



Listening to the most vulnerable children



LOCATION: Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)



PROJECT NAME: Most vulnerable child research – year 3



GOAL: To understand the extent to which World Vision's projects and programmes have impacted the lives of the most vulnerable children, and to support change, through improved policy implementation or programme intervention.

Overview

World Vision focuses on the most vulnerable children because they are harder to reach but the most in need of support. Children and their families living in the hardest of circumstances are often unable to participate in activities designed to reach children and families generally.

World Vision's response

We have come to realise how important it is to track how well we are reaching the most vulnerable rather than assume we are, given the central importance to our global goal; "the sustained well-being of children within families and communities, especially the most vulnerable."

Since 2018, we've been researching the impact of our work on the most vulnerable children, by asking children themselves, who they believe, in their communities

are the most vulnerable children, if they think they're being reached and how they are benefitting from our work. The aim is to hold ourselves accountable to our organisational aim of reaching the most vulnerable, with evidence to support change (whether through policy change or improved programme intervention).¹

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to conduct the research in the same way as in previous years, across the four countries. However, we were able to perform smaller studies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s Education Project² and Sierra Leone's Jaiama Bongor Area Programme³ to 'explore the effects of COVID-19 on the community and children's definition of vulnerability' through interviews with children (ten children from Sierra Leone and six from DRC, aged 10-17 years) who have taken part in this research before. Transcripts of the interviews were provided, and key themes analysed.

MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND OUR RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In both locations COVID-19 has meant restrictions on travel, public gatherings and the closure of public places, markets, and schools. Our programmes have continued, adapting to the pandemic but it has also confirmed why reaching the most vulnerable is so critical, now more than ever.

COVID-19

Both projects have trained community members and leaders on COVID-19 prevention, with staff in DRC also supporting local healthcare staff and supplying handwashing stations. Sierra Leone's team have supplied PPE to health workers and schools.

School closures

Students have been helped to continue to learn throughout school closures with workbooks (DRC) and reading clubs (Sierra Leone).

"Going to the reading club is one of the things I like in my village, as it prevents our parents from taking us to the farm," said one 11-year-old boy.

Child protection

In both areas, we heard concerns that girls' dropout rates would increase due to pregnancy and early marriages. In both project areas however the number of abuse cases reported during the pandemic has fallen. The exact reasons for this are not clear, and while, in DRC, local leaders suggest it may be due to fear of reprisals, our team in Sierra Leone point to changes in the community:

"There has been massive awareness raising coupled with stringent government policy, [and] by-laws that are monitored by all groups in the community." (Frances Berewa, World Vision programme manager)

In the DRC we've continued to support child protection training and a confidential hotline² for feedback and to report child abuse cases, including pregnancies in young girls, is still in use.

Our Jaiama Bongor team conducted a mapping exercise to identify the most vulnerable households in their community and then helped them with livelihoods and psychosocial support. Positive Parenting classes and children's clubs also provided training and built confidence in addressing child protection issues.



Family income

In the DRC, we heard that⁴ parents were forced to leave their children at home so they could farm or travel for work. During prolonged school closures, adolescents – especially those in remote locations – had little or no way to continue with formal education. Some children started working to help support their families.

Similarly, in Sierra Leone, we heard of negative coping strategies, such as withdrawing shares from savings groups, selling livestock, and eating rice which was intended as seed for next season.

Savings groups⁵ have continued to be a vital lifeline. In the DRC most of the 134 groups have, thankfully, survived the shock of the pandemic. And in Sierra Leone, all 72 community savings groups have adopted the habit of assisting the most vulnerable children with their social funds – helping 105 orphans and vulnerable children last year.

ABOVE: Lansana, Mariatu and Mamie (from Sierra Leone) and Katempa (from the DRC) all took part in this year's research.

¹See our *Listening to the most vulnerable children* reports under 'Disability and inclusion' at worldvision.org.uk/ourimpact

²Refer to the *2019 case study – Girls' education in DRC*, working in South East Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in partnership with Save the Children, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

³Upper Nyawa, Jaiama Bongor Area Programme, a long-term World Vision UK sponsorship-funded programme in Sierra Leone.

⁴Project reports in July and October.

⁵wvi.org/economic-development/savings-transformation



ABOVE LEFT: Kepi sorts the stems of shallots to form a pile for the next sale at the weekly Thursday market in the DRC. ABOVE RIGHT: Kapya from the DRC, on a construction site carrying bricks for the construction of a house. (Both Kepi and Kapya were involved in this year's research).

CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON...

The children shared their personal feelings and fears about COVID-19 and its impact. In the DRC, all those interviewed were out of school, and all but one were working.

... COVID-19

"Companies were closed down. We don't go to church no more, and to make it harder, we have to wear masks." (Girl, 14, DRC)

"We never used to wash our hands all the time. Now it is necessary." (Boy, 12, DRC)

"This sickness kills people. Because of it, we stand a metre away from friends. I'm afraid to shake people's hands." (Girl, 15, DRC)

"It's a pandemic. We don't go to school, to avoid contamination and to save each one's life." (Boy, 12, DRC)

"My biggest panic is death." (Girl, 13, Sierra Leone)

... school closures

Children described the different work they are involved in, including domestic work, farming, construction and going to the market. Farm work is difficult, tiring and even dangerous:

"We're facing up to hard work like watering the fields and our bodies ache in pain. If we were studying, we wouldn't be given to such hard labour." (Girl, 13, DRC)

"I did house chores but also the watering and cutting of weeds in the fields." (Boy, 12, DRC)

"I face difficulties while at home using knives, I slit my hand and sometimes fall and get wounded." (Girl, 13, Sierra Leone)

Being out of school puts children at risk of exploitation and other dangers. They said some have become thieves, stealing from markets and homes, while others are described as 'hooligans' or vagabonds:

"The boys, they became [mine] diggers. Others, motor-bikers, or thugs." (Girl, 14, DRC)

Both girls and boys mentioned girls becoming pregnant during this time. It was pointed out that this meant they would not go back to school when it reopened, not only because of their pregnancy but because they would be married off.

"Some won't go back because they are pregnant and have gotten married to other children." (Girl, 15, DRC)

... family income

Children talked about businesses being closed and parents losing jobs.

"My father was working but he was fired. Many parents lost their jobs because of COVID-19." (Boy, 12, DRC)

This led to an increased focus on farm work, but then when markets were closed, produce was left unsold.

"At home, we were broke. We and our parents went to harvest and lay out our products at the market as usual. But nobody bought our things. We even had to throw out certain items." (Girl, 14, DRC)

"At home, we battle with hunger." (Boy, 13, Sierra Leone)

... local issues, before and since the pandemic began

Children raised several issues which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. These included poverty, large class sizes at school and poor attendance, poor security, no local clean water and lack of medical facilities.

As one 15-year-old girl in the DRC project explained, **"the crisis has taken over all activities"** and a number of local issues have arisen or worsened, including crime and security concerns. She continued, **"before COVID-19, the neighbourhood was calm."**

Similarly, in Sierra Leone, one 16-year-old boy described,

"children get involved in violence, stoning and wounding each other."

Others raised the particular issues faced by people with disabilities or illnesses:

"Blind and sick people need help here." (Boy, 16, Sierra Leone)

In Sierra Leone, a group of child researchers⁶ have been exploring links between poverty, girls not going to school, and the risks of early marriage and pregnancy. Following their findings, they've continued establishing groups to advocate for policy change and working with parents to educate them on teenage pregnancy and marriage.

CHILDREN'S ASPIRATIONS

Aspirations and recommendations to World Vision and their governments

In Sierra Leone, the impact of COVID-19 was reflected in children's hopes for the future. They spoke of wanting to support their families, particularly their siblings, with healthcare. Children are acutely aware of the deepening hunger and poverty around them too, recommending improved food supply and services such as water, toilets, assembly rooms and better housing.

In both countries, children want to go back to school. They're keen to catch up, even suggesting additional classes:

"I want them to bring the curriculum to school to do evening classes, since we have forgotten a lot because we spent a lot of time in the fields." (Girl, 15, DRC)

"If they reopen schools, we will go back!" (Boy, 15, DRC)

In the longer term

In the DRC, one 12-year-old boy wants to be a driver, while another girl hopes to become a tailor to make clothes for her family. Education and healthcare are dominant themes.

One 15-year-old girl in the DRC, told us she wants to be a teacher to help her **"brothers who haven't studied and adults in evening classes, and youngest [siblings] in school."**

"When I grow-up I want to be a nurse to treat sick people." (Girl, 13, Sierra Leone)

Children in Sierra Leone were concerned that some parents may not be able to afford to send their children to school after COVID-19. Others said they need better provisions, including buildings and facilities, and more trained teachers and equipment. In addition, children in DRC recommended building a hospital, improved water and electric supplies, and a nearby mill.



ABOVE: Ibrahim, a child living with a disability, participating in and chairing a children's club meeting in Sierra Leone.

⁶2019 case study – Child-led research: from finding information to influencing community action in Sierra Leone



“The effort of all child protection actors in Jaiama Bongor is not wasted, as there is a gradual decrease in the child abuse incidences. We will continue to push and advocate so that our voices will be heard far and wide.”

ABOVE: Masalie, a Child Researcher from Sierra Leone, was part of this year's research.

What have we learnt?

In 2020, children told us about the negative impact of COVID-19 in their already difficult lives. In both research areas the children shared experiences of fear, missing school and the impact of having to work and cope in families where incomes have reduced. In both the DRC and Sierra Leone, they spoke of the likelihood of increased teen pregnancy.

We are encouraged by the children's aspirations to return to study and make a positive impact in the world and by the work of our programmes to reach the most vulnerable children. In particular, the inclusion of most vulnerable communities, the work of savings groups in both locations and the normalisation of reporting abuse.

OUR PROMISE TO VULNERABLE CHILDREN

We will continue to include children in the solution, be driven by their aspirations and harness their involvement,

the benefits of which have been seen in the work of the Child Researchers in Sierra Leone:

“The effort of all child protection actors in Jaiama Bongor is not wasted, as there is a gradual decrease in the child abuse incidences. We will continue to push and advocate so that our voices will be heard far and wide.” (Missallie, Child Researcher)

Whilst we're confident that these two programmes are having an impact on vulnerability, we acknowledge that many of the most vulnerable children are not yet benefitting. We need to further deepen our emphasis on the most vulnerable children in these programmes, particularly as COVID-19 exacerbates and increases their vulnerabilities.

We will continue to ask whether and how the most vulnerable children are becoming less vulnerable in our programmes.

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At World Vision, our focus is on helping the most vulnerable children, in the most dangerous places, overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian faith, we've worked together with communities, partners, local leaders and governments, for over 70 years, so that children – of all faiths and none – are empowered to experience fullness of life. World Vision UK is a registered charity no. 285908, a company limited by guarantee and registered in England no. 1675552. Registered office as above.

COVER: Ilunga, who was part of this year's research, sorts bananas for sale. All photos: © 2019/2020 World Vision