’ aspects of strengthening and building social support networks.

TYPES AND NUMBERS OF INFORMANTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Family strengthening programme staff at programme locations, SOS Children’s Villages | 21 |
| Representatives of SOS Children’s Villages’ community-based partner organisations | 27 |
| National-level family strengthening programme coordinators, SOS Children’s Villages | 10 |
| Total numbers of informants | 58 |

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

- › Desk research
- › Data collection based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews
- › Qualitative content analysis using elements of the Grounded Theory²

During an initial desk research phase, the research team conducted a scan of grey and academic literature, including an analysis of various external programme evaluations, internal reports, manuals, policies and policy support documents. These documents formed the basis for defining the subsequent thematic scope of the research and critical areas of interest.

Questionnaire design then followed, in consultation with local programme staff and external consultants in the respective research countries – each of whom came steeped in field realities and current programme challenges. Individual questionnaires were developed for the three interview groups, with further adaptations made for specific local contexts. Their semi-structured design allowed the interviewers to follow guide questions, with scope for topical tangents whenever this was appropriate.

Face-to-face interviews took place in six countries, with interviews in the remaining four conducted over the telephone. Interviews were undertaken either by members of the core research team or other SOS Children’s Villages programme staff. The data that was generated was triangulated with information gathered during site visits and during informal conversations. Interviews in two countries were held in French and the transcriptions subsequently translated. It should also be noted that a third of interviews with representatives of community-based partner organisations were held in groups, as these informants felt more comfortable speaking in a group setting.

FURTHER READING

The interview recordings resulted in 83 hours of recorded material, which was transcribed word by word, amounting to a total of 1,468 pages of transcript. Elements of the Grounded Theory were used to analyse the generated data over the course of a four-month period. The Grounded Theory was chosen as an analytical tool to allow for an unbiased examination of the felt social realities of the different stakeholders involved in the family strengthening work. As a result, this approach provided concrete insights into how the programme is perceived by stakeholders, and how appropriate they consider it to be for strengthening social support networks.

The analysis process, based on the Grounded Theory, involved a number of stages. At first, from the data that was collected key points were marked with a series of codes which were extracted from the text. These codes were then grouped into similar concepts in order to make them more workable. The concepts were then amalgamated into categories and regrouped in country-specific 'coding frames'. In order to minimise the potential of bias, external data analysts who were unfamiliar with SOS programme policy on social support networks were in charge of the entire data analysis process.

Based on an iterative process, the following themes or phenomena emerged: (1) improving network structure, functioning partnerships; (2) community agency; (3) strengthening CBOs, role of SOS/CBO; (4) strengthening families; (5) knowledge sharing; (6) cross-cutting: child protection, child rights, child participation, education, health, gender, staffing and monitoring & evaluation.

In a subsequent step, the main themes and cross-cutting issues were organised according to the coding paradigm suggested by Strauss & Corbin (1990)³ which examines: the reason/rationale that led to this theme; the context and intervening circumstances of the selected strategy; how stakeholders deal with the theme; and finally, the consequences of the actions/strategies. Finally, the findings were consolidated into sections as presented in chapters 2–5 of this publication.

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¹ The countries in which the research took place were: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa, Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

² Glaser, Barney G. & Strauss, Anselm L. (1967)

³ Strauss, Anselm L. & Corbin, Juliet M. (1990)

GLOSSARY

Capacity building: Capacity building aims at strengthening caregivers' abilities to provide adequate care and protection to their children – from organising a home to earning a living, from bonding with a child to creating a stable family life at home. Capacity building also relates to strengthening partner organisations and the community in their abilities to support vulnerable children and their families. Techniques include training in the areas of childcare, resource mobilisation and organisational development, and advising and mentoring.

Community: Community is defined as a group of people living in a specific geographical area, with a shared sense of belonging and identity. This includes a wide range of stakeholders, including the children and their families themselves.

Community agency: Community agency is the active participation of community members, with their own capacities, skills, imagination and energy in local activities. It means community involvement in all stages of a programme or project assessment, design and implementation. Ideally, community agency should contribute to community empowerment and local decision making.

Community based: Community based refers to any self-initiative within a community to work together to provide services and support for people in the community. SOS Children's Villages' family strengthening work includes support to community-based groups and initiatives which allow families to stay together and provide quality care for their children. Community-based initiatives are as far as possible resourced, implemented and monitored by community members. SOS Children's Villages helps communities so that they can help families.

Community-based organisation (CBO): Community-based organisations are local NGOs or self-help groups, often run on a voluntary basis. They are established by community members to address a particular issue in their community and can vary in terms of size and organisational structure; some are formally registered, some are rather informal.

Civic driven change (CDC): CDC is a set of ideas, thinking and debate about citizen-led change processes in society. The CDC concept is a move away from the traditional definition of development cooperation with its focus on the transfer of money and capacities. It makes the case that citizens of a community, country or society have the capacity and power to lead change that is long lasting and sustainable. To carry out civic action, civic agency is required – the capacities, skills, imagination and energy of people working together to change society.

Family development plan (FDP): The family development plan (FDP) is a tool to identify and build on the existing skills, experiences and expectations of families to better support themselves and their children. The individual situation of the family is carefully assessed including the specific development needs, targets, ambitions and activities which might further help the family to provide a caring home and a safe environment for their children. The specific steps family members

and programme staff will take towards reaching these targets are defined and the implementation is evaluated on a regular basis.

Family strengthening programme (FSP): Family strengthening programmes aim to prevent children from losing the care of their family. SOS Children's Villages empowers families to strengthen their capacity to protect and care for their children, and works with local partners and community organisations to provide supportive services to families. Families are considered self-reliant when they have the knowledge, skills and resources to adequately care for and protect their children.

Income-generating activity (IGA): IGAs are small businesses run by families or the community. The ultimate objective of this project is that caregivers have their own source of income which enables them to autonomously meet the needs of their children. SOS Children's Villages and the CBOs support families in the establishment of IGAs through trainings, site visits, knowledge sharing and access to savings and loans. CBOs themselves also run IGAs.

Memorandum of understanding (MoU): Document signed by two or more organisations that are planning to work together. MoUs are generally recognised as binding, even if no legal claim could be based on the rights and obligations laid down in them. An MoU should (1) identify the contracting parties, (2) spell out the subject matter of the agreement and its objectives, (3) summarise the essential terms of the agreement, and (4) must be signed by the contracting parties.

Sustainability in family strengthening: Sustainable family strengthening is where children who are at risk of losing the care of their families continue to be supported within a caring family environment after SOS Children's Villages has withdrawn from direct day-to-day involvement. This continued support is 'anchored' in strong social support systems, where the community fulfils its responsibilities towards the protection and care of its children, providing support from its capacities and available resources and actively claiming or securing support from duty bearers and other partners.

UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children were welcomed by consensus in the UN General Assembly in November 2009. They provide critical guidance to national governments and other duty bearers on implementing child rights on behalf of children without, or at risk of losing, parental care. They provide a framework for the development of empowering family strengthening interventions and the implementation of necessary quality standards across all alternative care settings.

Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) and Savings and Credit Co-operative (SACCO): Small group of 15-25 people who save together and take small loans from those savings. The activities run in cycles of about one year, after which the accumulated savings and the loan profits are shared out among the members according to the amount they have saved.



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