Addressing witchcraft in Tanzania:
case study of a promising approach
Acknowledgements

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Purpose of the case study

The purpose of this case study is to highlight a promising programme, service or approach that is supported by the UNICEF country office and that seeks to address issues of violence against children in Tanzania. It provides an outline of the work that is being done, and an analysis of its successes and challenges. The information presented is based on a documentary review and interviews with those involved and available. Its intended audience includes those working in the areas of research, programmes and policy to address violence against children in-country, in the region, and elsewhere, such as UNICEF, the Government of Tanzania, donors, civil society organisations and academicians.

Introduction

Violence against children includes ‘all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse’.¹ According to the Global End Violence Against Children campaign, one billion girls and boys suffer from violence every year, including physical, emotional and sexual violence.² Children all over the world are threatened by violence, yet the poorest and most marginalised children face the greatest risks and are least likely to be protected by their societies.³ Girls are especially vulnerable: they are subject to multiple forms of violence, including infanticide, femicide, sexual and physical violence, emotional violence, intimate partner violence,
trafficking and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation.⁴

Violence is an ongoing reality for children in Tanzania. A study conducted in 2009 on violence against girls and boys found that children experience high levels of sexual, physical and emotional violence in multiple settings, including the home, the community, the workplace, in care facilities and in school.⁵ One of the ongoing violence issues for children in Tanzania is witchcraft, although it is poorly documented. The Witchcraft Act of 2002 stipulates that witchcraft includes sorcery, enchantment, bewitching, the use of instruments of witchcraft, the alleged use of magical or supernatural powers and the alleged possession of any supernatural beliefs and knowledge.⁶ Anyone found guilty of exercising witchcraft with the intent of causing harm, death, fear or misfortune to people can be sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment or more.⁷

Although there are no specific data on numbers, over the past decade, witchcraft has been linked to young girls and boys being raped or injured, sometimes killed. Children living with albinism have been particularly targeted. Witch doctors, or traditional healers, advise adults to bring the blood or a limb of a child, or to rape a child, because it is believed that body parts and blood are needed in witchcraft to bring prosperity, good fortune and good health.⁸

The Government of Tanzania recognises that witchcraft is a serious concern and considers it to be a hindrance to national development. However, witchcraft remains entrenched in some parts of the country, such as Iringa and Njombe in the southern highlands, and Mwanza and Kigoma in the north, despite opposition from religious leaders, widespread sensitisation and tough legal penalties.⁹

Criminal acts related to witchcraft happen every year in Tanzania but, according to UNICEF staff, 2018 and 2019 were particularly bad years in the Njombe and Mbeya regions with high numbers of children being injured and killed for witchcraft purposes. It is unclear why more children were injured and killed in these years, although numbers had been rising over time. This case study showcases how the Tanzanian child protection system is robust and flexible enough to respond effectively to extreme cases such as these, without having to develop separate structures, guidelines and procedures.
UNICEF Tanzania’s support in addressing VAC through system strengthening

Since the enactment of the Law of Child Act (2009), UNICEF has supported the government to design a child protection system that can prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. As part of the child protection systems model, different regulations were developed to guide the implementation of the law. A child protection system coordination mechanism was designed and implemented at all Government administration levels (village, ward, district, regional and national level), and UNICEF continues to support the establishment and strengthening of these structures. The model was piloted in 2009 in four regions (Dar es Salaam, Kilimanjaro, Mwanza and Kigoma). It is now being scaled up nationwide, although different Local Government Authorities are at different stages of development. UNICEF currently supports 39 of 185 Local Government Authorities.

In strengthening the child protection system, UNICEF supported the development of regulations, guidelines and training manuals, which were used to train key frontline workers, such as police, social welfare officers, community development officers, magistrates and teachers. It also encouraged prevention and response mechanisms in homes through the enhancement of parents’ and caregivers’ knowledge and skills on ways to protect children, with a specific focus on developing and practicing non-violent discipline techniques. UNICEF also supported the development of the National Plan of Action to End Violence against Children, which was later expanded to a National Plan of Action to End Violence against Women and Children (2017/8 – 2021/22) in which all the components of a child protection system are included. This plan is multi-sectoral and is now being implemented by key ministries and UN agencies.
Promising approach to respond to cases of violence against children

Background

Between July 2018 and February 2019, there were 13 cases of rape against children – all girls under the age of 10 years – in the mining area of Matundas Ward, Chunya District, in Southern Tanzania, resulting in two deaths, including a three year old and a six year old. The rape cases were linked to witchcraft because the perpetrators were in search of blood and body fluids from young girls, which they believed were needed to conduct rituals to boost their production in mining activities. From November 2019 to February 2020, ten girls and boys below the age of 10 were also attacked in Njombe, resulting in seven deaths. These killings were also linked to witchcraft.

Child protection system response mechanism

As soon as these events in Chunya and Njombe came to light, social welfare officers visited the concerned families. They initially conducted an assessment of the safety and needs of the victims and their families, including other children in the household. This evaluation was followed by a preliminary enquiry to ascertain what had happened and write up a social enquiry report. In response to these cases, social welfare officers were able to provide financial, medical, psychosocial and legal assistance to victims and families as needed through the case management fund financed by UNICEF, as well as additional funding provided by the government and community members. The financial support primarily helped to cover the funeral costs for some of the children who had died. Legal assistance was also provided to help support victims and family members to understand and navigate judicial processes, and to follow up on cases that had gone to court. Psychosocial support was provided for as long as it was needed to the victims and other family members, including other children residing in the household who may have been traumatised and grieving.

According to UNICEF staff, social welfare officers collaborated closely with the Gender and Children’s Desks in Chunya and Njombe, which sit within the police and conduct investigations, as well as with community leaders, such as chiefs, elders and religious leaders, and District Commissioners. The social welfare officers were involved in regular community meetings, and worked closely with traditional leaders to better understand what had happened.

Once the severity of the situation became apparent, the Women and Children Protection Committees got involved in Chunya and in Njombe. These committees meet quarterly to discuss child protection issues in their areas. During this period, the groups realised that the number of cases associated with witchcraft was increasing rapidly. Extraordinary meetings took place outside of their regularly scheduled gatherings to try to address the ongoing rapes and killings. The committee members were very active and organised, and met with community members in village assemblies to discuss, agree and implement prevention strategies at the community level. These included:


- Encouraging parents and caregivers to accompany children to and from school, and ensuring that children walk in groups when not with adults;

- Advising parents to not leave children unattended at home;

- Spreading key messages using community radio, community meetings, brochures for distribution in public areas, mega phones and mobile cinemas to encourage community members not to believe in nor follow the advice of the witch doctors;

- Increasing numbers of police stations in wards;

- Strengthening the women and children protection committees to carry out their responsibilities in addressing child protection issues in their respective areas.

Each district took responsibility for developing agreements with community members to prevent violence and ensure safety. Some of these by-laws included: closing all bars at 6pm; requesting IDs from all newcomers to the villages; identifying all visitors in guest houses and households; and cutting back bushes around homes to reduce hiding spaces.

**Achievements**

In early 2020, UNICEF supported Njombe region to develop and finalise its regional communication plan (as called upon by the NPA-VAWC) to prevent violence against children. Key messages were developed and pre-tested and are disseminated through theatre groups, religious and traditional leaders, influential elders and through community radio and community dialogues. As a consequence, there is an increase in the number of child protection cases being reported and more people, including traditional healers, are speaking out against violence and rape in general. Anecdotally, killings associated with witchcraft appear to have decreased, although there are no hard data to verify this. Typically, cases of witchcraft increase around elections, but last year the anticipated rise did not appear to take place.

As a result of the coordinated action taken by the police and the social welfare officers, five people were arrested in relation to the rape cases in Chunya, and four people were arrested in connection with the killings in Njombe. One suspect was a child who confirmed that he had killed children due to witchcraft beliefs. His case is ongoing.

Although they had no direct connection with the rape cases in Chunya, ten witchdoctors were arrested for inciting violence among community members. These witchdoctors were known for claiming to know who in the community had put a curse on other community members, which would then contribute to tension and conflict among community members. The witchdoctors were not taken to court, but were educated on the effects of what they were doing, and cautioned.

According to the Njombe Ward Executive, the District Commissioner convened many meetings with community members and ordered police to conduct frequent patrols in the community. He openly condemned violence associated with witchcraft and urged parents to expose suspects. His actions are paying off; children are now safer and signposts advertising witchdoctors’ services have significantly reduced.
Addressing witchcraft is not an easy task. Government officials work in fear because some, like many others in these regions, believe in witchcraft. Community members respect and believe in the power of witch doctors and continue to seek their services for a fee. Furthermore, it is often difficult to provide the evidence needed to prove that violence has been caused by witchcraft.

UNICEF staff explained that while there is support from UNICEF and other partners to strengthen the child protection system, resources at district level are inadequate to meet the high number of child protection related challenges.

According to the minutes of a meeting in Chunya in February 2019 and interviews with UNICEF staff, one of the biggest challenges the districts face in bringing perpetrators to justice is that parents choose to settle cases outside of court and refuse to testify. There is a general distrust of the justice system. Families prefer to find solutions among themselves, with perpetrators often prepared to pay large sums of money to a victim’s family to settle out of court.

In a Legal and Human Rights Centre report, teachers and community members in Njombe reported that the police were generally uncooperative until the severity of the issue attracted a lot of media attention and became of public interest. At that point, Senior Police Officers were sent to investigate and social welfare officers were told they could no longer provide support to the families involved. The lack of local security mechanisms means that communities are entirely dependent on the police. There were also frustrations among community members that legal procedures took too long and they therefore took matters into their own hands. In one instance, an alleged rapist was seriously injured.
Key learning

A lot of time, resources and effort have gone into strengthening the child protection system in Tanzania, and the response mechanisms that kicked in following the brutal attacks and killings of children demonstrate that it is reasonably robust to respond to such extreme events in an effective way: all actors concerned played their role, investigating the incidents and providing assistance as needed to victims and families. Coordination and communication among the different sectors involved in the cases were also strong and led to multiple arrests of suspected perpetrators. Subsequently, sustained messaging in the affected communities and surrounding areas appears to have led to an increase in reports of child protection concerns to the police and a decrease in numbers of incidents linked to witchcraft.

That said, in areas where it is practiced, witchcraft is still both revered and feared and it is difficult as a consequence to fully address the violence that can accompany it. Furthermore, a combination of a lack of resources and a lack of faith in the judicial system from community members appears to undermine the child protection system’s ability to follow through on cases, thereby jeopardising the need for perpetrators to be brought to justice and for victims to feel better protected.

People in Tanzania and across the region tend to rely on the informal system of negotiations between families and individuals when crimes have been committed, particularly in instances of grave violence. Moving forward, it would be helpful to identify, understand and consider dynamics and priorities at play within communities as agencies seek to build and strengthen a child protection system that can respond effectively to the needs and priorities of the people it seeks to protect.
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Sources

[4] https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/ The Spotlight Initiative is a global partnership spanning several years between the European Union and the United Nations. It was launched in 2017 and aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls through prevention, protection and the provision of services, with a focus on women’s economic empowerment and participation in all aspects of society.
[6] United Republic of Tanzania (2002). The Witchcraft Act. The Witchcraft Act defines ‘instruments of witchcraft’ as “anything which is used or intended to be used or is commonly used, or which is represented or generally believed to possess the power, to prevent or delay any person from doing any act which he may lawfully do, or to compel any person to do any act which he may lawfully refrain from doing, or to discover the person guilty of any alleged crime or other act of which complainant is made, or to cause death, injury or disease to any person or damage to any property, or to put any person in fear, or by supernatural means to produce any natural phenomenon and includes charms and medicines commonly used for any of the purposes aforesaid.”
[13] Vehicles, installed with equipment to show movies, travel to remote areas, including where there is no electricity, to show free movies with specific messages for the community.
[14] Information is taken from the minutes of a meeting in Chunya in February 2019 involving Social Welfare Officers, Community Development Officers and UNICEF staff, as well as a UNICEF report on the killings of children in Njombe.
[15] Information is taken from the minutes of a meeting in Njombe in February 2019 involving Social Welfare Officers, Community Development Officers and UNICEF staff.
[17] Social welfare officers in Njombe and Chunya told UNICEF staff that up until now there have been no additional cases reported of killings or rape associated with witchcraft in their districts.
[18] Information is taken from the minutes of a meeting in Chunya in February 2019 involving Social Welfare Officers, Community Development Officers and UNICEF staff.
[20] Information is taken from the minutes of a meeting in Chunya in February 2019 involving Social Welfare Officers, Community Development Officers and UNICEF staff.
[22] Ibid.