

OAK FOUNDATION



The Child Abuse Programme aims to catalyse stakeholders, including children, to address the abuse and exploitation of children.

**Child Abuse Programme
What we're learning
November 2011**

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INTRODUCTION

For the Child Abuse Programme, learning is not an isolated function or an end in itself. For us learning is one of the strategies through which we can support improvements in programming and policy-making in the field of child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Ideally, learning combines evidence from practice and academic research and is enriched by the connection and interplay of both. In our view, combining the rigour of academic thinking with the wisdom and experience of practitioners, and recognising expertise from both the North and the South, are key to the generation of credible, relevant and accessible learning.

Building and finding evidence of what interventions are most effective and used in different contexts is central to learning. Having evidence gives practitioners the evidence to scale up interventions or undertake advocacy to influence policies and practices.

Through support to learning we hope to contribute to the development of evidence that resonates with and supports our partners in their quest to implement effective programmes. Learning will help us better target our investments in the sector to positively impact the lives of children. Our hope is that it also informs and strengthens the child protection sector as a whole.

For Oak, this commitment to learning is reflected in three distinct strands of work:

Framing and investing in learning through grants on priority issues identified with partners. These make up Oak's Learning Agenda.

Encouraging learning in other related priority areas that have emerged from over ten years of grant-making.

Encouraging better monitoring and evaluation of all of the projects we support, to contribute to the pool of practice-generated learning on sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children.

LEARNING AGENDA

Five issues or questions were selected in consultation with partners:

1. What can we learn from the life experience of children, families and communities to inform our understanding of resilience and strengthen practice and policy?
2. What are effective strategies for increasing the positive engagement of men and boys in the prevention of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children?
3. How are communities protecting their children, how are these linked with formal child protection systems, and how can external actors positively support them?
4. What do we know about the risks that increase children's vulnerability to sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and related trafficking and how can this understanding be translated into effective and sustainable risk mitigation interventions?
5. What can we learn from projects that promote children's participation, about the range of strategies and approaches that are consistent with children's rights to be listened to, respected and protected?

What can we learn from the life experience of children, families and communities to inform our understanding of resilience and strengthen practice and policy?

Using a broad definition of resilience-informed work as a starting point, Oak is supporting a number of projects through which we hope our partners and the child protection sector might learn more about the concept as it applies in practice.

This includes the Bamboo project, a multi country research and practice evaluation process, through which we are trying to generate answers to the question "What may be learned from the life experience of children and adults, from families and communities, and from programme practice that contributes to an understanding of resilience in prevention of and recovery from child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation". The overall aim of this initiative is to stimulate and support new thinking and new approaches, leading potentially to new policy and innovative practice that responds not only to the needs of the children but builds on their own experience and on the knowledge and experience of their families and communities. The research will be implemented in a number of different geographic sites; it began in Ethiopia in 2009, followed by work in Bulgaria in 2010, with a third site starting in 2011.

Other work linked to understanding more about resilience include our support for a review of risk and resilience factors within the Young Lives project, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty. In Switzerland we are supporting work based on the concept of Bientraitance, that is assessing how this impacts children's awareness of and protection from abuse and exploitation.

What are effective strategies for increasing the positive engagement of men and boys in the prevention of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children?

Oak Foundation's starting premise is that sexual abuse and exploitation can be prevented, but not just by supporting work with "victims". We are currently supporting a range of activities aimed at preventing/reducing sexual violence towards children through working with potential or actual abusers and exploiters. Current partners are addressing this through:

1. work with offenders to reduce the risks of re-offending (in Bulgaria and Switzerland);
2. work with potential abusers (through Stop It Now in the UK);
3. challenging and changing gender norms and stereotypes that tolerate or exacerbate sexual violence (in East and Southern Africa);
4. work that aims to reduce the demand from potential buyers of sexual services (including work with the private sector in Mozambique, and in setting standards of behavior for those in the humanitarian sector).

Expanding the evidence about effective work, through supporting partnerships between researchers and practitioners, and encouraging dialogue between actors working on different approaches in different contexts, will be a critical and ongoing element of our work.

How are communities protecting their children, how are these linked with formal child protection systems, and how can external actors positively support them?

In almost all societies, the primary source of protection for children is the family. In many instances, the family is supported by community members, including those organized as community based organizations. These can be a critical resource in recognizing and addressing child protection issues, especially in low-income settings. Oak is funding work aimed at strengthening the capacity of these organizations to play this role even more effectively.

One strategy for strengthening this work, is to generate in-depth knowledge about how communities have traditionally protected and supported their children, and how external agencies can strengthen or enhance their capacity – including identifying and addressing some of the most difficult and hidden forms of abuse, like sexual abuse. Oak is supporting interagency action research that will help deliver this understanding.

Another strand of work is looking at strengthening the organizational capacity of community based organizations. Through a partnership with Firelight Foundation, Oak is supporting work that will explore how this can contribute to better outcomes for children.

Both strands connect to work on child protection systems. Community based groups can play a key role in identifying children who have been abused or neglected and linking them to other parts of a system of support services. In many contexts the community groups may function as the front line responders. Oak is funding work in Sierra Leone, Brazil, Bulgaria, Uganda and Ethiopia that is helping to generate evidence about how community groups effectively connect with the more "formal system" to better address children's protection concerns.

What do we know about the risks that increase children’s vulnerability to sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and related trafficking and how can this understanding be translated into effective and sustainable risk mitigation interventions?

Identifying and addressing vulnerability to all forms of abuse lie at the heart of prevention work – and preventing abuse before it happens is of course something that everyone in the sector aspires to. Effective prevention work though requires an understanding of risks, how they interconnect with protective factors, and evidence about project/programmatic interventions that effectively mitigate the former and/or strengthen the latter. While there is “a substantial body of knowledge about what can increase susceptibility to child maltreatment”, in reality this is partial and is derived predominantly from research in high and middle income settings. In low income contexts, in addition to significant gap in the evidence about risks associated with vulnerability to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, there is little research about interventions that effectively mitigate those risks.

In the course of over ten years’ grant-making, Oak’s partners have implemented projects aimed at addressing a number of risks that have been deemed to increase a child’s vulnerability to being sexually abused or exploited. We see great opportunities for increasing practice-generated evidence through supporting cross project evaluations.

For many of our partners, poverty or economic disadvantage is one of the factors identified as increasing the risk of a child being sexually exploited, and more indirectly, associated with increased risks of sexual abuse. We are supporting a number of interventions that will explore the nature of the connection and how to strengthen responses.

What can we learn from projects that promote children’s participation, about the range of strategies and approaches that are consistent with children’s rights to be listened to, respected and protected?

Child participation is both a principle and a strategy – and both are important. Oak’s Child Abuse Programme expects partners to embrace the principle of child participation. And yet while this principle is widely accepted in our field as non-negotiable (and frequently referenced in proposals), we see a huge variation in the extent to which children, in practice, “participate” in project design, implementation, monitoring, and review.

Such variation is not in itself problematic. There is no simple “one size fits all” approach to applying the principle in practice. Differences in approach are justified. But the basis for selection of an approach or the choice of strategies for operationalising participation, is rarely the subject of explicit reflection. In practice, there is little information about the appropriateness or efficacy of different approaches, their relevance to different contexts, different issues, or with different groups of children. Some clarity on these would make the rationale for the choices more transparent.

Oak has supported several interesting examples of participatory approaches, in different contexts.

RELATED PRIORITY AREAS

In addition to projects supported through our “Learning Agenda”, Oak is continuing to support innovative work that expands and supports learning on a range of issues that directly or indirectly impact on risks of or response to sexual abuse, exploitation and/or the related trafficking of children.

Recovery and Reintegration

One theme of special relevance to work with sexually exploited children is recovery and the reintegration of children and young people with their families and/or community. Oak commissioned an assessment of current thinking and practice in the field, that was undertaken by Elspeth Turner and the late Professor Stewart Asquith. The Report offers a number of conclusions and recommendations for further action, but also recognizes that without additional dedicated resources, this might prove difficult. In response, Oak is providing funding for an Oak Fellow, based at the centre for Rural Childhood in Perth College, part of the UHI Millenium Institute, to take a lead on some of this work, including an online information hub.

Oak is also continuing to fund work aimed at expanding access to and improving the quality of services for sexually abused and exploited children, in all of our priority countries and beyond.

For more information see:

* Recovery and Reintegration of Children from the Effects of Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking, Geneva 2008.

* Recuperación y Reintegración de los Niños que sufren los Efectos de la Explotación Sexual y el Tráfico Infantil. Informe encargado por Oak Foundation Child Abuse Programme. Geneva 2008.

* www.childrecovery.info

BETTER MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Learning Initiative 2011: Monitoring and Evaluation to Generate Learning

We hear increasingly about the need for projects to be evidence-based, but we want to support work that is also evidence-generating. This includes supporting partners to design and implement robust systems of monitoring and rigorous evaluations, which generate data on if and how their work contributes to improved outcomes for children. One element of this effort is in demystifying the process and the language used to describe it.

We encourage organizations to document and share their findings, through reports and discussion papers that highlight challenges as well as achievements etc. We welcome and support evaluations and cross-project reflections that focus on “learning for the future” rather than a glowing audit of past practice aimed at justifying the next application.

With the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Oak is supporting the Children and Violence Evaluation Challenge Fund. This initiative is aimed at encouraging better policies and practices to address violence against children in low and middle-income contexts, through supporting the generation of credible, relevant and accessible evaluations. The pooled fund will provide resources to organizations to conduct rigorous evaluations of interventions.

[For more information:](#)

Simplifying the language of Project Design Monitoring & Evaluation (DM&E). Geneva 2010