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NETWORKING FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FORMAL–INFORMAL NETWORK DICHOTOMY IN UGANDA

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Abstract: The rising cases of violence against children (VAC) have prompted strategies, laws, and policies to protect Ugandan children at the grassroots, subnational, and national levels. Despite the emergence of various strategies by different VAC actors who network formally and informally to address VAC, the functionality of their networks has not received adequate attention in previous research. We conducted a qualitative study to examine the dynamics of networking for VAC in Uganda. We collected data using interviews with network funders and leads at the national and subnational levels and focus group discussions with grassroots and community members. Our findings reveal that VAC networks belong to two broad categories: formal and informal. These exist side by side, usually operating in parallel, but sometimes with crisscrossing and overlapping activities. While the work of formal network actors is better resourced and recognized, and more visible, informal network actors are invisibilized in government plans, philanthropic efforts, and scholarly research. A more collaborative and inclusive VAC networking system would be instrumental in enhancing VAC prevention and response.

Keywords: violence against children, child protection, children's rights, civil society networking, formal networks, informal networks

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Violence against children (VAC) is a global phenomenon that has received international attention. As part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals[1] (SDGs), world leaders in 2015 committed to striving towards ending VAC by 2030, specifically through SDG 16: Promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies. Progress is measured through indicator 16.2.1, which measures the "proportion of children aged 1–17 years who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in the past month" (Global SDG Indicator Platform, 2022). According to a global report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF; 2014), "On average, about four in five children between the ages of 2 and 14 are subjected to some kind of violent discipline in the home" (p. 96). Rates of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse are highest in countries with lower income, many of them in Africa (Walker-Simpson, 2017). In Uganda, according to a 2016 report by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), there were 2,878 calls made to the Uganda Child Helpline[2] to report instances of serious violent abuse (MGLSD, 2017, p. 6). In 2018, cases reported to the Child Helpline "included child exploitation, child neglect, child trafficking, emotional abuse, murder, online child sex and violence, physical abuse, and sexual abuse" (MGLSD, 2018a, p. iii). Child neglect (1,791 cases) was the most reported form of violence, and sexual abuse (753 cases) ranked second (MGLSD, 2018a, p. iii). Moreover, due to the complex nature of VAC, there is a possible discrepancy between the actual number of cases and the number reported. According to the World Bank, in 2018 Uganda had the fifth youngest population of any country in the world (Koop, 2021), with 45% of Ugandans being under 15 (United Nations Population Fund, 2021). The high prevalence of VAC (51%; MGLSD, 2018b) is thus of particular concern.

The high rates of violence have led to multilevel interventions and strategies from a range of actors at grassroots, national, regional, and international levels. At the national level, collaborative efforts are informed by INSPIRE[3], a global campaign that provides a practical guide for preventing VAC. The campaign calls for collaborations between multiple sectors and stakeholders, including public, private, and civil society organizations at national and local levels (UNICEF, 2020).

In 1990, Uganda ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; United Nations, 1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

[1] The SDGs are: (1) no poverty; (2) zero hunger; (3) good health and well-being; (4) quality education; (5) gender equality; (6) clean water and sanitation; (7) affordable and clean energy; (8) decent work and economic growth; (9) industry, innovation, and infrastructure; (10) reduced inequalities; (11) sustainable cities and communities; (12) responsible consumption and production; (13) climate action; (14) life below water; (15) life on land; (16) peace, justice, and strong institutions; and (17) partnerships for the goals. See https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

[2] The Uganda Child Helpline (also known as Sauti 116) is a government toll-free telephone service for reporting, tracking, responding to, and referring cases of child abuse.

[3] INSPIRE stands for: Implementation and enforcement of laws; Norms and values change; Safe environments; Parental and caregiver support; Income and economic strengthening); Response services provision; Education and life skills (World Health Organization, 2020).

(Organization of African Unity, 1990). These conventions have been domesticated through local laws and policies on children, including the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda; the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2009 (Republic of Uganda, 2009); the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act, 2010 (Republic of Uganda, 2010a); the Domestic Violence Act, 2010 (Republic of Uganda, 2010b); the Education (pre-primary, primary and post-primary) Act, 2008 (Republic of Uganda, 2008); and the Children Act, 1997 (Republic of Uganda, 2016). There are also other national commitments: for example, the National Strategic Plan on Violence Against Children in Schools (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports, 2015); the National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (2022/2023–2026/2027; Republic of Uganda, 2022); and the Third National Development Plan (NDPIII) 2020/21–2024/25 (National Planning Authority, 2020), which prioritizes early childhood development. Within the MGLSD, there are three sections focused on enhancing child protection: Children and Youth, the National Child Protection working group, and the National Children Authority. Additionally, there are the Uganda National Parenting Guidelines (MGLSD, 2018b), which place the responsibility for child protection on parents, in close collaboration with other members of their communities.

In addition to the government's efforts to ensure child protection, significant child protection work falls on civil society organizations and networks. It has been suggested that governments in the Global South are overwhelmed with issues related to resource scarcity and therefore rely on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide child protection (Renzaho et al., 2018; Walker-Simpson, 2017). As we outline here, this has resulted in splitting the VAC prevention and response system into two tracks — the formal and the informal. The formal track consists of government and registered child protection actors, while the informal one consists of smaller, less-established groups. These informal networks utilize strengths-based approaches to address VAC at the community level (September, 2006; Women of Uganda Network [WOUGNET] 2020).

Although formal networks have historically been involved in child protection work, research shows that these efforts have largely been unsuccessful (Ejuu, 2015; Manion & Jones, 2020; Ochen, 2012; Renzaho et al., 2018; Seruwagi, 2017; Walakira et al., 2017). Some scholars argue that government departments and formal networks lack the local and grassroots knowledge required to successfully guide their efforts (Ochen, 2012; Renzaho et al., 2018; Seruwagi, 2017; Walakira et al., 2017). Conversely, it has been contended that community-level groups have situated and cultural knowledge, making them better equipped to achieve meaningful, effective, and sustainable efforts for children in need of protection (Castro-Félix & DuPree, 2014; Renzaho et al., 2018; Seruwagi, 2017).

A review of past studies (e.g., Renzaho et al., 2018; Seruwagi, 2017; Walakira et al., 2017) shows that despite the existence of various child protection guidelines, policies, and interventions, there is a lack of consistent and intentional networking among VAC actors, which often results in overlapping and disjointed VAC services delivery. Moreover, the lack of systematic networking promotes the maintenance of an issue-based focus, with less attention to preventive measures (Walakira et al., 2017). Indeed, existing literature suggests that a multiplicity of actors, networks,

and interventions, however well intentioned, can result in a fragmented and confusing web of networks (Johnson & Sloth-Nielsen, 2020).

While some research exhibits an understanding that a two-track networking system exists, there is a lack of research that provides an in-depth analysis of the operations and functionality of these networks, both independently and in collaboration. While formal networks have created a significant legal and policy framework, they have largely been unsuccessful in eradicating VAC (Ejuu, 2015; Manion & Jones, 2020; Ochen, 2012), since they lack the requisite contextual knowledge. Informal networks that do have situated knowledge (Castro-Félix & DuPree, 2014; Renzaho et al., 2018; Seruwagi, 2017), on the other hand, have not received due attention in scholarly literature. Previous research on networking has also not analyzed how formal and informal VAC network actors interact to prevent and respond to VAC in Uganda. In the spirit of enhancing understanding of VAC network functionality, we utilize qualitative methods to highlight how VAC actors understand networking at the state and community levels, and we examine the gap between informal and formal groups. We elaborate on the existing types of VAC networks and the dynamics of VAC networking in Uganda. Employing systems theory, we advocate for better VAC network connectivity between network actors at multiple levels. We contend that more cohesive VAC networking is required to enhance child protection in Uganda.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws from Niklas Luhmann's (1970) systems theory, which argues that society consists of several differentiated social systems that each fulfil a societal function (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014). From a systems theory perspective, stabilizing social systems and subsystems involves the creation of binary codes. These codes define roles and expectations for specific situations (Kihlström, 2011). Our analysis also draws from the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), as they distinguish between dominant and subordinate actors within networks. They assert that dominant, high status, actors have the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital needed to catalyze change. In contrast, subordinate or lower-status actors do not have these types of capital. According to Maclean and Harvey (2016), dominant, or elite, actors have access to critical information, allowing them to see the bigger picture, whereas subordinate actors lack the necessary information regarding the available strategic choices. Maclean and Harvey noted that "elite actors who activate ties and bring together disconnected others are often less visible than apparent dominant actors" (p. 399). Networks can also be distinguished by the types of interests the actors in them have. Using Bourdieu's (1996) concept of fields, we follow Maclean and Harvey in their definition of *field-specific* networks as those comprising actors who share common characteristics and are bound by common interests, while networks within the *field of power* have elite actors from various fields who oversee societal interests (Maclean & Harvey, 2016, p. 3; see also Bourdieu, 1996). Through systems theory (Luhmann, 1970), and Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) dominant–subordinate actor framework, we analyze the formal–informal dichotomy of VAC networks' operations and functionality in Uganda.

Methodology

Study Design

The findings presented in this article are derived from a larger study, which began as a desk review of East African VAC networks and the overall landscape of these networks (CivSource Africa, 2021). The current study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, which allowed us to interact with participants and gather their in-depth perspectives on networking.

Data Sources

Before we began our study, the MGLSD (2018b) had reported that cases of VAC were highest in the district of Kampala but relatively low in the district of Gulu; therefore, we purposively selected these two districts. The study population consisted of local leaders and individuals involved in VAC networking within these districts. These included three national VAC network leads, three district network leads, and two representatives of VAC network donors. Additionally, we conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) with grassroots VAC actors, one in the Paicho subcounty in Gulu district, one in the Katwe area of Kampala, and one in the Nsambya area of Kampala (see Table 1). FGD participants included state and non-state VAC actors such as parish chiefs, child protection officers, religious leaders, local council representatives, head teachers, and representatives of community-based organizations (CBOs) and associations. These leaders were selected through a combination of purposive sampling and snowballing. Representatives of VAC networks who participated in interviews were those whose networks had been identified during the FGDs or through the document review process. Donors to VAC networks were identified during interviews with network leads.

Table 1. *Data Sources*

Data collection methods	Kampala	Gulu
Interviews with national network leads	3	0
Interviews with district network leads	1	2
Interviews with donors	1	1
Focus group discussions	2	1

Data Collection

Data were collected from the desk review, FGDs, and in-depth interviews.

Desk review: We conducted a desk review (published by CivSource Africa in 2021) to conceptualize study issues and identify literature gaps and existing networks. We searched for relevant documents from the websites of line government ministries (MGLSD, Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs). We also searched the websites of the local governments of interest (Kampala Capital City Authority and Gulu District). Additionally, we gathered materials on civil society networks and networking

using the Google search engine. The desk review produced information on existing networks within Gulu and Kampala, which enabled us to identify organizations and individuals to participate in the study interviews. Various online and physical sources were utilized to gather the reviewed documents. We also continuously collected secondary data from online sources and through visits to national government, local government, and VAC network offices throughout the life of the project.

Focus group discussions: Three FGDs were conducted at the grassroots and community levels by research team members using an FGD guide. Each FGD comprised eight to 12 participants who were key community influencers and community leaders. Informed written consent was obtained from each participant before the sessions. The participants were asked to describe existing children's rights networks in their communities; their understanding of, and best practices for, VAC networking within their communities; and their recommendations for children's rights networking. On average, the FGD sessions lasted about 90 minutes. All FGDs were audio-recorded with consent. The FGDs generated qualitative data that provided insights on VAC networking in the community.

Interviews: These were utilized to collect data from district-level and national-level network leads and donors. We sought information on VAC network formation and how networking for VAC prevention and response is conducted. Informed written consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. Interviews were conducted by members of the research team using an interview guide and typically lasted 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

Data Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis using an iterative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which data collected from one phase (desk review followed by FGDs) were analyzed to inform the implementation of the subsequent phase (in-depth interviews). Throughout this iterative thematic data analysis process, data were transcribed into text and anonymized. The anonymized transcripts were entered into the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software for further management. More than one research team member coded each interview and FGD transcript to identify emergent themes and subthemes. To eliminate any discrepancies in the interpretations, the identified themes were shared among all research team members and discussed until a consensus was reached. Summaries of the themes and subthemes were used to write this paper.

To achieve data trustworthiness, we engaged in reflective journaling and peer debriefing (Connelly, 2016) during data collection and analysis. We kept peer debriefing and field methodological notes and referred to these whenever necessary. We also engaged in iterative questioning of data, research themes, and explanations throughout the lifecycle of the project.

Ethical Considerations

We obtained ethical approval from the Uganda Christian University ethics review board. We received a permit from the National Council for Science and Technology to confirm that our study did not have the potential to cause harm to humans. Our participants consented to all research plans for data collection (including voice recording), data storage, and reporting. We ensured participant anonymity by anonymizing all raw data before coding and analysis.

Findings

In our study, networking is broadly conceptualized as being centred on actors with common interests and goals, such as knowledge- and experience-sharing, and on leveraging synergy or building relationships to achieve mutual goals and objectives (Younis, 2017). The collected data provided information concerning how informal and formal network efforts are recognized, the differences in VAC network functionality, the reasons for the formation of networks, and VAC network categories and linkages.

Recognition of Networks' Efforts

To generate a more fulsome understanding of networking, we explored how networks and actors define their work with VAC and their levels of operation. The results show different levels of network activity. Some networks exist only at the national level and have limited or no grassroots connections, while other national-level networks have connections at the subnational and grassroots levels. In the absence of a more detailed taxonomy of networking, we categorized networks as formal (structured) or informal (unstructured).

Formal networks can be described as those with legal status — those registered by the government. They have established management structures, including a constitution and criteria for identifying members who share common goals. Network members have obligations such as attending meetings and participating in network activities. Some formal networks require members to pay annual subscription fees. Members can be organizations or individuals and can be state or non-state actors. Some formal networks are fully active, while others are intermittently active. The intermittently active networks operate efficiently under certain circumstances but become quiescent when conditions are not conducive. For example, they collaborate well on VAC agendas while funding is available but become inactive when they cannot cover operational costs.

On the other hand, informal VAC networks are collaborations that are not recognized by national and local governments or by donors because they are not officially registered. As elaborated by Kakuru et al. in this issue, these networks are unknown to, or ignored by, scholars and others working in the field. Their purpose for existence is not formally defined, and their operational areas are not officially demarcated. For example, an informal network might comprise local leaders, religious leaders, and family or clan heads. Although such collaborations are not

formally constituted, they are guided by national legal and policy documents such as the Children's Act and the national constitution.

Most grassroots networks are informal, while most national networks are formal. Both types can incorporate groups of actors and individual actors operating at the state or non-state level. Our data made it apparent that not all "networks" describe themselves as such: some formal networks referred to themselves as working groups, platforms, coalitions, or initiatives. Regardless of which term is used, they all seem to connect in a similar fashion. At the grassroots level, we found individual community members networking without any management structure and without an agreed-upon description. Whereas formal networks are structured and have defined ways of describing themselves, in informal networks, networking happens spontaneously and therefore is not something that members can describe formally. Additionally, since informal networks are not established by or registered with the government, formal networks tend to discount their importance as child protection actors, leading to them being ignored and not consulted on policy formulation and implementation matters. Another result of informal networks being invisibilized is that they do not receive funding, even though they are the first responders to VAC in their communities. All VAC networking efforts should be recognized as relevant and important. Our findings show, however, that informal networks currently tend to be marginalized and unrecognized by local governance, philanthropic efforts, and academic literature.

VAC Networks' Functionality

Analysis of our data revealed that not all formally registered and well-structured networks have high functionality as far as preventing and responding to VAC is concerned. Some formal networks are actively engaged in VAC work only when they have running projects. For example, FGD participants described a prominent child protection network as "dormant" at the time of data collection, despite its supposed influence and large membership. We found that some networks[4] that formed to collaborate on specific goals, such as eliminating child trafficking within a specified time frame, became inactive after completing such a plan or when the funding ran out.

On the other hand, despite their lack of formal existence, informal networks — churches, local leaders, community members with focal roles in children's rights, family heads, neighbours, and village group heads — are able to remain active because they do not rely on external funding or technical project protocols. For example, when a community member notices a suspicious person or activity, they typically alert a neighbour or a member of the village council, who will then notify a family head, a religious leader, and the local police. Three or more people within the community often collaborate to prevent child abuse or to respond as needed. In such cases, the women's representative on the village council (LCI) who suspects another community member of child abuse may decide to enlist other LCI committee members to act as witnesses before addressing

[4] To maintain confidentiality, we do not identify specific networks in this article.

the matter. She can also convene a meeting to strategize on the way forward. During one of our FGDs, one participant noted:

> Last year I noticed a boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) rider who used to park across the road at the time when children were coming from school. He would stop and talk to a 14-year-old schoolgirl from another village every day. I didn't like their relationship, and I told my neighbour, who advised that we alert the chair of our child protection committee. The following day, when he started talking to the same girl, three of us watched him from a distance. We worked with the police, who apprehended the boda-boda rider after establishing that he was indeed a potential perpetrator of sexual violence. (FGD participant, Paicho)

Such informal networks operate spontaneously. When members collaborate, they use their own personal resources and their own time. Therefore, these individuals and groups working at the grassroots level have functionality — they do all the groundwork for preventing and addressing VAC, benefiting children and families even though their network is not formally recognized.

We found that the existence of formal networks was more theoretical in nature and technical in approach, with high visibility to donors and the public. In contrast, informal networks have higher visibility at the community level and the potential to create a more tangible and lasting impact. We contend that formal and informal networks play pivotal roles in the Ugandan VAC realm, but their efforts are largely detached from each other. The operations of VAC networks demonstrate that their formal and informal activities are disjointed, and therefore there is a need for more intentional collaboration for enhanced VAC prevention and response.

Lack of Coordination Across VAC Network Categories

An illustration of the detached nature of VAC networking efforts can be traced from the different categories of networks that exist. We categorized them based on their functions, which we identified as policy, advocacy, and service.

Policy networks operate at the national level mainly through formal structures. They are engaged in child policy formulation, advocacy, and funding. Some VAC networks involved in policy formulation and advocacy also provided services such as counselling for VAC survivors.

Advocacy networks are engaged in advocating for the adoption and implementation of child protection laws and policies. These networks can be either formal or informal. They lobby communities to prevent different forms of violence such as sexual violence, ritual murders, child labour, and child trafficking. They use various strategies and operate very effectively under certain circumstances, but fall silent when conditions are not conducive to their efforts.

Service networks, whether formal or informal, are those involved in VAC response activities. These include local NGOs, local CBOs, institutions, and stakeholders. They provide such services for VAC survivors as legal aid, psychosocial support, shelter, food, clothing, and medical care.

Actors in informal service networks usually belong to local groups such as village child protection committees or children's rights committees.

The different types of networks perform different functions. Although these functions are complementary, the networks' efforts are often detached from each other. For example, while both policy and advocacy networks are interested in ensuring a protective child policy landscape, their services are not coordinated. Additionally, informal networks are ignored in policymaking and formal service provision efforts, yet these efforts need to be consolidated. After policies have been formulated, policy networks should liaise with advocacy networks that can work on the next step: advocating for adoption or implementation. Both policy and advocacy networks need to consult with those involved in service networks to find out what is needed in each local circumstance.

Formation of Networks

When we asked network leads why they network, they offered different reasons depending on whether they were associated with a formal or an informal network. Formal networking leads explained that networking enables actors to pool resources, increase visibility and impact, enforce government accountability and response, facilitate government oversight and support, keep the national VAC agenda active, and maximize technical expertise and knowledge-sharing to help refine intervention strategies. As one participant from FGD2 noted, "The major reason for networking is concerted efforts, more visibility and greater child protection impact." Several network members worked with allies on specific interventions and projects, such as research projects.

The representatives of informal networks stated that their main motivation for networking was to better serve their communities. They did collaborative VAC prevention and response work, including serving on village child protection committees, church committees, local councils, and other grassroots groups. FGD participants mentioned that some people serve as police and court witnesses. As community members, they are also obliged to protect each other's children, and they do not necessarily have to be members of a committee to prevent or respond to VAC. Participants felt that perpetrators of VAC were beginning to realize that the community cares for children, which will ultimately reduce the incidence of VAC. While informal networks may not aspire to increase their visibility or change policies, their members recognize that networking is necessary — that it would be difficult for them to be effective against VAC as individual actors. Hence while formal network actors form networks with the intent of improving their visibility and consolidating their efforts, informal networks form organically, without the use of structured procedures. The differences in the motivations for the formation of formal and informal VAC networks partly explain why they work unilaterally instead of collaborating with each other.

Additionally, we found networks that exist within or alongside other networks. Within formal networks, this takes the form of subcommittees; in informal networks, these are regarded as allies or co-allies. Despite their differences, the involvement of subcommittees and allies can be seen as a commonality between informal and formal networks.

How Networking Happens

The study also aimed to understand how networking happens among the different VAC actors. We found a difference between the dynamics of networking in formal versus informal networks. For example, some formal networks, such as those at the national level, have big memberships: Uganda Child Rights NGO Network (UCRNN) and the Gender-based Violence Prevention Network have over 200 members. Formal networks at the national and subnational levels hold regular VAC networking events or meetings, and keep detailed written records of them. Meetings of informal networks are less structured, and usually documented with voice recordings that may be referred to for years to come.

Although donors do not generally prioritize network activities, individual, institutional, and organizational actors who are members of prominent formal networks pool resources to support those activities, making contributions of meeting space, furniture, stationery, snacks, drinks, and so on. Actors in informal networks, by contrast, contribute their personal resources to VAC work, mainly in the form of using their time for village, clan, or family meetings, making telephone calls, and so on.

Despite the general lack of interaction between the two types of network, we found that in some circumstances formal organizations do draw on informal network actors to implement their projects. For example, the district local government, which belongs to a formal network, can reach out to the village child protection committee for community mobilization support, while formal institutions such as the police sometimes collaborate with informal VAC actors. Nevertheless, the two types of network function independently most of the time.

Another difference between formal and informal networking can be found in the types of network actors. Informal networks embody connections among individuals, while some formal networks, like the Joining Forces Coalition and the End Corporal Punishment initiative, comprise both individual and organizational members. In sum, networking among formal and informal VAC networks happens differently in terms of resourcing networking events and meetings, record keeping, and types of network members. This finding further elucidates the nature of the formal and informal networking systems — coexisting but largely detached from each other — for responding to and preventing VAC.

Crisscrossing Linkages

Although formal and informal networks may operate independently, our findings demonstrate that connections between formal VAC actors crisscross intricately. Many actors belong to multiple child protection networks, yet we found few direct connections between formal and informal networks. We also found only limited direct contact between children and formal networks. However, strong relationships with children did exist with grassroots networks, and with individual members of formal networks and government bodies. Note that, as Nassimbwa et al. and Kamusiime et al. report in this issue, and as our findings confirm, children do not normally

participate in networking activities themselves. This is especially true in formal networks, although service networks are sometimes in contact with VAC survivors.

To a great extent, formal and informal networks operate independently within the child protection landscape. However, some actors, such as local governments and CBOs, participate in both types of network and help mediate between them. Our study shows that formal and informal networks operate in separate social systems that have varying expectations, as Michailakis and Schirmer (2014) and Kihlström (2011) have described using social systems theory.

Discussion

This study was conducted to understand the functionality of VAC networks in Uganda. Previous research suggested that VAC networks consist of both formal agencies and grassroots initiatives, with multiple efforts and interventions being made to address the severity of VAC (Renzaho et al., 2018; Walker-Simpson, 2017). Our study found that formal and informal networks are described and recognized differently by the groups themselves, as well as by government, philanthropists, and the public. They also receive different levels of attention from scholars and hence in published literature. While formal networks must be established and registered with the government, informal networks are not structured and operate spontaneously. Although past studies by Ochen (2012) and Renzaho et al. (2018) have underscored the importance of the contextual and situated knowledge possessed by informal networks in spearheading child protection efforts, our study findings demonstrate that informal networks are "unknown" and ignored when it comes to matters of child policy formulation and implementation, as well as in accessing funding opportunities. The assertions of Bourdieu (1996), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), and Maclean and Harvey (2016) regarding the differences in status between dominant and subordinate actors are relevant to the formal–informal network dichotomy in Uganda. In our study, formal network actors are analogous to the dominant actors described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in that they have high status and economic resources; however, they lack the cultural and symbolic capital required to catalyze change. Informal networks at the community level have the symbolic and cultural capital and situated knowledge that enables them to offer more sustainable and culturally relevant interventions than formal government agencies can (Seruwagi, 2017; Walakira et al., 2017). In addition, we found that informal network actors, though they are the critical frontline VAC actors who initiate the ties that form networks, are less visible than formal network actors, who are the dominant actors in this landscape.

The lack of coordination between formal and informal children's rights networks in Uganda can result in duplication of actions. Worse, it ultimately fails to address the factors that underpin the vulnerability of children (Walakira et al., 2017). Our finding that there is a lack of communication among the diverse networks, actors, and intervention efforts confirm past studies, such as Castro-Félix and DuPree (2014) and Walakira et al. (2017), which called for better connections among the various systems to create a more effective and harmonious child protection

landscape. Walakira et al. (2017) also proposed that strengthening the multiple child welfare systems in Uganda could address the piecemeal nature of current approaches and that "issues of system functionality, improved capacity, quality of process and services, expanded reach, and effective coordination of mechanisms should be given critical attention" (p. 262).

While formal networks sometimes function intermittently, depending on funding cycles and seasonal child protection activities, informal networks operate year round. The networking activities of informal networks are not dependent on funding, donor conditionalities, or government regulations, because they happen spontaneously. We argue that the negative effects arising from formal networks operating only intermittently would be minimized if they were to work intentionally in close collaboration with informal networks. This position agrees with the work of Johnson and Sloth-Nielsen (2020), who noted that fragmented networks can be confusing to potential beneficiaries.

Based on their functions, we identified three network categories: policy (formal networks engaged in policy formulation and funding), advocacy (networks involved in policy adoption and implementation), and service (formal or informal networks providing services to VAC survivors). In policy formulation, and in formal advocacy and service provision, informal network actors are not consulted or involved. The findings revealed that these networking efforts are disjointed, impacting their synergy and their ability to leverage each other's actions and resources.

Formal and informal networks have different reasons for networking. Actors create formal networks to increase their visibility, collaborate on projects, and moblize resources jointly. Informal networks form organically to leverage their members' VAC response and prevention efforts. We contend that these differences in motivation partly explain why formal and informal networks work unilaterally instead of collaboratively. Our analysis resonates with Maclean and Harvey (2016), who contended that network actors who share common interests are bound by those interests only.

Strengthening child protection networks requires an understanding of the existing efforts being made through various networks. In agreement with previous research that highlighted the need for more collaborative efforts (Renzaho et al., 2018; Walakira et al., 2017), our study further underlines the areas where VAC networks and actors need more collaboration and connection. Although existing connections have resulted in many acknowledged successes that should not go unnoticed, networks need to work on improving collaboration to cultivate a consistent approach to child protection in Uganda.

Through the lens of systems theory, it is obvious that a better connection between these systems will require clarification of their individual roles (Kihlström, 2011; Renzaho et al., 2018) to avoid duplicate interventions and a piecemeal approach to child protection (Walakira et al., 2017). Similarly, research participants emphasized the importance of VAC networks that offer community-attuned resources and interventions while having clear goals; such networks are more effective than their counterparts. In agreement with Castro-Félix and DuPree (2014), we assert that

grassroots initiatives could improve the implementation of interventions as their services are more likely to fit with community priorities.

Achieving clearly defined roles can be challenging in the current child protection climate. For example, the fact that informal networks and actors lack visibility cripples their efforts, since they are ignored in funding programs. A more equitable and resource-abundant VAC networking landscape might minimize competition and ultimately contribute to a more stable system of networks.

We caution our readers that the study findings are not meant to be generalizable but rather to provide a nuanced, in-depth understanding of how networking for the prevention of and response to VAC in Uganda exists in an informal–formal network dichotomy.

Conclusion

In this article, we report the results of an exploratory study that examined VAC network functionality in East Africa (CivSource Africa, 2021). Although Uganda has a well-developed legal and institutional child protection framework within a rich child-focused civil society, VAC remains unabated. We have presented an in-depth analysis of informal and formal VAC networks in Uganda and shown that they operate adjacent to each other with regard to how their efforts are recognized, how they function, the reasons for their formation, how they are categorized, and their linkages. The findings of our study demonstrate a system of networks aimed at preventing and responding to VAC that operates on two separate tracks, leading to fragmented and sometimes redundant efforts. Since the detached nature of VAC network operations leads to disjointed efforts, intentional collaboration between formal and informal networks is necessary for enhanced VAC prevention and more rapid response. For example, policy networks and advocacy networks should collaborate and work in consultation with informal, grassroots networks who are the VAC frontline responders. Following the recommendations of the global status report on preventing VAC (WHO, 2020), which include the need to prioritize research in terms of data collection and knowledge translation, we argue that it is urgent to address the paucity of research in this area. Future research about children's rights networking should investigate how to foster collaboration between VAC networks at the grassroots, subnational, and national levels, including state and non-state actors.

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