Child protection case study

TAPPING INTO COMMUNITY VALUES TO SUPPORT CHILD PROTECTION IN FIJI

"CHILDREN ARE A PRECIOUS GIFT FROM GOD": COMMUNITY-BASED FACILITATION MANUAL
For many years, the Fijian government, together with UNICEF and development partners has worked tirelessly to promote the need for increased awareness of children’s protection issues in Fijian villages. Central to these community discussions is the use of “Children are a Gift from God”, an educational resource package that enables trained facilitators to foster community efforts to increase protection of children against abuse, exploitation and neglect. This case study will explore the manual’s impact in Fijian communities and present recommendations by development partners on future considerations to ensure the resource’s continued relevance and effectiveness.

The Nakese settlement is located 20 minutes from the bustling cosmopolitan town of Suva in the Pacific island nation of Fiji, but on first impressions, it appears a million miles away. Resettled here from Suva in 1985 to make way for the city’s stadium, the five communities that call Nakese home have etched out a living over the past three decades with limited access to health, education and social services. A road put in just before the most recent election, paved the way for future development in their village. Before that, the only way in and out was via a muddy and slippery path that became increasingly unreliable (and dangerous) with the notorious inclement Suva weather.

On a mild afternoon, representatives from this settlement and nearby villages took time out of their busy days to attend a session on positive parenting skills. Through using a community facilitation manual, “Children are a gift from God”, Malinda Tugaga, Community Protection Officer from the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation of the Fijian government facilitated a discussion on the role of children in Fijian communities. As the meeting progressed, it became more and more obvious that the process was about providing parents the opportunity to reflect on how their own personal experiences, culture and tradition have moulded their parenting styles. Many shared their experiences of physical punishment as children as a way of discipline. Most agreed that their personal history had formed their attitudes towards disciplining their own children. All were open to learning about alternative ways such as positive parenting.

In the gathering, one elderly lady speaks of the young children who roam the streets near her home, not attending school and seemingly uncarred for. When she uses the word ‘neglect’, Malinda nods knowingly, noting the term’s use as potentially a result of her work with this community. It appears that awareness about protecting children is high; people understand the importance of caring for their kids and the kids of their neighbours and families. However, there is a broader acknowledgement that child protection is also equally dependent on the systems and services of the social and community institutions such as government ministries, police, non-government agencies and community groups.

The “Children are a Gift from God” manual has been used in child protection outreach activities by the Department of Social Welfare for a number of years. Using a strengths-based approach, the manual has proven to be an effective facilitation tool in encouraging community participation around potentially contentious issues. The manual promotes alternative ways to traditional and cultural ideas of raising children around five central themes:

1. Effective child rearing depends on the development of sound, healthy relationships with family, community and society and is the responsibility of everyone
2. Causes of child abuse and neglect are complex
3. Children are a precious gift from God and ought to be protected
4. Parents are best placed to “drive” child safety and protection
5. Children are best protected from child abuse and neglect by stopping it before it begins

This recently revised resource was initially produced through the Pacific Children’s Project jointly implemented by UNICEF Pacific and the Australian Government, and continues to play a key role in ongoing children's protection awareness activities.
ACHIEVEMENTS/
SUCCESS FACTORS

A number of factors are highlighted as key contributors to the manual’s widespread uptake and effectiveness:

Champions for children’s protection

Central to the manual’s success as an outreach tool is the work and commitment of a number of ‘champions’ working within government, development agencies and communities. At the forefront of children’s protection in Suva is a small team of highly committed Social Welfare Officers from the Department of Social Welfare, who work tirelessly with mostly marginalized communities to raise awareness about the importance of protecting children from neglect, abuse and exploitation. There are three officers each covering a district in Vitu Levu. Much of their time is spent travelling to, and speaking with, communities in their districts, facilitating the establishment of community-based groups, planning actions to promote child protection at the village level, and supporting community awareness-raising opportunities.

At the community level, the work of Pauline Fong in Nassouri showcases ongoing efforts to mobilize and foster individuals to take leadership in the area of child protection. Following a workshop which used the initial version of the “Children are a Gift from God” resource, Pauline was instrumental in establishing a group of more than 20 women wanting to make a difference in their homes and communities. Initially the group met monthly to discuss how to increase awareness of children’s protection in their village. Since that time, the group has grown and undertaken a number of activities in their homes and communities (including churches, temples and mosques) to promote the need to protect children, especially the importance of considering alternatives to using violence as discipline or punishment in the household.

Targeted at parents and caregivers

The manual is primarily aimed at parents and caregivers to encourage positive parenting and promote alternatives, such as positive discipline, to physical punishment. In a 2008 survey, 72 per cent of caregivers interviewed admitted to physically hurting children in their household. The manual seeks to reorient the communities by encouraging them to reflect on how they were raised and to explore how community attitudes and expectations are changing in terms of the roles of children in a modern society. According to Malinda, the workshops using the manual provide parents “permission to care”. In her experience she has seen how the workshops can open up rigorous and informative discussions around different community attitudes about how to raise children. “Many people feel like they have to raise their children the same way they were raised, but now they are seeing that they can question previous practices.” A key outcome of the workshops using the manuals is the development of a community action plan and a community ‘task-force’ that commits to improving child protection attitudes and practices within the village.

According to Ministry’s Assistant Director, Eia Tukutukulevu, the strength of the package is that it is “grassroots, community based, that reminds parents to go back to the basics”. She also resounds that the resource and workshop have given parents “permission to value their children.”

Cross-collaboration and support for children’s protection

The manual and subsequent activities are part of an ongoing collaboration between the Ministry, UNICEF, and key agencies working in child protection in Fiji. The facilitation package has been rolled out nationally across all 14 provinces, including the maritime areas. The package’s underlying premise is simple: the protection of children is up to parents and caregivers and the organizations and services that seek to support them. Without community commitment and infrastructure in place, children are exposed to serious issues of abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Using religion as a community motivator

Part of the revision process was deciding to keep the resource’s former name. The title of the original materials, “Children are a Gift from God” was carried over, participants agreeing that this sentiment appealed to individual and community values regarding what is seen as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ behaviour. Whilst the resource itself only touches on religion, the title aims to tap into existing community values. In Fiji, religion plays a large role in households and communities. Participating in village religious activities such as attending church, temple or mosque is valued in the community and, in many instances, considered a social norm. Using religious overtones is considered an effective motivating factor to promote caring for children.

Increased community demand for more children’s protection initiatives

Anecdotal evidence suggests a noticeable increase in community demand for increased child protection in Fijian villages over the past few years. It is unknown whether this is a result of increased awareness about the need for greater efforts to protect children, or a direct result of an increase in actual cases of abuse and exploitation in the community. Whatever the case, it is recognized by all partners working in this area that this surge of public demand is feeding into national efforts particularly government efforts to respond to community concerns and requests for additional programmes and services to address village needs.

The Ministry of iTaukei (indigenous Fijians) affairs is using the manual to support the development of more tailored resources to support its community-based work. The Ministry is responsible for developing and promoting policies to ensure good governance and welfare of the iTaukei. A key policy maker within the Ministry suggests, “The ministry’s role is to contextualize the manual to help parents and communities.” The Ministry is primarily focussed on responding to specific issues highlighted across iTaukei villages and has translated the manual into Fijian. The Ministry has indicated their awareness of a growing community concern to put into place mechanisms to support children, particularly young girls. The “Children are a Gift from God” manual is proving to be an important foundation resource to instigate further community discussions regarding the need for greater awareness at the village level.
CHALLENGES, LESSONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The need for more resources
Malinda recounts the transformative power of her work, speaking of numerous incidents where parents break down in the workshops, and then re-emerge weeks later having organized community-based groups to further the need for children’s protection. However, it is widely acknowledged that there is an urgent need for more resources, more “manpower” to share the strong messages about the need for improved services for child protection. “There needs to be at least three people covering my area,” says Malinda. This sentiment is echoed by the Senior Welfare Officer of the Central Division, Semi Bukarau, “We need more people on the ground. We need more social welfare officers working with village leaders.” Government and development agencies alike acknowledge the need to reassess the current level of capacity in response to the increase in demand. The Ministry is highly supportive of the need for greater individual and institutional capacity and has indicated this will be a priority in future planning.

The need for a monitoring and evaluation framework
A highlighted priority for the near future is establishing a stronger system for assessing outreach activities. While substantial anecdotal evidence supports the impact and reach of the manual, the need for a formal monitoring and evaluation system to collect qualitative information on its impact has been identified and is being integrated into future departmental workplans. The Director of Social Welfare, Rupeni Fatiaki, is focussed on ensuring that the impact of departmental funds is maximized and acknowledges the role of monitoring and evaluation as a way to leverage ongoing and future funding, “We must always ask, ‘What difference have we made?’” Central to this is an external evaluation framework that will seek to measure the numbers and details of those people participating in child protection awareness activities and the impact of ongoing work in the field. This view is also reflected by UNICEF that also recognizes the need to develop an integrated monitoring and evaluation framework.

Manual assumes previous training and experience in children’s protection
While aimed at general readership, the primary target audience for the manual is facilitators with prior training or experience in child protection issues. This is evident in specific areas of the manual (such as ‘Stages of Development’). There is an underlying assumption that readers either have existing knowledge of children's protection, or have access to means to research further. Many contributors to this manual suggest that the next version of the manual may have to broaden its reach to ensure use by people with little or no training or experience in child protection issues. There is a need to discuss the role of this manual for new facilitators (i.e. people not trained by the Ministry) which may include additional information on how to facilitate, the key role of a facilitator. In this way, the manual also seeks to build the capacity and skills of its readers.

NEXT STEPS
A key focus for the next few years is strengthening how and where the manual can be used as a tool to facilitate and strengthen community infrastructure and support mechanisms and priorities include:

- Providing professional development of Department of Welfare workers, teachers, police and iTaukei to strengthen service delivery through training on ‘Children are a Gift from God’ facilitation manual
- Developing a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for implementation of the manual that will include capturing information on the communities exposed to this manual through the training
- Promoting how the manual can be used by all communities to support community development initiatives

UNICEF Pacific Child Protection Programme
UNICEF’s Child Protection programme sets out to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Child Protection Systems (including Justice and Police, child and family social services, health and education, and communities) provide improved quality of and access to services for the prevention of and response to violence, abuse and exploitation of children at all times.

2. Parents, caregivers and children demonstrate skills, knowledge and behaviour enabling children to grow up in caring homes and communities, including schools that are free from violence, abuse and exploitation.

This fits within the global framework for child protection, the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) that outlines world benchmarks for children’s protection and standards. Countries who ratify the CRC commit to implementing a number of economic, administrative and social measures to ensure an appropriate protective environment for children. Fiji ratified the CRC in 1993.