



LISTENING TO THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN

LOCATION

Three research communities in Jaiama Bongor Area Programme, Sierra Leone

PROJECT NAME

Most vulnerable child research 2018 – 2022

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. Unfortunately, those living in the hardest of circumstances are often unable to participate in activities which aim to reach them.

As part of our global goal: “the sustained well-being of children within families and communities, especially the most vulnerable” it is vital to track how well we are reaching these children.

Our response

Since 2018 we have been researching the impact of our work on the most vulnerable children in Jaama Bongor Area Programme, by asking them 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. We have brought together the previous four years work and heard from children who were involved from the start, alongside project monitoring data and work from the child led research team.

Context

Our three research villages¹ are around 1.5 hours from the nearest town, via poorly surfaced roads. Leaders noted that road conditions had improved, though flooding remains an issue.

Despite free schooling and health care, lack of staff, medicines and school overcrowding were said to be challenges. Evidence suggests some improvement in education. However, in year four, despite better equipment and a school feeding project, untrained teachers and a lack of monitoring were still noted as problems. There is greater awareness of sexual abuse, though prosecuting offenders remains challenging.


People recognise positively that they have livelihoods - farms - but income generating potential is limited. Hard child labour is common and negative for child well-being, as is rising food prices. Loans were mentioned negatively, where they cause debt, but savings groups were mentioned positively. Access to a mobile signal (where it exists) and radio programmes are seen as positive.

In 2020, Covid³ restrictions led to schools market places and other closures, which may still adversely affect children.

ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Participants in the research: Aruna 15, Bintu 11, Francis 13, Monjama 13, Zainab 15, Haja 14. ©2022 World Vision

Who are the most vulnerable children?

The following were agreed between five stakeholder groups (men, women, leaders, girls and boys) and categorised under World Vision’s definition of most vulnerable⁴. A child is said to be most vulnerable if they experience more than one vulnerability.

-  **Serious discrimination:** Children with a disability; those with chronic illness and those who face extreme deprivation to the level that this is the reason for discrimination.
-  **Abuse, violence and exploitation:** Pregnant teenagers/teenage mothers, children suffering from neglect and abuse; child labour.
-  **Extreme deprivation:** Children from very poor families where food, clothing and housing are inadequate. Orphans.
-  **Vulnerability to disaster and catastrophe:** Children whose school compounds are prone to flooding and whose communities face storm damage⁵.

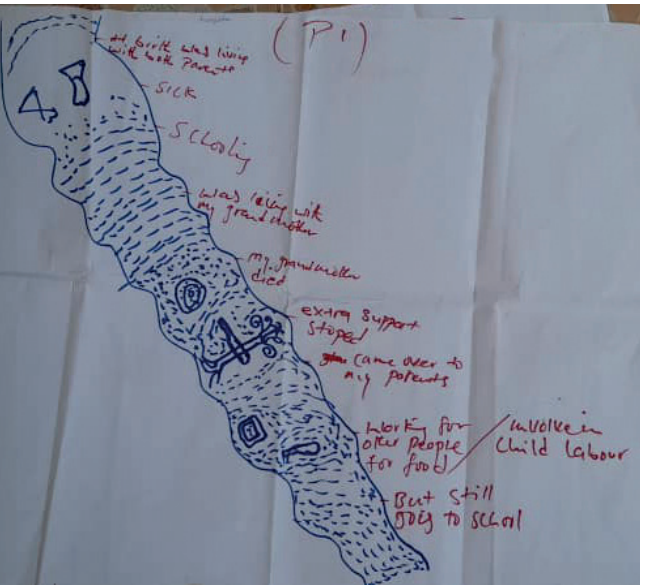


What did we hear in the stories of Most Vulnerable Children?

The most vulnerable children in our research have used river of life drawings to tell their stories and been part of focus groups. In 2022 we spoke to six children who had been identified as most vulnerable in 2018 and part of the research each year. Two believed that no-one is more vulnerable than them. The others believed they are not as vulnerable as some children. This has been the case throughout every year of the research.

“Children like orphan and disabled live in more difficult situation than me. This is because their parents are not around to take care of them and the disabled cannot freely move.” (Haja, 14)

ABOVE: A group of women taking part in the research, defining what “most vulnerable” means in their community. ©2022 World Vision
RIGHT: One of the “river of life” drawings which have enabled children to explain their life stories in the research. ©2022 World Vision



¹In Upper Nyawa sub county, chosen due to being communities where World Vision’s intervention was less than other areas.

²The context using the PESTLE tool was done each year to note the main positive and negative factors affecting the well-being of children. This provides the background for the research findings and notes any major changes over time.

³How the COVID affected children in our research area, 2020 case study: [listening-to-the-most-vulnerable-children case-study-2020_12-04-21.pdf \(worldvision.org.uk\)](https://www.worldvision.org.uk/listening-to-the-most-vulnerable-children-case-study-2020-12-04-21.pdf)

⁴ Laziness was identified in some years not others. It was identified by most stakeholders in 2021 but does not fit under any category within World Vision’s definition. This could relate to a lack of opportunities and role models, though further investigation was not part of the research. WVUK’s definition had disability as a separate category in its own right. The WV partnership include it as a reason for discrimination. These are simply different approaches. Pregnant teenage girls/teenage mothers was agreed and added in 2018, not in 2019 but then added again by all five stakeholder groups in 2021.

⁵In the year 2021 this was added as a category, having been agreed by five different stakeholder groups.

Are the most vulnerable children reached?

In 2018, interventions such as savings groups, radios and solar lights to support education, and support for medical emergencies, were mentioned. However, whilst they reached most vulnerable children, their level of impact in our research villages was shallow in years one and two.

In 2021 focus group discussions with stakeholder groups suggested that we were intentionally targeting a wide range of children, closely comparable to the agreed definition.

We continued to see “being reached” linked to tangible benefits, in evidence from children. “They supplied us with recreational materials like footballs and skipping ropes. School materials like books, pens and bags were also supplied to us.” (Girl, 2021 report)

Women and local leaders said saving groups greatly helped them and their children.

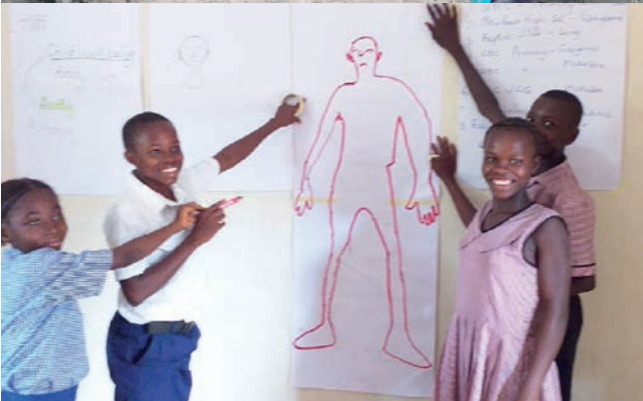
“With the help of this group, we now have access to loans in our community. If we have an emergency issue to address such as medical bills, school support, food for our children, we can easily loan from the savings box and pay later.”

(Woman, 2021 report)

We know that group members now attend to the needs of children who are most vulnerable. World Vision staff pointed to work with community members to formulate bylaws and community members recognised the work in child protection.

“Government and World Vision have trained more caregivers on child protection protocols and early marriage prevention.” (Community members⁶)

Programme monitoring reports indicated that the carers of all six children we spoke to in 2022 are part of savings groups supported by World Vision. Five out of six children have had treatment at the health centre which is supported by World Vision. Two attend a reading club and a third attend a children’s club, both of which are supported by World Vision.



ABOVE TOP: Children receiving school materials paid for by the social fund of the local savings group. ©2021 World Vision
ABOVE MIDDLE: Children sitting in a savings group meeting. Children become excited about savings groups due to the success of their parents’ groups. Starter funds are provided by their parents. ©2022 World Vision
ABOVE BOTTOM: Children taking part in life skills activities in a children’s club. “Before now, we could not identify our body parts well but with the life skills received from the kids club, we can now do body mapping to record injury, and know what action to take next on child-friendly safeguarding behavior protocols.” Sallay, age 14, in front. ©2022 World Vision

⁶ Children, adults and local leaders were asked to explain their community context using the PESTLE tool. This statement was part of that evidence and is found in the 2021 report.



Are the most vulnerable children’s lives transformed though programmes?

Almost all 19 stories in 2021 describe some level of improvement, such as no longer experiencing abuse or hunger. In around half, the improvement was such that the child may no longer be most vulnerable (in two categories). In almost half, despite improvement, the child is likely to be “most vulnerable” because of ongoing challenges. In just one story the child still experienced extreme deprivation and child labour, with no apparent improvement.

2022 stories largely mirror 2021. Four out of six children’s lives had improved and in two their situation had not improved or improved initially then deteriorated.

There is an enormous commitment by the children and caregivers to improve life through hard work and to rescue children from situations of extreme deprivation or abuse.

“I did not go to school for a year because I was selling fruit for my aunty, so when I got back to the village my parents managed to enrol me in school and now I am attending school. I am in [class] four.”

(Haja, 14, pictured above)

There is evidence that some caregivers help children they are not related to.

“My parents are also rendering helping hands to a friend of mine, both his parents are alive but can’t afford to take care of him.” (Bintu, 11, pictured below)



How are World Vision programmes responsive to most vulnerable children and ensuring change over time?

Greater focus by World Vision in remote communities with the greatest number of vulnerable children led to a mapping exercise of the whole programme area in 2020. This led to intentional inclusion of 574 children and increased advocacy for children with disabilities. Community groups have been strengthened or set up including savings groups, child welfare committees and mother groups. These groups were trained in child well-being, including child protection, across all parts of the programme - including hard to reach areas.

"The community are very aware of their own problems and how to work on all those categories of vulnerability. They have ideas on development. No one is left behind, no one is excluded. Participation of women and children in the discussion and decision making is high compared to before." (Francess Berewa, former programme manager)

Child led research

In 2018, 14 girls and boys were invited to take part in child led research which enabled young people to understand the issues facing most vulnerable children. Their work has contributed to increasing awareness of teen pregnancy.

The team focussed on teenage pregnancy and were trained in research methods. They interviewed teenage girls and met with community chiefs, police, parents, nurses and teachers. The findings were analysed and a report shared with leaders, parents, and young people. "We are proud about what we achieved."

The group's advocacy helped raise community awareness about the rights of girls, and the causes and impacts of teenage pregnancy. It is widely believed to have contributed to the acceptance of the community by-law, formulated to reduce teenage pregnancy and promote the rights of pregnant girls to return to school. Leaders in our research communities believe abuse cases have reduced and we have great hopes that we will see continued actions to prevent rape and forceful marriage.

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"The research built my confidence to talk to my peers and parents to stop sending their children into early marriage."

(Salamatu Tajawai, 14)

OPPOSITE: Salamatu (left) speaking with elders in the programme area.
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What did we learn?

The Jaiama Bongor Area programme has shown that it is possible to deepen our commitment to the most vulnerable children and this has happened in our research communities.

We are aware of our limitations compared to needs expressed by children in remote locations. Additional resources are needed, such as improved infrastructure and medical treatment for children. Staff pointed to ongoing challenges: the terrain causing difficult access, the inability to prosecute offenders, local mining and ongoing risk of sexual abuse.

There is a long way to go in ensuring that improved health and education services reach the community and child safety must continue to improve. However the communities have owned this change to child wellbeing and the sustainability of our support to the most vulnerable children will be essential as the programme continues for its final two years.

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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.

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COVER PHOTO: Salamatu right and Mesalie left – young researchers in Jaiama Bongor AP. ©2022 World Vision