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Guest Editors

Katharine Briar-Lawson, Christine James-Brown and Donna Petras



Enabling Community-led Child Protection: The Journey of an Experimental Field Site in Madhubani Bihar, India

Kajol (Devasmita) Menon

Leher

Mumbai, India

Nicole Rangel

Leher

New Delhi, India

In a country as vast and populous as India, can communities equipped with skills and tools come together to keep children safe? Discussions in this paper focus on the collaborative journey of informal village

child protection committees and children's groups in one of India's underdeveloped rural districts, Madhubani, in the state of Bihar. It attempts to make a case for the child protection system to move from being top-heavy to bottom-up, driven by community needs and preventive in nature. Indicators for analysis include democratic, inclusive participation; child protection mandates; awareness, attitude and behavioral change; linkages with formal structures and mechanisms; and collaboration between local stakeholders, including children and community members at large.

"If you do anything to stop me from marrying him, I will kill myself," 16-year-old P. tells her parents. She packed her bags and was leaving home to marry 25-year-old A. P. and A. met when he lived with her family as a paying guest for a week, attending a training program in P's village. They stayed in touch on the phone thereafter. Angered at being "disgraced," P's family arranged for her to be forcefully wed to another man. Information reached the Village Child Protection Committee (VCPC), who stepped in to calm and counsel P. and her family. The VCPC explained to them that P. could well marry A., but in her own interest and that of her life together with A., she should focus on completing her education and reach the minimum legal age for marriage. The VCPC and her parents also would take the time to find out more about A., where he came from, and what his intentions were. P. agreed for a short time to leave her phone with a VCPC member so stop her from being distracted as she prepared for her upcoming examinations.

—Village B, Madhubani, India

Protecting children and helping them safely transition into adulthood is critical in the development of a well-functioning nation. This can be realized through collective work, thought, and a coming together of society and the state. In India, as elsewhere, child protection is dynamic and evolves or regresses based on social, political, and economic history and current reality. At the heart of child protection work is change in attitudes, behavior, and, eventually, societal norms. Child protection is a constant work in progress as societies consider and adapt what they deem to be safe childhoods.

India is a big country with a very large population. Sixty-eight percent of its 1.3 billion people are under 35 and 390 million are under 18 (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India^a, 2011). Though on par at a global level in certain sectors of industry, India also is an old, complex society ridden with dichotomy and containing parallel

worlds. The richest 10% of Indians hold 77.4% of the country's wealth while the bottom 60% hold 4.7% of it (Credit Suisse, 2018). Disasters, conflicts, agrarian crises, displacement, migration, unemployment, and unplanned urbanization are major issues with which India continues to struggle.

Devoid of agency, children hang low at the bottom of India's social, political, and governance systems. For example:

- India has 10 million children at work in some form (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).
- 27% girls marry before the age of 18 (Government of India Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2016).
- Enrollment of children in India in elementary school is comparable with developed nations including the United Kingdom and the United States; however, in grades 9-12, enrollment is comparable with Nepal and Pakistan (Government of India Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016).
- Crimes against children increased 500% from 2006 to 2016 (National Crime Records Bureau, 2017). Some of this increase may be attributed to increased reporting under a new law for sexual offenses against children.
- The CHILDLINE 1098 emergency helpline—India's emergency 24-hour outreach helpline service for children in distress or emergency situations—received nine million calls between April 2018 and March 2019 (CHILDLINE India, 2019).
- Over the past 20 years, funding for child protection has hovered at around 0.03% of government spending (Ganguly, 2019).

The child protection system in India is characterized by an elaborate legal and policy framework and a thick population of structures and services concentrated at state governments and district headquarters that taper to nearly nothing at the block and village levels. So far,

the system has adopted a top-down approach that is tilted toward curative interventions in response to children who have experienced harm (Ganguly, 2019).

In rural areas, the majority of the population resides in villages a distance from the district headquarters and are mostly unaware of the child protection system. Those who need the system often must travel long distances to receive services, costing families time and money; hence, they seldom do. In cities, child protection is one of several trials of daily living for the vast population of urban poor. The child protection system in urban areas is distant from the struggles of people and children in communities. Decentralized rural self-governance (Panchayati Raj; Rath & Panda, 2018) systems offer opportunity for communities to take charge, even influence spending on child protection if they should desire.¹ However, urban governance systems are more complicated to navigate for children.

There have been calls for a preventive system for child protection² and a number of significant qualitative pilot initiatives (Ganguly, 2019) have been developed in some communities over the last decade.³ Yet questions persist around sustainability and measuring the outcomes

¹ From the 14th Finance Commission Report, Page 112, Basic grants to Panchayats, "The grant provided is intended to be used to improve the status of basic civic services including water supply, sanitation including septage management, sewerage and solid waste management, storm water drainage, maintenance of community assets, maintenance of roads, footpaths and street-lighting, and burial and cremation grounds." See https://fincomindia.nic.in/writereaddata/html_en_files/oldcommission_html/fincom14/others/14th_FCRReport.pdf.

² In December 2019, Dr. Yasmin Ali Haque, UNICEF Representative, emphasized that "We need to look at ways to socially and systemically prioritise prevention in all our work. This goes beyond care reforms and should look at ensuring children live and thrive in protective environments free from violence. Unfortunately, media reports continue to remind us how much work needs to be done. This requires us to work with communities, faith leaders, opinion leaders, influencers, to adopt community behaviors that nurture children, recognise the value of girls, and are violence free." See Express Health Care (2019, December 20).

³ "Civil society organisations including Child in Need Institute (CINI), HAQ: Centre for Child Rights along with its partner organisations in the states... Leher, Save the Children and partners, Plan International and partners, UNICEF and Partners, have demonstrated qualitative pieces of work in this area over the last 10 years, some even leveraging technology and use of interactive audio-visual content to educate and orient communities which must be scaled up through capacity building institutions of the State" (Ganguly, 2019, p. 90).

of such work. There is hesitance in investing in and scaling up community-led child protection.

Answers can lie in combining a systems approach with principles of social change, taking communities through a process that enables them to make tangible changes: promoting access to rights and entitlements; building response and prevention interventions led by the community to keep children safe, at home, and with their families; and creating dialogue, shifts in thought, and change in the social fabric over time.

This paper discusses the experience of the collaborative journey of informal village child protection committees (VCPCs) and children's groups in one of India's rural districts, Madhubani (which is 3,500 square kilometers and has a population of 4 million), in the state of Bihar, toward strengthening the arguments for scaling up community-led child protection mechanisms.

Experimental Field Work in Madhubani

In 2009, the government of India introduced an Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS; Government of India Ministry of Women and Child Development, n.d.) that provides for services and structures that make up the child protection system in accordance with provisions of the principal child protection legislation: the juvenile justice law (Government of India Legislative Department., 2015). ICPS also promotes the creation of a protective environment for children through collaborative efforts between state and members of society at the village, block, and district level. The plan introduced VCPCs, informal groups of village "duty bearers"⁴ and community members, to be a platform for communities to converge for assistance, dialogue, and action for child

⁴ Duty bearers are government-appointed frontline workers found in communities—such as midwives, teachers, health care workers, and/or police constables, also including local political representatives such as the head of the village.

protection—and to provide a link between families, communities, and the child protection system.

Amid skepticism that VCPCs would be a top-down imposition that would not belong to the people and would not be sustainable, Leher—a child protection-focused nonprofit based in New Delhi—stepped in with a field experiment that did not question the manner of existence of VCPCs but to test the potential of VCPCs to emerge as an effective mechanism for community-led child protection (Leher, 2017). To experiment with, study, and understand the nature of facilitation and tools required at the community level and enable VCPCs to grow as effective, community-led child protection mechanisms is critical to the work. The work also is multidimensional, involving different actions that take place in parallel, including direct assistance to children and families and a range of preventive interventions: awareness training and discussions in the community, liaisons with the government at the block and district level, and commitment to positive change for all children in the district of Madhubani. The ideological premise for this work is that child protection is the state's responsibility and the work shall not promote a parallel system, but work to strengthen and build bridges to the formal system.

This experimental field action site launched in 2014 and continues to the present day.⁵ Site coverage includes currently 36 villages—a total population of 100,000 people reached through direct engagement with 720 individuals who form part of 36 child protection committees and 36 children's groups (Leher, 2017). More than 2,000 children have been directly assisted by VCPC across 36 villages. Of 81 girls who turned 18 years and exited the children's groups, 34 are continuing

⁵The work is stewarded by Leher, a child rights organization whose focus is to promote the preventive approach to child protection, and its partner Sarvo Prayas Sansthan (SPS), a grassroots-level organization based in Madhubani, Bihar.

with higher education. Most of their mothers had child marriages and little education. Two girls received state level awards for art and culture. Five women, including those who were part of VCPCs and children's groups, won local elections (Leher, n.d.). The goal is to demonstrate the potential of communities to lead child protection, create knowledge and tools to help communities equip themselves for a transformative journey, and advocate for support for community-led child protection in India.

Inside Madhubani: Turning on the Switch

In 2014, when VCPCs started their journey in communities, the dominant narrative around child labor was acceptance that children had to work and disinterest in any conversation against it. Underpinning the years of work in Madhubani has been rigorous process with communities, communities (VCPC and children) as protagonists and leaders, Leher and SPS learning alongside, collating the experience, reflecting it back to the communities and asking questions from time to time. Key building blocks include participatory processes, leadership building, collaboration with government, and synergy between children and adults.

In 2015, across several villages, 82 children returned home for Diwali and Eid and did not go back to work at VCPCs request to parents. However, at the time the community felt they had nothing to offer these children in terms of vocational training. Only a fraction of them, around 28, were admitted back to school. For the rest, there was no record kept. It is assumed they went back to work for lack of other options (Leher, 2017). In 2016 and into 2017, it was observed that communities stopped reporting child labor almost completely (two cases of child labor were reported; see Leher, 2018). During internal project review discussions, VCPCs stated that families did not want to give

information about children at work. VCPCs themselves feared risk to their own personal safety if they reported cases. SPS and Leher teams nudged VCPCs to take stands and helped them devise ways to deal with risks, including reporting cases to CHILDLINE India anonymously. In 2018, more cases of child labor began to be reported by VCPCs (62 cases; see Leher, 2019). In 2019, VCPCs noted that parents, using their own social networks, began to bring their children back to the community and put them back in school.

The VCPC experience has been similar for child marriage. In many villages, as the children's groups have grown over the past five years, the discourse is moving from "resistance to marriage at legal age of 18" at the time of the project baseline study in 2015 (Leher, 2015) to "complete your education and find a suitable job," recorded in discussions impact assessment study at year five, conducted internally in 2019. See Table 1.

Reflection and tracing back the steps in Madhubani helped piece together a story. VCPCs lived in similar conditions and shared the struggles of the community. They knew that confronting issues head on, casting judgement, or imposing their own views could threaten their work and its efficacy. VCPCs moved forward with what they could, with multiple work streams going on in parallel.

In India, implementation and delivery of public welfare services can end up being diluted. Through routine visits to schools, to early childhood care and government-run early childhood education centers (*anganwadi* centers), and through dialogue with related officers at the village and block level, the VCPC ensured that the local government streamlined procedures to ensure that children received social protection entitlements including civil registration, immunization, nutrition, scholarships, and educational materials provided by community-level service providers such as schools, health centers, early childhood care and education centers, and public distribution service centers (Srivastava, 2013).

Table 1*Shift in the Communities: 2014-2019*

Baseline 2014	Assessment 2019
Child Marriage	
Child marriage takes place after 10th grade. Reasons for child marriage: Fear that the girl may get sexually assaulted, fear of her getting into a relationship, elope, fear of loss of reputation and family honor, fear of not being able to find a suitable match later.	Parents wait for children to turn 18 years old before getting married. If there is a child marriage taking place or being planned in the village, people now report it to the VCPCs. The conversations are now limited to the legal age of marriage and include the need for focus on girls completing their education, finding jobs and disadvantages of 'early' marriage ('early' defined as after completion of 18 years of age).
Substance Abuse	
Majority of children start consuming some form of substance by the time they reach Class 5. Consuming certain substances like beetle leaves, beetle nut etc. are considered to be a part of the culture in Madhubani, i.e. children grow up seeing their parents, members in the community consuming the same. In some cases, parents send children to buy bidi (local cigarette), tobacco, and cigarette from village shop. Parents were resistant to messages on substance abuse telling VCPC find fault with their children.	The resistance from parents has stopped. VCPC report that they telling parents once is enough for them to ensure that children do not consume substances. Parents who consume substances display responsibility ensuring that they discourage their children, they have stopped sending children to shops to buy tobacco products. Awareness has been created among shopkeepers, through repeated dialogue, about the illegality, fines and punishment for sale of tobacco products to children.
School Attendance	
Parents did not know how children spend their day or if they attended school regularly. School attendance did not even come up in discussions at baseline.	Parents are more attentive to their children's well-being. They ensure that their children attend school.

Table 1 (*continued*)*Shift in the Communities: 2014-2019*

Baseline 2014		Assessment 2019
Health and Nutrition		
Immunization was not identified as an issue at the baseline. It came up in discussions when the VCPCs started meeting and holding dialogues with community members. Parents were under the misconception that immunization makes children ill.		Parents understand myths and facts about vaccines and immunizations through increased awareness by the VCPCs. Parents now keep track and seek immunization day.
Growth in Understanding of Child protection in VCPCs and the Community		
High prevalence issues identified at baseline	High prevalence issues and taken by VCPC for action	Issues not identified at baseline but taken up
Child labor	Child labor	Birth registration, Romantic relationship among children, School drop-out, school attendance, immunization, eloping, addiction/ unsupervised access to smart phones and internet, delaying marriage beyond 18 years, focus on education, especially for girls.
Substance abuse	Substance abuse	
Child marriage	Child marriage	
Corporal punishment	Corporal punishment	
Discrimination	Gender, caste	
Disability	Disability certification, and pensions	
Linking children and families to schemes and services	Linking children and families to schemes and services	

Source: Leher. (2015). *District Need Assessment Study and District Child Protection Plan, Madhubani, Bihar.*

They also addressed inadequacies in the system around teacher vacancies, school infrastructure, and corporal punishment. Families who were extremely vulnerable were connected to government financial sponsorship programs by VCPCs (Leher, 2019). As benefits accrued to families, VCPCs earned a place of trust and respect in the community.

Members also kept a watchful eye on children in the community and in school, encouraging them to attend school, and encouraging parents to be more careful and alert to their children. Simultaneously, as children’s groups in the villages formed and grew in strength, they began reporting more cases and assisting VCPCs with case interventions. Both children’s groups and VCPCs worked together consistently to give clear messages about child labor and its illegality, sharing stories of children rescued from child labor situations and urging parents to bring their children home. Somewhere amid this journey, a switch turned on for child protection.

As time went by, the work of VCPC grew more defined. Figure 1 details the areas in which the scope of work may be categorized.

Assessment at Five Years

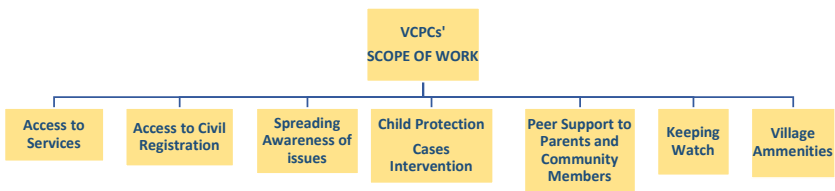
At the five-year mark of the program, a set of indicators was designed to map the VCPC journey, to look for signs of its impact, and to identify markers of community ownership and sustainability.

Methodology

Data was gathered from 25% of 36 villages across the three administrative blocks of Bisfi, Rajnagar, and Pandaul in the district of Madhubani

Figure 1

Scope of Work of Village Child Protection Committees (VCPCs)



through focus group discussions (FGD) with VCPCs, children's groups, and groups of adults representing the communities at large. Villages selected for data collection were chosen based on self-evaluation scores from a separate review conducted by VCPC earlier that year. From each of the three administrative blocks, three villages were selected from the top, middle, and bottom range of scores. The data collection tool was prepared and tested by the Leher team in one village across each block. The indicators for data collection, as well the data collection tool, also incorporated feedback given by a qualitative research expert who is a member of Leher's governing board. To ensure integrity, data collection and collation was carried out by an external consultant. The data was analyzed by the Leher team according to indicators of: democratic, inclusive, and active participation; clarity of child protection mandate; increasing awareness; changing attitudes and behavior; support to families/children; linkages with formal structures and mechanisms; collaboration between child protection committees and community stakeholders, including children and community members; monitoring; and self-assessment. The respondents included VCPCs, members of the children's groups, and members of the community at large. Outlined below is a collation of the information gathered from the sample villages.

Representative and Participatory VCPCs

One hundred percent of VCPCs are ordinary citizens who do not hold government office in any form. More than 50% of VCPCs have more than one third of members who are ordinary citizens, signifying that VCPC holds the interest of the community and that they see value in it. Seventy-eight percent of VCPCs reach out to the whole of the village, engaging the diverse social groups in the community. Eighty-nine percent of VCPCs take collective responsibility for tasks. All VCPCs meet on a monthly basis.

Table 2

VCPC Understanding of their Child Protection Mandate

Percentage of VCPCs (%)	Understanding of Child Protection Mandate
100	Aware and able to articulate the objectives and scope of work of VCPC, intervened in cases of child marriage, child labor and substance abuse, conducted awareness in the community, approached by the community for assistance, conducted awareness about schemes and entitlements
100	<i>Support to Families:</i> Awareness, counselling parents, children, conversation and dialogue with families, keeping watch over children in the community: home visits, school visits, and in public spaces, assisting families with obtaining entitlements, have information on vulnerable families in the community-- 44per cent VCPC state that procedure is streamlined such that families can obtain entitlements themselves.
67	Approached the formal child protection system
44	Developed relationships with representatives of the formal child protection system.
11	Attempted to understand laws for child protection
0	Have received any training on laws and the child protection system

Child Protection Mandate among VCPCs

VCPCs have understood their mandate and have made many strides in their communities (see Table 2). However, as the work progresses and requires more nuanced technical knowledge, they have needed to link with the formal system at the block and at the district headquarters. VCPCs have asked for help with communication skills such negotiation, using data, making compelling arguments to officers who are overloaded with work or disinterested, and requiring more in-depth understanding of the law.

Synergy with the Formal System

All VCPCs have taken up issues related to social protection entitlements for children with the local administration at the block level. To date, 67% of VCPCs have made referrals to the child protection system. In 56% of the villages with which they have worked, VCPCs have noted that there were risks associated with the reporting of child protection cases—such as fights in the community or personal attacks on child welfare workers. Twenty-two percent of VCPCs have received referrals from the formal child protection system. All VCPCs have members who are part of other development committees; 78% have taken child protection issues forward in those committees, which include women's groups, school management committees, village health and sanitation committees, *anganwadi* centers, and workers' groups.

Working together with Children's Groups

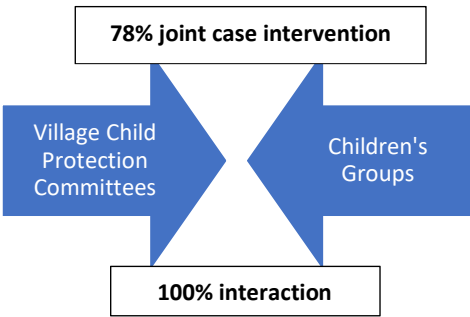
All VCPCs interact with children's groups (see Figure 2). Seventy-eight percent of VCPCs have worked together with children's groups on cases and issues and see value in having children's groups in the village, tackling issues like child marriage, child labor, substance abuse, and problems with school attendance. Children's groups are the eyes and ears of VCPCs; members speak up for their peers and challenge parents on practices that they deem unsafe or unjust. Children's groups themselves have been transformational for children.

Recognition of VCPC from Community at Large

In all villages where data was collected for the assessment, the public at large was found to be aware of VCPCs, recognized that it is the right platform through which to approach children's issues in the village, have approached VCPCs for assistance, and support VCPCs in their work.

Figure 2

Interaction between VCPCs and Children's Groups



Application of Local Wisdom to Find Solutions

From the time their work commenced, VCPCs organically developed their own methods to work through issues. This enabled them to devise strategies that would work best in their own community contexts. The committees identified the methods documented below.

Composition

VCPCs decided the composition of their groups based on what would ensure maximum reach and representation. The program's initial years saw less participation of male members of the communities. Female members noted in hindsight they were glad about this, as it gave them (the women) the opportunity to learn the ropes and gain confidence without male community members present; they now welcome and encourage male membership in the committee. In some villages, the lower castes initially played a more active role, consolidating a space

for themselves and then, later, let the higher castes into the committee. This prevented lower caste members from feeling marginalized at the program's outset.

To ensure that VCPC decision-making is not monopolized by village duty bearers, it was decided after discussion with communities that the secretary of the VCPC must be an ordinary citizen, that the president may be the *mukhya* (the village head man or woman) to ensure support, and that elected representatives take interest in child protection. It was also expected that the *mukhya* would not play a hands-on role considering their many other duties, leaving the VCPCs to function independently.

Gathering Attention and Prominence in the Community

To get noticed and to help the community at large understand their work, VCPCs often hold their meetings in prominent spaces in the community, inviting local people to stand by and observe the discussions. As a pressure tactic in some villages, VCPC members have held meetings in places where adults behaved in a way that could negatively impact children—for example, where adults gambled, smoked, or took drugs; near alcohol or tobacco shops; or even in quiet places in the village where children who absconded from school would gather. VCPCs from different villages have congregated at the block level and have held joint meetings; in a few instances, VCPCs from nearby villages get together to support each other with case interventions. Children's groups from villages that are close to each other have come together to undertake activities such as awareness, recreation programs, and to support each other in case interventions.

Setting Good Examples

VCPC members learned that they had to model good child protection practices themselves, as well, by refraining from marrying off their own

daughters and supporting their children's education. In one community, for example, where parents had been reluctant to send their children to school, a teacher (a VCPC member) made it a practice to walk to school every day with a group of children from that community. This helped the community overcome their inhibitions.

Reporting of Cases

The VCPCs were fearful of disturbing community status quo when cases were reported. If they were unable to deal with a child protection case, they learned that they could anonymously call and report cases on the national child helpline, CHILDLINE 1098, guide the team, provide them with support and information, and ensure the child was rescued without disclosing information to the public. They also learned to use "hot and cold" tactics with parents in the community, combining dialogue and cajoling with some measure of creating fear of law when speaking to parents they sensed were bring irresponsible or negligent.

Learning, Discussion, and Questions for the Future

Community-led child protection programs are open; accept the socio-cultural and economic realities of the communities they serve; and trust community members to determine their starting points, ask questions, and find their change levers. Yet, as demonstrated by the Madhubani field study, once the switch turns on, attitudes and behaviors start to change and the community transforms. Change occurs in ways that perhaps cannot be predicted or imagined in simple terms.

When a critical mass of communities seek protection for their children, will the issue become one of significance to those who plan and invest national resources in community-led, preventive child protection? There is a need to break out of the chicken-or-the-egg cycle,

instead finding ways to create good practice and getting the attention of community planners. The discussions below are based on the experience of the field site in Madhubani and observation of context in India. The points made are geared toward strengthening the discourse on community-led child protection mechanisms.

The Case for Promoting Community-led Child Protection in the Continuum of Child Welfare

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes family as the fundamental, natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members—particularly children (United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, 1990). It states that in order to achieve and sustain well-being, children should grow up in a family environment with an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding. The UN Guidelines on Alternative Care promotes parental care, asks for family-oriented policies designed to promote and strengthen parents' ability to care for their children (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). Its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.2 targets ending all forms of abuse, exploitation, trafficking, torture, and violence against children (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Statistical Division, 2020).

Societies are not homogenous and function differently. Families are part of an ecosystem of wider networks: the extended family, the neighborhood, duty bearers, elected representatives, public services, and public spaces. For families to be able to hold and nurture their children, there is need for collaboration across the ecosystem. Communities are both physical spaces and people with the intrinsic ability to support each other through transformational shifts in thought, behavior, and practice.

Where the state is constrained in reaching communities due to large populations, resource scarcity, and other factors, people can collaborate to strengthen community-based services for the welfare and protection

of children and families; step up as first responders to child protection violations; and link families to the formal child protection system. Communities have great potential to be gatekeepers for children.

Articulating of strong calls in global and national guidance to governments in favor of support and investment in bottom-up community led child protection mechanisms as part of the continuum of child care would advance the fulfillment of provisions of the CRC and the UN guidelines on Alternative Care, and also strengthen the achievement of the SDGs.

Facilitation of Community-led Child Protection Process

The role of facilitators (such as civil society organizations who chose to do this work in communities, or District Child Protection Units⁶ who are mandated by the Integrated Child Protection scheme of the Government of India), is to stand alongside the community, learn with them, provide information, make gentle suggestions about finding solutions, ask questions, and discuss issues. Helping groups come together in a participatory and inclusive manner, sharing rights-based perspectives, and imparting skills to negotiate on behalf of children are some required inputs to be made by facilitators. Facilitation must be guided primarily by the understanding of child protection and the law, presenting communities with options, encouraging them to set their own pace, and helping them carry their work through to the last mile.

Design development to bring initiatives like the one in Madhubani to scale must recognize communities (adults, children, youth) as the protagonists who provide communities with “light-touch” inputs that leave them in control. Knowledge tools; use of audio-visual

⁶ District Child Protection Units (DCPUs) are district-level units mandated to coordinate all child protection services and activities under the Juvenile Justice Care and Protection Act, 2015. Further the Integrated Child Protection Scheme mandates the establishment of Village Level Child Protection Committees and the DCPU with the role of coordinating them.

interactive technology solutions, the Internet, and smartphones; or do-it-yourself (DIY) toolkits could help fill in some of the resources that governments struggle to provide for child protection (Better Care Network, 2019). These tools could help establish good precedence of work and provide evidence to inform advocacy efforts for community-led processes.

Youth who are regular users of digital technology can play a key role as facilitators of community-led child protection, as well. Organizations and individuals with relevant experience can work in collaboration with these youth to create and disseminate the knowledge tools and build capacities. Facilitation of community-led processes is necessary, must be continuous, and requires investment from governments and civil society.

Balancing Strength and Risk in Community-led Child Protection Mechanisms

The voluntary nature of community-led child protection mechanisms allows for them to be innovative, find their own means, set and move their own goalposts, and develop their own child protection narratives. At the same time, informality can carry risk—community backlash fueled by local politics, failure to report and address cases, making decisions that are not in the interest of children, or personal attacks to individuals. It may not be possible to define a threshold or protocol for taking stands on issues or escalation of matters to the formal child protection system, but with appropriate guidance, communities themselves are able to address issues, and take decisions in the best interests of children. While weighing risks and benefits of community-led child protection mechanisms, it is important to bear in mind that in many communities, there is a good chance that issues were never addressed with focus before—or never escalated to

the formal child protection system—prior to the community coming together for child protection.

Measuring Change

In looking to measure progress and change, perhaps the question to ask is: What do communities need to evaluate their progress and change? There is need for them to generate real-time data to manage themselves on a routine basis—akin to a Management Information System (MIS)—constructed in a manner that is of use to them. Communities require a measuring mechanism that places them at the center and helps them track their journeys, with an almost instant turn around of feedback, to enable the information to be of relevance and use to them. Standard quantitative indicators may not always be the right fit for communities. The need of agencies external to communities who govern, support, or fund this work cannot be the primary need. Typical top-down approaches to measuring change need to be set aside for community led child protection processes.

Sustainability in Relation to Community-led Child Protection

When children receive protection and a safe environment in which to grow and develop, their lives are impacted positively; this carries into adulthood and further into generations, and uplifts communities. Can community led child protection mechanisms be consistently high paced? Not likely. Like all people centered processes, there will be crests and troughs, in need of injections of energy from time to time. It is critical to accept this to help community led child protection/VCPC grow into viable, vibrant spaces in the community that link to the formal child protection system.

Strengthening Effective Community-led Child Protection Efforts

As described in the case of Madhubani, when communities organize themselves and take their issues forward at higher levels of governance, they can face resistance. Often, the system itself is unable to help them.

To combat this, countries should create their own narrative for community-led child protection. This narrative must shift toward building conversations about enabling community-led child protection mechanisms, transforming the environment for children, and bringing focus on collaborations between government and civil society so that community groups can be recognized and supported by the formal child protection system.

Before, my parents would not let me go anywhere other than school. Today, my friends and I can access every single inch of our village. Our parents listen to us. They will let me study [for as long as] I decide.

—A member of the children's group, Village H, Madhubani

Before, I would never leave my village. Now I go with myself to the block. I will cross seven seas for this work. There is no looking back.

—A mother who is a member of VCPC, Village S, Madhubani

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