

# COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP AND SOCIAL NORM SHIFTS: STRATEGIES TO END CHILD LABOUR

## 1. PREFACE

This paper zooms in on the plethora of activities implemented by the Work: No Child's Business (WNCB) alliance partners to influence harmful social norms relating to child labour. Namely, it presents two approaches practically applied in the programme to promote the sense of ownership at a community level; thus, resulting in a more holistic and sustainable impact on the lives of at-risk or working children.

Throughout the duration of the programme, inspiring practices to lead to this outcome have been witnessed across the six countries implementing the programme. However, here, we share lessons learned from two countries, Uganda and Mali, to keep this paper manageably short and it focuses on how it was implemented and what lessons we can take along for future programming.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The WNCB Alliance aims to achieve that all children and youth are free from child labour and enjoy their rights to quality education and (future) decent work. The Alliance is run by Save the Children Netherlands, UNICEF Netherlands and the Stop Child Labour Coalition, together with partner organizations and country offices in Cote d'Ivoire, India, Jordan, Mali, Uganda and Viet Nam. Collaboratively we address the root causes of child labour and ensure that relevant stakeholders (civil society, governments and businesses) take their responsibility to protect and fulfil children's rights.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO)<sup>1</sup> child labour may be so deeply ingrained in local customs and habits that neither the parents nor the children themselves realize that it is against the interests of children and illegal. Parents may also be unaware of the potential risks of child labour, especially in terms of exploitation, abuse, and trafficking and how those affect girls and boys differently. As affirmed by the WNCB Sense Maker data collection assessments, popular perceptions and local customs and traditions (even when they are well-intended) play an important part in normalising child labour, and those include and are not limited to the following:

- The view that work is good for the character-building and skill development of children, including unpaid household chores.
- The tradition that children are expected to follow in their parents' footsteps in a particular trade, and to learn and practice that trade at a very early age.
- The widely held view that girl children are less in need of education than boys, which leads to them being taken out of school at even an earlier age and placed in unpaid/informal work at home or sold into domestic employment or sex work.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/moscow/areas-of-work/child-labour/WCMS\\_248984/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/moscow/areas-of-work/child-labour/WCMS_248984/lang--en/index.htm)

- Children from large families are more likely to be at work than those from small families, simply because the parents' income is quite insufficient to support a large family.

### 3. THE IMPORTANCE OF CHALLENGING SOCIAL NORMS TO TACKLE CHILD LABOUR

In WNCB, we realize change by implementing an integrated area-based approach that is applied in high incidence areas to tackle child labour at the root. We work with all relevant stakeholders at the local level around the norm that ‘no child should work - every child must be in school’. Children, youth, parents, teachers and community-based advocates organize themselves within their communities to claim their rights and call on local governments to strengthen child protection systems, provide public services including accessible and quality education and market relevant vocational training, as well as livelihood support.

With this integrated approach we aim at systemic and sustainable change, ensuring that children are not moving from one sector to another, and/or start working in hidden or worst forms of child labour. We aim at protecting and fulfilling the rights of all children, offering better perspectives of entering decent employment when they have the appropriate age and breaking cycles of poverty for next generations.

### 4. WNCB INSPIRING COMMUNITY AND NATIONAL INITIATIVES TO INFLUENCE SOCIAL NORMS

In addition to challenging social norms on an individual and familial level, the programme aimed to increase the sense of ownership of communities and children as catalysts of change who play a pivotal and substantial role in ending child labour. This was primarily achieved through the establishment of community-based committees, who as actors of change, led on or contributed to raising the awareness of community members on harmful consequences of child labour and the mechanisms of recourse if children’s rights are violated. In practice, this took place through the planning of educational talks/debates, the setting up of anti-child-labour clubs, providing children with platforms to voice their opinions, and facilitating social dialogue spaces and general assemblies to shed light on spillover effects of child labour.

In the section below, we present two examples of clusters of community engagement and awareness raising practices that were inspired by WNCB’s area-based approach and were put into action by the Uganda and Mali teams to influence social norms surrounding child labour.

#### 4.1 UGANDA

In Uganda, mapping, establishing, activating, and empowering community-based influential bodies was a key milestone to building and cultivating a strong sense of commitment on a community level to eliminate child labour. Those include and are not limited to local protection committees, children’s clubs and governments, women’s groups (who benefit economically from Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) and who brought the group of women together to be economically empowered), communal child watch/protection committees and religious leaders who can sustainably adopt programme activities beyond the closure of WNCB and advocate for child rights.

To set up and empower committees, the team followed four steps as outlined below.

#### Step 1: Mapping and establishing community-based influential bodies.

During the setup phase of the programme, it was essential to kick-off by conducting a comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise, ensuring the involvement of influential members

right from the beginning. This step sets the foundation for effective collaboration and support throughout the programme's lifecycle.

Furthermore, the programme team established solid collaboration with the local district department by introducing itself and outlining the programme's goals and planned activities. Through this, the team received the buy-in of key governmental stakeholders, thus, leveraging existing data, needs, and insights within the community. Following this engagement process, specific mining locations that promote child labour were identified. Simultaneously, and upon receiving district advice on potential targeted areas, the team conducted household mapping at the onset which enabled them to identify the scale of the problem, establishing a baseline for later impact measurement.

Through the district, the programme team was introduced to local councils, who play a crucial role in mobilising influential individuals for initial introductory meetings. During these sessions, the programme's objectives and goals were presented, and community members were encouraged to participate in the localised efforts to eliminating child labour. As awareness grows, individuals expressed interest in joining the initiative, voluntarily offering their participation in committees.

At the village level, committees were formed, consisting of 3-4 individuals who take on the responsibility of mobilising additional community members to join the initiatives. Focal points were then established based on community advice, providing support in household mapping, and identifying cases of child labour.

Adopting an area-based approach, the programme team collaborated with schools through dialogue which in return resulted in the establishment of Motivational Centres designed to reintegrate child labourers into education. These centres focused on imparting transferrable skills, numeracy, literacy, and other necessary knowledge to facilitate the seamless return of these children to school. The systematic step-by-step approach served as a guiding framework throughout the process, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive initiative.

## **Step 2: Activating and empowering them.**

The first step of activating community based influential bodies (including community mobilisers) comprised of enhancing their child protection knowledge and capacity. Namely, community based formed committees underwent comprehensive training encompassing child rights, the role of community agents of change in combatting child labour, case management, psycho-social support, and referral pathways to service-providing organizations. Men were trained in employing a gender-sensitive approach, fostering collaboration with women. Moreover, community mobilizers were equipped with smartphones to facilitate the easy reporting of child labour cases and conduct real-time monitoring activities. Mobile radio devices were utilized for mass messaging, reaching a broader audience in an efficient and mobile manner.

In terms of mitigating the unique needs/barriers of child labourers to education, training emphasized the importance of addressing holistic challenges surrounding children on a case-by-case basis. For example, in cases where child labour was closely tied to poverty, alternative livelihood options were provided for caregivers, specifically focusing on farming to address food insecurity. In some cases, ceremonies were arranged to celebrate completion of vocational training which was regarded motivational by participants and inspiring to other community members.

On the district level, targeted leaders received training on lobbying and advocacy (L&A), emphasising policies related to child labour and education. Consequently, this led to increased demands for budget allocations, particularly for the recruitment of teachers to sustain educational services. To further motivate district leaders in working hand in hand with the programme, an evidence-based approach was employed, demonstrating the impact of a similar initiative in a programme site or other areas. This demonstration played a pivotal role in garnering support and buy-in from stakeholders.

Upon building the capacity of community leaders and district level leaders on successfully identifying and managing child labour cases, community level awareness raising efforts were organised, primarily through those established committees. Through these activities, even more community members were reached to strengthen their child rights knowledge but were also encouraged to voice their opinions on community issues, influencing decision-making at higher levels, including government and civil society organisations.

To sustain the motivation of established committees to continue partaking in the programme's initiative to eliminating child labour, several strategies were put in place. Firstly, the programme team continually reminded them of the societal transformational benefits they will be part of. Secondly, the programme team showcased and celebrated success stories which community leaders/government stakeholders contributed to. Through those means, the programme ensured those committees continue to work hard because the community trusts them, and their contribution is enacting change on a community level.

### **Step 3: Engaging children proactively to promote their rights.**

In addition to the above, the programme team strived to provide support to children to act as agents of change towards advocating for their rights. More specifically, children were provided with outlets (such as drama, sports, interactive learning sessions and debates) to meaningfully participate in the process of eliminating child labour and advocating for their rights. An example of this is that throughout community level engagement activities, children were engaged in voicing their concerns, wellbeing and education needs and those in some cases were recorded and broadcasted on local radio channels; thus, magnifying their reach. This in return helped to influence decision makers in taking a stronger standpoint in eliminating child labour, and enhanced children's sense of empowerment and confidence. For accountability purposes, the programme team attempted to reconvene with the children to inform them of the steps they have taken to mitigate the needs expressed by children.

### **Step 4: Monitoring back-to-school children's attendance and motivating them to continue to pursue their educational goals.**

For child labourers who successfully re-enrolled in schools, it was key to ensure their attendance was monitored and barriers to their enrolment are mitigated. To this end, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and school management committees were established in the community schools. And to reach children who once again drop out from school, child labour ambassadors and volunteers from the community were mobilised to conduct household visits and to support those children/caregivers to successfully sustain their access to education. And to make the schools more appealing, teachers were trained on the International Labour Organizations' Supporting Children's

Rights Through Education (SCREAM) curricula to delivering extracurricular activities such as sports, debates, and drama activities which embed life skill components that are sought to further bolster children’s communication skills and self-esteem. Finally, to celebrate children that stopped working, those were referred to as champions who provided testimonies to the change they experienced in their lives; consequently, providing a positive example for other child labourers.

#### 4.2 MALI

To foster a sense of belonging at the community level, the WNCB team in Mali implemented a comprehensive approach involving various phases and steps. The multidisciplinary team, including teachers, administrators, psychologists, social workers, and former radio communicators, utilised different approaches such as the Child Labour Free Zone approach, child protection system strengthening, and advocacy/communication at local, regional, and national levels to combat child labour.

The following summarises the key actions taken:

#### **Step 1: Identification of sectors and mapping the depth of the problem**

During the inception phase of the programme, the Mali team delved into secondary data sources to explore which areas and sectors have the highest numbers of child labour. With this data, the team learned that traditional gold mining and cotton cultivation were identified as major sectors for child labour, focusing the programme in the Sikasso and Ségou regions. Following that, the team carried out a baseline assessment, comprised of interviewing households, technical service providers and key community leaders (such as the head of a village), to map the altitude of the problem and to quantify child labour and understand root causes, addressing poverty, school infrastructure, and quality of education. With thanks to this assessment, 208,072 cases of child labour were identified in 20 municipalities of Sikasso and Ségou.

#### **Step 2: Promotion of trust, transparency and information sharing between the programme and local communities**

Programme staff who were also referred to as field agents, were identified from targeted communities and took the lead in engaging heavily with targeted community members. Those were recruited based on their mobilisation skillset and knowledge of targeted areas. Namely, they employed various strategies such as conducting home visits to casually meet with households and build rapport, facilitate public talks and debates to carry out their responsibilities.

Since field agents are community based, they were generally perceived positively by community members, especially those who previously engaged in similar programmes and roles and have experience in community-based action. They were also able to establish a collaborative relationship quite easily with individuals they worked with primarily because they are aware of the context and the reality of gaps/challenges.

#### **Step 3: Involvement and participation of community members and the private sector in the programme**

Alongside sharing information with community members and collating ideas on what their needs are, the consortium utilised Save the Children’s accountability to children and communities (ACC)

processes to allow for individuals to voice their opinions throughout the life cycle of the programme. This was particularly important as by learning about the needs/feedback of targeted children and families, the team was able to apply an adaptive management lens, in the form of regularly convening, reviewing feedback, and introducing necessary actions.

On a broader level, local Child Protection Committees were established, involving representatives of various community members. For example, key field players such as teacher unions, were brought into the programme, and were provided with capacity building activities which strengthen their skills in teaching methods and advocating for child rights. This in return increased teachers' sense of ownership in monitoring children's school attendance and advocating for children's rights beyond the scope of the programme. Furthermore, it was pivotal for the programme to receive elders and government officials' buy in the programme who are largely respected and influential in targeted communities who continued to educate and preach child rights within their circles.

In terms of joining forces with other relevant stakeholders, the team established rapport with formal companies who agreed to partake in the programme and voluntarily agreed to join WNCB in forces to eliminate child labour. Not only have they offered apprenticeships for young people aged 18 to 24 years to develop their professional skills, but they also joined WNCB forces in eliminating child labour through reviewing their policies and ensuring they no longer involve children in their supply chain.

Finally, radio programs were gauged to convey messages about children's rights and the consequences of child labour. Following those, several communities have committed themselves to making the fight against child labour their mission not only by monitoring the achievements of the programme in its areas of intervention, but also taking a personal stance in supporting to monitor and report child labour cases.

#### **Step 4: Identification and implementation of actions which mitigate felt needs of the communities**

Through the baseline assessment, as well as the roll out of a robust ACC system, the programme team continually learned of most existing needs that targeted communities expressed. To this end, the programme team implemented actions that are tailored to mitigate those issues that are predominately affecting community members, and directly influencing child labour. For example, to encourage child labourers to enrol in formal education, it was key to rehabilitate school infrastructure, improve teaching methods, introduce vocational training, and implement activities which support women economically. The latter point was particularly important in the Mali context because mothers are generally supportive of children's education and therefore became WNCB allies who are able, with few resources, to take sustainable steps towards eliminating child labour.

In one of the communities, funds generated for women were sufficient to ensure children can easily commute to school (by arranging for a cart and hiring a driver) and have necessary stationery and books to go to school.

*'When you give women a say and financial means, they actually invest in children's education, and they even maintain it beyond the scope of the programme. These women-generated funds have really contributed to the success of the program, as they are used to support initiatives such as preventing school dropout and keeping children in school.'*

## 5. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To further bolster the sense of community ownership of the programme's goal, the Uganda and Mali teams advise that:

- Early engagement with local government, district authorities and other influential bodies takes place, emphasizing the important role that political will plays in promoting successful implementation of activities and community mobilization.
- Programme objectives are transparently and clearly presented to the community during the initial stages to manage expectations and build trust with relevant stakeholders.
- Focused engagement with elders to take place during the onset, especially in the context of Uganda, as they play a role in key decision-making processes on a community level.
- The capabilities of community bodies are continually enhanced to ensure programme sustainability beyond the timeline of the programme. This would take place through providing additional training and guidance, enabling them to carry out monitoring and evaluation tasks and L&A efforts that are part and parcel of mitigating child labour.
- The felt needs of community members are addressed through the programme to further build trust between communities and programme teams.
- A robust MEAL system is established to enable regular data collection activities which highlight progress and gaps; thus, allowing for adaptive management to take place.
- Success stories are regularly shared in the media to highlight the positive impact of the programme on targeted communities.
- Children are allowed to voice their opinions on what affects them in their community and how they need to be supported during the early stages of the programme. This really influenced government/CSO level decision making and helped shape a more contextually appropriate intervention model.
- A systematic and area-based approach is adopted that involves every segment of the community, starting with elders and children, but also parents and teachers.
- Diverse outreach strategies are utilised, including house-to-house visits and mobilisation through health centres, to reach as many people as possible.
- Gender messaging pertaining to child labour is advisable to take place in small groups over multiple sessions. This would support fostering a safe and accessible space that encourages participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences. Namely, this approach acknowledges the nuanced nature of the topic and aims to enhance understanding through ongoing dialogue with community members and children.
- Regular learning and reflection moments are planned and integrated as part of the programme's strategy, as those would offer opportunities to assess progress and adapt for greater impact. And to ensure that insights, lessons learned, and best practices are captured and are accessible beyond the programme's close-out, it is key to establish a knowledge management platform that is organized and made readily accessible to team members. Namely, this will ensure learnings are considered in the design of future programmes aiming to follow a similar approach to tackling child labour.

If the teams could go back in time, they would:

- Design activities that actively involve children right from the programme's onset. Although the team initially focused on activities targeting parents and teachers, integrating children into the programme's early stages would have proven highly beneficial to design the intervention in a more child-friendly manner.
- Invest more in sports, drama, music etc., to inspire other children and parents to go back to school because it has a fun element!
- Incorporate L&A activities within this framework to ensure a comprehensive, area-based approach. Not only would this raise community awareness on child rights, but it also builds in an integrated approach to advocate for children's rights.
- Actively involve more politicians and government officials in the programme, not only through the setup phase of the programme, but during implementation as well. For example, their engagement could have played a focal role in advocating for the procurement of region-specific iron sheets for house roofs in Karamoja. This proactive involvement might have saved the programme costs spent on purchasing these sheets for schools when they could have been obtained at no cost.
- Budget for the provision of financial incentives for community-based structures; not only to motivate them but to help support them in addressing their basic needs. The team suggests an amount that directly aligns with the effort they invest.
- Initiate discussions to integrate WNCB structures into the local government's governance framework. This step aims to ensure the continuity of the ongoing programme work and its seamless transition to sustained efforts under local government management.
- Apply a holistic lens to target all sectors contributing to child labour, such as domestic work, and extend the programme to all areas with child labour issues. This is particularly important given that children leaving one sector does not necessarily mean they are freed from labour, as in many cases they end up doing more domestic chores or work within other sectors.
- Set up annual public feedback sessions with communities where 1) The programme team collates public feedback on how the programme is progressing, 2) Achievements and success are celebrated, especially on sharing back the number of children who successfully stopped working and re-enrolled/enrolled in the formal education system and 3) Gaps, challenges and lessons learned are discussed with attendees.