

PROTECTING CHILDREN WHERE IT MATTERS MOST: IN THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS

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University of the Western Cape

ABSTRACT

Globally, there has been a growing tendency to make civil society the primary participant and beneficiary of community-based intervention. In South Africa, since the publication of the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997), with its emphasis on developmental social welfare services, many social welfare agencies have been recognising the benefits of working in partnership with local communities. In the field of child protection, it has long been recognised and accepted that formal child and family welfare services will never be able to respond adequately to the increasing number and diverse range of child protection issues and challenges presenting in communities on a daily basis. The Child and Youth Research and Training Programme (CYRTP) (previously the Institute for Child and Family Development) at the University of the Western Cape has introduced a neighbourhood-based child protection approach¹ in a number of neighbourhoods around the country. This approach is aimed at building stronger families and communities to safeguard children. Important lessons are emerging from the implementing neighbourhoods. The aim of this article is to report on these experiences and to share some of the lessons learnt.

INTRODUCTION

During the many years of training child protection workers, the CYRTP became increasingly concerned about the rise in the numbers of children entering the formal child protection system. Following consultations with colleagues in the field of child protection, the idea of neighbourhood-based child protection emerged as a strategy to reach children before they become part of the formal child protection system. The strategy involves working directly with families and residents in local communities to strengthen their capacity to look out for their children and simultaneously establishing child protection within neighbourhoods as the norm. However, it became clear that unless the residents living in these neighbourhoods share the same vision and want to do something about protecting children themselves in ways that work for them, the initiative would not succeed.

Adopting a strengths-based approach, CYRTP believes that most communities want their children to live in safe neighbourhoods, and that they have the capacity and the right to seek appropriate solutions to their social concerns themselves (Mazibuko, 1996; Mbatha, 1998; September, Beerwinkel & Jacobson, 2000). The work in neighbourhoods is informed by both the theoretical underpinnings and practical outcomes of the discipline of community development. Graham (1999:23) describes community development as follows:

"Community development...is a way of working which is informed by certain principles which seek to encourage communities...to tackle for themselves the problems which they

¹ The concept of neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives is used here to refer to the activities of mobilised citizens that aim to strengthen families and communities in order to safeguard children where they live.

face and identify to be important, and which aim to empower them to change things by developing their own skills, knowledge and experience and also by working in partnership with other groups and with statutory agencies. The way in which such change is achieved is crucial and so both the task and the process are important."

The use of a community development approach to effect social change is not new. Over the last decade community development has permeated the language and practice of almost all human and social science disciplines, including social work, psychology, health and development. An overview of historic and current practices suggests that the field is growing in both its theoretical discourse and its practice base (McShane & O'Neill, 1999). There seems to be a growing consensus that community-level development is an effective way of sustaining and promoting the role of civil society groups and organisations. The grounding element of such community-based interventions seems to be the mobilisation of local residents (who are also the main beneficiaries) to participate directly in the identification, analysis, assessment and action components of development initiatives.

A RATIONALE FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD-BASED CHILD PROTECTION

Communities with a high prevalence of crime, unemployment and socio-economic problems are often perceived as deviant and dangerous. People living in these communities are consequently viewed as dysfunctional and helpless with nothing positive to offer. Unfortunately many residents in these communities at times think of themselves and their neighbours as fundamentally deficient or as victims who are incapable of taking charge of their own lives and the future of their communities. There is, however, obvious evidence, especially among black South Africans, that living in poor neighbourhoods does not necessarily lead to a lifetime of poverty. Many South Africans have successfully transcended the cycle of poverty, despite the poor conditions of their neighbourhoods.

The positive contributions and remarkable resilience of communities have historically not been acknowledged. This is particularly the case with regard to helping and help-seeking behaviour patterns in communities. Drawing from South Africa's strong history of social and political mobilisation (popularly referred to as 'the struggle') for the common good, the post-apartheid government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and the African Renaissance project have both reintroduced the value of 'Ubuntu', a word borrowed from the Xhosa language which in its broadest sense can be translated as inspiring mutual caring and connectedness. The important role of civil society has also been emphasised through the concept of participatory citizenship, which involves ordinary citizens and local communities taking charge of their own affairs. This 'connectedness' enhances social capital and includes a range of ideas, institutions and social arrangements through which people can find their voice, express themselves and mobilise private energies for public. O'Neill and Douglas (1999) suggest that community work, through processes such as community development, community education and community planning, can assist to promote the goals of social democracy and participatory citizenship, which will ultimately lead to social change. Green & Nieman (2003:178) have similarly concluded that participatory community development contributes to a number of successful outcomes, for example, that training and development make a difference in the experiences of participants and that belonging to groups contributes to support and learning. Gathiram (2003:45) argues that life skills development as a strategy for achieving equity and social justice is appropriate provided that quality training is accepted as part of empowerment.

The neighbourhood-based child protection approach deviates from interventionist and policing approaches to child protection which are firmly embedded in a deficit approach to families who

experience difficulties. In contrast, it is based on the recognition of community assets and capacities, and the importance of mobilising these resources and capacities to develop strategies to better protect and safeguard children where they live. Community mobilisation is therefore used as a primary strategy to protect children in their home communities. Community mobilisation can be defined as a process of raising awareness or consciousness among people of diverse cultural backgrounds so that they can organise themselves to take collective action around common problems (Taylor, 1997:23). In the neighbourhood-based approach to child protection, the capacities of local residents and organisations are mobilised for a common goal – the protection of children.

Whilst the government has the final responsibility to intervene in instances of child abuse, neglect and exploitation, it is generally accepted that government alone cannot protect children. Most children are abused in or around the neighbourhoods in which they live. Neighbourhood-based child protection is based on the premise that raising awareness can facilitate open conversation about child abuse and exploitation and therefore "break the silence" and reduce isolation. This is a critical element in the prevention of child abuse. Morrison, Howard, Johnson, Navarro, Plachetka, and Bell (1997:2) believe that connectedness between people in neighbourhoods should be encouraged and promoted so that the "silence" and isolation of individuals, which function to tolerate and sustain neighbourhood problems and sabotage mobilisation efforts, are curtailed. Connectedness also implies strong linkages between neighbourhood groups and formal service providers in ways that facilitate access to help when it is needed.

Neighbourhood-based child protection is particularly powerful in facilitating the rebuilding of community structures and services to become more responsive and appropriate to the needs of the people. In the Western Cape, for example, neighbourhood child protection initiatives stimulated the establishment of after-hours child protection facilities in communities. This was driven by the fact that social work offices close after 4pm, even though communities still need help after this time. In this regard, agencies and individual service providers were challenged to work closer together and with the local neighbourhood groups.

Neighbourhood child protection initiatives work better if they are part of a comprehensive approach to community development. This involves the development of collaborative partnerships between local structures, service providers, primary institutions, and ordinary citizens around a plan to promote the overall well-being of children and families. A comprehensive community-based development approach recognises the interaction between social, political and economic development and individual and family circumstances at neighbourhood level. Kubisch, Weiss, Schorr and Connell (1995:1) suggest that comprehensive community initiatives may contain several elements and that the aim is to achieve synergy between them. For example, the individual elements in the expansion and improvement of social welfare services and support such as child care, youth development and family support may include mental health care, economic development, housing, community planning and organising, adult education, job training, and quality of life activities such as neighbourhood safety and recreational programmes.

However, it must be recognised that the needs and circumstances of people vary and interrelate at neighbourhood level. Any effective attempt to address these needs must therefore take into account the whole range of issues and circumstances in a neighbourhood and should be framed in a comprehensive and integrated way (Chaskin, Joseph & Chipenda-Dansokho, 1997). While child abuse occurs in all communities, it is recognised that children who grow up in poverty, overcrowded homes and unsafe neighbourhoods are at greater risk. An integrated development approach acknowledges these connections and purposefully includes them on its agenda.

Globally, there has been a large number of comprehensive and integrated community-based initiatives that have incorporated development strategies to maximise the effects of resources and the extent of neighbourhood change (Chaskin *et al.*, 1997). Over the years this has led to the inclusion in the community development lexicon of terms that define integrated community development initiatives. The term 'integrated development' brings together the insights of the last decade about the importance of people-centredness, human rights, social justice, equity and sustainable development. It recognises the importance of ensuring meaningful participation in economic production, realising a political voice and attaining self-actualisation. In many neighbourhoods issues of exclusion, child abuse, domestic violence, poor services and economic crisis are at the heart of the work that needs to be done. Community mobilisation is therefore often about shifting power relations and reinforcing or strengthening the values and practice of democracy, human rights and equity.

Integrated development also emphasises locally specific development needs and the interests of the beneficiaries as a starting point for intervention. Fowler (2000) reminds us that appropriate development must be based on an understanding of the social structures that give meaning to people's lives and expression to their interests, beliefs, status, rights, obligations and aspirations. Community development activities can only be sustained if the beneficiaries are also included as the main actors. The neighbourhood-based child protection programme targets residents and builds their capacities to safeguard children. Buckland (1998) in Gathiram (2003:41) suggests that the building of the political and social capital of grassroots groups will significantly improve the sustainability of the impact of community-based initiatives.

Community-based child protection efforts are especially enhanced if there is a strong presence of multiple helpers within communities to support and strengthen grassroots mobilisation, organisation and processes of capacity development and empowerment. A range of diverse skills and creativity are necessary to identify and apply appropriate interventions. There is clearly a fine balance between the argument that the 'poor themselves', whether urban or rural based, must take responsibility for their own development and the recognition that government and civil society has certain obligations in respect of enabling, supporting, providing and securing equality and social justice. Mulroy and Shay (1997:132) argue that there are limitations to neighbourhood initiatives in that it "... has to be supported in the context of an understanding that poor, isolated neighbourhoods cannot be transformed, nor the life chances of their residents significantly improved, by focusing reform just within the neighbourhood itself". There must therefore be a balance between mobilising and supporting the strengths of the communities themselves and mobilising external resources including those from government departments and the private sector. While neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives would be strengthened by a comprehensive integrated development plan, they are not dependent on one. Rather, to work effectively, such initiatives are dependent on and require dedicated and committed leaders, individuals and groups.

It is also important to recognise that neighbourhood-based development initiatives are not a panacea. Chaskin *et al.* (1997) identified three reasons why it has been difficult to sustain the integration of strategies and activities in communities and why over time the focus seems to shift to parallel provision of services and away from the integration of strategies. Firstly, it is very difficult and time-consuming to reach consensus on the meaning of comprehensive development and how to implement it. Secondly, operational barriers such as time, resources and organisational structure inhibit the development of integrated programmes. Thirdly, competing motivating factors which influence collaborative activity and decision making may interfere with the integration of projects. Ntsime (2001) in Gathiram (2003) argues that given the legacy of apartheid and people's

real experiences of exclusion, it will take time and money to achieve the ideals of civil participation.

IMPLEMENTING NEIGHBOURHOOD-BASED CHILD PROTECTION

The neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives were established at three sites in the Western Cape in 1999 and were the focus of a research project by the Institute for Child and Family Development (now the CYRTP). Using a qualitative research design and methodology, in particular intervention research (Rothman & Thomas, 1994), the study had the following key objectives:

- to engage with residents in three neighbourhoods in order to study their natural responses to child abuse and exploitation
- to engage with the three neighbourhoods to study the existing roles of and relationships between formal and informal service providers or helpers
- to engage with the three neighbourhoods in developing guidelines for neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives.

The outcomes of the study strongly supported the view that neighbourhoods have an important role with regard to the protection of children (September *et al.*, 2000). It found that although poverty and unemployment were rife, residents were eager to get involved and to improve their neighbourhoods to better protect children. Residents in all three sites were able to organise themselves into action groups which later became local child protection forums. The activities that the forums/neighbourhood sites engaged in ranged from cleaning up community sites, supporting children and families through formal child protective processes involving social workers and the courts, engaging with residents and the police to close shebeens, and establishing temporary care and safety homes. The groups also spontaneously started to request training and support in a number of related areas, for example child abuse, parenting and HIV/AIDS.

The study also found that in most neighbourhoods there existed some form of helping network. These 'natural helpers' are people who without prompting provide support to others. They do not only help friends, family members and neighbours, but may also provide assistance across the community to people with whom they have had no prior relationship. They may have a special concern or an altruistic desire to help or support others, they may have some special skills, they may be very resourceful, or they may have a strong conviction regarding people's obligations and responsibilities as part of a community. The subsequent interventions included the identification, support and training of these 'natural helpers' as a key strategy for community-based child protection (September *et al.*, 2000). This study concluded with a list of practical guidelines for neighbourhood-based child protection.

Between 2000 and 2002 the Department of Social Services in the Western Cape introduced the neighbourhood-based child protection approach in 14 neighbourhoods in the province. Several important lessons from these experiences were recorded. In 2003 the CYRTP received funding from a donor to implement the programme in other provinces, with a specific focus on developing an integrated neighbourhood-based response to child protection including programmes focusing on HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB). The methodology included three distinct phases. Firstly, a national five-day capacity development and training workshop was conducted to introduce the concept to 70 social workers representing the nine provinces. The social workers were selected on the basis that they were responsible for child protection services in the districts where they worked and that they would be the 'facilitators and the support system' for the neighbourhood-based

groups. Secondly, provincial capacity development and training workshops lasting between three and five days were conducted. These workshops were arranged by the social workers who attended the national training workshop and the residents from five selected local areas in each province. Thirdly, following the workshops, neighbourhood-based child protection sites/groups were started in a number of selected local areas. Follow-up visits to all the implementing sites took place after their establishment, and ongoing contact is maintained with the social workers who work with the neighbourhood sites.

LESSONS FROM NEIGHBOURHOOD-BASED CHILD PROTECTION SITES

Planning before implementation

Neighbourhood work requires a deep understanding of and insight into the dynamics of implementing neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives. Ongoing critical reflection on the political, socio-economic and cultural aspects of the project is imperative. Insights and observations must be shared with trusted insiders and the lessons learnt should be incorporated into the process.

It is never a good idea to rush into communities without a trusted ally. It is also always more effective in the long run to start small and to go at the pace of the community. Residents must be given the time and space to articulate their understanding of what the issues are, which solutions will work and how they will work. Their own insight, attitude, needs and capacities will determine the extent of their ownership and the sustainability of the project. The locus of planning and decision making must be with the neighbourhoods themselves.

Ensuring the involvement of all relevant structures, groups and individuals

Involving and engaging all the relevant groups, organisations and individuals from the beginning will strengthen the basis of subsequent activities. It may also be necessary to use specific strategies to involve and sustain the participation of key community players, especially gatekeepers, from the outset. This is usually time-consuming, but critical. It must also be recognised that in some communities only small groups of people may be interested in participating in neighbourhood-based initiatives. The idea is to start with those who are willing and able to participate. Key aspects of this process are that it involves working on relationships in a focused way and that it can seldom be considered to be complete.

The relationship between formal and informal service providers

Neighbourhoods and communities cannot function in isolation. They need support and resources. This was clearly demonstrated in those neighbourhood sites where residents had a genuine commitment to ensuring safer neighbourhoods for their children but lacked the resources or support to achieve this. In this regard, the commitment and involvement of provincial departments of social development² and local municipalities is an important sustainability strategy.

2. Responsibility for social development falls under an array of different departments in the nine provinces in South Africa. In the Free State, Eastern Cape, Gauteng, North West and Northern Cape separate Departments of Social Development have been established. In Mpumalanga, responsibility for social development lies with the Department of Health and Social Services, and in Limpopo with the Department of Health and Welfare. In KwaZulu-Natal the function is housed in the Department of Social Services and Population Development, and in the Western Cape with Social Services and Poverty Alleviation. For the purpose of this article these departments are collectively referred to as provincial departments of social development.

The involvement of formal service providers must be carefully managed in order to ensure constructive collaboration between and synergy of objectives and expected outcomes. Competing motivations of the various role players could have a negative influence on collaborative activity and decision making.

During the establishment phase of the neighbourhood sites in the respective provinces, social workers from mainly the provincial departments of social development facilitated logistical arrangements such as finding a venue, arranging refreshments and setting the agenda. Later, most of these activities were taken over by the community groups themselves. In addition, formal service providers (social workers, nurses, religious leaders and others) initially played an important role in facilitating and servicing the educational and information needs of the groups. However, in most of the sites the groups now perform some of these tasks themselves, for example disseminating information about access to child support grants.

Coordination of services at a local level

The services of the various service providers are fragmented and seldom coordinated on a local and neighbourhood level, leading to duplication and overlap of resources and services. For example, in many instances non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) operating in the same communities and providing services that are similar in scope and content are not aware of each other.

The residents involved in the neighbourhood sites felt that they needed to have a clearer understanding of the work of formal service providers in order to better use them and access their services. They also felt that this knowledge would help them to strengthen relationships with the service providers in the interests of working closer together on the ground. Residents were of the opinion that formal service providers seemed mainly to focus on statutory work and therefore did not always have the time to establish and sustain community-level initiatives. Notwithstanding these observations, most of the neighbourhood sites show growing evidence of good working relationships between community groups and formal service providers.

To ensure optimal coordination of services, one of the most important elements in the planning and implementation of neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives is the establishment of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of formal service providers. In addition, it is especially important to provide clear guidelines with regard to the extent and boundaries of the roles and functions of volunteers and informal helpers.

Training and capacity building

It is essential that the neighbourhood-based child protection groups are equipped with adequate and appropriate skills and competencies to respond to the issues they have identified in ways that can work for them. However, ongoing training and capacity building programmes for volunteers and residents are also a necessary vehicle for positive feedback and for gaining a sense that they are being valued and supported.

In all the sites residents requested information on a variety of topics including child abuse, parenting, HIV/AIDS, TB, sexuality, gender roles, communication with schools, starting up and sustaining projects, social pensions and grants, and counselling. The project team dealt with these requests by either referring the groups to appropriate service providers or providing the training themselves. All the training was done in workshops using an informal, participatory design.

HIV/AIDS and its impact on communities

The HIV/AIDS epidemic was a sensitive issue in most of the communities in which neighbourhood-based initiatives were established. It is evident at a community level that there is an increase in the number of people infected with the disease. Although there are several interventions in affected communities, there appears to be a fundamental need to address the awareness and educational needs of communities in a more coherent manner. Such a coherent strategy will go a long way in curbing the prevailing stigmatisation which still limits efforts to help and support affected families.

It was important for the neighbourhood child protection groups to discuss the issue of HIV/AIDS, especially in respect of their capacity to respond to the every-day needs of those infected and affected by the disease. The neighbourhood sites provided a platform where ordinary members of the community could speak out on HIV/AIDS and how it affected them and their communities. There were times during the workshops when people infected with the disease disclosed their status. This may have been because they felt they were among people who genuinely cared for them or because the workshops provided them with their first opportunity openly to talk about the disease.

Residents debated at length how they could address the impact of the disease. They raised a number of issues including payment for the work done in caring for sick people, the need for ongoing and relevant training and the time and commitment that it takes to do this, the need to know who is already doing what in order to coordinate interventions, and the need for financial sustainability with regard to the requirements of infected individuals and affected households. In most of the sites the residents felt strongly that there is far too little focus on prevention, especially when it comes to working directly with children and youth. In general, most people felt that they could not take on added responsibilities that had financial implications.

Sensitivity to the political and cultural dynamics of communities

The importance of understanding the political and cultural context of communities was a primary focus of all the neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives, and a significant amount of time was spent grappling with this issue. The groups identified the need for skills training in addressing cultural and political issues including dealing with politicians, traditional leaders and traditional healers. There was also a great sensitivity regarding the importance of consultations with traditional leaders.

Acknowledging and dealing with political suspicion

Community development initiatives often raise political suspicion among various groups. Such groups may argue that community development is used as a vehicle for a hidden radical agenda, to placate communities, or as a subtle means of social control. Community development could also be interpreted as the promotion of cheaper services to communities, leading to the dilution of the state's obligation to provide basic services. The encouragement of community participation in the context of limited resources can also be seen as 'window dressing' or even as setting communities up to 'fail'. For these reasons, the motivation and agendas of all the role players must be critically and continuously assessed to ensure that the interests of residents remain the focal point of neighbourhood-based initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mobilising and strengthening families and communities to protect children is a sensible thing to do. A number of factors should be considered, including the following:

- Mobilising and strengthening families and communities should become an explicit, collaborative child protection strategy executed by both government and civil society.
- Neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives work best if they are supported by strong political leadership with the will to invest in them.
- Neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives are best sustained if specific individuals are assigned responsibility for their implementation and development.
- Neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives work best if they are included in the business plans of the formal service sector and are supported by adequate financial resources. Such budgets should include:
 - support for community events
 - capacity development and training of volunteers.
- Neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives work best if the efforts of residents are supported by the resources of formal service providers. Such support should include:
 - transportation for participants who cannot get themselves to and from meeting venues
 - refreshments for meetings.
- Neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives are enhanced if the efforts of the residents are visibly promoted. Good advocacy, and promotional and workshop materials are therefore important tools.
- Neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives often involve more structured interventions such as safe-house parents, emergency homes, after-hours child protection centres and after-school programmes. These special projects must be incorporated into formal service plans, business plans and budgets.
- The provincial departments of social development and the social workers/officers in local governments must work with local municipalities to ensure that neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives are incorporated into the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) of the municipalities.
- Integrating and linking neighbourhood projects to existing community-based projects is essential to avoid unnecessary overlap and competition.
- Faith-based organisations are a key resource in initiating and sustaining neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives.
- Involving children and young people directly in the projects is essential. Special focus must be placed on projects that they can drive and own.
- Developing good relationships with the business sector is essential. Specific meetings must be held on an ongoing basis to inform this sector about the goals and successes of the project. The business sector should not only be approached when donations are needed.

- A specific advocacy, media and communications strategy must form part of every action plan. This entails the development of good relationships with specific journalists from both the print and radio media. The advocacy programme must include at least three major events per year, which are jointly owned and organised by all service providers and communities. Visibility is key to neighbourhood-based child protection work.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to establish a conceptual and practice-based context for neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives, it seems appropriate to place these initiatives within the framework of community-based development. In general, the lessons learnt from the neighbourhood-based child protection initiatives indicate that such an integrated approach seems to be successful in a number of communities. However, no evaluation or impact study of these initiatives has yet been done, and the lessons discussed here are those that have been directly reported by the implementing sites. Based on this experience though, it seems reasonable to conclude that community-based child protection initiatives work well if they:

- are integrated with other existing social welfare and development initiatives
- are tailored to the individual neighbourhoods involved and are focused on a local area of manageable size
- begin not only with the needs of neighbourhoods but also with an inventory of their assets and resources
- involve residents and other local stakeholders directly and centrally in setting goals and priorities and shaping plans to address them.

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