SHARING GOOD PRACTICE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ZIMBABWE’S CHILD-FRIENDLY NATIONAL PLAN OF ACTION FOR ORPHANS AND OTHER VULNERABLE CHILDREN

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Abstract

Zimbabwe launched its National Plan of Action (NPA) for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (OVC) in September 2005. Inspired by children’s expressed need to understand the NPA, in 2006 the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare will publish a child-friendly version of the NPA. It was developed in collaboration with children, with the aim of facilitating their participation and coordination in NPA implementation. It uses straightforward language, appealing graphics and creative formatting to make the document easy for children to understand and share.

This paper presents Zimbabwe’s development of the Child-Friendly (CF) NPA as a sound practice and key milestone in the country’s effort to improve the lives of children affected by HIV/AIDS. It describes how the idea came about and details the process of developing the document through extensive child consultations and close coordination between non-governmental organisations and the government. The paper also explains why the CF NPA is so critical to implementing NPA objectives. In particular, the paper highlights how the CF NPA will facilitate youth development by supporting meaningful child participation and enabling coordinated peer education on the NPA for OVC.

Paper

In June 2003, more than 300 people met in Harare, Zimbabwe, for a national stakeholders’ conference aimed at drafting the country’s National Plan of Action (NPA) for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (OVC).¹ The participants included 50 children, as well as representatives from government ministries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and international organizations. These children designed the conference theme: “Children at the Centre: Our Joy Today, Our Hope Tomorrow – Action Now” (GoZ 2004, 16). Then, using their own words, they submitted recommendations for what objectives the NPA should include. They also lobbied for ongoing child participation in the development, implementation and monitoring of the NPA, and requested that the final plan be something they could understand. During the conference, the children created and recited a slogan that made their position on child participation clear:

“Anything for us, without us, is against us.”

This message was taken to heart throughout the development of the NPA, and lives on in the coordinated and participatory way in which the NPA is being implemented. In 2006, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare

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will publish a child-friendly version of the NPA – an idea inspired by children and developed in collaboration with children, with the aim of facilitating their participation and coordination in NPA implementation.

This paper will present the Child-Friendly (CF) NPA as a good practice and key milestone in Zimbabwe’s effort to improve the lives of children affected by HIV/AIDS. It begins by providing some additional background on the NPA, its development, and the role of children in key NPA institutions. Then, the paper reflects on the motivation behind creating a child-friendly version and the process of developing the CF NPA, including what was learned from the child consultations held throughout the development process. It also highlights the reasons why this special version is so important to implementing NPA objectives. In particular, the paper describes how the Child-Friendly NPA will facilitate youth development by supporting meaningful child participation and enabling coordinated peer education on the NPA for OVC.

This paper comes at a critical juncture. Developing and implementing a national OVC policy is one component of the Declaration of Commitment signed by 189 State parties, including Zimbabwe, at the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the global HIV/AIDS pandemic in 2001 (UNGA 2001). In 2006, the UN is set to review countries’ progress towards fulfilling this commitment. Zimbabwe will be the only country in the region, and possibly the world, with a child-friendly version of its OVC policy.

Part 1 – Background on NPA Development

At the international level, three significant strategic meetings served as the backdrop for NPA development in Zimbabwe: the November 2000 “OVC in Eastern and Southern Africa” meeting in Lusaka, Zambia; the June 2001 UNGASS meeting; and the November 2002 Regional Workshop on Children Affected by HIV/AIDS in Windhoek, Namibia. At the Lusaka meeting, government and NGO participants proposed five strategic components of an effective national response to the OVC crisis, including “national consultation and the establishment of coordinating structures” and “development of a national action plan” (Dhlembeu and Mayanga 2006, 39). Next, UNGASS resulted in a Declaration of Commitment, as noted above. Finally, the Windhoek workshop helped countries develop national action plans to meet their UNGASS commitments, and Zimbabwe’s delegation returned with a draft plan to finalize an NPA by 2003 and begin its implementation in 2005 (Dhlembeu and Mayanga 2006, 40-1).

The delegation presented its plan to the Social Services Action Committee (SSAC) of the Cabinet, and, with support from the SSAC, an OVC Working Group of government officials and representatives of NGOs and donor organizations began preparing for the above-mentioned national stakeholders’ consultative conference to develop a draft NPA. In preparation for this
conference, Futures Group completed a study of OVC programming in Zimbabwe. A key finding from this study was that more than 200 organizations were implementing programs for children without the strong coordination structures necessary to create seamless safety nets.

After the “Children at the Centre” conference, children – along with representatives from seven government ministries, the National AIDS Council, UNICEF, community-based organizations (CBOs), international NGOs, faith-based organizations, the National Association of NGOs, the Zimbabwe Red Cross Society, donors, and the private sector – were represented in the Working Party of Officials (WPO) charged with moving the policy from draft stage to a document that could be presented to the government for approval. Many months and meetings later, in August 2005, more than 300 children repeated their slogan during a Children’s Summit to introduce the final NPA, which the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) officially launched on 8 September 2005.

The NPA’s vision is “to reach out to all orphans and other vulnerable children in Zimbabwe with basic services that will positively impact on their lives” (GoZ 2004, 5). Its seven main objectives are to:

- Strengthen the existing coordination structures for OVC programs;
- Increase child participation as appropriate in all issues that concern them from community to national level, considering their evolving capacities;
- Increase the percentage of children with birth certificates;
- Increase new school enrolment of OVC while ensuring retention of OVC in primary and secondary schools;
- Increase access to food, health services and water and sanitation for all OVC;
- Increase education on nutrition, health, and hygiene for all OVC; and
- Protect OVC from abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, and loss of inheritance and reduce the number of children who live outside of a family environment (GoZ 2004, 17).

Not only is increasing child participation in decision-making an NPA objective, but the concept of child participation is also a guiding principle. It is significant, too, that improving coordination – a motivating force behind the creation of the NPA – is now an NPA objective. Child participation and coordination form the foundation upon which all the other NPA objectives become achievable.

Several institutions have been established to implement the NPA in a coordinated and participatory way, and children are represented in almost all of them. First, there is a National Secretariat based in the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare. This National Secretariat supports the establishment of district- and provincial-level Secretariats, which in turn are helping to create village-, district- and provincial-level Child Protection Committees (CPCs) and village-level Children’s Committees. All children can be
members of their village Children’s Committee, and it is this committee that elects child representatives to the CPCs and advises these representatives on children’s issues, challenges and needs. The CPCs are charged with NPA implementation, coordination, and monitoring and evaluation activities, and their members include a wide range of stakeholders, such as members of the Zimbabwe Republic Police, CBOs, village headmen, health workers and children. Finally, now that the NPA has been finalised, the WPO’s terms of reference are to monitor NPA implementation and to ensure child participation both in the WPO and in NPA implementation (GoZ 2004).

As first published in August 2004, and as launched in September 2005, the NPA is a 60-page document written in English for an adult audience with a high level of literacy. It is printed in small type with no graphics or colours.

**Part 2 – Development of the CF NPA**

At the start of 2005, the WPO determined its priorities for the year, which included creating a “simplified” version of the NPA. Early in the NPA development process, children had expressed their desire to have an NPA that they could understand, and it was hoped that a simplified NPA would respond to this need, as well as the needs of low-literacy adults. Recognizing the importance of raising stakeholders’ awareness of the NPA, the WPO also made plans to host a National Children’s Summit and an official NPA launch (GoZ 2005).

The goal of the Summit was to educate child representatives from across the country about the NPA, so that they could return to their communities and share what they had learned with other children. However, as the WPO and the National Secretariat began preparing for the Summit, they realized they could not simply present the dense NPA policy document to children and expect them to understand the policy, nor could they expect children to use such a document to coordinate children’s involvement in the NPA. Instead, they needed a child-friendly communication tool that would effectively acquaint children with the NPA and help children share information about the NPA with their peers. This need was a topic of discussion among WPO members, including Catholic Relief Services/Zimbabwe (CRS/ZW) and Save the Children Norway in Zimbabwe (SCN-Z). Building upon the idea of “simplifying” the NPA, the National Secretariat, CRS/ZW and SCN-Z proposed developing a child-friendly version that would explain the main features of the NPA using simple, straight-forward language, appealing graphics and creative formatting.

The CF NPA idea was quickly approved by the WPO. It was to be written in English, with a view towards developing local language versions at a later stage. Once finalized, the CF NPA was submitted to the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare for approval to make it an official government document.
With support from CRS/ZW and SCN-Z, the process of developing the CF NPA began in June 2005. The first step was to select and hire an expert, Justine Smith. Smith’s role was to facilitate all child consultations; use feedback from these sessions to “translate” the NPA into child-friendly language; liaise with an artist engaged to draw simple, appealing illustrations; and co-manage, along with the Secretariat, CRS/ZW and SCN-Z, the final design and publication of the document by a professional design/printing company.

At the very start, the Secretariat, CRS/ZW, SCN-Z and Smith (hereafter referred to as “the team”) made some initial decisions about the CF NPA’s goal, design, content, and process of development with the aim of upholding principles of coordination and child participation.

First, they decided that the primary goals of the CF NPA would be to 1) provide the information necessary to inspire, motivate and make possible children’s coordinated participation in NPA implementation and 2) serve as a tool children could use to share the NPA with their peers. To meet these goals, the team decided to include critical content from the original NPA, as well as interactive activities that would encourage children to think about both how they could become involved in NPA implementation and how government agencies, organizations, community members and children may already be involved. In addition, the CF NPA would include a resource page that children could use to contact key NPA institutions. A secondary goal of the CF NPA was to give all community members – CPC members, peer educators, teachers, NGO representatives, etc. – a tool they could use in their work with children to help share information about the NPA.

Second, the team made the design decision to create one CF NPA that catered to different levels of children’s capacities instead of multiple CF NPAs for differing levels of capacity. This one document would appeal to children of all ages and feature a variety of entry points for children to access information. Thus, children with less capacity could simply flip through the CF NPA and engage with the pictures, while more advanced users could read the fine print and complete the activities. The team also thought having one document would encourage children of differing capacities to work together to understand the NPA, creating the foundation for their coordinated support of NPA implementation.

In terms of content, the team decided to craft the CF NPA around two child characters – Tendai (a Shona name) and Sibongile (an Ndebele name) – whose personal stories would help tell the “story” of the NPA’s objectives and implementation activities. The team also invited two youth who had participated as children in the 2003 national stakeholder conference to write an introduction to the CF NPA. This introduction explained that children had been involved in the policy from its very early stages and encouraged children to continue this involvement by participating in NPA implementation. A third content decision
was to create a special “acknowledgements” section listing the names of each group of children that participated in the process of developing the CF NPA.

Finally, the team designed a three-stage development process using a child participation methodology. This decision was grounded in the belief that children have a right to participate in imparting information to their peers, and that such participation would ensure that the document was accessible and appealing to children and met their information needs. The three stages of the development process were initial child consultations (including one consultation at the Children’s Summit), working draft child consultations and a field test with children. Two additions to this original plan were a working draft consultation that included adults as well as children and an extension to the field test stage – Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with selected field-test participants.

The team also made the decision to include as many types of “vulnerable” children iv as possible in the consultations and field tests, to strive for gender balance, and to consult with a diverse range of children in terms of age, geographic area (both majority Shona and majority Ndebele areas), and rural/urban area. Along the way, the team also planned to solicit feedback from the WPO members. The draft CF NPA was continually modified based on feedback received from all sources.

The development process lasted more than three months, followed by a review, editing and printing process of about the same length of time. It was quite clear to the team that the participation of children in the development process made the CF NPA a much stronger publication. To begin with, the consultations helped the team determine what words were most difficult for children to understand, and how children would explain them in their own words. In the CF NPA, “coordination” is defined as “working together” – a definition that emerged directly from a consultation. Children’s suggestion of including comic strips is also reflected in the final product. Children asked, too, that the pictures depict a wider age range, and the team commissioned new pictures in response. As a final example of the richness of the children’s feedback, children at the Summit expressed concern that the CF NPA would stigmatize them, since it only applied to OVC and not to all children. Although the CF NPA development process could change the NPA’s target beneficiaries, the team did take away the important reminder that OVC are, fundamentally, children. For this reason, “OVC” is never used in the CF NPA, in order to avoid labelling a varied group of children with one acronym.

Part 3 – Importance of the CF NPA and Next Steps

The intention is for the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare to publish the final CF NPA in April 2006. It is significant to share as a sound practice and key milestone for two key reasons. First, the process of developing the document demonstrates the importance NPA stakeholders ascribe to
coordination and participation, and provides an example of how this coordination and participation can occur among government, NGOs, and children in the OVC policy arena. Second, the document itself will contribute to meeting the NPA’s objectives of participation and coordination. Children now have a resource they can use to understand the NPA, and, by engaging in CF NPA activities, they can relate the NPA to their own lives and their own communities. This will enhance their ability to participate in NPA implementation as CPC representatives or as members of child-led groups, and gives child-led groups already involved in supporting OVC the information they need to coordinate their activities with other NPA stakeholders. It is only through coordination and participation that the NPA’s objectives in education, health, birth registration, etc., can be met.

Particularly critical for this CINDI conference is to highlight how the CF NPA will facilitate youth development. Child participation experts stress the important role that participation plays in further developing children’s capacity to participate (ECPAT International 1999; Lansdown 2004). Lansdown (2004, 6), for example, argues that, “the most effective model for developing competencies is one where children work collaboratively, each serving as a resource for others, and taking varying roles and responsibilities according to their understanding and expertise”. The CF NPA is designed to enable and enhance child participation in the NPA, and, as noted, earlier, one of the initial decisions was that the document should be accessible to children of different ages, thereby encouraging them to work together. In addition, the CF NPA can be used by peer educators to engage the children of all ages, especially OVC, in NPA implementation and to encourage coordination. It is in these ways that the CF NPA will contribute to youth development.

The CF NPA is an important output, but there are many things that can and hopefully will be done to amplify its positive impact. First, the WPO sub-committee on communications and advocacy is currently reviewing a CF NAP dissemination strategy. To fulfil its potential role, the CF NPA must be distributed to children – and all organisations/institutions that work with children – on a national level. It should also be distributed regionally and internationally to demonstrate Zimbabwe’s leadership in the area of OVC policy and to disseminate the sound practice of creating child-friendly policy communications. Presenting at conferences like this is one part of this dissemination effort. Second, there are a number of “spin-off” CF NPA products being considered by the WPO, including translation into the local languages of Shona and Ndebele and the creation of guides that teachers, peer educators, CPC members and NGOs can use to introduce the CF NPA to children.

Part 4 - Conclusion

A sound practice can be defined as operational practices or sets of actions used to demonstrate what works best in a particular context and why. Sound practices
make a positive difference, have a sustainable effect, and serve as a model for the adoption of initiatives elsewhere.

This paper has presented the Zimbabwe’s CF NPA as a sound practice. The CF NPA is an important initiative in the Zimbabwe context, in which cooperation and child participation were a key part of the NPA development from the start and are now NPA objectives. The positive impact it will have in facilitating child participation and enhancing coordination with children is yet unknown, but initial indications are that it will be significant. As other countries look towards fulfilling their UNGASS commitment to have a national OVC policy, the process of developing the CF NPA, and the document itself, serves as a useful model.

References


For a more detailed account of the meetings, reports, conferences and commitments that inspired the NPA’s development, see “Responding to the Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Crisis – Development of Zimbabwe’s National Plan of Action” by N. Dhlembeu and N. Mayanga. 2006. Journal of Social Development in Africa. 21(1).

The NPA defines a child as a person below the age of 18 years, and an orphan as a child whose mother and father have both died (GoZ 2004, 7-8).

CRS/ZW’s funding contribution came through its Support to Replicable, Innovative Village/community-level Efforts (STRIVE) project for OVC and SCN-Z’s funding came through its Light the Children’s Path project.
The NPA defines vulnerable children as children with “unfulfilled rights”, such as children with disabilities, children infected with HIV/AIDS, street children, working children, and children in conflict with the law (GoZ 2004, 7-8).