Economic Strengthening and Child Protection in Western Uganda: Preliminary Findings from Evaluation Research

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Governments and NGOs in humanitarian crisis settings are increasingly interested in tackling the intergenerational cycle of poverty through holistic interventions that integrate support for child development/protection and economic strengthening. This study addressed the relationship between household livelihoods and children’s well-being and protection in two districts of Western Uganda supported by the Western Uganda Bantwana Initiative (WUBP). The study involved a survey of a total of 246 households supporting orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). Sampling allowed comparison of 142 households that had received WUBP services (for one or two years) with 104 households that had not yet received services.

Active in four underserved districts in the western region since 2008, WUBP builds the management and technical skills of nine community-based organizations (CBOs) to improve comprehensive service provision to OVC and their families in three areas of community-identified priority needs: 1) child protection, 2) livelihoods, and 3) psychosocial support (PSS). Using an approach that is child-centered and household-focused, WUBP promotes child rights through Child Rights Clubs in schools and communities; supports a range of household-based income generating activities for OVC households; and supports PSS and counseling to families through routine home visits by Bantwana-trained community volunteers.

WUBP works on the assumption that, as a sole intervention, livelihoods activities that improve the financial security of households are not enough to improve overall child well-being, but must be delivered as part of an integrated service package of child protection and psychosocial support (PSS). The contribution of sustainable livelihoods to child protection and well-being is central to the WUBP approach, but the global evidence base concerning the linkages between livelihood programming and child outcomes is lacking. This study was designed to examine these connections, both to inform future WUBP service delivery and the global conversation around livelihoods, child protection, and well-being.

1WUBP is a project of the Bantwana Initiative launched in 2006 by World Education, Inc (WEI) and John Snow, Inc. (JSI) to address the comprehensive needs of children affected by poverty and HIV/AIDS (OVC) in high HIV prevalence countries in sub-Saharan Africa.
The evaluation research was designed to specifically answer the following questions:

1) Does a household’s livelihood status (measured in income and assets) predict the likelihood of protection from risks and/or the well-being of children from within that household?

2) Do certain household livelihood strategies (measured in terms of recent adjustments to household economic activity) predict child protection and well-being outcomes as well?

3) Does receipt of any services (inputs from WUBP or other programs active in the area) at the household level predict any of these child outcomes?

A household survey addressing assets, income, livelihood strategies, caregiver attitudes, and perceptions of child protection and well-being (including basic needs and psychosocial well-being) was administered in villages served by WUBP’s CBO partners. Indicators for child well-being were developed in stages, incorporating Uganda-specific research prior to field work; meetings of the Child Protection Committee (CPC) Program Learning Group that includes government, NGOs, and academics; and a collaborative process with the CBO survey enumerators during the research training and survey pilot. Child protection indicators measured caregiver attitudes toward child protection and caregiver perceptions of risks to children. The survey also gathered information on the level and types of support each household was receiving.

In-depth caregiver interviews and child focus groups utilizing participatory ranking methodology were conducted in order to provide greater depth and a contextual lens through which to view the linkages between household livelihood activities and child outcomes. Data was gathered to measure five key concepts: 1) livelihood status measured in terms of income and assets, 2) livelihood strategies measured in terms of income generating activities and strategies, 3) basic needs and physical well-being of children as reported by their primary caregiver, 4) psychosocial well-being of children as reported by their primary caregiver, and 5) child protection measured in terms of the perceived risks children face from the perspective of their primary caregiver.
Key Findings

Research results suggest that there is a strong relationship between household livelihood and children’s well-being and protection. Across all households, both the level of assets owned and the types and intensity of livelihood strategies were found to be significant predictors of improved physical well-being of children, as well as of improved household provision of children’s basic needs. Households with greater assets reported fewer child protection risks. High household asset value, increased livelihood activity, and fewer children living within a household proved to be the most predictive factors of adequate provision of basic needs and physical well-being of children. Short-term increases in income were most often directed towards meeting the needs of children (e.g. paying school fees). Ownership of valuable assets was the largest predictor of children’s basic needs being met, which is consistent with the focus of most economic strengthening initiatives on increasing skill sets or providing access to capital such that households have the capacity to increase overall income in the long-term. The study results also demonstrated that the higher the value of household assets, the more likely a caregiver perceived risks to children in their care to be lower.

The number and intensity of Bantwana services were stronger predictors of children’s positive psychosocial well-being than household income, assets, or intensity of livelihood activities. These findings suggest that psychosocial support should be an explicit service offered within an integrated approach and further suggest that unlike physical well-being, children’s psychosocial well-being does not automatically improve with financial gains or improvements to livelihoods. As such, policies and programs must not overlook the importance of directly addressing social and emotional well-being within groups of vulnerable children at the household level. The level and intensity of Bantwana services received were also predictors of increased reporting of child protection risks by supported households, suggesting either that Bantwana-supported households are particularly vulnerable or that sensitization activities to child protection have increased caregivers’ awareness of the range of risks faced by children under their care.

When basic needs are unmet, children in poorer households will look outside the house for financial support, which can lead to early marriage, exploitation, or child labor.

As one caregiver noted, “I am worried that my young girls will not complete school and will go and get married because we don’t have enough for them.”