

## REFLECTIONS ON NETWORKING DYNAMICS TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN TANZANIA

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Article abstract

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**Keywords:** children, civil society networking, collaboration, violence against children, violence prevention, youth

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Violence against children (VAC) is increasing globally due to many factors, and has even been recently accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Violence is an almost daily reality for large numbers of children and women alike in Tanzania (Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children [MoHCDGEC], 2016). A survey conducted in 2009 found that nearly one in three girls and one in seven boys experience sexual violence before turning 18 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2011, p. 2). The Legal and Human Rights Centre (2018) revealed that VAC incidents increased from 4,728 in mid-2017 to 6,376 by mid-2018; sexual violence was reported as the major form of abuse in all districts, followed by physical and psychological violence (p. xxxviii), and neglect/desertion (p. 173). A recent study by the education advocacy organization HakiElimu (2020) emphasizes that reported cases of VAC increased in Tanzania from 2014 to 2018 (p. 26). Many of the children who participated in the study had experienced psychological (60.9%) or physical (87.9%) violence (pp. 1–2), and at least 3 in 10 girls and 1 in 7 boys had experienced sexual violence (p. 15).

According to Martínez (2017), many schoolgirls experience sexual harassment from teachers, as well as from “bus drivers and adults who often ask them for sex in exchange for gifts, rides, or money, on their way to school” (pp. 10–13). Girls in the study had often not disclosed these experiences, reporting that they “do not know how to do so, do not trust that their concerns will be addressed, or they fear retaliation from teachers” (Martínez, 2017, p. 71).

Child forced marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) are harmful cultural practices that perpetuate violence and gender inequality, violating the rights of girls and even causing permanent disability in some cases (Avalos et al., 2015, p. 642). In some communities, as many as 70.8% of the girls have experienced FGM (National Bureau of Statistics & ICF Macro, 2011). In addition, children with disability continue to be discriminated against, and while the practice has decreased, it is still the case that some children with albinism are killed in Tanzania because of misconceptions, including the belief that ritual murders will bring riches and prosperity (UNICEF, 2021, p. 42; Human Rights Watch, 2019).

VAC is, therefore, multidimensional and complex. Addressing it requires concerted efforts from actors with different competencies and strengths at the grassroots, subnational, and national levels. Tanzania has been applauded for its heavy investment in government-led violence prevention and response partnerships and collaborations (Bissell, 2015, p. 12). One notable collaborative undertaking followed the 2011 review of the national survey on VAC in Tanzania when an interministerial group was created to develop an interdisciplinary and decentralized response plan. This resulted in the establishment of more robust child protection systems and a 5-year costed National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children 2017/8-2021/2 (NPAVAWC; MoHCDGEC, 2016).

The Tanzania NPAVAWC provides a systematic framework that emphasizes interconnected ventures involving many stakeholders. These include government, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and development partners. Tanzania has recorded some progress in terms of the enactment and operationalization of relevant policies and laws. The government has rolled out child protection systems to local government authorities, equipped child protection teams at the district and village levels, enhanced the capacity of VAWC frontline workers, and established child labor committees to monitor workplaces. Other measures include the establishment of a national child toll-free helpline, a national multisectoral committee on prevention and response to VAWC, and a Police Gender and Children's Desk (PGCD) at police stations throughout the country. Despite these VAC prevention and response measures, the national statistics remain alarming.

Recently, investigators have examined the prevalence, context, and health outcomes of VAC (Vagi et al., 2016), its impact (Hillis et al., 2017), possible remedies (Lachman et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021), and existing interventions (Reuben et al., 2022; Wangamati et al., 2022). Although some research has been carried out on community-based child protection mechanisms in Tanzania (e.g., Reuben et al., 2022), there is still limited understanding of the dynamics of civil society networks and connections at different levels as well as the advantages of networks, and the challenges they face, in regard to VAC prevention and response. Extensive research has been conducted on civil society networking generally without focusing on VAC. For example, van Stapele et al. (2019) described the benefits of collaboration, including the fact that it amplifies the voices of small organizations. Networking also helps organizations achieve legitimacy and funding, thereby prolonging their survival (Johansen & LeRoux, 2013). According to Mizrahi and Rosenthal (2001), collaborations or coalitions can potentially “revitalize their communities to create opportunities to influence larger social agendas” (p. 75) as well as cultivate and deepen working relationships among diverse groups. Although Gajda (2004) elaborated on the importance of trust and healthy connections among network members, recent work (e.g., Shawar & Shiffman, 2021) shows that collaboration can be marred by competition among partners. LeRoux and Goerdel (2009) contended that not-for-profit organizations that operate in highly competitive contexts have to decide how much time to invest in networking versus service delivery. While some research has been carried out on VAC in Tanzania and on networks generally, there has been little analysis of the dynamics of VAC-focused collaborations.

This paper presents our reflections on the dynamics of networking for VAC prevention and response, and the advantages and challenges associated with VAC networking in Tanzania. It draws on a larger study (CivSource Africa, 2021) conducted to understand the functionality and connectivity of existing networks and their corresponding impact on the prevention and realization of children's rights in East Africa. We use the concept of collaboration to explore how joint endeavors contribute to VAC prevention and response. We follow scholars like Gajda (2004), who advised that “there is an ever increasing need for individuals, educational authorities, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, community networks, and business groups to

come together to address the complex issues that confront our society today” (p. 67). Gajda (2004) agreed with other scholars (e.g., Austin, 2000; Calabrese, 2000) when she asserted that “individual entities can pool scarce resources and duplication of services can be minimized ... [and] common interventions can be developed” (p. 67) to increase efficiency. Whereas collaboration can connect fragmented nodes and systems to address multifaceted social concerns like VAC, Gajda felt that its definition remains “somewhat elusive, inconsistent, and theoretical” (p. 66), noting that it has been described diversely as “working together”, “joining forces”, “working in partnership”, “pooling resources”, “acting as a team”, and “cooperating” (p. 68). We question and continue to draw on this fusion of attributes to make meaning of how different actors function within a network arrangement in Tanzania’s context to respond to and prevent VAC.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

In this article, we draw from sociological institutionalism (Drori et al., 2009), which explains the formation and operation of organizations. We perceive organizations, groups, and networks as existing within a larger social environment that influences their strategies and plans. The networks are embedded in societal institutions that operate at the different levels of the child protection ecology, starting with the smallest institution — the family — and proceeding through the community, national, and global levels. The dynamics within these institutional structures sometimes affect networks and groups through coercive processes. The sociological institutionalism theory explains these coercive processes in the form of national legal actions (formal government rules, laws, and policies) and normative controls in the environment (informal rules and norms). Our analysis of networks was further informed by the view that VAC actors are not only influenced by the wider environment but also have room to construct preferred ideas and pursue group interests (Jepperson, 2002). We applied sociological institutionalism to examine how children’s rights networks are influenced by the different systems, policies, rules, regulations, and norms in which they operate.

We further borrow from network theory (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011), which articulates how the interaction between a network structure and its processes generates outcomes for the network as a whole. Borgatti and Halgin (2011) used information flow as an example of the processes that generate outcomes. We find information flow relevant to our analysis of the dynamics in Tanzania’s VAC network functionality, particularly knowledge-sharing. Borgatti and Halgin (2011) also described the network theory of networks, which arises when network processes include other network phenomena, such as when existing ties between two actors change and cause other network members to choose sides. Lizardo and Pirkey (2014) agreed that network outcomes are the culmination of previous relational dynamics and the connection mechanisms between present network structures. We applied network theory to analyze VAC network dynamics, including the benefits and challenges of VAC networks in Tanzania.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Design and Sites***

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach (Stebbins, 2001). We conducted the study in the Dar es Salaam region between 2019 and 2020 in three urban districts — Kigamboni, Temeke, and Ilala — and eight wards.

Kigamboni is a new, well-planned settlement primarily occupied by middle-income people. The area has undergone significant changes in recent years, prompted by the announcement of a series of large-scale property development projects as well as the opening of the Kigamboni Bridge in 2016, which has improved accessibility to the peninsular northwest part of Kigamboni significantly. As Kigamboni is a new district that has been the focus of substantial development, we were guided by the perspective that efforts concentrated on economic and infrastructural growth may sometimes come at the expense of social development, including addressing VAC. To examine this idea, we explored the VAC prevention and response efforts that were in place.

The population of Temeke district are primarily Swahili people who hold strong Islamic beliefs and ideologies and typically earn low incomes. Their unique mix of social, cultural, and economic characteristics made them a particularly well-defined group for studying joint VAC prevention and response efforts in the area.

Ilala is an administrative district in Dar es Salaam. As a business center, it is commonly referred to as “Downtown Dar”, and most of the city’s commerce, banking, and national offices are located there. It is also part of the city center, with congested residential areas like Buguruni, with its informal or unplanned settlements. Ilala was selected for the study because of the mix of activities that take place there involving people from many locations, and to provide a multidimensional awareness of the dynamics of networking for VAC.

### ***Study Participants***

We used a bottom-up approach to select study participants. Using purposive and snowball sampling, we first identified VAC actors at the grassroots level who led us in turn to those at the district level. At the grassroots level, study participants comprised crucial community actors in VAC such as local leaders (parish chiefs, religious leaders, elders, local council representatives), headteachers, child protection officers and probation and community development officers, and representatives of community-based organizations and associations. The participants who provided key informant interviews were at the district level or higher. At the district level, we selected members from different networks and key district officials. Similarly, at the national level, we included representatives of national umbrella organizations that support actors at the district and grassroots levels. We also included funders of VAC networking activities and those referenced at different levels of the research. The participants, therefore, included network leads, hosts, and chairs at the district and national levels. The donors were only those who were currently funding or had previously funded VAC interventions through the participating networks.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

A desk review on the functionality of networks and networking was carried out to help conceptualize study issues, identify literature gaps, and identify existing networks (published by CivSource Africa, 2021). The review enabled us to map out relevant organizations and individuals for inclusion in the research. We then designed and pre-tested the data collection tools — the focus group discussion (FGD) guide and interview guide — which sought perceptions of how VAC networking is practised in Tanzania.

Primary data were collected using FGDs and in-depth interviewing conducted in person and on the telephone, and some participants received followed-up emails. FGDs were conducted at the grassroots level with individuals who were key community influencers and community leaders. The FGDs were incorporated into the study process to generate qualitative data to give deeper insight into VAC networking at the grassroots and identify key VAC actors and networks at the district and national levels.

Interviews were used to collect opinions from district and national level participants and from participating donors. All FGDs and interviews were audio-recorded for proper data interpretation, analysis, and management. The interviewers recorded initial impressions and interpretations as field notes based on the interview process, which provided further cues during data analysis. We also collected secondary data during the document review phase.

### ***Data Management and Analysis***

All data were stored using Dropbox, a file hosting service, in a folder accessible only to members of the research team. After each interview or FGD, the audio files were uploaded into the project Dropbox. Thematic analysis was done using an iterative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All audio files were transcribed into text, cleaned to remove identifiers, coded, and categorized into emerging themes based on the study objectives. The coding process was managed using NVivo (version 11) qualitative data analysis software. Arguments were checked to make sure they were supported by relevant literature on related research. To achieve trustworthiness, members of the research team took field notes and engaged in peer debriefing (Connelly, 2016). Further, we engaged in data and researcher triangulation (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). For example, we used a variety of data sources to diversify the viewpoints of different participants. Additionally, the research team members held regular meetings to compare and crosscheck the consistency of information gathered at different times, by various means, and from multiple sources.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Before the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH). Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Regional Administration and Local Government office, the *Tawala za Mikoa na Serikali za Mitaa* (TAMISEMI), to confirm that our study did not subject participants to any harm. Full, informed written consent was obtained from all FGD and interview participants, and their anonymity was protected throughout the data storage and reporting processes.

## Findings

### *Conceptualization of Networking*

In the study, we use “networking” to mean all forms of joint effort that come together with a specific goal — here, responding to VAC — whether within formal relationships or informally, as long as it is for mutual benefit. In this diverse understanding of networking, the network actors are of different kinds. They include individual persons, groups of people, registered organizations, unregistered organizations, government institutions, academic institutions, and development partners. Participants explained networking using the analogy of the woven nest of an African weaverbird, in which it is difficult to determine a starting or ending point; we adopted their description of networking as “an intertwined and complex process”, one that crisscrosses intricately, as described by Kakuru, Kamusiime, Kibukamusoke and colleagues in this issue (p. 115). Relatedly, Waddock (2002) described networks as a collection of organizations that come together to solve complex problems that typically cannot be solved by one organization acting alone. Based on our analysis of participants’ responses, we categorized networks as either formal (structured) or informal (unstructured). In the next section, we present an analysis of how complex networks organize to respond to VAC in Tanzania.

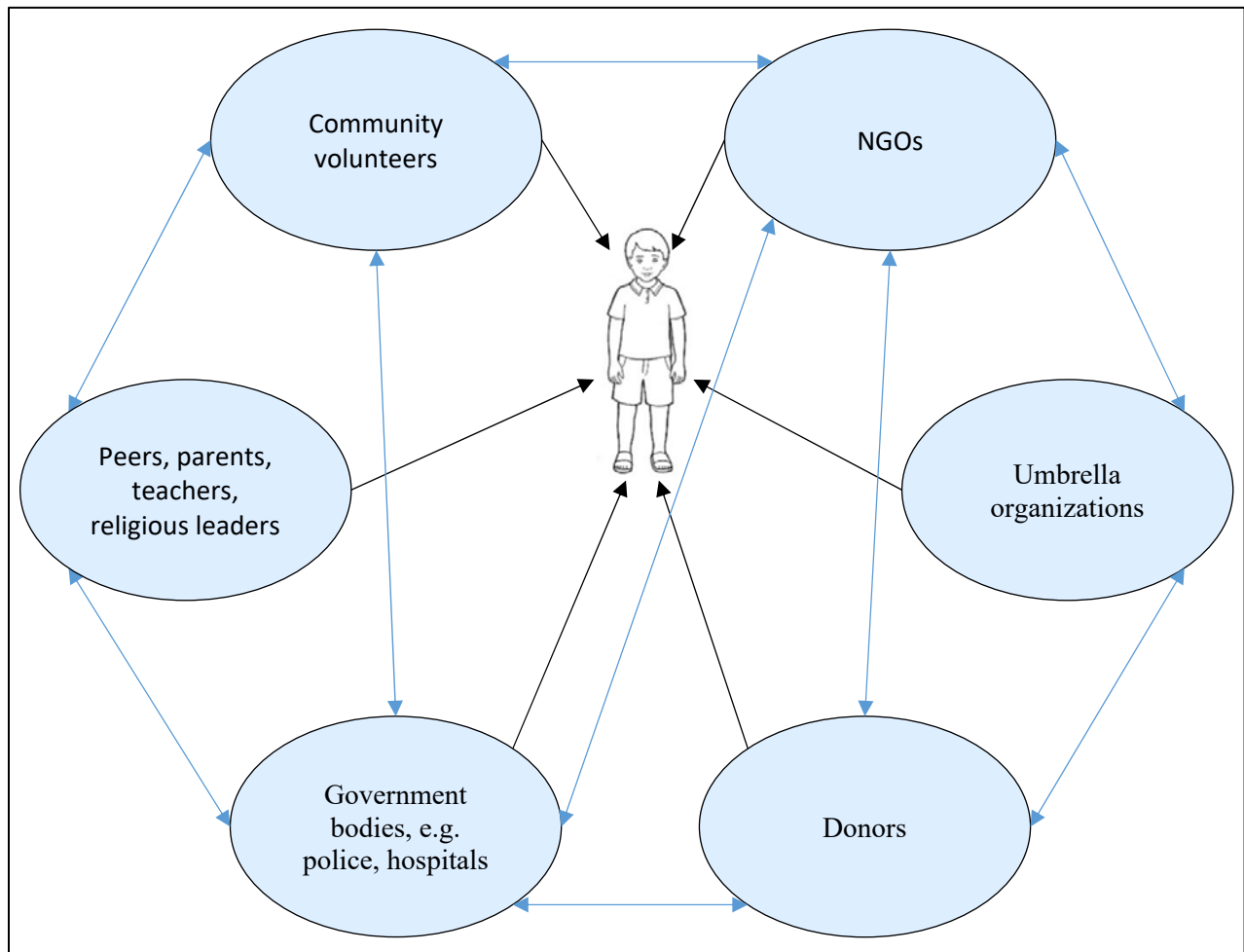
### *Dynamics of Network Connectivity*

**Encircled efforts around children:** A key objective of the study was to find out how networking to address and respond to VAC is practised. The different stakeholders who participated in this study mentioned child protection and the welfare of children as the primary motivations for their involvement in VAC networks. In networking efforts, the child is the link connecting VAC actors at the grassroots, subnational, and national levels. Our analysis of the network relationships reveals that grassroots network actors have the most direct connections with the child. In contrast, umbrella organizations or networks work through their civil society partners to reach the child (see Figure 1). Similarly, many interventions are implemented directly by single organizations working together with government and community members. VAC networking happens between government bodies, umbrella organizations, NGOs, donors, community volunteers, and individuals. However, although individuals, community volunteers, and some representatives of NGOs and government bodies do interact with children, they do not necessarily involve them in networking activities. Our data, therefore, shows that VAC networks happen around children but not with children.

An FDG participant explained the non-involvement of children in VAC networks using the analogy of a bird’s nest: “Just as a bird builds a nest to protect its young ones, so too do child protection actors form networks to protect children without their involvement.” In Figure 1, children are the targets of interventions and decisions made by a range of actors: there is little room for children’s active voice in networking activities. However, organizations do engage with children when delivering programs and interventions.



Figure 1. *Relationship Map for VAC Actors in Tanzania*



**Unspecified VAC network lifespan:** The longevity of a network depends on many contextual factors that determine the duration of its activities and influence; therefore, the lifespan of VAC networks in Tanzania is variable. Our discussions with VAC actors revealed that they engage in both short-term (temporary) and long-term collaborations. Short-term collaborations occur from time to time when established organizations, individual children’s rights activists, and networks form ad hoc coalitions to achieve limited or even one-off objectives, such as celebrating a special day like the Day of the African Child, or putting on a fundraising gala for a cause like autism. On the other hand, many collaborations are structured to require a long-term commitment by their members. Examples of long-term collaborations include the Tanzania Police Female Network (TPFN), *Mtandao wa Elimu* (Tanzania Education Network), MenEngage Tanzania (MET), Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), and Kigamboni Community Center (KCC). Sometimes long-term collaborations start with a short-term goal but the result is a lasting network.

Our data show that commemorating global and national events engenders one-off collaborations between VAC actors of various kinds, including organizations and individuals. For instance, the Global Action Week for Education normally brings together many partners who have worked together on an ongoing basis and new ones who add value to the event. Other events include the campaigns on zero-tolerance for gender-based violence (GBV), the 16 Days of Activism against GBV, and *Sikukuu ya Mtoto wa Kike* (Day of the Girl Child). During such events, partners contribute their strengths to influence stakeholders. For example, to mobilize the public, the *HakiElimu* (Right to Education) organization uses media, the Femina Hip network uses its social media, and other networks like MET and Children’s Dignity Forum (CDF) communicate with their large memberships.

**Strategic public–private networking:** Our findings show that some organizations strategically network with government bodies to pursue a VAC policy reform agenda. Such strategic coalitions usually address contextually complex policy issues such as adolescent sexuality education and child marriage. For example, some participating police officers noted that they had formed strategic alliances with the Ministry of Home Affairs, MoHCDGEC, and other professionals from the health, social welfare, and justice systems, as well as children’s rights organizations, to boost VAC prevention and response efforts. The police are among the VAC frontline responders who occupy a privileged position in the child protection domain. We also found that some organizations that belong to a VAC network will collaborate with actors (organizations or individuals) who may not belong to any network to strategically address a specific VAC concern. These can be either long-term or short-term collaborations. Our analysis shows that such actors who strategically collaborated were typically members of several networks.

**Joint project implementation:** We established that some networks engage with other networks in writing grant proposals and implementing joint projects. Each partner takes on a function based on its core competencies and specializations. For example, a project addressing the risks of early pregnancy and improving access to justice for victims was implemented by CDF, the Tanzania Women Lawyers Association (TAWLA), the *Msichana* (Girl) Initiative, and the Tanzania Media Women’s Association (TAMWA). The CDF raised awareness among parliamentarians, the TAWLA trained police officers, TAMWA led media advocacy campaigns, and the *Msichana* Initiative trained clinic officers and mobilized children’s and women’s groups to work as advocates.

**Network-to-network collaborations:** Collaborative efforts may be undertaken between networks that operate in different geographical areas or that have ideological differences but share key beliefs and values. For instance, during the district interviews we found that on some occasions, *Bakwata*, the National Muslim Council of Tanzania, has engaged in advocacy and training with the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT). Participants explained that this interfaith networking or collaboration happened because there was a need for religious-based networks to join in efforts such as campaigning for child protection.

**Joint resource mobilization and sharing:** The work done by VAC network actors requires resources, including funding, for networking activities, office premises and management, public engagement and advocacy, and project implementation. We asked network leads about VAC network funding options and found that many donors fund individual organizations and consortia to engage in child protection work. Our data reveal that even when collaboration is not explicitly stated as a funding requirement, collaborative efforts have received more positive results than solo endeavors in the VAC funding landscape. In addition, VAC networks with a large membership and those comprising reputable child-focused organizations tend to have a competitive advantage in winning donor trust and grants. Therefore, the findings suggest that funders and donors take into consideration the perceived impact on the sector when reviewing funding proposals submitted by networks. Additionally, donor funds have been shrinking over the years, which has led to increased competition for funding. In this context, joint resource mobilization is a preferred strategy since a proposal from a network has more political weight than one that comes from an individual or organization working alone.

**Synergy building:** In responding to VAC, rather than “reinventing the wheel”, networks tend to take advantage of opportunities already established by other actors, such as grassroots-level investments in training community volunteers and other community resource persons. For instance, we found evidence that a team of community volunteers from the Kigamboni district who were trained by the collaborative network MET were able to support other projects because of their newly acquired skills. Similarly, VAC networks exploit their members’ connections with government departments, community members, and donors to implement their interventions.

### ***The Benefits of Collaboration***

To further understand the dynamics of VAC networking, we sought network leads’ perspectives on its benefits. VAC networking is driven by the desire to achieve a common goal, such as having a stronger voice, greater influence, better resource mobilization, increased visibility, or joint learning.

VAC networks whose membership includes influential international organizations or those with many members have the visibility needed for the success of advocacy programs. For example, the Tanzania Education Network successfully lobbied the government for a more significant quality assurance budget and a supportive grading system for girls’ education. The Tanzania Ending Child Marriage Network worked to change the girl child marriage law in the country from a minimum age of 15 years to 18 years. The Girls Not Brides campaign was conducted in 2016 as a collaboration between several networks: the Priority for Entrepreneurship Network (PEN Tanzania), CDF, Save the Children, Hope for Young Girls, Umati, Plan International, and the *Msichana* Initiative. One participant stated:

We started this coalition since we noticed a strong need for increased awareness about the harmful nature of early child marriages. We have advocated for policy

reform to end child marriages and support unmarried children and girls at risk from 15 to 18 years. This is our great success. We have also strengthened the collaboration of all organizations dealing with ending child marriages. (Interview, network lead)

Our findings show that VAC networks strategically work in partnership to advocate for policy changes, taking advantage of the resulting larger numbers and greater influence. In addition, participants noted that VAC is a complex and multidimensional problem and addressing it requires a holistic, collaborative approach. A network lead observed:

As you know, children’s rights are a broad subject; we believe that improving children’s education will reduce VAC, especially in school. Improving education goes with many aspects, such as providing a comfortable environment at schools, like classrooms, toilets, teacher training, providing books, and many others. Therefore, one organization can’t do everything alone. (Interview, network lead)

NGOs, individual activists, and professionals also form coalitions because of the increased visibility that comes with a larger organization, which in turn helps to enhance the visibility of their own work. As one of the community volunteers noted, “For sure, if we were each working on our own, it would be hard to be known” (FGD participant). Being visible is essential to being identified by other stakeholders for possible partnerships. Apart from enhancing the visibility of networks and their work, VAC networking is used as a strategy to mobilize resources and improve the accountability and quality of child protection initiatives.

Another way that VAC networks are beneficial for responding to and preventing VAC is that individual actors who join a network can then more easily coordinate — usually virtually — to track and apprehend perpetrators or follow up on reported cases. The interconnectedness presented by networking ensures efficiency in responding to VAC, saving time, money, and other resources. Networking, therefore, provides the synergetic benefits required for delivering holistic prevention and response in VAC practice.

Additionally, the different VAC network actors leverage each other’s professional skills and competencies in individuals’ and organizations’ areas of focus. The study participants indicated that managing VAC requires network actors with varied abilities, such as knowledge of children’s rights, psychosocial competencies, and healthcare skills, that may not be found in one organization. Furthermore, networks comprise organizations focused on different thematic areas. Some we encountered were child marriage, corporal punishment, child labor, sexual violence, and children’s rights generally. Hence, networking facilitates the availability and consolidation of a repertoire of skills that would be unlikely to occur together in a single individual or organization.

Since VAC network actors consolidate their competencies, experiences, connections, funds, and resources, they reap enhanced performance and efficiency. This is particularly important for policy advocacy, as one of the participants commented:

It is difficult for one voice to influence law or policy reform. Each one has their power and levels of influence which when added together have a stronger voice that is likely to bring success. (Interview, network lead)

Our findings, therefore, show that networking is associated with strategic decision-making by different stakeholders. Coalitions are based on who is better suited to contribute to the common cause: network partners are selected based on the nature of the violence the network focuses on and the expertise the potential partner is expected to share. Our findings imply that one individual or organization can be a member of several networks for different reasons.

### ***Challenges Faced in VAC Networking***

Despite the advantages of networking, our data revealed that formal network members are sometimes suspicious of each other's motives. In order to attract funding, each organization in the network will compete with the others to show that its contribution is more deserving of financial support. This limitation in their ability to share knowledge and learn from each other's experiences regarding VAC prevention and response is a challenge that some networks are unable to avoid.

A related challenge is that of inadequate communication. The interviewed network leads noted that they have little or no access to reliable forms of communication within their networks and that network members have limited contact outside of formal meetings and events; this leaves some smaller network members unsure whether more influential organizations or network members are benefiting at their expense. These findings show that a lack of reliable communications systems and strategies creates distrust between smaller members and more prominent ones, which can lead to bickering and disharmony.

We found that VAC networking activities are prioritized by neither networks nor donors. Our analysis shows that network actors prioritize other activities, especially interventions that provide support directly to their beneficiaries, thus making networking a secondary or supplementary activity. The interviews with district VAC network leads revealed that some networks rely on individual champions who keep bringing forward the advantages of networking. When such champions are not present, the network suffers. In one of the interventions, known as *Kuwa Mjanja* (Be Clever), three partners set out to implement an intervention aimed at training health workers and volunteers to educate and mobilize parents and adolescents. When the first partner withdrew from the collaboration, and then another, the only remaining partner could not sustain the intervention. One of the network leads we interviewed said, "Some people become more active than others in one way or another such that when they are not around, the network doesn't work effectively."

Some networks go through a period of quiescence between projects that negatively impacts the sustainability of VAC prevention and response work. This arises because most networks anchor their VAC interventions within projects and have no specific networking agenda or budget to sustain general VAC networking activities. Networking is seen not as a permanent function but rather as a tool to be deployed when necessary to achieve specific goals.

## Discussion

This paper set out to assess how VAC prevention and response collaborations happen and the benefits and challenges of such collaborations. Previous studies that investigated VAC in Tanzania did not focus on the dynamics, importance, or challenges of networking. This study could be particularly pivotal in a context where only formal networks are recognized in child rights policy, programing, and research at the expense of informal networks and their beneficiaries — the children. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, and drawing on sociological institutionalism as described by Drori et al. (2009), we analyzed the perspectives of network actors, leads, and donors at the grassroots, subnational, and national levels. We found that VAC networks are formed for a variety of reasons, and that collaborations exist between organizations and institutions, including state and non-state actors. Our results show that while VAC collaborations bring substantial benefits, they also face multiple challenges, such as competition for funds between network actors and a lack of effective communication channels. VAC itself is a complex challenge that affects different children in different ways, and multiple strategies and actors are thus needed to address it. Together for Girls<sup>1</sup> is an example of a global partnership working in Tanzania to end VAC, with a focus on sexual violence against girls. Their work is based on the understanding that a problem of this magnitude cannot be solved by one actor or one sector working in isolation.

Our findings agree with Raman et al. (2021), who also recognized the importance of building alliances. Besides Together for Girls, other actors in the VAC landscape — for example, the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), the International Society for Social Pediatrics & Child Health (ISSOP), and the International Pediatric Association (IPA) — have also learned that addressing abuse requires building effective partnerships (Raman et al., 2021).

One of the partnerships we found in Tanzania is the Global Partnership to End VAC. Tanzania has joined the Global Partnership as a “pathfinding country” — a country whose fight against VAC is guided by INSPIRE<sup>2</sup> strategies. INSPIRE emphasizes the need to engage in intersectoral and

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<sup>1</sup> Together for Girls is a partnership that brings together more than 20 national governments, civil society organizations, United Nations’ entities, development partners, and the private sector to improve violence prevention, healing, and justice.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

coordination activities while illuminating the roles of multiple sectors in coming together to develop an integrated platform of concerted actions to end VAC (Butchart & Hillis, 2016). Consistent with this view, our findings reveal that joint efforts offer holistic solutions to preventing and responding to VAC, which agrees with Raman et al.'s (2021) assertion that collaborative efforts benefit by drawing from different actors' expertise and experience, and that it is important to ensure that interventions complement and synergize with other actors at different levels.

Interdependent and conjoined efforts offer possibilities for tackling VAC on multiple fronts. A global report by Know Violence in Childhood (2017) recommends that addressing VAC take place on as many different levels as possible, be it family, community, or institutional levels, and using various means: changing laws or norms; working in different settings with a range of actors; including children, parents, and teachers in the effort; and so on. We concur with Bissell (2015), who contended that addressing VAC requires the involvement of actors in many fields, like health, child protection, education, social welfare, and justice. Drawing from our findings, we argue that such multidimensional strength is unlikely to be found in a single actor but rather requires alliances in which each partner contributes its wealth and expertise. Even smaller organizations are able to contribute their strength and amplify their voices within a consortium. Our findings are consistent with van Stapele and colleagues' (2019) statement that "working in collaboration amplifies the voices of isolated community-based organizations and makes it louder" (p. 17). Such conjoined voices and efforts are critical for successful VAC prevention and response efforts.

Analysis of our findings shows that the importance of multilevel and multisectoral collaborations is well acknowledged in the literature and by our participants. What is missing is an understanding of the importance of informal networks in VAC networks. Informal networks are not recognized by governments, a factor that impairs their effectiveness (Jepperson, 2002).

The promising results of collaborative efforts notwithstanding, our findings indicate that networking can give rise to difficulties of its own. Therefore, our study results cannot confirm Mizrahi and Rosenthal's (2001) findings, particularly that collaborations deepen working relationships among diverse groups. Our participants felt that network partners are sometimes suspicious of each other and may therefore lack the transparency necessary for sharing key information and acquiring knowledge, partly because partners in the same network or working group are often competing for the same resources and for visibility. Our study findings agree with those of Shawar and Shiffman (2021), who found that some actors compete for the position of the most influential actor in the field of VAC in order to gain control over the agenda and be credited for their contribution. This creates rifts in the partnerships and fosters mistrust, leading to a loose and unproductive collaboration. As Gajda (2004) emphasized, "Without a basis for trust and healthy interpersonal connections between people, strategic alliances will not have a solid foundation on which to stand" (p. 69).

Our results further support the ideas of Leroux and Goerdel (2009) and Johansen and LeRoux (2013) in regard to the dilemmas faced by nonprofits operating in competitive environments where

they are compelled to make strategic decisions to prolong their survival. For instance, the Tanzanian child protection ecology “coerces” networks to make strategic decisions regarding how much knowledge is shared. This defeats a key purpose of network formation and confirms that networks are not static. Rather, they are dynamic products of actors’ agency. Hence, in agreement with Lizardo and Pirkey (2014), who asserted that networks do not exist independently of actors, our findings suggest that VAC networks in Tanzania are the product of individual and organizational strategic responses to changes in the child protection ecology.

There is also a potential for clashes and tensions to arise among different actors regarding which form of VAC prevention, and which strategies, to employ. This finding corroborates Shawar and Shiffman’s (2021) call for attention to the multiplicity of available entry points for addressing VAC. These entry points may emphasize prevention or remediation, law enforcement and prosecution, health education and health programs for social change, corporal punishment, sexual violence, humanitarian action, and so on. Indeed, Shawar and Shiffman (2021) asserted that sometimes “there exist disagreements about which types of violence should be prioritized” (p. 416). The scramble for power, resources, influence, and visibility may not favor the achievement of shared VAC networking goals.

Despite sustained discourse on the importance of child participation in decisions about matters of importance to them, our study found that children are not involved in VAC networks, and neither are they consulted. Study participants used the analogy of an African bird that builds a nest to protect her family members without their involvement to underscore that network actors can form effective VAC networks without the direct participation of children. Although this was a surprising finding, we contend that, for our participants, such a localized understanding of the child protection context is pivotal for decolonized theorizing about VAC networks.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is based on a study aimed at understanding the functionality and connectivity of VAC networks and their impact on the realization of children’s rights in East Africa. In this paper, we focused on how VAC prevention and response efforts are connected at different levels, and the benefits and challenges of networking in Tanzania. The complex challenges that VAC networks must strategically navigate impact network longevity, membership, functionality, and activity. Our findings imply that structural factors and actors’ agency combine to influence not only benefits and challenges for VAC networks, but also strategies for longevity. For example, actors use joint resource mobilization, public–private networking, joint project implementation, network-to-network collaboration, and synergy-building strategies to enhance their visibility and influence, win donors’ trust, and boost their child protection efforts. The practice of networking around children, rather than with children, is part of the localized conceptualization of child protection and is an essential issue for future research. Questions about how to resolve some of the challenges that diminish the benefits of VAC networking persist. Future research could investigate the best



practices for knowledge-sharing between networks operating in a competitive setting. VAC network actors should intentionally build more supportive relationships and strive for consensus as critical ingredients in successful child protection efforts. A key focus should be on achieving mutual goals while maintaining separate identities and contributing according to each partner's greatest strength.

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