

## Child Sponsorship Impact Evidence Brief

Answering key questions about the impact of World Vision's child sponsorship approach

Worldwide, an estimated 9.1 million children are sponsored through funding in excess of US\$3 billion each year.<sup>1</sup> World Vision's child sponsorship makes up a large portion of this, maintaining the largest number of child sponsorship programs in the world. According to World Vision's latest figures, in 2016 and 2017, US\$3.5 billion was invested to benefit more than 48 million children—including over 3 million sponsored children and approximately 5.9 million of the most vulnerable.<sup>2</sup> Child sponsors contributed US\$2.6 billion of that amount, benefitting an additional four more children for each sponsored child<sup>3</sup> because of our community-focused solutions. However, there is limited research on child sponsorship models that use a community development approach.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, World Vision began systematic, comprehensive research on both activities specific to sponsorship per se, and those that are delivered through World Vision's long-term, community development work, which are funded largely by child sponsorship. This research has relevance to the core of World Vision's work, including work funded by private non-sponsorship and public grants as these are largely implemented in the context of our sponsorship-funded area programs, for which World Vision is well known.

The Child Sponsorship Research project was conducted in three phases, over four years, and covering programs in nine countries. This brief draws primarily from the third phase of the research, which ran from 2015-2017, and focuses on those findings related to broader development activities implemented in the child sponsorship programs. Phase three research was conducted in partnership with RMIT University, Deakin University, SOAS University of London, and Stellenbosch University. Data for this phase were collected from programs in Georgia, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and Peru.

### Who benefits from World Vision's child sponsorship?

Participation of sponsored children and others in World Vision's sponsorship-funded programs was associated with improvements in their lives. Based on self-reporting, for adolescents who participated in World Vision activities, there were positive linkages with being happier, enjoying health, being more hopeful, and having higher levels of school attendance. *World Vision* considers those positive associations to be central to a positive future for children and youth. While specific programs and outcomes differed across sites, sometimes there were relationships between adolescent participation in World Vision activities and higher levels of social support, human capital, adolescent resilience, and life satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

Our academic partners in Phase 3 of the Child Sponsorship Research applied quasi-experimental methods as well as a realist evaluation approach. While the key questions for many evaluations ask “does it work?”, realist evaluations ask, “what works, for whom, in what respects, to what extent, in what contexts, and how?”\*

This means that **findings** are not fully generalizable, but are **transferable, valid, and credible**. This approach makes sense to evaluate complex, multi-sectoral interventions across a variety of contexts. Other programs using realist evaluation approaches include the USAID-funded, \$30 million [Passages Project](#), and the DfID-funded [Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters \(BRACED\)](#).

\*[https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/approach/realist\\_evaluation](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/approach/realist_evaluation)

<sup>1</sup> Wydick, B., Glewwe, P., Rutledge, L. (2013). Does International Child Sponsorship Work? A Six-Country Study of Impacts on Adult Life Outcomes. *Journal of Political Economy*, 121 (2), 393-436. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/670138>

<sup>2</sup> Adolescents and households were defined as vulnerable if they (or an adolescent household member) met one of the following criteria: have a disability, are an orphan, partial orphan, married, have children, are pregnant, not attending school and not in a training program, aged under 15 and regularly do unpaid work in a family business, aged under 15 and regularly do paid work, are the household head, receive social assistance from the government or are living in an environment that has recently experienced a natural disaster.

<sup>3</sup> Conservative calculation from World Vision International beneficiary counting using Monitoring and Evaluation records.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wvi.org/2017impact>

<sup>5</sup> Varying by country, there were statistically significant differences (not always positive) between World Vision area programs and comparison sites for some of these indicators.

Across the five sites, area programs were successful in involving vulnerable and marginalized groups as well as including communities of both Christian and non-Christian faith. In four of five sites, statistical testing revealed that vulnerable adolescents and households were no more (or less) likely to have participated in, or benefitted from, World Vision activities than non-vulnerable ones. The only exception was in the Ethiopian area program in which vulnerable adolescents were more likely to have participated in, or benefitted from, World Vision activities in the past 12 months. This finding affirms that vulnerable children are just as likely to participate as non-vulnerable children. While this is a remarkable achievement in terms of equity of participation, it also raises the bar on where World Vision would like to go. To further fulfill its mission, World Vision is making policy and practice changes to deepen robust inclusion of the most vulnerable children. Additionally, the study identified two perceptions of inequality in relation to child sponsorship that World Vision is committed to minimizing through additional internal review of standards and practices. More specifically, across most of the sites there was a neutral to weak agreement among responders regarding 1. perceptions of inequality of benefits between sponsored and non-sponsored children; and 2. inequality among sponsored children based on what they individually receive from their sponsors. While there was no evidence in any site that these perceptions had translated into families or communities withdrawing from participation in sector-based World Vision activities, we are committed to continuously addressing any community sense of unfairness about who benefits from child sponsorship activities and development or sector activities.

## How do communities benefit from child sponsorship?

Beyond individual children, households with a sponsored child or adolescent were more likely to report participating in or benefitting from World Vision activities. There was also strong support for some aspects of child well-being having improved across the area programs for participants. Furthermore, through their participation and collaboration in programs, some people in community partner organizations, some faith leaders, and some community members reported having built various forms of capital. Those improvements in human capital, social capital, and economic capital are all important mechanisms World Vision uses to strengthen communities and enable households and communities to better provide for the well-being of their children.

In Ethiopia, Peru, Sri Lanka and Senegal, trust in World Vision was found to be critical in successfully facilitating collaboration across different groups and faith communities. Trust takes time to build; therefore, World Vision's long-term presence, enabled by child sponsorship, is a critical contribution to development in these communities.

The research also found that World Vision's child sponsorship programs foster collaboration and build bridges that strengthen communities. Both quantitative and qualitative data show that World Vision programs are associated with strong communities across the five evaluation sites. Where trust and collaboration between groups was not already established, it was necessary for groups to establish trust in World Vision before cross-group facilitation work could be effective (the analogy of building a bridge between communities works here—one must trust the bridge before walking across it).

Despite the evidence of bridge-building within communities, the research showed that World Vision needs to review its scale and depth of operations and ensure local programs are adequately resourced to have community-wide impact.

## Social capital in fragile contexts

As World Vision's 2030 strategy calls for deepening our commitment to the most vulnerable—who increasingly live in fragile contexts—building trust, networks and cooperation within communities and across communities is paramount.

Bridging is one of three key components to building social capital (along with bonding and linking). Widening evidence shows that 'social capital' is the core driver in building resilience to conflict and disaster through mutually-reinforcing functions of 'bonding' within communities, 'bridging' across communities, and 'linking' between communities and formal institutions for access to information, resources, and responsive action.\*

While this child sponsorship research can only speak to the evidence of World Vision's social capital work in the more stable contexts studied, this success is a strong foundation to build on as we adapt to increase social capital in fragile contexts.

\* Ingram, G. & Papoulidis, J. (2018, November 8). Fragile states and the search for 'what works' [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/11/08/fragile-states-and-the-search-for-what-works/>

## How does World Vision's Christian faith impact child sponsorship programs?

World Vision's Christian identity can enable meaningful engagement and build trust in communities when expressed through development-focused activities that benefit children and demonstrate World Vision is inclusive and not linked to proselytization.<sup>6</sup> Findings show that World Vision's Christian faith is an important aspect of its identity in each site. The interaction between our explicit recognition and acknowledgement of faith and spirituality with groups involving faith leaders, and the development and community work we support and undertake, contributed to growing trust in World Vision programs and intentions, with increased engagement as a result. Where there has been suspicion or negative perceptions about World Vision, these can be overcome by prolonged exposure to activities and engagement with the organization. Seeing the beneficial outcomes for individuals, families or communities of engaging with World Vision activities builds trust that World Vision's Christian identity is not sectarian, is seeking to engage with all members of the community, and is not linked to proselytization.

This positive finding is encouraging as World Vision continues to build evidence beyond this research on how faith-based programming affects development outcomes for children and families. For more information on evidence-based, signature programming models rooted in our faith and contributing to development outcomes see [Channels of Hope](#), [Celebrating Families](#), and [Empowered Worldview](#).<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

World Vision's most comprehensive research on child sponsorship programming to date has demonstrated positive results for participating children and communities while shedding light on how the many mechanisms across many contexts produce these benefits. For children who participated in World Vision's sponsorship program, there were positive linkages with self-reported sense of happiness, health and hope. Programming includes the most vulnerable children and adolescents and helps build trust among communities. The research also had implications for World Vision's policies and practices moving forward to reach more vulnerable children with greater impact.

In World Vision's new *Our Promise 2030* strategy, we have a strategic imperative to focus our ministry for greater impact, seeking to achieve better results, especially for the most vulnerable children. As we move forward, we are taking steps to deepen results for children in their local communities, while also engaging broader strategies with partners, governments, families, and communities that will enable that impact to be sustained. World Vision tries to augment resources raised by combining contributions from child sponsorship with local and international resources from other donors and partners so there are adequate resources to benefit both sponsored children and others in communities as per the program design. We continue to monitor the effectiveness of inclusion of most vulnerable children, making adjustments to fill gaps in implementation.

Where this research has shown that there are problems in our programs or practices that may lead to a community's sense of unfairness about who benefits from our activities, it has given us the opportunity to fix them before investing more resources in unsatisfactory initiatives. Where the research has been favorable, it demonstrates the value of partnering with World Vision on behalf of the world's most vulnerable children.

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<sup>6</sup> Proselytism refers to improper attitudes and behavior in the practice of Christian witness, including every type of physical coercion, moral constraint or psychological pressure that would deprive a person of their personal judgment, freedom of choice, or full autonomy. *Third Official Report of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, "Common Witness and Proselytism (A Study Document)"*. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/jwg-rcc-wcc/third-report-of-the-joint-working-group>

World Vision does not proselytize. The organization does not demand that people hear any religious message or convert to Christianity before, during or after receiving assistance. This commitment is affirmed by the research at hand.

<sup>7</sup> Note that these programming models were not studied in the Child Sponsorship Research but are supported by other pieces of evidence.