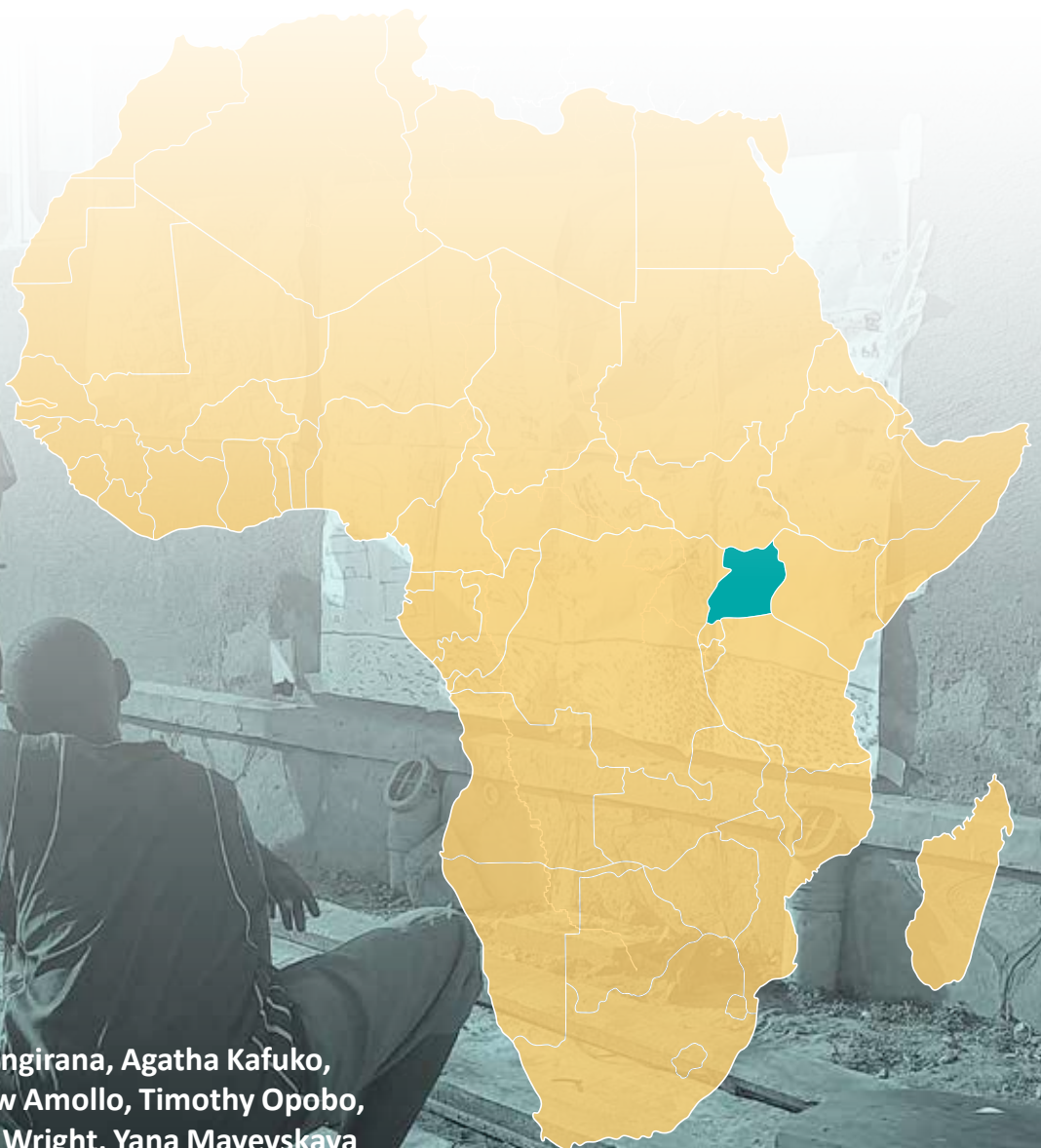




# Lessons Learned from a Child Participation Project with the AfriChild Centre in Uganda

Piloting tools from the *Children as Partners  
in Child Protection in COVID-19 Guide*

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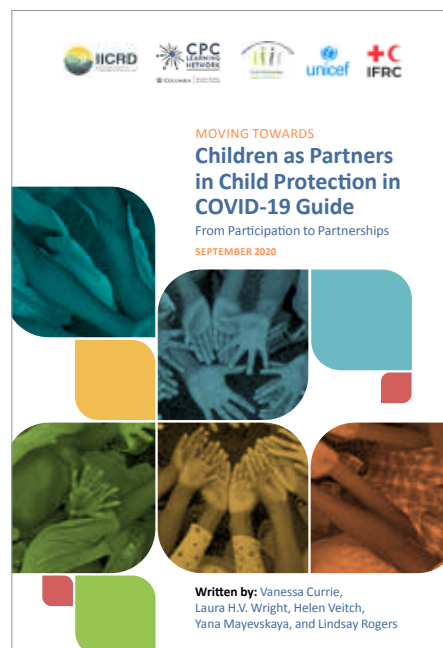
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## ► INTRODUCTION

The [AfriChild Centre](#)<sup>1</sup> in partnership with the [Care and Protection of Children \(CPC\) Learning Network](#) and the [International Institute for Child Rights and Development \(IICRD\)](#) embarked on a process to pilot test child participatory tools from the [Moving Towards Children as Partners in Child Protection in COVID-19 Guide: From Participation to Partnerships](#) (“Children as Partners Guide”, hereafter) that was developed to facilitate meaningful child participation in child protection during COVID-19 and similar contexts. After a series of meetings, the AfriChild team selected three tools to be piloted in a research context in Uganda. This report describes the process undertaken to pilot the guide, lessons learned, constraints encountered, and recommendations for adaptation based on the experience with the three selected tools.



### Background

COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020, having spread to over 110 countries and territories.<sup>2</sup> Uganda registered her first COVID-19 case in March 2020. This was followed by a series of actions to prevent and control the spread of the virus including country-wide lockdowns.

Despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, children and youth around the world have pioneered innovative and often tech-savvy ways of protecting and supporting their peers, families, and communities. Inspired by their resiliency and creativity, the *Children as Partners Guide* was created for child rights and child protection actors seeking to engage children and youth in meaningful participation and partnership in child protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Children as Partners Guide* includes quick tips and tools to start engaging with children and youth immediately, as well as longer tools to foster deeper reflection and action about how humanitarian actors can practically center children and youth’s voices in their work.

- <sup>1</sup> The AfriChild Centre is a child- focused research institution housed within the [College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Makerere University](#). The Centre’s niche is in generating high quality research evidence to inform policy and programmes for the improvement of the wellbeing of children in Uganda and Africa as a whole.
- <sup>2</sup> Sserwanja Q., Kawuki J., Kim J.H. Increased child abuse in Uganda amidst COVID-19 pandemic. *J. Paediatr. Child Health*. 2020; 57:188–191. doi: 10.1111/jpc.15289.

## ► PROCESS

### Selection of Tools

After a series of discussions, the AfriChild team selected the following three tools to be piloted:

- [3.3 Involving Children in Assessing and Responding to Risk](#)
- [4.2 Child Protection Community Mapping](#)
- [5.3 Power Sharing: Children and Adults](#)

### Training the AfriChild Team on the Tools

The IICRD and CPC teams facilitated virtual training sessions on the child participatory tools to enable the team to get acquainted with the tools. [Reference videos](#) were shared for additional training.

### Identifying a Suitable Research Study

Once the training had been completed, the AfriChild team selected one of their existing research studies titled, *Child Protection Mapping and Honour*, which aims to explore the global narratives of child protection, the concept of honour, and how these shape child wellbeing. The tools selected for piloting were found to be in tandem with the objectives of this study which is part of a multi-country study intended to inform global child protection intervention designers and implementers. The concept of children's agency is central to this research study; therefore, the tools provided a platform for this to be streamlined in the research.

### Training AfriChild's Peer Researchers on the Tools

The research on *Child Protection Mapping and Honour* is anchored on the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework and has a team of four youth peer researchers on board. These young people have worked with AfriChild previously on research on violence against children living on the streets in Uganda. They were trained and oriented on the three tools in a one-day training session held in Kampala. The team (two males and two females) had both a theory and practice session with the tools. During the training, the AfriChild staff shared an overview of the guide, reviewed the tools, and conducted role-plays in the local language. The team also reviewed the purpose of the study and discussed it both in English and Luganda to enable the peer researchers to fully understand the tools. At the end of the training, the peer researchers shared their views and submitted their recommendations particularly with regard to the flow of questions and potential constraints based on their experience.



## Locations and Participants

The AfriChild team conducted four rounds of pilot testing of the three participatory tools between October and November 2021. Below is a breakdown of the participants and the tools tested.

Tool	Rounds of testing	Location(s)	Participants
<b>3.3 Involving Children in Assessing and Responding to Risk</b>	3	Kalerwe (Kibe Zone) Bwaise (Mayinja Zone) Virtually	5 boys aged 15 to 17 years living on the streets 5 girls aged 14 to 17 years living on the streets 5 girls aged 15 to 17 years living with their parents 9 boys aged 11 to 15 years, some living on the streets and some living with their parents Remotely, the tool was tested with 5 boys aged 12 to 15 years
<b>4.2 Child Protection Community Mapping</b>	3	Kalerwe (Kibe Zone) Bwaise (Mayinja Zone)	5 boys aged 15 to 17 years living on the streets 5 girls aged 15 to 17 years living with their parents 9 boys aged 10 to 15 years, some living on the streets and some living with their parents
<b>5.3 Power Sharing: Children and Adults</b>	1	AfriChild Office, Makerere University	7 staff members: three role-play pairs and a facilitator

## ► REFLECTIONS

### Strengths

#### Peer Researchers

The AfriChild team worked in partnership with youth peer researchers to facilitate the tool piloting. The researchers highlighted the critical value of peer researchers to stimulate conversations and foster trust. Children and young people felt more comfortable to trust and interact with peer researchers who were of closer age, shared contextual realities, and felt relatable to their lived experiences. In addition, in contexts where respondents speak a different language from that of the facilitator, having peer researchers from the community was helpful in addressing the language barrier challenge.



**Figure 1** An AfriChild peer researcher facilitating a session



## Peer to Peer Learning

In addition to learning from peer researchers, young people who participated in the activities were able to learn from one another about their communities. For example, during the Child Protection Community Mapping activity, a child voiced concern over an electric wire and other children learned that clothes should not be hung on them at risk of being electrocuted. Children shared different tips to respond to situations further deepening collective learning.



**Figure 2** A group of boys discussing their community maps

## Reflection

Furthermore, the activities supported children to reflect more deeply on what occurs in their communities and how to keep themselves and their peers safe. As such, one researcher stated that “tools are eye openers” for children, young people, and adults. In reflecting on the implementation of the child participation tools, members of the AfriChild team were impressed with the young people’s reflections. This demonstrated the tools’ role in both fostering space for youth to articulate their opinions and shifting adults’ perception of young people’s abilities. The researchers added additional time to activities allowing for more opportunities for children and young people to share their ideas and reflect.

## Applicable to Research Settings

While the tools were designed for organizations implementing child protection interventions, this pilot has demonstrated that it is also applicable to local research settings and supports children to be active participants both in the research process as well as equipping them with the knowledge and ability to take action on some of the risks they face.

## Adaptations and Lessons Learned

As experienced researchers in participatory approaches with children and young people, the AfriChild team was able to offer some constructive criticism of the tools, which helps to further thinking around how tools can best be adapted to support children and young people, as well as peer researchers.

## Offering a Variety of Mediums for Expression

AfriChild members highlighted that adapting the tools was an important aspect of the pilot process. Offering a variety of mediums for expression proved to be a key ingredient for meaningful participation. Inviting youth to engage with discussion prompts through drawing, writing, or speaking facilitated a more inclusive dialogue and open exchange of experiences and ideas.



**Figure 3** A group of girls jointly drawing a community map

### **Working in Collaboration with Community Organizations**

It was important to work with community organizations who are providing services to children and families at the same time as the research was being conducted to accommodate any expectations that would arise because of their participation. This supports ethical research practices and sustainable action going forward.

### **Working with Young Children**

Working with children as young as six years old was challenging for some of the peer researchers. One recommendation was to work with children over eight years old, unless specialized training is offered on working with younger children.

### **Working with Similar Groups of Children**

Working with children in similar groups, such as boys aged 12-16 who are street connected, was an important lesson learned. By spending time and effort on the design of the groups, the quality of the outcomes from the tools was enhanced. Additionally, working in smaller groups (e.g., five people) allowed for more intimate conversations and sharing.

### **Literacy**

Some children and peer researchers have not been taught and/or learned how to write. This made it challenging for children and peer researchers to engage in activities that required writing summaries. The team reflected that it is best to adapt the tools to remove any focus on writing, and instead introduce drawing or objects that represent key themes to move through activities. Adjustments could be made to the tools to have children draw or use available items (such as a key, stone, shoe, earring, etc.) to represent different concepts, risks, or resources. This supports children to all feel welcomed and to avoid feelings of shame for those unable to read and write. Additionally, in the local language, more than one word may be desired to express an idea. If activities are completed in the local language, it is important to allow children to use phrases instead of single words.

### **Risks and Resources or Resources and Risks**

The researchers highlighted that some confusion arose in the activity *3.3 Involving Children in Assessing and Responding to Risk* by starting with thinking about resources their community has to address child protection issues and transitioning to challenges. Children felt perhaps the resources did not always address the risks they shared. The team suggested starting with risks and moving to resources. Depending on the group, this could be done if less time existed. However, for the fulsomeness of the activity, starting with strengths supports people to operate from a strengths-based approach to reflect on risks and identify any further resources they may need to supplement their existing strengths.

### **COVID-19 Adaptations**

For children who are permitted to be together all the time, it was challenging to maintain six feet distance. In addition, the lack of adequate facilities in the field meant that children had to share their seats, and as such, it was not possible to practice social distancing. In certain contexts, engaging with children online is challenging with lack of internet connectivity and socio-economic conditions. For example, many of the children involved in the research did not have phones or gadgets to engage in remote connectivity. As such, safe in-person adaptations were more effective than remote engagement.



**Figure 4** The team utilizing available spaces to conduct research activities

### **Time Allocation and Building Rapport**

In many cases, the AfriChild team learned that it took time to build trust with children and young people that they had not worked with in the past. Because many children are raised to be “seen and not heard”, encouraging them to share their perspective took time. Working with peer researchers from the community helped with this. In all instances though, spending time building trust with children and young people was important, recognizing that relationship building takes place over time. Using energizers to build trust amongst the group and promote laughter and relaxation was important. In some cases, children and youth were not immediately ready to dive into the activities. Having volunteers participate alongside children and youth fostered trust between the young people and program staff and facilitated buy-in from children and youth.



### **The Art of Facilitation**

There is an art to facilitation, in terms of learning how much to allow one person to share, while respecting the time and need for others to share as well. Working with peer researchers to help them gain confidence in their approach to guiding and facilitating group dynamics was important. Having mobilization done early enough enabled facilitators to plan accordingly for the different abilities of the children identified. Where it is not possible to have two people facilitating, one facilitator can ably run the sessions and use devices to record or have the children volunteer to support some of the tasks.

### **Culturally Adapting Activities**

As [Module 1 Tip Sheet 1.3](#) outlines, activities are not one-size-fits-all and should be tailored to children and youth's diverse characteristics, including age, gender, and ability. Facilitators tailored activities to best meet the needs and lived experiences of the children and young people.



## ► APPENDIX: REFLECTIONS ON INDIVIDUAL TOOLS

### Tool 3.3: Involving Children in Assessing and Responding to Risks and Resources

This tool supports a partnership approach to identifying existing resources in the community to respond to children’s risks and worries.

Process Reflections	Comments on the Questions	Lessons Learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The interviewers, with the help of a field guide, identified a safe space for the group discussion. This was done in an empty commercial building, where the respondents and interviewers were able to sit in a circle.</li> <li>● Starting with identifying existing resources made it hard for the respondents to relate the identified risks and worries with the resources. They found it easier to first identify the risks and then resources that address/respond to the risks. The children were asked to explain the existing resources that protect and or respond to their named risks.</li> <li>● Writing a single word on the card did not allow the respondents to fully express themselves. Children tried hard to find a single word that could be explicit enough, so they ended up using phrases or full sentences.</li> <li>● Children who did not know how to write and read felt embarrassed as their peers sometimes laughed at them or teased them for not being able to write.</li> <li>● The instructions on children taking turns to pick and read out cards to the group were not very clear as facilitators were not sure at what point the discussion happens. Here, facilitators improvised and led a discussion with each card picked.</li> <li>● For the virtual piloting, participants gathered around one laptop with the help of a community mobilizer. Most children in the context where the tools were piloted did not own phones or any video conferencing gadgets. The process was disrupted by connectivity challenges as well as heavy rain.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The peer researchers confirmed that the children would be able to understand the questions and provide clear responses.</li> <li>● Questions 2 and 7 could be switched so that mapping risks is done before identifying resources/strengths. However, in some cases identifying resources first worked well to point to which resources were more known or accessible to the children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The tool was empowering. Children got to know the dangers around them and possible places or strategies to avert the danger.</li> <li>● The online interviews are possible if there is a mobilizer or peer researcher with a gadget/device to use.</li> <li>● Depending on who is facilitating the online session, it could compromise confidentiality if a third party has to sit in to handle technological issues.</li> <li>● 45 minutes for the activity was not enough for children to fully express themselves. The first activity with the young boys went for an hour, the second activity with older girls took longer than one hour, and the third activity with the young boys also went for one hour and 20 minutes. Therefore, reserving one and a half hours for the activity would be ideal.</li> </ul>

## Tool 4.2: Child Protection Community Mapping

The purpose of this tool was to understand children’s differing perceptions of community strengths and challenges; the places, spaces, people, and activities that are safe and unsafe; and to facilitate dialogue among children about the community and how it currently supports and/or does not support children’s protection and wellbeing during COVID-19.

Process Reflections	Comments on the Questions	Lessons Learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The original location chosen was an open space, near a very busy access road, which made it hard for the participants to open up. However, when a new safe place was chosen, the respondents and interviewers were able to sit in a circle and respondents felt free to discuss matters that concerned them.</li> <li>● The participants fully participated in drawing their community map, including the most important spaces/features.</li> <li>● It was simple for the participations to mark all safe and dangerous spaces in the map. Children chose a “red cross” to signify dangerous spaces and a “green tick” to signify safe spaces.</li> <li>● In the group of boys interviewed, researchers divided the group in two and asked each group to draw a map of the community. However, some of the children preferred to work individually. In the end, the group generated one map that was drawn communally, while in the second group, every child had their own map. The members in the group where every child worked independently were eager to show off. There was a sense of competition as children wanted to outshine their peers.</li> <li>● The tool was familiar to the participants and therefore was able to draw out lots of information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The questions were clear to the participants.</li> <li>● Although the questions targeted COVID-19, it was hard to deter participants from bringing in their experiences before COVID-19. It was realized that COVID-19 only worsened their conditions, but the risks they encountered already existed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Drawing the community map was especially empowering for the children. Children were amazed that they could generate a map of their community. They were proud of their accomplishments, and after the discussion, they asked to carry their maps with them.</li> <li>● This activity was meant to last one and a half hours; however, for participants to fully express themselves, the activity took two hours.</li> <li>● The guide suggested a total of 8 to 10 participants for this activity; however, due to the nature of the participants the researchers worked with (street-connected children), this size was too large for a smooth interaction. A total number of 5 to 6 participants per group is recommended to ensure that adequate information is obtained, and the COVID-19 standard operating procedures are upheld.</li> </ul>

## Tool 5.3: Power Sharing: Children and Adults

The purpose of the tool was to explore the feeling of power dynamics through role-play, moving from adult-led activities to child participation in programming to children as partners.

Process Reflections	Comments on the Questions	Lessons Learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The tool brought out <i>what being a child means</i> during the current programming processes.</li> <li>• The role of a child was hard for the participant to act out, especially when it came to sitting down (looked intimidating).</li> <li>• Switching roles between participants was done in the third scenario which still left the person acting as an adult in the first and second scenarios taking the lead. Therefore, the one who acted as a child remained on the receiving side, hence reducing the natural feel when power is shared.</li> <li>• Writing instructions on the flip chart deterred natural behavior of the participants since participants could easily tell what their counterparts were acting out.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The questions were clear and understood by the participants; however, the case management instructions somehow made the participations think the adult was to settle a case of a child before them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants could change roles in scenario 2 instead of scenario 3 to fully understand and capture power dynamics from each pair.</li> <li>• Simplify the language on the instructions in the guide.</li> <li>• It was difficult for participants to develop scripts within two minutes for the role-play. It would be valuable to add more time as this was not enough time for the participants to creatively come up with conversations.</li> </ul>

