

Research Brief 3: Testing psychosocial interventions for vulnerable rural Zambian children*

This is no 3 of a series of briefs providing new insights on the wellbeing of rural children in Sub-Saharan Africa, a previously much under-researched population. Findings are derived from a longitudinal (2008-2010) controlled study in 5 communities of Kafue District, Zambia. This study was aimed at evaluating and developing a results-based intervention programme focussed on the interface between psychosocial wellbeing and livelihood. In addition, the study identified particular risk and protective factors for the psychosocial wellbeing of vulnerable children.

In the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, children in Sub-Saharan Africa are at higher risk of social and material deprivation (see Research Brief 1) and mental health challenges (see Research Brief 2). Professional social and mental health services are limited in resource-poor settings across Sub-Saharan. In response, children's organisations are increasingly incorporating psychosocial support interventions to improve children's psychosocial wellbeing, alongside economic strengthening programmes. However, there is a dearth of systematically-gathered data on the effectiveness of such community-based interventions. This brief reports findings from an impact evaluation of a low-cost child-centred programme, incorporating psychosocial and livelihood interventions, implemented in rural Zambian communities. Findings from this study suggest mixed results from the interventions used.

Research Questions

- Does the intervention enhance the psychosocial wellbeing of rural Zambian children?
- Does the intervention affect vulnerable and non-vulnerable children differently?

Programme

- Interventions: The formation of Children's Committees, meetings bi-weekly, combined with short structured narrative psycho-social interventions (Hero Book and Tree of Life, see www.repsi.org)
- Participants: Orphans (50%), non-orphans with elderly and/or chronically ill caregiver (13%), and non-vulnerable (37%) children (10-18 years at enrolment); 50% were girls. Orphans and vulnerable children were oversampled in this population.

Research Methodology

Two studies with a quasi-experimental control group design:

- Study A compared 3 intervention groups followed-up for 2 years: Children's Committees only (n=167), Children's Committees & Hero Book (n=104), and Children's Committees & Tree of Life (n=84).
- Study B implemented a holistic intervention group followed-up for 8 months, which comprised of: Community Sensitisation; Children's Committees, and both Tree of Life & Hero Book (n=88).
- The same wait-list control group (n=105) for both studies was set up in a separate similar community.
- 3 standardised face-to-face interviews: baseline (2008), interim (2009), final (2010).



Figure 1: Tree of Life session, Chikupi, Kafue District, Zambia, 2008

Key findings

1. **Non-vulnerable children attending Children's Committees reported improved peer relations and integration with their age group** after one year (Study A);
 - However, no further improvement was observed from continued participation in the second year (Figure 2).
 - While **peer bullying for non-vulnerable participants decreased, orphans and other vulnerable participants reported more bullying** after joining the Children's Committees.

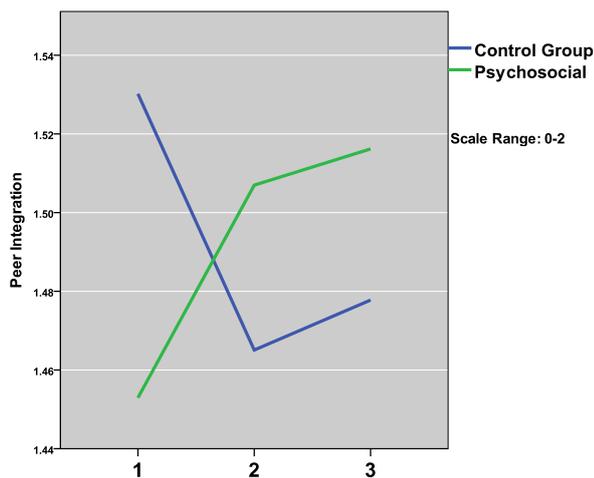


Figure 2: Improvement of peer relations (Study A – all intervention groups collapsed)

2. Increase in negative perception of social environment

- Participants of the combined psychosocial intervention (Study B) report more discrimination at home (Figure 3) and more stigmatisation in their communities.
- Perceived social support from siblings, friends and teachers decreased, but only for vulnerable children (Study B).
- These aversive effects could not be observed in Study A where post-intervention assessment was more delayed than in Study B.

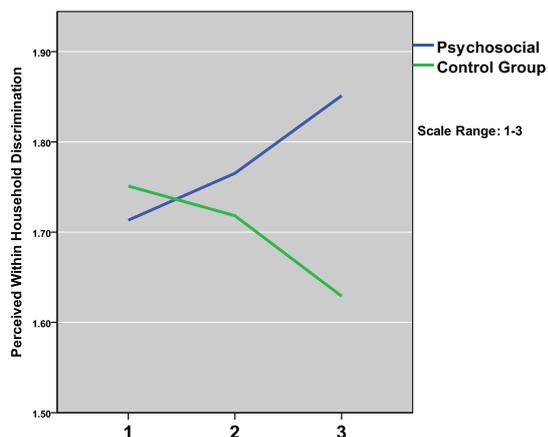


Figure 3: Increase in perceived discrimination at home - intervention took place between data collection 2 and 3 (Study B)

3. No impact on depression and satisfaction with life from the intervention

- There was no difference between intervention and control groups regarding depression and satisfaction with life.

Conclusions

- Children's Committees can support peer social integration. However, it can't be assumed that without specific training vulnerable children will not be exposed to peer bullying can within these Committees.
- Increased perception of discrimination and stigma at home and in the community as a consequence of the psychosocial programme may reflect changed perceptions rather than an actual increase in discrimination. In the structured narrative interventions, participants learnt how to access, label, and express internal states - including negative emotions. These effects are likely to be transient and could not be confirmed in the long-term follow-up. However, additional research is required to confirm this.
- More studies need to be conducted before generalisation can be made.

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