

A system that protects children: Connecting the dots on child protection



PHOTO BY ANTONIO KASOTE FOR SAVE THE CHILDREN

Case Managers accompany a family to present a child rights violation situation to the Village Headman.

“It takes a committee like ours to be there to guide people on what is right and wrong.”

—OVC Committee members, Jumbe village, Kachenga, Balaka district

Now we can tackle the tough issues!

Strengthened response capability, community-wide sensitization and engagement of Traditional Leaders has helped communities recognize some traditional practices are damaging to a child’s development and now increasingly recognized as illegal. Common infractions now resolved at the community level include:

- Beating and corporal punishment
- Failure to send children to school
- Denial of food or shelter as a disciplinary measure
- Coercing or condoning early marriage
- Traditional initiation rituals for boys and girls
- Property grabbing
- Emotional abuse, shouting, or use of demeaning language
- Excessive child workloads

We now have a system that protects children and we know that it works

To tackle this, the USAID and PEPFAR-funded IMPACT program mounted a multi-pronged, layered approach to create a protective net for vulnerable children across the nine districts it supports, beginning with forming or re-vitalizing 604 Village and Group Village level OVC committees, each with a cadre of trained family care volunteers from the community. OVC Committee members, elected by their respective villages, are trained and equipped with the Child Care, Protection and Justice Act of 2010 and responsible for coordinating support for children within their communities. Representatives from village-level OVC committees form

“OVC Committees are becoming structures that the communities believe in and respect. Even though they are volunteers, they are not afraid to tackle the tough issues they come across.”

—Confidence Mkungula
OVC Supervisor, World Vision International

“The OVC Committees really know what to do and where to refer issues, making it easy for me to attend to cases in time. I know what is happening in communities very easily.”

—Sam Thom,
Government of Malawi
Community Child Protection Worker, Chikwawa district

an OVC Committee at Group Village Headman level, facilitating access to a higher level of local law enforcement.

From the outset, IMPACT OVC Committees intentionally work hand-in-hand with Traditional Leaders to combine both traditional and governmental legal frameworks to create a cohesive protective community. With technical support from IMPACT partners, OVC committees conducted a series of sensitizations and dialogue meetings with Traditional Leaders who became increasingly aware of the need for change. As a result, OVC Committees became a regular fixture at community meetings where, sanctioned by the Traditional Leader, they tackle sensitive topics with authority and credibility. There is a growing expectation within communities that child rights abuses should be reported to the Committee.

With IMPACT support:

- **604 OVC Committees have been established or revitalized in nine districts**
- **7,552 community members and government extension workers have been trained on Child Protection; 3,772 of them have been trained on Child Protection Case Management, using GoM materials and trainers**
- **OVC committee members and family care volunteers have spoken with 40,278 adults and children about the legal framework for child protection and/or where to find services**
- **12,710 adults and children have been reached with one-on-one counseling and support**

Family care volunteers monitor and support OVC households

Acting as the eyes and ears of the committee are the ‘family care volunteers’ (FCVs). This innovative approach is an adaptation of the health sector’s successful outreach strategy, the Care Group model¹. Each of IMPACT’s 7,330 FCVs² is responsible for monitoring the wellbeing of 15 OVC households (Figure 1)³, making regular home visits and, twice yearly, applying the Child Status Index (CSI) tool to conduct structured assessments of child well-being. FCVs identify cases of abuse, offer counseling and encouragement, and initiate referrals for cases they can’t resolve themselves. Importantly, in many cases, parents and caregivers were not aware that certain practices were considered abusive but skilled FCVs were able to present information and solutions that helped change behaviors and reduce family conflict. With OVC committee members, FCVs also implemented community-wide sensitization campaigns on children’s rights and the responsibilities of parents and guardians.

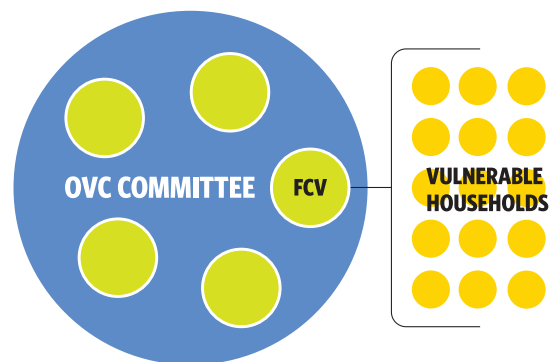


Figure 1: Family Care Volunteers are each assigned 15 OVC households

¹ In the health sector, a Care Group is a group of 10–15 volunteer, community-based health educators who conduct regular home visits to do health promotion with their assigned cluster of mothers with young children.

² IMPACT program monitoring data, April 2013.

³ The Family Care Volunteer model, while similar to the Care Group Model, does not cover all households in a geographical area but rather, provides services to targeted vulnerable OVC households only.

“I appreciate the role that the IMPACT program has played in issues of child protection and case management in my community... Given the capacity this community has gained, there is no way such work will ever stop.”

—Asibu Boniface Bwanali
Village Headman, Chowe village, Machinga district

Supporting the government’s Child Protection Case Management strategy

IMPACT worked to strengthen case management at district level providing Child Protection Case Management training for district stakeholders in seven districts. Government of Malawi (GoM) materials were used and trained GoM staff provided skilled facilitation. Participants were drawn from the departments of education, police, judiciary and Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare (MoGCSW), as well as NGOs and other relevant stakeholders. Where these stakeholders were once operating in isolation, they now form a pool of trained, committed and accountable Case Managers who meet regularly, conduct joint supervision and ensure support and consistency of approach on each case until it is concluded (Figure 2). While FCVs and OVC committees handle many of the cases within their own communities, more complex cases are handled by the traditional courts or referred to the district case management team.

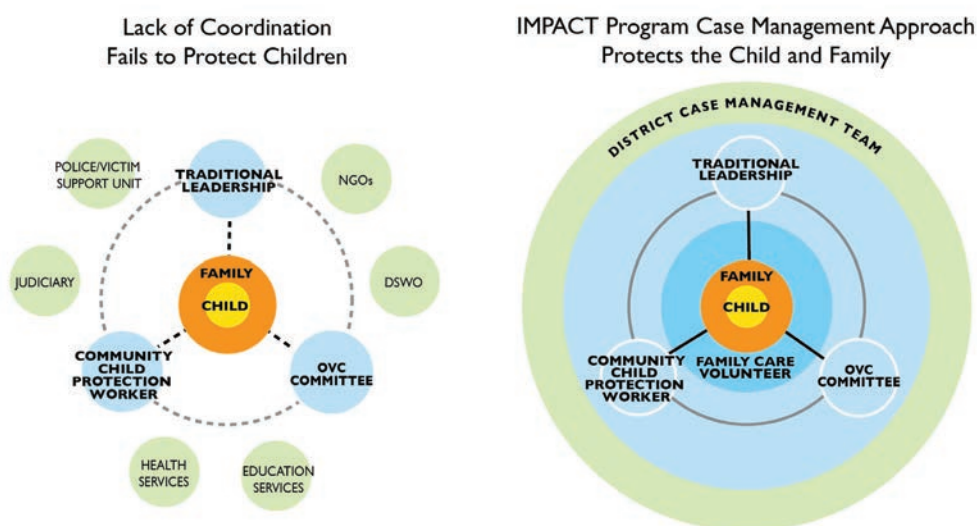


Figure 2: IMPACT has shaped a fragmented collection of stakeholders into a unified circle of trained, committed and accountable Case Managers

Implementation challenges

Some child rights principles conflict with cultural norms

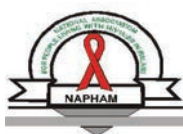
While Traditional Leaders are generally supportive, many must also observe cultural values and practices that have long governed the communities they serve. Not surprisingly, some leaders needed time to process and absorb the proposed changes, thus occasionally causing periods of disengagement.

Weaknesses on the receiving end of the referral process

Unfortunately, IMPACT noted several instances where OVC Committees referred children for services, but the receiving agency was poorly trained or resourced and cases were dropped.

Bottlenecks in the judiciary are difficult to navigate

IMPACT kick-started progressive changes at local level but encountered frustrating bottlenecks in the formal judicial system. IMPACT partners recorded the formal reporting of 538 serious cases but many remain stalled at magistrate level.



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Tips for implementation

Engage Traditional Leaders early and often

Traditional Leaders, with training and support, are very effective at both preventing and resolving child rights infractions in their jurisdiction, reducing the burden on the government services. However, they will encounter issues that have the potential for significant conflict within the community. Traditional Leaders need time, ongoing sensitization and support from their peers to process new ‘truths’ as they tackle child protection’s thorny contextual issues. It might be helpful to start with less-controversial issues, such as access to education, and build on small successes over time.

Build the capacity of OVC Committees

Where child rights are embedded in legislation, in-depth familiarity with the relevant statutes builds confidence and underpins consistent, credible interventions. Information sharing and learning visits between OVC Committees should be supported. Each committee needs an experienced point person at district level to ensure that volunteers can be debriefed regularly and questions answered.

Standardize data collection and reporting systems

Committee members should be trained to collect program data in line with government guidelines. The number of active, trained OVC Committees, number of reported cases and number of referrals are the three indicators that should be collected and monitored when working with OVC Committees.

Map, evaluate and—where possible—improve the capacity of referral points

Effective child protection requires a systemic approach which draws on the skills and authorities of multiple players. Be opportunistic and proactive in incorporating stakeholders to continue the institutional strengthening of receiving agencies in the referral system. Include stakeholders in trainings and technical discussions and expect performance improvements. Select specific agencies, key staff or change agents for exposure to issues and strategic engagement in learning activities (study tours, program planning meetings, advocacy events, trainings and documentation exercises).

Sustainability

Communities in the IMPACT catchment areas are now more knowledgeable about what constitutes abuse. FCV and OVC Committee members are volunteers and give their time to the community with no incentive from IMPACT apart from initial training. They are personally committed to the work they do, and proud of the success and respect they have earned in their communities. Through their relationships with the traditional leadership and the MoGCSW community child protection worker, FCVs and OVC Committee members are able to manage and refer cases of child rights infringements and abuse. These mechanisms are part of a government system which previously existed only on paper; now these mechanisms exist in practice!

This publication made possible by the generous support of the American people through USAID.

Integrated (HIV Effect) Mitigation and Positive Action for Community Transformation

(IMPACT) is a four-year USAID-supported Global Development Alliance program that aims to improve the quality of life for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and people living with HIV (PLHIV). As lead agency of the IMPACT Program, Catholic Relief Services brings together twelve consortium partners to expand service access and relevance in partnership with the Government of Malawi.

Catholic Relief Services – Malawi

For more information about IMPACT’s work, email:

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