Teens use Interactive Learning Sessions
to promote own rights

For two years, schools in Uganda remained closed as the country like the rest of the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, when the official pronouncement was made by the President, many school going children resorted to lottering around the communities or worse still engaged in less productive work which left some exposed them to instances of Violence Against Children (VAC). Uganda's Northern region is one of those that were severely hit by the effects of this closure notably recording an increase in teenage pregnancies and drug abuse.

These cases were even escalated by the parenting gaps in most households specifically emanating from poor communication with teenagers, harsh and tough disciplining mechanisms, failure to guide young people to transition from teenage to early adulthood, family neglect and exposing them to hard labour. While it is evident that these gaps are addressed by best parenting practices, many kept growing without redress in Lira, one of Uganda's Northern districts. The Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Uganda with funding from the OAK Foundation took centre stage to improve the parenting styles with a focus on the most vulnerable households and families. The project worked through

Children's Parliament and Parenting sessions.

The Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) Uganda - a rights based Non-Governmental Organisation with funding from OAK Foundation – is using Community-based approaches to end Violence Against Children (VAC) in Lira City East Division, Agweng and Ogur Sub-counties, located in Lira City and District. The organization uses two major interventions to address drivers of VAC at the community level; the Children’s Parliament and Parenting sessions.

These interventions are in response to the high cases of VAC as a result of sexual and reproductive health challenges like early marriages. For instance, in February this year, a Primary Seven pupil from Agweng Sub-County, Lira District reportedly committed suicide after she was allegedly forced into marriage at a tender age. The deceased's body was discovered a day after forceful initiation into traditional marriage at a fee of Ugx 10,000 ($5).

There are more cases of child marriages and teenage pregnancies in the rural areas of this Sub-region. Negative gender norms, poor parenting coupled with greed for dowry are partly to blame for this shift. But poverty and ignorance, peer pressure, breakdown in social protection and safety nets are also highlighted as contributing factors.

According to Peninah Kia, the TPO Uganda Project Coordinator for the Lira Field Office, initiatives like the Children's parliament have worked well with learners in schools. On a weekly basis, a group of between 12 and 15 pupils meet for a session of the Children's Parliament to discuss issues of violence as experienced both in schools and home. “The sessions are chaired by the Senior woman and Senior man who table varying topics to collect the perspectives of children and also address emerging issues,” says Ms Kia. The issues are then presented at the quarterly PUS (Parent and Student) meetings as well as other leadership meetings for further discussion and redress.

Agak Primary School in Agweng Sub-County is one of those that have benefitted from the Children's parliament. At Agak, the pupils have gone ahead to establish a school court to handle minor issues like theft of scholastic materials and indiscipline among pupils and teachers.

“When we feel that the matter is beyond us, we refer to our senior woman and senior man teachers for proper management. So far, we have successfully handled two cases, and made two pupils who had already dropped out of school to return to school,” Lorna Azongo, a Primary Seven pupil, who also doubles as the Parliament's chairperson, says. "Sometimes the sessions are conducted on the sidelines of normal classes as other pupils reveal. "We notice that sometimes a class has an issue, we ask the class teacher to give us some minutes to talk to the pupils," says Mercy Trinity Akiwe, a member of the Children's Parliament.

“Fellow children feel more comfortable to disclose issues that affect them to the teachers and parents,” said another pupil, Reagan Apilis. It is evident that the Children's Parliament has contributed to a reduction in school drop-outs, as Paul Muyangep, the Agak deputy head teacher says, “Before the intervention, if 100 girls had enrolled in Primary One, less than 30 of those girls would complete Primary Seven but now, at least 75 girls reach Primary Seven, thanks to the intervention by TPO. Other community leaders like Evelyne Agalo, the Community Development Officer (CDO) of Agweng Sub-county, also confirm the positive impact of the intervention through building the capacity of parenting facilitators, para social workers, the police mostly Child and Family Protection Unit, and some selected teachers on case management.

“There was no clear or defined reporting mechanism for cases of child abuse. As a result, a lot of cases were unreported”, said Ms Agalo. Ms Innocent Candro, a para social worker, says: “After several trainings conducted by TPO, we got to know that there are cases that we are not supposed to handle, but rather refer them to higher authorities.”

Additionally, 176 children have benefited from the organisation's advanced medical services.
Interventions such as Parenting sessions and the interactive learning sessions to fix the gaps. Young people are mobilized through their respective local council leadership at parish level and the Village Health Teams (VHTs) at the community level. The project also worked through schools under the guidance and mobilization of renown senior-women and senior-men of the selected schools. The children aged between 10 and 14 years were selected with representation from several villages within the subcounty and encouraged to participate in interactive sessions such as debates and organized students’ parliament. However, the student’s parliament stalled as schools remained closed. Project interventions and approaches were diversified from schools as collection centres to community spaces to continuously address the drivers of VAC. In Oteng-oye’ sub-county, Lira district, young people like 20-year-old Brenda Acen and Michael Onen are some of the 20 group members from the subcounty who testify to the workings of the interactive learning sessions. The duo’s revelations conform to the positive impact of the sessions.

Acen says, “I was very sensitive to the community about observance of rights of children. I would gather children in small groups and teach them about their rights because I gained the confidence and knowledge to speak about violence of rights of children. I would also approach and sensitize the violators of children rights and other offenders and for those who resisted change, I would report to the Local Council or the Police.”

Onen speaks in the affirmative, “I communicate better with both my peers and elders. I continue to identify cases of violation of children rights and refer them to the relevant authorities. I normally report the cases to the LC1 office in our village and the perpetrators are invited over for response. Some cases have been elevated to the attention of the Police.”

Although the interactive learning sessions didn’t work on a structured curriculum, the sharing of real-life experiences based on observations and encounters in the respective communities served well to enable free speech. The conversation also covered identification of hotspots for VAC, the reporting mechanisms, referral pathways, dealing with perpetrators. There was a great deal of awareness for the child protection hotline of 116 as one of the prevailing avenues for cases.

Enon and Acen graduated from the one-year sessions and were linked to the local government structures under the stewardship of the Community Development Officer (CDO) for monitoring and continuity of interventions. The duo has moved the sessions to accommodate followers in schools with the re-opening for the new year.

**Lira district leaders declare abandonment of harmful, violent practices against children**

In many parts of Uganda, Lira district inclusive, children continue to face shocking levels of physical, sexual and psychological violence. They are exploited sexually and economically, exposed to early marriage and child births are victims of harmful practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), it is absurd that this violence is perpetrated by immediate family members and relatives such as care givers and parents. But there are also cases of violence amongst children. This persists, scale and gravity of the problem of violence against the youngest members of our society remains an intervention of key community elders and leaders. It is true that the pronouncements and solemn promises have been made, repeated and echoed from the years which signs of hope and modest progress can be seen. However, there is need for other interventions that are inclusive of community support structures of local and grassroots leaders to support and get involved in the case.

In Lira district for instance, over the last three years, the Uganda police have reported 190 cases emanating from poor contributing factors. The police have been elevated to the attention of the Police. This has led to a commendable reduction in the number of cases of child neglect. For each case, the Police have undertaken training by TPO Uganda, mobilizing the community leaders for signing on the board to denounce the harmful practices. And the leaders conform to the positive impact of the declarations.

In Lira district, leaders have issued a certificate which demarcates it as a model area or exemplary for other communities to emulate. According to John Bosco, the Chairperson LC1, “The impact of intervention is increasingly felt in the reduction of cases of child neglect to the extent that only one case has been reported over the last two months compared to the previous record of three cases per week a year ago.”

The interactive learning sessions, children’s parliament and the community awareness sessions have increased involvement of community leaders to keep watch on the community especially those whose actions contravene the declaration, “says John Bosco. Women leaders also testify to the positive impact of the interventions, “Before TPO Uganda came in with this intervention, we were overwhelmed by the many cases of child neglect by women citing challenges of sexual and gender-based violence. My home had turned into a collection centre of abandoned children but today, more parents are increasingly taking responsibility and this is good for the community,” says Syda.

The intervention doesn’t stop at just declaration but community leaders ensure that it is tabled as an agenda item in the respective Sub-county Community Development structure to remind members to ensure adherence.

“We also sensitize children and their parents or caregivers during the child engagement forums focusing on children’s rights and the avenues through which violations can be reported,” said John Bosco.

The declaration of abandonment of harmful practices works alongside other interventions such as the Children’s Parliament, the institutionalization of Child Wellbeing Committees, at both the district and sub-county levels, the interactive learning sessions for out-of-school children and the empowerment of community support structures to address drivers to VAC. All these support efforts bring to the perpetrators to book and eventually put an end to VAC.

Since 2018, the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Uganda with funding from the OAK Foundation, has been implementing ‘Counselling National Efforts and Supporting Community-based initiatives that Prevent Violence against children in Uganda, a project based in Lira district. The project interventions have aimed at reducing sexual and all forms of Violence Against Children (VAC) in Lira district.

To achieve this overarching goal, the project adopted the Parenting Sessions approach where up to 25 members of the community, with each representing a particular household are taken through 24 training sessions, targeting the different drivers and possible solutions to VACs. With a consideration of the levels of vulnerability, these members are either household heads or influential members of the community who are selected through the engagement and guidance by the respective local council leaders in the Sub-county. The determinants of vulnerability include but not limited to households where children live under abuse, care dependency, elderly child headed households, dangerous child-care givers, persons with disabilities, orphans and presence of a terminally ill family member for the last two months or more.

Grace Akello, 58, a single mother of six biological children and four other dependents, is one of the beneficiaries of this intervention, as a member of the 25-member group from Addikgwonjo Village, Adidikgwonjo Sub-county, Boke Parish, Lira district. In May 2021, Akello and others were taken on a journey to improve their parenting styles. It was not long before the end of the training sessions that Akello through self-reflection identified the gaps and challenges in her parenting style. Like many mothers, old age comes with diminishing productivity especially with hard labour. It gets worse with the need to maintain food supply for the family and for Akello, her children are tasked to this form of hard labour. While this seemed to work for a few months, the children decided to fast-spending the day iodinating in the communities which according to Akello, caused disconnection and a rise in cases of indiscipline within the neighborhood.

“I hated the children to the extent that I had started on the process of giving them away to charity and orphanage centres. If it wasn’t for the training by TPO Uganda, my children would have been sold,” said Akello.

Today, Akello not only makes ample time for the children but has also made communication a priority to encourage free speech and sharing of ideas. Perhaps, her biggest take home from the parenting sessions is the need to initiate conversations through open communication to enable establishment of beneficial relationships with children.

“I can do better monitoring of both all children under my custody and also keep a close eye on those in the neighborhood. I know that it is my role as a parent to take responsibility of children than abandon them at the orphanage centres because some of the children who are abandoned at such centres miss out on education that they may affect them negatively,” said Akello, also adding, “I have a clearer sight on the parenting gaps in my neighborhood and community. The most common ones are child labour which is noticeable through fetching water, farming and abuse by step-parents”.

According to Caroline Acio, the parenting facilitator for Akello’s group, most caregivers have allowed their children to extend to the extent that some are already volunteering in the community to resolve issues reported by the members.

While there still exists several children in her community who are exposed to VAC, Akello is committed to employing community sensitization mechanisms to prevent such occurrences. They also seek to expand the understanding of children’s rights and the dangers associated with violations or abuse.

“Every Sunday after mass during our women’s meetings, I am given chance to talk about parenting and many parents are improving especially the way they communicate to children,” says Akello.

Some of the beneficiaries of the OAK funded project showcasing hope that they received through Care Management