



Promoting synergies between child protection and social protection in West and Central Africa

At the core of social protection is the reduction of vulnerability and risk. It is increasingly recognised that social protection policy frameworks and programmes need to be informed by the diversity of vulnerabilities and risks at different stages of the lifecycle (see Box 1). One area that has been relatively neglected in social protection strategies and policy frameworks is the need to address children's vulnerability to the risks of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. However, evidence from children themselves highlights that they regard such violations of their protection rights as among the most serious of all the problems they face¹.

This policy brief focuses on child vulnerability to the risks of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect in West and Central Africa, the underlying causes of these problems and the ways in which measures to address them can be more effectively integrated into social protection systems and policy frameworks. It is based on a research report on the relationship between child protection services and broader social protection systems, which was produced as part of a broader study on social protection and children in West and Central Africa².

The study used a conceptual framework that emphasises both the social and economic drivers of protection-related risks and vulnerabilities (see Figure 1). Among the social factors are family violence and break-up, broader societal violence and conflict, social exclusion and discrimination, harmful traditional practices based on cultural values, such as female genital mutilation/cutting, which is widely practised in a number of specific ethnic groups in West Africa, and early marriage.

3 key points

- Vulnerability to violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect is an important dimension of children's experience of poverty and vulnerability, but has received inadequate attention in social protection debates and policy frameworks.
- Child protection services and programmes in the region are extremely weak, fragmented and under-funded, with very limited linkages to wider social protection programmes or other sectors.
- There are nevertheless important potential synergies, which could be capitalised on, between the development of social welfare services for children and the nascent social transfer programmes in the region.

¹ UN (2006), Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence against Children. New York: United Nations General Assembly.

² This research programme was sponsored by the West and Central Africa Regional Office of UNICEF and carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London, with the participation of researchers from the region. This briefing paper is based on the report, "Promoting Synergies between Child protection and Social Protection", written by Nicola Jones and published jointly by UNICEF and ODI in June 2009.

Orphanhood and the loss of family, owing to HIV and AIDS, migration and trafficking or separation during armed conflict, put children particularly at risk, owing to the pivotal role of the family as the basic social unit for the care and nurturing of children. These social problems can lead to children living outside a caring family environment, for example on the streets, in institutions or in exploitative 'foster' households.

Children can become even more at risk (of participation in warfare, death in combat or sexual exploitation) when

they are associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG), as has happened in several West and Central African countries, or are subject to armed attacks or rape by soldiers or militias. Other children are victims of school violence and sexual and physical abuse.

It is important to note, however, that other child protection concerns, such as child labour, commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, are closely intertwined with the economic vulnerabilities of households, in a region where income poverty rates are extremely high.

Box 1. Characteristics of childhood vulnerability

- **Multi-dimensionality** - related to risks to four broad clusters of rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: the rights to survival (including health, nutrition, water and sanitation), development (education and psycho-social development), protection (from abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect) and participation (in decisions that affect children's lives)
- **Changes over the course of childhood** - in terms of vulnerabilities and coping capacities (e.g. young infants have much lower capacities than teenagers to cope with shocks without adult care and support)
- **Relational nature** - given the dependence of children on the care, support and protection of adults, especially in the earlier stages of childhood, the individual vulnerabilities of children are often compounded by the deprivations, vulnerabilities and risks experienced by their caregivers (owing to their economic position, level of education, gender, ethnicity, spatial location or other factors)
- **Voicelessness** - although marginalised groups often lack voice and opportunities for participation in society, voicelessness in childhood has a particular quality, owing to legal and cultural systems that reinforce their marginalisation.

Source: N. Jones and A. Sumner (2007), 'Does Mixed Methods Research Matter to Understanding Childhood Well-Being?' WED Working Paper 40, ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries.

Child protection systems in West and Central Africa

Definitions of child protection and social protection reveal important overlaps, as they both focus on risk and vulnerability. As defined in UNICEF's Child Protection Strategy, adopted in 2008, child protection systems comprise 'the set of laws, policies, regulations and services needed across all social sectors — especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice — to support prevention and response to protection related risks [...] At the level of prevention, their aim includes supporting and strengthening families to reduce social exclusion, and to lower the risk of separation, violence and exploitation.

Unfortunately, such systems remain very weak and under-resourced across West and Central Africa, with the government agencies charged with child protection often among the most marginalised of all government bodies. Part of the problem is the limited number of social workers and other professional personnel employed in child-related agencies, especially at the local level. There are serious capacity deficits, including with regard to planning and budgeting, interagency coordination, policy analysis, information management and communication, as well as programme delivery, case management and referral. Budgetary allocations are also extremely limited. There is therefore a high degree of dependence on

social exclusion

reduction of poverty

Figure 1. Key drivers of children’s protection-related risks in West and Central Africa



international agencies for funding and implementation of services, resulting in programmes generally being fragmented and difficult to sustain.

In terms of legislation, one of the first key steps in establishing a child protection system relates to the domestication of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in national legislation. However, as highlighted by the responses of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the periodic reports of West and Central African governments on their implementation of the UNCRC, the extent to which such legislative frameworks are in place varies widely across the region. In some countries, overarching children's legislation is entirely absent, whereas in a number of others, including Ghana and Senegal, there are specific laws or children's codes and/or child rights are incorporated into constitutions. Yet, even where there is a strong legislative framework, law enforcement is invariably weak. Preventative awareness-raising activities are sporadic, under-funded and often dependent on implementation by NGOs.

Responsive and reintegration-oriented social services, such as activities to combat child labour and reintegrate children into education, have received more attention. Partnerships built by ILO through the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) have been effective in a number of countries in tackling the worst forms of child labour, for example in addressing trafficking and the use of child labour in cocoa plantations and other forms of commercial agriculture (especially in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Nigeria) and in mining (Burkina Faso and Niger).

Linkages between child protection and broader social protection systems

A mapping of social protection in the region revealed that few countries have real national social protection 'systems'³. Even fewer have effectively integrated child protection components into these broader social protection systems, although countries such as Ghana, Mali and Senegal provide examples of partial exceptions. An analysis

of poverty reduction strategy papers in 20 countries in the region also suggests that child protection issues receive only limited attention and are rarely linked explicitly to the challenge of strengthening broader social protection systems. There are, however, a number of opportunities to create potential synergies between social welfare services for child protection and broader national social protection systems, including social transfer programmes.

Given the diversity of institutional arrangements for addressing child protection concerns in the region, a country-specific approach is needed. However, it is vital to ensure that child protection issues are not compartmentalised into vertical programmes, but rather integrated across the sectors and agencies of importance for the fulfilment of children's rights, including in particular the ministries and local government bodies responsible for health, education, labour, police, justice and social welfare. This will require institutionalised inter-agency mechanisms for coordination, common data systems and integrated case management.

Since social development ministries often have responsibility for both social transfer programmes and some core social welfare services, capacity building support for these ministries is crucial for strengthening these different components of social protection and improving coordination among them. An essential first step is to carry out capacity assessments, followed by costed plans for capacity development, covering mandates, organisational arrangements, coordination, human resources and financing. A good practice example in this regard is UNICEF's support of a capacity assessment of the Ghanaian Department of Social Welfare in 2007, which has now led to capacity building measures that are being assisted by the UK Department for International Development.

In addition to institutionalising inter-sectoral coordination, there are also a number of possible entry points to strengthen linkages to child protection issues within existing social protection programmes. In the case of social transfers, one of these is the inclusion of especially vulnerable children among the target groups

³ R. Holmes and T. Braunholtz-Speight (2009), *Strengthening Social Protection for Children, West and Central Africa*. Dakar and London: UNICEF and Overseas Development Institute.

for transfers. This is the case in programmes such as the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) programme in Ghana. A concern that has been raised about such categorical targeting, however, is the risk of it being too narrow – for example being focused only on HIV/AIDS-related orphans without considering children who may be especially vulnerable for other reasons.

A second approach has been to make eligibility for social transfers conditional on child protection-related behaviours, such as the registration of children's births and non-involvement in child labour and trafficking, in addition to requirements such as vaccinations, health check-ups and school attendance. This is also a characteristic of the LEAP programme. However, child protection-related conditions are difficult to monitor, and conditionality in general often tends to be 'soft', in the sense that it is rarely enforced and is used more as a tool for awareness raising⁴.

This highlights the third possible interface: the potential for the social welfare workers who enrol and interact with cash transfer beneficiaries to engage in broader dialogue with these families and their communities about child rights, including protection issues. In Ghana, for example, this could be done through the LEAP beneficiary forums, which are held on transfer payment days.

Fourth, since the households targeted by cash transfer programmes are usually among the most vulnerable, facing a range of different types of deprivations and risks, there is a strong argument to link cash transfer beneficiaries to other supportive programmes, including, where necessary, preventative and responsive social welfare services. This could involve referral to other programmes, as well as management of individual cases across agencies. A particular emphasis could be placed on promoting linkages with existing social welfare services that address child maintenance payments and alternative care arrangements for neglected or vulnerable children.

Fifth, such linkages could be facilitated by using the beneficiary databases developed for cash transfer

programmes, such as LEAP's 'single register' system, as the core for wider information management systems, covering social welfare services as well as transfer programmes.

Sixth, broader linkages with other sectors, such as schools, health facilities, the police and the justice system, are needed, to identify, refer and assist at-risk children. Owing to their extensive contact with children, teachers and health care workers can play a critical role in child protection at the grassroots level.

Seventh, the approaches set out above need to be accompanied by the development, strengthening and implementation of comprehensive children's legislation, to uphold children's protection rights, including anti-discrimination measures, in line with the UNCRC and the 'transformative' dimension of social protection. This should include, where it has not yet been done, the ratification of international and regional agreements, such as the optional protocols of the UNCRC and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child⁵.

Given that child protection responsibilities cut across a range of actors, another key consideration in developing a child-sensitive approach to social protection systems is to promote broad participation from civil society and the private sector in consultation processes. Involving children and young people themselves, by working with and through organisations that already have a consultation structure, such as schools, youth groups, children's clubs and child-focused NGOs, is an approach that is still only at a fledgling stage in the region and could be significantly strengthened.

Interaction with parliaments is also needed so that relevant parliamentary committees (for example on social development and justice) have access to information about the state of child protection violations and progress in addressing these through preventative and responsive services and communications programmes.

⁴ N. Jones, W. Ahadzidze and D. Doh (2009), *Social Protection for Children: Opportunities and Challenges in Ghana*. Accra and London: UNICEF and Overseas Development Institute.

⁵ As of October 2008, the Democratic Republic of Congo and São Tomé and Príncipe had not ratified the ACRWC.

Similarly, the private sector has a role to play in ensuring respect for child protection rights, for example regarding child labour, through corporate social responsibility mechanisms.

Finally, involving community, religious and traditional leaders in efforts to prevent and redress violations of children's rights to protection through communication and awareness raising activities needs to be given high priority, as these actors are powerful opinion shapers.

Conclusions and policy implications

The challenges in promoting the integration of child protection services and programmes within broader social protection frameworks in West and Central Africa are considerable. The extent and depth of the challenges vary considerably across countries and need to be informed by the UNCRC principle of progressive realisation of economic and social rights in order to tailor policies and programmes to the specificities of individual country contexts.

In countries where child protection services and programmes are extremely weak and social protection is only marginally if at all on the policy agenda, building a child-sensitive social protection system that addresses both the economic and social risks that children face will undoubtedly be a long and arduous process, especially given the broader governance challenges that most of these countries face. By contrast, in countries such as Ghana, Burkina Faso and Senegal, where there are already long-established child protection programmes (albeit often fragmented and heavily dependent on external assistance) and where social protection is already on the policy agenda, the challenges are of a different order,

and will need to focus more on strengthening the existing systems and programmes, improving their funding from domestic sources, building up a stronger cadre of trained social workers and promoting better coordination, both between social welfare services and social transfer programmes and across sectors.

In order to better address the key social and economic drivers of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect, efforts need to be concentrated in four broad areas: i) strengthening protection-related legislative and policy frameworks, including law enforcement; ii) supporting more effective inter-agency and inter-sectoral institutional arrangements, strengthening information systems and knowledge sharing, and capacity building for the effective planning, financing, delivery, coordination and monitoring and evaluation of programmes; iii) investing in awareness raising and preventative services to address child protection vulnerabilities, in partnership with public service providers (schools, health facilities, police etc), the justice system, civil society actors (including traditional and religious leaders) and the private sector; and iv) developing stronger child-sensitive responsive services.

Finally, in terms of specific entry points for promoting synergies between child protection services and broader social protection systems, the analysis above shows that there are many opportunities to address child protection problems directly within social transfer programmes. However, given these programmes' relatively limited coverage and scale to date in West and Central Africa, equal attention should be given to promoting linkages between child-focused social welfare services and key actors working with children in other sectors, including schools and health facilities.

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