



RESEARCH BRIEF

Child and Youth Protection and Development [March 2013]

The **New Generation** project in Burundi established Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), entrepreneurship and financial literacy education, and Healing Families and Communities (HFC) discussion sessions. The International Rescue Committee found that the **VSLA intervention reduced poverty and the HFC intervention significantly reduced harsh physical and verbal discipline, but improved economic wellbeing did not directly translate into improved child outcomes.**

Evaluation Overview

Country	Burundi
Sector	Child Protection
Funding	USAID
Sample	1595 households
Policy Goal	Building family economic capacities and improving child wellbeing

Poverty is a predictor of poor wellbeing outcomes for children, such as stunting, poor cognitive, motor, socio-emotional development, and poor school achievement¹. There is also evidence that poverty contributes to child labor, low rates of school enrollment, and increased levels of violence in the home and against children themselves. This evidence further suggests that economic interventions may reduce risks to child protection, development and wellbeing. However, there is little evidence of which economic interventions work most effectively to improve children's outcomes in the poorest and most vulnerable communities.

While caregiver's ability to protect and provide for their children relies in part on their economic circumstances, increased assets might not be enough. Non-economic factors such as harsh disciplining practices, neglect and exposure to violence in the home have a strong negative impact on children's development and wellbeing. A growing body of evidence from low and middle income countries suggests that parenting interventions can reduce risk factors that hinder child development². None of these studies measure the impact of both economic strengthening and parenting interventions. The IRC conducted a randomized impact evaluation of a savings intervention and a family program to understand their impact on children's wellbeing.

Burundi, one of the poorest countries in the world, is recovering from decades of conflict that claimed 300,000 lives and forced over a million to flee their homes. Since 2002, over 550,000 refugees have returned to the country³ and the potential for political instability is high. In this context, children face numerous risks to their development and wellbeing, including domestic and community violence and limited caregiver capacity to protect and care for their children.

¹ Engle et al (2009), Campbell et al (2010) and Akware et al (2010).

² Knerr, W., Gardner, F. & Cluver, L. (2013) Improving Positive Parenting Skills and Reducing Harsh and Abusive Parenting in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review. *Prevention Science*, 14(4): 352-363.

³ Data from UNHCR as reported by the International Network for Education in Emergencies. <http://www.ineesite.org/en/crisis-spotlights/burundi>

Is money enough? Evaluating the impact of an economic strengthening and family discussion series for Burundian families

Evaluation

The New Generation project sought to address the household level risks faced by children in this context. The project aimed to improve household economic outcomes and improve children's protection and wellbeing, while generating evidence about how this can be effectively done and included two program components: 1. Establishment of VSLAs and provision of entrepreneurship and financial literacy education; 2. Provision of the Healing Families and Communities discussion series.

The impact evaluation used a **randomized waitlist controlled trial** design implemented over the course of two project cycles. Through the project the IRC established and supported a total of 80 VSLAs, representing 1595 vulnerable households from eight zones⁴ in the Makamba and Bujumbura Rural provinces of Burundi.



VSLA groups received a standard VSLA training that includes six sessions to prepare group members to operate VSLAs and share out funds at the end of the cycle. In addition to the standard VSLA training, all VSLA groups received an entrepreneurship and financial literacy education training package that included 10 sessions focused on business planning, financial planning, and marketing.

Over the life of the project, 39 of the 80 VSLA groups also participated in the Healing Families and Communities discussion sessions. The ten weekly discussion sessions, developed by the IRC's team in Burundi, were designed to increase the caregivers' knowledge of actions to improve their children's protection, wellbeing and development. Sessions included: 1) children's perspectives and reality; 2) children's wellbeing and participation; 3) access to health and education; 4) positive discipline and communication; 5) child protection in the family; 6) child protection in the community; 7) daily life and income use in the household; and 8) family budgeting. For the ninth session, participants invited spouses and other family and community members to a public forum where the participants shared what they had learned and described the changes they pledge to make. In the final session, groups reflected on the previous sessions, evaluated the program, and discussed their pledges, possible challenges to upholding the pledges, and possible solutions.

The New Generation project was designed to answer the following questions: (1) Does a VSLA intervention⁵ improve economic outcomes of poor households?; and (2) Do the Healing Families and Communities discussion sessions offer additional benefits for child wellbeing beyond those that can be explained by increased economic outcomes? Or is money alone enough to improve child wellbeing in poor families?

Quantitative data collection methods included a household survey and a children's survey. The household survey was administered to 1,595 households prior to the intervention; 1,369 households after the first project cycle; and 778 households at the end of the second project cycle. The children's survey was administered to 362 children prior to the intervention and 262 following the first project cycle.

In order to feed into and complement the quantitative research, prior to the intervention and at the end of the first project cycle, the IRC conducted participatory activities with the children surveyed. A participatory "timeline exercise" was also conducted with 39 caregivers in the VSLA+ group and with 20 children between the ages of 8 and 15 who had caregivers in the VSLA+ group.

⁴ A zone is an administrative division just under the commune – higher than the village and the hill.

⁵ The VSLA intervention included and evaluated as part of New Generation includes the establishment of VSLAs and provision of standard VSLA training plus entrepreneurship and financial education training. For simplicity, the intervention package is referred to in this report as VSLA or VSLA intervention.

Results

- 1) The VSLA intervention had a positive impact on per capita consumption expenditures, poverty, and household assets.** The study found an increase in monthly expenditures that amounted to 40.6 USD for an average family of 5.8 members as a result of the VSLA intervention. The net impact of the VSLA intervention amounted to a 14% reduction in poverty. Households that participated in the VSLA intervention also had, on average, an asset score 0.22 higher than a control household, corresponding roughly to one extra head of cattle for each of the treatment households.
- 2) The VSLA intervention led to increases in spending on education and clothing, and decreases in spending on health.** Education expenditures in the control group increased by 82% and in the VSLA group by 115%. The increase was statistically significant compared to the control group indicating that participation in the VSLA intervention had an impact on spending on education. Spending on education also increased among participants in the VSLA+ group by 90%; however, no additional effect was seen. Participation in the VSLA intervention also led to increases in spending on clothing, with greatest increases in spending being seen among those in the VSLA+ group. Among those who participated in the VSLA+ group there was a 42% increase in spending on clothing for children (compared to a 27% increase among those who participated in only the VSLA intervention and a 16% increase among those in the control group). The impact of the Healing Families and Communities discussion sessions relative to the control is statistically significant. After the first project cycle, spending on health dropped for all groups, with larger decreases being seen among those in the treatment groups (VSLA and VSLA+): -19% versus -11% for the control group.
- 3) Participation in the Healing Families and Communities discussion series significantly reduced the use of harsh physical and verbal discipline.** VSLA participants who also participated in the discussion series reported 30% less use of harsh discipline than those who participated in the VSLA intervention alone.
- 4) Participation in the VSLA intervention reduced family problems but had no impact on positive family functioning.** The participants in the VSLA intervention reported significantly lower family problems than the control group, but no impact on family functioning compared to the control group. Children reported that the Healing Families and Communities discussion sessions significantly lowered family problems compared to the VSLA and control groups but had no impact on measures of family functioning, although caregivers reported no impact from the family sessions.
- 5) Neither the VSLA nor VSLA+ intervention had a significant impact on children's wellbeing or mental health.** Neither children nor caregivers reported significant changes in children's overall wellbeing, distress or aggression from caregivers' participation in either the VSLA or the family sessions.
- 6) Participation in the Healing Families and Communities Discussion Sessions did not significantly reduce child labor.** After the first project cycle, the children's survey showed a reduction in child labor for those children who had caregivers in the discussion groups although the difference was not statistically significant. The final evaluation reveals that, based on caregiver reports, the Healing Families and Communities discussion sessions had no impact on whether or not a child did economic labor or domestic work.

Lessons

- 1) **Savings groups combined with entrepreneurship and financial literacy education can improve the economic outcomes of poor households.** Overall, as one of the first RCTs on VSLAs, the results from the New Generation project provide important evidence that Village Savings and Loans Associations combined with entrepreneurship and financial literacy education can improve the economic outcomes of poor households.
- 2) **Brief parenting skills-building interventions can decrease caregivers' use of violence as a form of punishment, although it did not impact children's mental health or overall wellbeing.** When it comes to reducing harsh discipline, the Healing Families and Communities Discussion Sessions are significantly more effective than VSLAs alone.
- 3) **Further program development and testing is needed to impact children's outcomes.** Neither the VSLA intervention nor the Healing Families and Communities Discussion Sessions appear to be effective for improving children's mental health and wellbeing outcomes within the timeframe of the evaluation. Further development and research is needed to better target for both prevention and response in settings affected by violence and poverty.
- 4) **More rigorous and longitudinal research necessary to strengthen evidence base in low-resource, post-conflict settings.** Recommendations from recent reviews of parenting interventions in low and middle-income countries as well as findings from this study point to the need for more rigorous study designs, including validation of cross-cultural measures, use of observation methods, assessment of child outcomes, and follow up of at least 12 months post-intervention to assess emergence or maintenance of longer-term outcomes. Further research is also necessary to understand the relative cost effectiveness of various intervention models, and the scalability and sustainability of interventions when delivered using a public health and social service workforce model.

The IRC is Evidence-Based and Evidence-Generating

Using findings from the New Generation impact evaluation, the IRC made adaptations to the Healing Families and Communities Discussion Sessions and, with the support of USAID, is now implementing a second phase of the New Generation project, reaching 400 caregivers. Results will be assessed through a pre-post evaluation. Through the New Generation project, the IRC's program of research on the prevention of violence against children and youth, and research on family-based programs in Liberia and on the Thailand-Burmese border, the IRC will contribute to evidence-based policy and practice around parenting and violence prevention in low-resource, conflict-affected settings.

Research Brief Author: Jaime Costigan, Child and Youth Protection and Development Unit, IRC

Based on evaluation by: Annan, J.; Bundervoet, T.; Seban, J.; and Costigan, J.

To obtain the full evaluation report, please contact the IRC at rel@rescue.org or children@rescue.org.