



Evaluating Community-led Child Protection Initiatives: A Case Study of T/A Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi.

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ABSTRACT: The study focuses on community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi, examining their effectiveness and sustainability. The aim is to evaluate the functionality of these initiatives and identify factors influencing their success. The study outlines four objectives: 1) To identify and describe community-led initiatives addressing child protection, 2) To evaluate the functionality of community-level child protection structures, 3) To analyse the sustainability and scalability of these initiatives and 4) To explore community members' perceptions and practices regarding child abuse in T/A Kalumo. The study used a Qualitative research design where Key Informant interviews, Focus Group Discussions were used for data collection, while document analysis was utilized for both data collection and analysis. Through thematic analysis, the study found that while community structures like child protection committees are functional, their effectiveness is limited by inadequate resources and training. Community perceptions of child abuse are influenced by cultural norms, which sometimes hinder protective behaviours. Sustainability and scalability of initiatives are threatened by resource constraints and dependency on external funding. The study suggests strengthening community structures through continuous capacity building, enhancing awareness programs on child rights, improving coordination between stakeholders, and ensuring ongoing financial and technical support. Promoting community engagement and culturally sensitive approaches are crucial for the success and sustainability of child protection initiatives.

KEYWORDS: Community-led initiative, Child Protection, Malawi, Ntchisi district, Qualitative research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16.2, which aims to end child abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence and torture against children, is a global priority. This goal is of relevance to Malawi, where child protection remains a pressing issue. Despite international and national efforts, children in Malawi face significant challenges, including child labour, early marriage, and physical abuse, exacerbated by limited resources, infrastructural deficits, and socio-economic barriers.

Globally, child protection is a critical issue, with millions of children subjected to various forms of abuse and neglect. According to UNICEF (2014), an estimated 15 million adolescent girls worldwide have experienced forced sexual acts at some point in their lives. In Malawi, the situation is similarly dire, with the International Labour Organization (2017) highlighting that approximately 38% of children aged 5-17 are engaged in child labour, further emphasizing the need for robust child protection mechanisms.

Community-driven initiatives play a crucial role in addressing these challenges in regions where formal child protection systems may be underdeveloped, absent, or insufficient. These initiatives often leverage local knowledge and resources, making them culturally relevant and sustainable. Studies, such as those by Wessells (2015) in Sierra Leone and Plan International (2017) in Uganda, have demonstrated the effectiveness of community-based child protection mechanisms in reducing incidents of child abuse and exploitation.

This study evaluated the effectiveness of grassroots efforts in the Traditional Authority (T/A) Kalumo area of Ntchisi District, providing a comprehensive understanding of their impact on child protection. By adopting a qualitative approach, the research employed focus group discussions with various community structures, including child protection committees, local leaders, and caregivers,



to gather in-depth insights into their roles and experiences. Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted with stakeholders directly involved in managing child-related issues, such as social workers, educators, and health workers.

Through thematic analysis, the study expected to identify the critical elements that contribute to the success or limitations of these community-led initiatives, offering valuable insights into their impact and potential scalability within the broader framework of child protection in Malawi. The findings of this study are expected to inform policy and practice, contributing to the development of more effective child protection strategies at the community level.

Statement of the problem

Globally, community-led child protection initiatives have shown promise in addressing child welfare, particularly in regions where formal systems are lacking. Numerous studies have examined these initiatives in diverse contexts, such as India, Colombia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, highlighting their potential for sustainability and cultural relevance. However, these studies also reveal significant gaps, including issues with sustainability, integration with formal systems, and the need for capacity-building.

In the African context, while some research has been conducted in countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, these studies are often limited by their focus on specific cultural or regional factors, leaving broader questions about scalability and sustainability unanswered. In Malawi, the existing research on community-led child protection initiatives is sparse, with most studies focusing on urban areas or specific types of interventions, such as those in Mzuzu City.

This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the rural area of Traditional Authority (T/A) Kalumo in Ntchisi District, where child protection challenges such as child labor, early marriage, and abuse persist despite the presence of community-led initiatives. By exploring the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives in a rural Malawian context, this research seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of community-driven child protection mechanisms, highlighting both their potential and their limitations.

Objectives of the study

- i. To identify and describe the community-led initiatives addressing child protection in T/A Kalumo

- ii. To evaluate the functionality of community-level child protection structures in T/A Kalumo.
- iii. To explore community members' perceptions and practices regarding child abuse in T/A Kalumo.
- iv. To investigate the factors influencing the sustainability and scalability of community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo.

Research questions

- i. What are the current community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo, and how were they initiated?
- ii. How effective are the community-level child protection structures in T/A Kalumo at addressing the needs of children?
- iii. What are the community's perceptions and practices regarding child abuse, and how have these evolved over time?
- iv. What factors influence the sustainability and scalability of these child protection initiatives?

Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the factors that influence the sustainability and scalability of child protection initiatives, both globally and in Africa. By identifying key elements such as community ownership, cultural alignment, government support, and continuous capacity building, the study provides critical insights for developing effective and sustainable child protection strategies in T/A Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi. These findings are essential for ensuring that child protection initiatives are culturally relevant, well-supported, and capable of long-term impact.

Scope of the study

The scope of this study covers the geographical area of T/A Kalumo in Ntchisi District, Malawi, focusing on community-driven child protection initiatives. It evaluates these initiatives, including their structures, community perceptions, and factors influencing their sustainability and scalability. The study is limited to 56 people allowing for an in-depth analysis of the development and long-term impact of these initiatives within this specific period and region.



II. LITRATURE REVIEW

Community-led child protection initiatives

Community-led child protection initiatives have gained significant attention globally due to their ability to leverage local resources and knowledge to address child welfare issues. These initiatives, particularly in regions with limited formal child protection services, have shown promise in providing culturally appropriate and sustainable solutions. However, studies have identified several gaps in these initiatives, including sustainability, integration with formal systems, and capacity-building. Lachman, A., Cluver, L., Boyes, M., Kuo, C., & Casale, M. (2014) conducted a study in South Africa that showed community-led initiatives often lack the necessary training and resources to deal with complex cases of child abuse, which can lead to burnout among volunteers and reduced effectiveness over time. This study collaborates with Wessells, Kostelny, and Ondoro (2014) who found that community-based child protection mechanisms in Kenya were effective due to strong community leadership and involvement. However, unlike Lachman et al, (2014), Wessells et al (2014) found out that challenges such as limited resources and inconsistent support from formal systems were identified, indicating a need for ongoing capacity building and better integration with formal child protection systems. This underscores the importance of integrating community-led initiatives with broader child protection systems. These studies highlight that without formal recognition and support, these initiatives may struggle to address complex cases that require more specialized interventions.

Betancourt et al. (2013) explored how community-led approaches in post-conflict settings, such as Sierra Leone, can be adapted to address child protection issues. The study emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive interventions that build on existing community structures. Kostelny et al. (2013) having agreed with Bentancourt, added that community-driven approaches to child protection in Ethiopia are important in community-based monitoring systems that are integrated with formal mechanisms to improve accountability and effectiveness.

Finkelhor (2008) found that community perceptions of child abuse vary significantly across cultures, which affects how community-led initiatives are implemented and received. In regions where traditional practices conflict with modern child protection norms, there is often resistance to adopting new approaches. Chitera (2011) also

highlighted how cultural norms in Malawi shape community responses to child abuse. The study suggests that successful child protection initiatives must navigate these cultural dynamics carefully to achieve widespread acceptance and effectiveness.

Chilera (2014) emphasized the need for evidence-based policies that support community-led child protection initiatives. The study called for greater investment in research to understand how these initiatives can be scaled up and integrated with national child protection systems. Wessells (2015) reiterated the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure that community-led initiatives remain effective and responsive to the changing needs of children and families. The study suggests that adaptive approaches, which allow for continuous learning and improvement, are essential for the long-term success of these initiatives.

By drawing on these diverse studies, the literature highlights the potential of community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi. However, it also underscores the importance of addressing the challenges of sustainability, integration with formal systems, and capacity-building. To enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives, it is crucial to consider the unique cultural and social context of the region, while also leveraging insights from global **best** practices.

Community-Level Child Protection Structures

Community-based child protection mechanisms are increasingly recognized as critical components in safeguarding children, especially in areas with limited formal child protection systems. Various studies across the globe have highlighted the effectiveness of these community-level structures in identifying, preventing, and responding to child protection issues. For instance, UNICEF (2013) emphasizes that community engagement and ownership are essential for the sustainability of child protection efforts. This involves establishing child protection committees, training local volunteers, and integrating these initiatives into broader community development programs.

Wessells (2015) further underscores the importance of bottom-up approaches to strengthening child protection systems. His study found that when communities are actively involved in the protection process, there is better identification and response to child protection issues. The study highlights the need for more research on how community involvement can be scaled and adapted across different contexts to enhance child protection outcomes.



Similarly, studies from Africa, such as those by Wessells, Kostelny, and Ondoro (2014), reveal that community-based child protection mechanisms in Kenya were effective due to strong community leadership and involvement. However, challenges such as limited resources and inconsistent support from formal systems were identified. This indicates a need for ongoing capacity building and better integration with formal child protection systems.

In Malawi, community-level child protection structures are also playing a significant role in safeguarding children, particularly in rural areas. Banda (2020) found that in Mzuzu City, child protection committees in schools were effective in identifying and addressing child protection issues, with key success factors including the active involvement of teachers, parents, and local authorities. However, the study also identified challenges such as limited resources and insufficient training.

The literature across global, African, and Malawian contexts consistently highlights the importance of community engagement, local leadership, and integration with formal child protection systems as key factors in the effectiveness of community-based child protection mechanisms. However, common challenges such as resource constraints and the need for better training and integration with formal systems suggest areas where improvements are needed to enhance the functionality and sustainability of these structures.

Community Perceptions and Practices Regarding Child Abuse

Understanding community perceptions and practices regarding child abuse is crucial for the development and implementation of effective child protection initiatives. Communities play a significant role in shaping the norms and behaviors surrounding child protection, and their perceptions can either support or hinder efforts to prevent and respond to child abuse. This literature review examines the existing research on community perceptions and practices regarding child abuse, focusing on how these factors influence child protection efforts, particularly in resource-limited settings like Traditional Authority (T/A) Kalumo in Ntchisi District, Malawi.

Community perceptions of child abuse vary widely across different cultural, social, and economic contexts. According to Finkelhor (2008), perceptions of what constitutes child abuse can differ significantly based on cultural norms and values. In some communities, certain forms of

corporal punishment are considered acceptable, while in others, they are viewed as abusive. This variability in perceptions can impact the effectiveness of child protection initiatives, as communities may resist adopting practices that conflict with their traditional beliefs. While in African African communities, corporal punishment is seen as a necessary part of child-rearing (Hecker et al., 2016). This perception can lead to challenges in implementing child protection policies that discourage physical punishment. Similarly, in South Asia, practices such as child marriage are often culturally sanctioned, despite their recognition as forms of child abuse.

Cultural norms and beliefs play a critical role in shaping community perceptions and practices regarding child abuse. In Malawi, for example, traditional practices such as "chinamwali" (initiation ceremonies) can sometimes put children, particularly girls, at risk of abuse (Munthali, 2018). These cultural practices are deeply ingrained in the community, making it challenging to change perceptions and practices through external interventions alone. Another study Chitera (2011) highlights that in Malawi, community responses to child abuse are often influenced by cultural norms that prioritize family reputation over the welfare of the child. This can lead to underreporting of abuse cases, as families may prefer to handle issues privately to avoid shame. Such practices can hinder the effectiveness of formal child protection systems, which rely on timely reporting and intervention.

However, education and awareness-raising initiatives are crucial in changing harmful perceptions and practices related to child abuse. Research indicates that communities with higher levels of awareness about child rights and protection are more likely to report abuse and support interventions (Chilera, 2014). Community education programs that engage local leaders and use culturally relevant messaging have been shown to be effective in shifting perceptions and promoting protective behaviors. Lachman et al. (2014) also found that in South Africa, community-led initiatives that included educational components were more successful in reducing child abuse than those that did not. These initiatives often involved training for community members on how to recognize and respond to signs of abuse, as well as efforts to change attitudes toward corporal punishment and other harmful practices.

Despite the efforts to educate and raise awareness, changing deeply ingrained community perceptions and practices regarding child abuse remains challenging. Resistance to change is often



rooted in long-standing cultural beliefs and practices that are seen as integral to the community's identity (Foster, 2017). Additionally, fear of retaliation or social stigma can prevent victims and witnesses from reporting abuse, further complicating efforts to protect children.

Wessells et al. (2014) found that in Kenya, while community-based child protection mechanisms were generally effective, they faced significant challenges when it came to addressing cases of child abuse that conflicted with local norms. This underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches that work within the community's value system while promoting the protection of children's rights.

The literature suggests that for child protection initiatives to be effective, they must take into account the community's perceptions and practices regarding child abuse. This involves not only educating communities about the harms of child abuse but also engaging them in a dialogue about how to reconcile traditional practices with modern child protection standards. Community-led initiatives that are culturally sensitive and inclusive of local norms are more likely to succeed in changing harmful practices and improving child protection outcomes.

In Malawi, and specifically in T/A Kalumo, the success of child protection efforts will depend on the ability to navigate cultural dynamics and foster a community-wide commitment to protecting children. This requires ongoing engagement with community leaders, consistent education and awareness campaigns, and the integration of child protection initiatives into broader community development efforts.

Community perceptions and practices regarding child abuse are deeply influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors. While there is growing awareness of the need to protect children from abuse, traditional beliefs and practices can pose significant challenges to these efforts. The literature emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that engage communities in the process of changing harmful practices and supporting child protection initiatives. In the context of T/A Kalumo in Ntchisi District, Malawi, addressing these challenges will be key to the success of community-led child protection efforts. By building on existing community structures and fostering a culture of child protection, it is possible to create a safer environment for children and ensure that their rights are upheld.

Factors Influencing the Sustainability and Scalability of Child Protection Initiatives

Wessells (2015) examined bottom-up approaches to child protection, emphasizing factors critical to sustainability and scalability. Key elements include strong community ownership, alignment with local cultural practices, integration into existing structures, ongoing training, and robust monitoring and evaluation. The study highlights the need for more research on adapting these initiatives to different cultural contexts, especially for developing sustainable child protection strategies in T/A Kalumo.

Palusci and Vandervort (2014) evaluated international child protection programs, identifying government support, secure funding, and effective partnerships as crucial factors for sustainability and scalability. The study stresses the importance of evidence-based practices and the adaptability of programs to local needs, providing insights for T/A Kalumo's initiatives.

Wessells, Kostelny, and Ondoro (2014) studied community-based child protection mechanisms in Kenya, emphasizing the importance of cultural alignment and community ownership. Successful initiatives involved traditional leaders and were integrated with formal systems, requiring ongoing training and support. These findings are vital for T/A Kalumo's child protection efforts.

Save the Children (2015) compared community-based child protection mechanisms in Uganda, finding that government and NGO support, effective training, and integration into existing community structures are crucial for sustainability. The study's insights on regular monitoring and evaluation are applicable to T/A Kalumo's initiatives.

These studies collectively highlight the importance of community ownership, cultural alignment, government support, robust evaluation, and partnerships in the sustainability and scalability of child protection initiatives. These insights are crucial for designing effective child protection programs in T/A Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi.

Theoretical Framework Ecological Systems Theory in Relation to the Study

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding the complex interactions between individuals and their environments. The theory posits that a child's development is influenced by multiple layers of environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings like family and school (microsystem) to



broader societal contexts like culture and government policies (macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory is particularly relevant to the study of community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo, as it emphasizes the importance of understanding how different environmental systems interact to influence child protection outcomes.

In the context of T/A Kalumo, the microsystem includes the immediate environments of children, such as their families, schools, and peer groups. This study found that community-led initiatives like Child Protection Committees (CPCs), Mother Groups, and Community-Based Child Care Centers (CBCCs) play a crucial role in protecting children within this microsystem. These initiatives operate within the community and directly interact with children and families, providing essential support and interventions to prevent and address child abuse.

The mesosystem represents the interactions between different microsystems. In this study, the effectiveness of community-level child protection structures is influenced by the interactions between families, community organizations, and local government agencies. The findings indicate that resource constraints and lack of coordination between these systems can hinder the effectiveness of child protection initiatives, reflecting challenges at the mesosystem level.

The exosystem includes broader societal influences that indirectly impact the child's immediate environment, such as local government policies, NGO interventions, and community resources. The study highlights how the lack of formalized training and support for community-led initiatives, driven by broader resource constraints and policy gaps, can weaken the functionality of these structures, illustrating the influence of the exosystem on child protection outcomes.

Finally, the macrosystem encompasses cultural norms, values, and societal laws that shape the overall environment in which a child grows up. In T/A Kalumo, traditional beliefs and practices around child discipline, such as the acceptance of corporal punishment, are embedded within the macrosystem. These cultural norms influence community members' perceptions of child abuse and the effectiveness of interventions. The study's findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive approaches that align modern child protection principles with local cultural practices to create sustainable change.

By applying Ecological Systems Theory to the study of community-led child protection

initiatives in T/A Kalumo, we can better understand the multi-layered influences on child protection efforts. The theory helps to contextualize the challenges and successes of these initiatives within the broader social, cultural, and institutional environments.

The chronosystem, which includes the dimension of time, is also relevant to this study. Changes over time in societal attitudes toward child protection, shifts in local leadership, or the introduction of new policies can significantly impact the effectiveness and sustainability of child protection initiatives. For example, the study may find that historical practices and generational shifts in attitudes toward corporal punishment are influencing current community practices and perceptions. These temporal dynamics are crucial for understanding how child protection efforts evolve and adapt in T/A Kalumo.

In conclusion, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the various factors that influence child protection in T/A Kalumo. By recognizing the interconnectedness of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, the study highlights the need for a holistic approach to child protection that considers the complex interplay of individual, community, and societal factors. This theoretical perspective supports the study's emphasis on culturally sensitive, community-driven initiatives that are integrated with broader formal systems to create a more effective and sustainable child protection framework in the region.

Research Gap

In the African context, while some research has been conducted in countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, these studies are often limited by their focus on specific cultural or regional factors, leaving broader questions about scalability and sustainability unanswered. In Malawi, the existing research on community-led child protection initiatives is sparse, with most studies focusing on urban areas or specific types of interventions, such as those in Mzuzu City.

This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the rural area of Traditional Authority (T/A) Kalumo in Ntchisi District, where child protection challenges such as child labor, early marriage, and abuse persist despite the presence of community-led initiatives. By exploring the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives in a rural Malawian context, this research seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of community-driven child



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potential and their limitations.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section details the study's methodology, focusing on the qualitative research approach and case study design used to explore community-driven child protection initiatives in TA Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi. The study area and population encompass a diverse range of stakeholders, from grassroots community members to district-level officials, all engaged in child protection efforts. The target population includes individuals and structures actively participating in these initiatives, selected to provide in-depth insights into the effectiveness and challenges of the initiatives within their real-life context.

Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in Ntchisi District, located in the Central Region of Malawi. Ntchisi covers 1,655 square kilometers and has a population of 317,069 (Republic of Malawi, Ntchisi District Council, 2020). The specific focus was on TA Kalumo, situated in the western part of the district near the main town, locally known as Boma. The area has a population of 74,850 (NSO, 2018) and is primarily an agricultural area. This area has a diverse population involved in child protection efforts, ranging from grassroots community members to district-level officials.

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study method to explore community-driven child protection initiatives in Traditional Authority (TA) Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi. This approach is particularly well-suited for examining complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts, allowing for a detailed understanding of the intricacies of community practices and perceptions. By drawing insights from various sources and perspectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the issues at hand, building on the established use of qualitative case studies in social work and child protection research (Yin, 2018). For instance, Stake (1995) emphasizes that case studies are ideal for examining how individuals or communities understand and engage with social issues, making it a common choice in research on community-based interventions.

Furthermore, Creswell (2013) notes that qualitative case studies are particularly effective in settings where contextual factors such as cultural

practices, social norms, and economic conditions play a critical role in shaping outcomes. This is evident in studies like Mathews (2010), who used a case study approach to explore community-led child protection initiatives in rural Kenya, revealing the complex interplay between local culture and child protection efforts.

In the context of African child protection research, Abebe and Aase (2007) utilized a qualitative case study design to investigate the effectiveness of community-based child protection mechanisms in Ethiopia. Their study highlighted the importance of understanding local perceptions and practices, which aligns with the goals of the current study in Ntchisi District.

By drawing on these examples, this study's design is validated as it follows a well-established methodological tradition that has been proven effective in similar contexts. The qualitative case study approach not only allows for a deep exploration of the specific dynamics within T/A Kalumo but also provides insights that can contribute to broader discussions on community-led child protection in similar settings.

Population of the study

The study population includes individuals and community structures engaged in child protection activities within TA Kalumo. This includes community leaders, health workers, district council officials, and NGO representatives. Community structures involved are Mother Groups, Primary Education Advisors, Parent-Teacher Associations, Child Protection Committees, and Child Labour Committees.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, employing a dual approach that facilitated the gathering of rich qualitative data. This methodology provided a deep understanding of community-driven child protection initiatives in TA Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi, by capturing both individual insights and collective perspectives. The combination of these methods ensured a comprehensive exploration of the effectiveness and challenges of these initiatives.

Two primary tools were utilized for data collection: semi-structured interview guides for the key informant interviews and discussion guides for the focus group discussions. These tools were



carefully designed to elicit detailed and relevant information, allowing participants to share their experiences and viewpoints in a structured yet flexible manner. The interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure that all information was accurately captured.

The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, providing a precise and comprehensive account of the discussions. This meticulous transcription process was essential for the subsequent data analysis, as it ensured the accuracy and completeness of the data. The resulting transcripts served as a reliable foundation for the thematic analysis, allowing for the thorough examination and identification of significant themes within the data.

Study Participants

A total of 56 individuals participated in this study, including 30 males and 26 females. Of these, 11 participated in key informant interviews, while 45 were involved in focus group discussions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of those most

capable of providing in-depth insights into the community-driven initiatives being studied. This selection process was critical for obtaining a nuanced understanding of the issues and outcomes associated with the initiatives.

Data analysis

In line with the approach outlined by Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005), this study employed thematic analysis as the primary method for data analysis. This technique involves identifying and analysing recurring themes within the qualitative data collected from key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The thematic analysis was selected for its inductive nature, allowing the study to derive insights and patterns directly from the data. By systematically coding the transcribed data and grouping related information into common themes, the study effectively captured the complexities of community-driven child protection initiatives in TA Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi. This approach facilitated the discovery of underlying insights and enabled meaningful conclusions regarding the effectiveness and challenges of these initiatives.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide a comprehensive analysis of community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo, Ntchisi District, Malawi. By examining the effectiveness of these initiatives, evaluating the functionality of community-level structures, understanding community perceptions, and investigating factors influencing sustainability, the study offers valuable insights into the child protection landscape. This discussion synthesizes these findings, drawing on both the literature review and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play.

Community-Led Initiatives Addressing Child Protection in T/A Kalumo

The study highlights the critical role of community-led initiatives, such as Child Protection Committees (CPCs), Mother Groups, and Community-Based Child Care Centers (CBCCs), in addressing child protection within T/A Kalumo. These initiatives are embedded within the local cultural and social fabric, reflecting the microsystem and mesosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's theory, where immediate environments and interactions between these environments significantly influence child development and protection.

The grassroots nature of these initiatives is consistent with global findings that emphasize the effectiveness of community-level structures in safeguarding children (UNICEF, 2013; Wessells, 2015). However, challenges such as limited resources, voluntary participation, and inconsistent training hinder their effectiveness, echoing concerns raised by Lachman et al. (2014) and Wessells et al. (2014). These issues can be understood through the lens of the exosystem, where external factors like local government support and NGO involvement (or lack thereof) impact the functionality of these community-led initiatives.

Functionality of Community-Level Child Protection Structures

The evaluation of community-level child protection structures in T/A Kalumo reveals a complex picture. While these structures are crucial for identifying and addressing child abuse, their functionality is compromised by resource constraints, lack of training, and internal conflicts. These challenges are reflected in similar community-based mechanisms in other regions (Wessells, Kostelny, & Ondoro, 2014) and can be analyzed through the interaction between the microsystem and exosystem.



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory suggests that the effectiveness of child protection structures depends on the quality of interactions between different systems. In this context, the mesosystem—comprising relationships between CPCs, local authorities, and NGOs—plays a critical role. Strengthening these interactions through better coordination and support from the exosystem could enhance the functionality and sustainability of these structures (Save the Children, 2015).

Community Members' Perceptions and Practices Regarding Child Abuse

Understanding community perceptions and practices regarding child abuse is vital for the success of child protection initiatives. The study finds that traditional beliefs and practices, deeply rooted in the macrosystem, continue to influence how child abuse is perceived and addressed in T/A Kalumo. This aligns with Finkelhor's (2008) findings that cultural norms significantly shape community responses to child abuse.

The persistence of corporal punishment as an accepted practice in some communities highlights the need for culturally sensitive approaches that consider the macrosystem's influence while working to shift harmful practices. Education and awareness-raising initiatives have shown some success in changing perceptions, consistent with the literature (Chilera, 2014; Lachman et al., 2014). However, the study also reveals ongoing challenges, such as fear of retaliation and social stigma, which deter reporting of abuse. These challenges underscore the importance of the exosystem's role in providing

V. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the strengths and challenges of community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo. By applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the discussion highlights the importance of understanding the interactions between various systems—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—in shaping the effectiveness of these initiatives. Addressing the identified challenges through capacity building, resource mobilization, and culturally sensitive approaches can strengthen these initiatives, ultimately leading to better outcomes for children in the community.

supportive reporting mechanisms and fostering trust within the community.

Factors Influencing the Sustainability and Scalability of Community-Led Child Protection Initiatives

The study identifies several factors influencing the sustainability and scalability of community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo, including community ownership, resource availability, and external support. These factors resonate with Wessells (2015) and Palusci & Vandervort's (2014) findings on the importance of local ownership and alignment with cultural practices for sustainability.

Bronfenbrenner's theory highlights how sustainability is influenced by interactions between the microsystem and exosystem. Initiatives that are deeply embedded in the community, with strong leadership and support from external systems, are more likely to be sustained and scaled. However, the study notes that resource constraints and dependency on external funding pose significant challenges, reflecting a disconnect in the exosystem that needs to be addressed for these initiatives to thrive (Save the Children, 2015).

To enhance sustainability and scalability, there must be a focus on building local capacity and integrating child protection into broader community development efforts. This approach aligns with the need for robust structures and support systems identified in both the literature and Bronfenbrenner's model, emphasizing the importance of external support and adaptation to local contexts (Wessells, 2015; Save the Children, 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis of community-led child protection initiatives in T/A Kalumo, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. **Strengthen Community Structures:** There should be continuous capacity building for community-level child protection structures. Training programs should focus on enhancing the skills of community leaders, health workers, educators, and other stakeholders to effectively identify and respond to child protection issues.
- ii. **Enhance Awareness Programs:** Expanding awareness campaigns on child



rights and protection is crucial. These programs should target all community members, emphasizing the importance of reporting and preventing child abuse.

- iii. **3Improve Coordination Between Stakeholders:** Establishing a more coordinated approach between local community structures, district officials, and NGOs can improve the effectiveness of child protection initiatives. Regular meetings and information-sharing platforms could foster better collaboration.
- iv. **Support for Sustainability:** Ensuring the sustainability of child protection initiatives requires ongoing financial and technical support from government agencies and international organizations. Programs should also focus on building local capacity to manage and sustain these initiatives independently.
- v. **Promote Community Engagement:** Actively involving the community in the planning and implementation of child protection initiatives can enhance their relevance and effectiveness. Engaging local leaders and cultural influencers can also help in overcoming resistance to change.

Areas for Further Study

- i. **Longitudinal Impact of Community-Led Initiatives:** Future research could explore the long-term impact of these initiatives on child protection outcomes in T/A Kalumo. Understanding how these initiatives evolve and their sustained impact over time would provide valuable insights.
- ii. **Barriers to Reporting Child Abuse:** Further study is needed to identify the specific barriers that prevent community members from reporting child abuse. Such research could inform the design of interventions aimed at increasing reporting rates.
- iii. **Role of Gender in Child Protection:** Exploring the influence of gender on the effectiveness and participation in child protection initiatives could shed light on gender-specific challenges and opportunities within these programs.
- iv. **Scalability of Successful Initiatives:** Investigating the potential for scaling successful community-led initiatives to other regions could provide a blueprint for

expanding these efforts across Malawi. This research should focus on the factors that contribute to the scalability of such programs.

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