



Five key things we have learned about how to support communities to mobilize around early childhood development

Lessons learned from Firelight's work with community-based organizations in eastern Africa
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1. Families and communities make up children's most immediate environments – so when they make changes, the effects on children can be transformative.

When parents and community members have the right knowledge and tools, they can make critical changes in the environments in which children live, learn, and interact – resulting in transformative shifts in children themselves. The work of Firelight's CBO grantee-partners in implementing the Care for Child Development curriculum resulted in parents increasing the frequency with which they engaged in positive care practices with children under 3 – including telling stories, reading books, playing together, and singing songs. Similarly, CBOs empowered ECD center-based caregivers to improve their practices in fostering positive adult-child and child-child interactions, as well as in improving children's school readiness. These behavioral shifts can result in tangible changes for children's early childhood development.

2. Investing in community-based organizations is investing in the social fabric made up of the community themselves.

Community-based organizations are local, grassroots groups made up from people within the community who came together to respond to issues deemed important by the community itself. They are a local infrastructure woven from the social fabric of the community themselves, making them intimately familiar with community needs and assets, trusted by and accountable to the community, and able to navigate the different systems affecting children's lives – from families to schools to health clinics to broader government policies.

Investing in CBOs means investing in *communities*, empowering them to raise their children into thriving and contributing adults. Building the capacity of CBO staff is an effective and sustainable way to build the capacity of the community itself – trained CBO staff can actively engage their communities and encourage their participation in creating and sustaining social change for children. Firelight has already found that CBOs have been able to increase community demand for quality early childhood development services and sensitized communities around their right to hold government accountable for quality service delivery. In other words, CBOs help communities advocate for themselves both now and into the future.

3. A deep understanding of early childhood development is critical.

You can't ask a CBO or a community to 'copy-paste' a preexisting package or model and expect the process and results to be relevant, effective, and sustainable. It is essential to develop and cultivate CBO and community capacity to critically assess both local and global knowledge, values, and skills in order to make the best decisions they can for their children – in ways that are relevant, effective, and sustainable for their own communities.

An important part of this is consulting with / collaborating with CBOs at every stage – from determining goals of capacity building to designing and carrying out evaluations. If CBOs do not have the flexibility to design adaptive interventions in close partnership with their communities, then it is almost impossible to expect long-term, sustainable change at the community level.

However, it is also helpful to provide standardized / peer-reviewed tools as options so that CBOs do not have to start from scratch when helpful resources exist. At the same time, if bringing in external knowledge, it is important to think about what is relevant, what is aligned with local realities and values, what pieces can/should or cannot/should not be adapted, and what is sustainable at the community level. A key component of this process is listening to what CBOs need and being responsive to their realities.

4. Strengthening CBOs' technical capacities is important – but not sufficient in itself.

Building the capacity of CBO staff is an effective and sustainable way to build the capacity of the community itself – trained CBO staff can actively engage their communities and encourage their participation in creating and sustaining social change for children.

As such, CBOs benefit greatly from targeted support and capacity building – in organizational competencies, technical programming capacities, and in systems thinking and community development. Funders must also go beyond 'traditional' methods of capacity building to include capacity building in:

- Stronger strategic planning, governance, financial management, and accountability systems enable CBOs to sustain themselves as organizations over the long-term.
- Stronger technical skills enable them to deepen and improve the quality of their programs and interventions – resulting in greater benefits to community members.
- CBOs who are able to mobilize communities to 'own' issues and change processes, map out systems, identify and understand root causes, strategically partner with key stakeholders, and carry out actions that address root causes rather than 'band-aid' solutions to symptoms – are more able to create change in systems and in underlying root causes that are sustained long beyond the end of the funding partnership.

However, in order for capacity building to be relevant, effective, and create lasting change in the capacities of CBOs and their community stakeholders, it should be planned in close consultation with CBOs themselves, designed with a combination of pedagogical methods, and build on the knowledge, capacities, and skills already held by CBOs themselves.

5. The key to effective, relevant, and sustainable solutions for ECD is community-driven systems change.

CBOs have long known that the secret to creating lasting change in communities is ensuring that community members themselves own and drive the change process – and that change actions focus on addressing the underlying systems that actually cause the issues of concern in the first place. By only investing in a limited program / package, funders can often

restrain the true capacity and power of a CBO – or clusters of CBOs – to effect change. When communities are actually able to map the entire systems that surround young children, they can then design the most effective interventions for early childhood development.

Firelight knows that giving our CBO grantee-partners the full toolkit for community-driven systems change is the key to creating effective, relevant, and sustainable solutions that set children up for long-term success. Supporting CBOs to create this kind of systems change means –

- time, support and funds to look at and address contextual factors, stakeholders in the system, relationships between stakeholders, and other dynamics and patterns.
- time, support and funds to consult others and gather different perspectives
- time, support and funds to partner with key stakeholders at every stage
- recognition that cause and effect is not linear, and that social change in complex systems takes time
- ability to make choices about what part(s) of the system you want to impact (you do not have to do everything) and to understand what role others will play
- time, support and funds to learn and reflect as you go

This means supporting an adaptive learning approach both within CBO grantees and within funder themselves. This also means changing our own strategic definitions of what constitutes ‘impact’, ‘growth’, ‘success’, and ‘sustainability’ – and the indicators of progress to which we give value and meaning.