Translating global thinking to community-level practice: How a southern-based organization is influencing improved practice in violence prevention in East Africa

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1. Introduction and background

"African solutions to African problems" was a rallying cry coined in the early 1990s by George Ayittey, a Ghanaian economist. It was a realization that global North attempts to resolve African problems have regularly proven ineffective and sometimes counterproductive, and that any long-term solution to problems can come only from Africans themselves (ie UNIVERSITY). This does not mean that Africans must work in isolation, but rather it recognizes global South practitioners' talent and capacity to learn, share knowledge and create relevant south-to-south implementation and collaboration support systems for greater impact.

In this Practice Perspective, we present practical lessons on how to translate global thinking into local practice from the ground up, diffusing local ideas for impact. We draw on a variety of sources including implementing partners' project evaluations, models/approaches to practice and policy advocacy, learning briefs, program reports and research reports. This is a story of how a Uganda-based non-governmental organization (hereto "The NGO") providing Technical Assistance (TA) as a learning partner offered accompaniment to national NGOs focusing on ending violence against children (VAC), creating a powerful learning initiative (LI) partnership across East Africa. It is the story of how confidence was built and community-level implementation improved, while integrating globally designed VAC interventions with local understanding, meaning and sense making. It is equally the story about the implementation challenges along the way, backed by six years of robust intervention testing, adaptation, analysis and documentation.

2. Context

Violence against children is a global crisis experienced every hour and every day in homes,

Schools, communities, and the online/digital spaces where children interact. Africa ranks high on both child abuse and neglect. Up to 41.8 %

girls and 39.1 % boys are neglected, over 50 % of all children experience physical abuse (APEVAC, 2022). According to the African Partnership to End Violence Against Children (2024, para. 3), VAC remains widespread.

"… every second a child reaches out to child helpline services to report abuse and violence. Over 60 percent of children experience physical punishment from family members and caregivers and one in four children experience sexual violence. Each year three million girls are at risk of genital cutting in Africa, and over 15 million girls are married every year, with 40 percent of girls in sub-Saharan Africa married before their 18th birthday."

Since 2016, the global violence prevention community has made huge strides forward. *INSPIRE: Seven evidence-based strategies for ending VAC* was published, followed by a technical package for practitioners (WHO, 2016). After years of work in the corridors of the World Health Organization and within the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York City, global partners created the field's gold standard guidance, backing up the call with an important message saying that violence is preventable. At the same time, a small and potent group of NGOs and international agencies lobbied and succeeded in putting violence against children on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. Target 16.2: "End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children" came into being, and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children (EVAC) was launched. In spite of these efforts, VAC has largely remained persistent.

In the early stages of INSPIRE implementation, pressure on low and middle-income countries to produce results was strong. Yet, most NGO partners had capacity gaps in implementation including limited knowledge of how to test interventions, weak intervention designs, underdeveloped monitoring and evaluation systems, and little or no documentation of good practices. This is where the NGO stepped in with the support of sustained funding from a progressive donor who understood that change takes time.

3. The programme history

The NGO is a not-for-profit regional technical assistance (TA) and learning partner organization that works with development agencies in the public and private sectors in East Africa to promote impactful and innovative programming. With global guidance and encouraging high level political support for VAC prevention in place, local and national learning from the region remained untapped. The NGO's work was underpinned by clear community-development principles of locally grounded practice (Mahub, 2022). Before the NGO's interventions, partners had difficulty with documentation, poor monitoring and evaluation systems, patchy implementation of tested interventions, and the majority were working as isolated organizations. Donors were typically focusing on results and numbers (Ssengooba et al., 2017), with little interest in improving technical capacities or "walking with" implementing partners from design, implementation, and learning. The donor-driven approach hired external evaluators who left little in terms of learning, improving, or how to effectively scale, spread, and sustain change.

In 2015, the NGO, together with seven local organizations co-founded the Learning Initiative (LI). The LI was conceived as a joint effort of implementing organizations, governments, researchers, parents/communities, and children, working together to eliminate VAC, with the NGO as the facilitating organization. The NGO and the implementing partners together designed pathways, innovations, and data-driven techniques to effectively implement, learn, and adapt tested and good practices to prevent VAC in East Africa. The NGO's approach was deliberate and respectful to all types of organizations (small and big, research-oriented or not, less-mature and established), designed to meet them at their level and provide the time to learn together and connect. This approach removed the expectations around high-level impact, shifting instead to reflection, learning and improving, thus humanizing TA. Coaching and mentorship, curated according to each organizations' level and requests, helped build a case for the donor to appreciate that the learning and practice are evidence and central to the improvement process especially because VAC is a complex problem with multiple dimensions.

4. Methods and data sources

A systematic document review and experience-based reflection approach was used to synthesize evidence and lessons to make sense of the processes and outcomes resulting from the NGO's TA. Documents reviewed included: i) TA reports capturing the nature and methods of TA delivery; ii) learning convening reports that documented collaborative learning and adaptation; iii) evaluation reports showing evidence of change in outcomes; iv) learning briefs; v) a compilation of implementation models/approaches that illustrated evidence-based interventions; vi) monitoring and evaluation frameworks; and vii) a recent learning initiative assessment that analysed the contribution of the NGO's TA over the six-year time period. We used content, narrative and document analysis techniques to analyse, code and synthesize information from multiple sources. Thus, the data and findings reported in this paper did not require ethical approval.

5. Intervention

The LI was conceived and suggested by the implementing partners themselves following a workshop organised by the NGO in 2015. Representatives of the foundation that funded the implementing partners attended this meeting. As opposed to one-off, training-like interventions, the initiative was imagined as a continuous and coordinated learning process and convening platform. The donor's commitment was critical to ensure that there would be sustained funding covering six years of project activities. It focused on enhancing the internal capacity of implementing partners in the areas of evidence-based implementation, documentation, and learning with the goal of elevating partners so that they could account for and communicate their contribution towards VAC prevention through their respective programmes and interventions more effectively (The NGO, n.d.).

Unlike conventional/traditional TA approaches, the NGO's model is guided by three overarching, interrelated, and flexible mechanisms. First, the NGO emphasizes joint understanding and appreciation of the problem – measured by how partners engage with communities in understanding what drives VAC (Jewkes et al., 2021). Second is a focus on learning together as a collective, with annual learning convenings as the backbone. Partners exchange knowledge and learning, sometimes reinforced by exchange field visits to implementation sites across the region. Third is curated TA, driven by partners themselves whereby each organization first identifies the competences they need, and then the NGO systematically responds to build partner technical capacity and expertise. This demand-driven approach allows partners to develop at their own pace. Over time and with maturation, this also allows the NGO to pair partners, based on their respective skills and needs, to support each other on adaptation and learning journeys. Below, we explain how the three learning mechanisms work in tandem.

Joint understanding and appreciation of the problem: Some partners have limited skills on how to tailor and adapt evidence-based interventions to fit their contexts. Alongside this are limited skills around trust working with local communities to first agree on VAC as a "community problem" and second, agree to co-design community-led interventions. To address this, the NGO supports partners to map actors connected to VAC, encouraging joint review of the data. Next, the NGO technical advisors facilitate community-level intervention co-design meetings, sitting with the implementing partners, inviting all actors connected to VAC (children, teachers, religious leaders, cultural leaders, parents, duty bearers, etc.) to the table, to reflect on the data/evidence, listen to each other, and agree on the problem and solutions. The NGO then supports the partners to adapt or design context-appropriate VAC innovations (Grundlingh et al., 2024). Sitting down with children, religious leaders, parents, cultural leaders and local government staff to co-design VAC solutions has proved to be good practice and a powerful mechanism for community ownership.

For example, partners in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania applied this approach to conducting diagnoses of harmful social, cultural, and gender norms, engaging communities (children, parents, religious leaders, teachers, local government staff, etc.) to design social norms change activities. One organization addressing social and gender norms around parenting noted:

> "After the social norms exploration we were able to map the key influencers and the status of mothers … in December 2023, we had social norms design workshop, and the NGO team came over to facilitate the process of co-designing social norms change interventions because the intention is to pilot an intervention that works in terms of these children. We did the problem tree analysis to identify the existing norms, design some messages that can be shared to the communities and identify some of the key activities to pilot the intervention. We know we can merge the social norms programming together with the gender transformative parenting approach …" (Kenya-based partner)

This quote suggests that the process of joint understanding of the problem and co-designing interventions boosts partner's confidence to innovate, have better contextual understanding, to know what to implement, how to modify interventions and who to engage with, which was not the case before.

Learning together as a collective faced with similar VAC problems: The NGO brings all implementing partners for annual meetings called VAC learning convenings. The NGO defines a VAC learning convening as 'a non-hierarchical coming together of researchers, implementation experts, local organizations, community members, parents, children and government officers working on VAC prevention

to learn from each other – and improve'. This is achieved through sharing best practices, acknowledging failures, having open discussions, and supporting field visits to understand how change happens. The learning convenings are rotational across the three East African countries and jointly convened by a selected country partner. The NGO together with the hosting partner organization and with input from all partners co-create a learning theme and agenda. At each convening, the hosting partner invites the relevant central government representatives to share learning as well as government strategies and plans in relation to VAC prevention. This allows the partners, local communities, and central government teams to strategically align and learn from each other.

As of June 2024, the NGO has conducted seven learning convenings over the six-year period. Acknowledging the global guidelines, the themes are aligned with INSPIRE strategies but critically anchors them in the complexity of local contexts. For example, partners convened around parenting (2021 and 2024), social norms (2020), and education interventions (2023). Peer-to-peer learning and improvement is robust, as one partner organization said thus; "There are topics which the NGO brings on board like learning, adaptation and sustainability of interventions where we gain additional learning, and we can use this to integrate into and refine our work" (Uganda-based partner, 2023).

Curated TA, driven by Partners and Partner pairing: This mechanism is rooted in an "All Teach – All Learn" principle, where the NGO identifies and matches a partner with a specific technical expertise, with another partner that has a skills and/or knowledge gap in same area. The role of the NGO in such cases is to facilitate learning, knowledge and/or skills transfer, facilitate adaptation processes and hand control of the process over to the partners. The NGO provides mentorship to partners on organizational self-assessment (e.g. monitoring and evaluation, organizational learning and safeguarding) and on identifying TA needs. The NGO provides a TA 'menu' to all partners to fill/populate following deep internal discussions and consensus by partner team members. The NGO then conducts one meeting with the partner to understand the partners thinking, jointly prioritize TA needs, and the appropriate learning/knowledge transfer approach. The NGO assigns, from its staff, technical/subject matter specialists to the partner to provide the necessary skills through training, hands-on coaching, and ongoing mentorship. Ultimately, the NGO's approach is always to meet partners at their level and start an improvement journey. Through this process, partners learn and adapt INSPIRE strategies to improve outcomes within their own often-messy political, social, and cultural contexts. This approach is more effective compared to the traditional forced or directive technical guidance that is typical in the development space.

A Uganda-based partner working in schools recalled that during one convening, they were placed in a room with partners from Uganda (for the first time ever) and Kenya – to learn from each other. The learning acquired proved pivotal helping them shift their programme from scholarship provision to a whole school environment improvement approach. This partner also learned how the Kenya-based partner linked its successful parenting model to schools as a way of increasing impact across multiple settings where children live and learn (Uganda-based Partner, 2020). The NGO paired the Uganda-based partner with the Kenya-based partner and they adapted aspects from the parenting and school-based models. This kind of approach means that both partners and the NGO specialists are empowered as learners, gaining knowledge, exchanging technical conversations, and building relevant knowledge and implementation expertise. The learning is vast, and generates direct, context-specific, and real-world results. Furthermore, consistent mentoring and coaching are central to the process. The confidence and expertise built is so impressive that partners often graduate to providing TA to other partners in the LI.

Another example of this pairing process was in 2021, when the NGO paired a Kenya-based partner to assist a Uganda-based partner to adapt their tested parenting model to the Ugandan context. The Kenya-based partner travelled to western Uganda for five days to train Ugandan staff, providing tools, and then backstop support through monthly check-in calls during implementation. In May 2024, the Uganda-based partner evaluated their adapted intervention and the results showed that five out of eight adapted modules were impactful and therefore essential for scale-up. As of November 2024, the Uganda-based partner was implementing a new three-year program at larger scale, including the five adapted modules.

6. Discussion and practice based implications

The impactful lessons and practice-based insights presented in this paper have been generated from years of field experience managing the LI. Our understanding of successful TA draws on multiple types of qualitative data including observed changes documented through partner reports, programming documentation, the NGO programme reports, and monitoring and evaluation data. The findings show that the LI approach and methods have positively influenced relationships, organizational practices, and created an improvement in staff skills needed for effective implementation as elaborated below. Essential to success is mutual-trust, power sharing, access to local and national experiences, and the patience to effectively build in-house skills that reduce dependency on external consultants.

Increased trust in jointly designed learning processes: Unlike conventional Technical Assistance (TA) approaches where partners follow in-step with donor demands, producing quick, often temporary wins, the LI approach, in contrast, is respectful of partners' needs, and builds trust and cooperation. It provides local organizations time to express their ideas, leaving all parties open to innovation. For example, in this manner the NGO "walked with" one of the more feminist-led partners in the Initiative working on gender transformative parenting programmes in Kenya. The Kenyan partner embraced a social and gender-transformative journey from capacity building on subject matter/approach applying this lens to a joint exploration and analysis of harmful norms, intervention design, and finally implementation-oriented capacity building. Ensuring that a feminist, gender-transformative lens was essential to VAC prevention was not necessarily a forte of the NGO (if anything an admitted deficit). Their approach was consistent and focused, insisting the women and children should be at the centre of their work. Five years into their journey, the Kenya-based partner earned sufficient trust to invite community members to learn, co-design and co-implement a social and gender norms innovation. Supporting the process, the trust transcended the NGO and reached into the highest levels of government to influence parenting nationally (Beatrice Nyakwaka Ogutu, 2025).

Equal stake and sharing power in implementation: Traditional TA approaches place and maintain power in the hands of donors while implementing partners are left to demonstrate solutions to VAC. However, the LI approach levels the power playing field by engaging a variety of stakeholders including local communities (parents, children, teachers, religious leaders, cultural leaders, other duty bearers) in collective problem analysis, intervention co-design and implementation. As a result, local communities determine and, in some cases, innovate their own change processes. Local communities are also key to examining root causes, validating problems, suggesting implementation strategies and taking responsibility to identify and implement activities to address problems in their communities. The focus on end-users (versus donors or their grantees) is a fundamental power shift absent from most VAC intervention efforts.

For example, in 2023, a Tanzania-based based partner with TA from the NGO co-designed a systems' change and movement building intervention with local government officers, children, teachers, local CSOs, religious leaders, and Tanzania local police. Previously this partner was under pressure to conform to hierarchal notions embedded in Tanzanian society. Inspired by other courageous partners in the LI, the Tanzania-based partner gave vulnerable and powerless children, teachers, and local community elders the power to shape the design of their own

program. Stakeholders were offered equal say during the design process, and shared a sense of ownership to both the approach and the outcomes. The communities now co-run a variety of projects and activities are "co-implemented" with support from Tanzania-based partner and the NGO having shifted notions of where power is best located.

Timely access and capability to modify and implement tested interventions: Learning together as a collective and partner-pairing as described above also serves to increase partners' access to other partners experiences with tested interventions—enabling rapid learning from the region. The NGO provides mentorship on how to modify interventions through learning convenings and one-on-one TA sessions where partners pursuing similar VAC prevention programming. The receiving partner gains first-hand practical implementation support through conversations, sharing resources, field-level practical training and coaching. This reduces implementation level failure rates and inspires the adapting local organization to think in terms of adaptation and scale, without reinventing.

For example, during the 2016 Learning Convening, a Tanzania-based partner was exposed to a well-established, INSPIRE-certified school-based model in Uganda (The NGO, 2019). The partner reported: "We were implementing without an evidence-based approach, but when we joined the Initiative, we were exposed to a tested school-based model and were supported to access the material and adapt it in Tanzania" (Tanzania-based partner, 2021). The Tanzania-based partner adapted the INSPIRE-featured model in eight schools in Tanzania, modified the implementation structure to fit their own "Friends of Education" network and organizational context, and further modified the composition of the school-based model implementers. The modifications were communicated to the Ugandan partner (model originator) through a virtual learning meeting to demonstrate improvements to the Ugandan model. This worked so well that the Uganda-based partner adapted the same approach to their programming in Uganda. In Tanzania, the programme has since scaled to reach 32 schools. In 2024, two new LI partners from Tanzania also adapted the school-based model, learning from Tanzania-based partner – thus spreading innovation grounded in the reality of East Africa.

Improved skills in design, measurement, adaptation, and scaling: At the start of the LI, partners had a variety of different technical skills and competence levels. For example, in schools, a Ugandan partner was implementing their previously tested randomized control-tested intervention while a Tanzania-based based partner was focused on children's participation implementing school-based Children's Councils with moderate success. At the same time, another Ugandan partner had neither a tested nor a promising intervention – yet all of them were implementing activities to eliminate VAC in schools. Most local partners had no hands-on skills in implementation science and yet, all were expending funds and energy on trying to design or implement nearly the same impact: a reduction of violence in schools.

The NGO approached these different contexts with the goal of simplifying implementation science concepts into digestible units of learning. The NGO outlined the four steps, including designing the plan; measuring to track progress/change; adaptations to modify and course correct; and finally scale up to achieve wider impact. This process enabled partners to gain confidence—in a stepwise approach on how to improve their interventions. Impressively, a partner in a 2024 evaluation highlighted how they adapted a parenting programme, made modifications to improve the scalability and are now implementing at sub-national scale (Uganda-based partner Evaluation report, 2024). A Tanzanian partner made modifications to a school-based model, and are now scaling sub-nationally in Tanzania.

Another Ugandan partner applied the same stepwise approach to design and pilot an innovation called "Watch My Neighbor", an intervention designed to increase accountability of parents and community members in detecting, preventing, and responding to VAC cases. The intervention was expanded to refugee settings in Uganda (Uganda-based partner report, 2024). Clearly, titrated learning around implementation

has improved skills, leading to greater confidence in implementation, testing, modifying, and ultimately scaling for impact.

> "With the support of the NGO, we have been able to jointly design an innovation called Watch My Neighbour, with a clear theory of change and have tested it in Lira and in Kyaka refugee settlement. We gained this skill through months of coaching and mentorship by the NGO technical staff member."

Across the seven partners, there has been remarkable improvement in measurement (each partner now has a program database), documentation, and wider knowledge-sharing beyond the LI. For example, following the M&E self-assessment, a Ugandan partner who originally had challenges in reporting on outcomes identified personnel as one of their biggest gaps. Consequently, they hired M&E staff and they have since led the design and commissioning of three strong project evaluations focused on measuring change at outcome level – with minimal (and even lately no) technical support from the NGO. Some partner staff have started documenting and producing scientific peer reviewed papers on VAC prevention and response including their experiences of 'learning by doing' (Beatrice Nyakwaka Ogutu, 2025; Nevatia et al., 2025).

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Prioritizing local ownership and peer-to-peer learning can redefine how TA can foster meaningful, long-term change. In a development landscape often dominated by external prescriptions, The NGO celebrates the principle of "African solutions to African problems," proving that communities and communities of practice are most resilient and innovative when empowered to lead their own transformations.

Through this intentional method—giving partners the time to learn, fail, and improve–the NGO's approach has not only strengthened the organizations but also inspired a new way of thinking about adaptation and scaling up. Adaptation is not just about solving technical problems; it's about creating systems of trust, shared power and knowledge, and local leadership that can outlast any single project. The success of the NGO's LI lies in its ability to connect communities, amplify local voices, and co-create solutions tailored to the unique challenges of each context and of the region.

Sustaining this momentum requires continued commitment. As initiating funders phase out and projects close, it is crucial for national governments and other donors to champion this model. While they have participated in the LI and are very supportive, significant budget shifts to VAC remain in need Critically, as the AID and development sectors globally are undergoing rapid restructuring the findings presented here offer important insights. Investments must prioritize processes, not just results, ensuring that communities have the resources to innovate and adapt at their own pace. When we trust local actors to lead and innovate, progressive success is inevitable. The results of the Initiative serve as a call to action for donors, governments, and practitioners to invest in Africa's capacity to solve its own challenges. By embracing this vision, we not only honor the principle of "African solutions to African problems" but also create a foundation for a future where every community has the tools to thrive.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ramadhan Kirunda: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Deogratias Yiga:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition. **Samalie Teera Lutaaya:** Validation, Supervision, Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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