



# Researching the linkages between social protection and children's care in Rwanda

The VUP and its effects on child well-being, care and family reunification

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This research investigates the links between the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP), child well-being, children's care and family reunification. It is part of a wider study on the linkages between social protection and children's care in Rwanda, Ghana and South Africa. The research is a joint initiative by Family for Every Child and the Centre for Social Protection (CSP) at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) in the UK. Uyisenga Ni Imanzi, a Rwandan NGO and member of Family for Every Child, led the research in Rwanda.

This qualitative study addresses three overarching questions.

## 1. What are the linkages between social protection and the quality of children's care?

This question examines whether and how social protection influences child well-being and relationships between children and their parents/carers.

## 2. What is the link between social protection and the loss of parental care or family separation?

This question considers the impacts of social protection on key factors leading to loss of parental care and family separation, including poverty and access to basic services.

## 3. How does social protection influence decisions about foster or kinship care?

This question explores whether the provision of social protection can offer incentives or disincentives for placing children in alternative care such as kinship care or foster care.

The VUP is targeted at the abject and very poor based on community-based targeting using the local *Ubudehe* household wealth categories. The programme consists of four pillars, of which the largest

two are Direct Support (DS) and Public Works (PW). DS consists of unconditional cash transfers targeted at extremely poor households without an adult who is able to work. PW offers paid employment on community asset building projects and are targeted at extremely poor households with at least one adult who is able to work. Financial Services (FS) is the third pillar and includes providing access to savings, credit and financial institutions. The fourth pillar is training and sensitisation, which focuses on creating awareness within the community on the VUP and how it can support households to improve their lives. This pillar is currently being rolled out. This study focuses primarily on the DS and PW components of the programme and considers the role of training and sensitisation in future efforts to strengthen linkages between the VUP and child well-being, children's care and family reunification.

The sample for this study includes more than 120 adults and 90 children from Rwabicuma and Kibilizi sectors in Nyanza district, Southern Province. Participants included programme staff, programme participants and community members. The findings reflect the opinions and perceptions of those directly and indirectly benefiting from the VUP. They also provide benchmark information regarding issues of child well-being and children's care.

## Main findings

- **The VUP plays a positive role in improving child well-being and quality of care.** Findings point towards overwhelmingly positive effects regarding both material and non-material aspects of care for children. The cash transfers improve carers' abilities to provide for children's basic needs, instilling confidence and making carers feel better able to fulfil their care responsibilities.

- **The VUP can support family reunification.** Findings suggest that children have returned home following improved living conditions as a result of their families' participation in the VUP.
- **Benefits from the VUP do not benefit all children equally.** Findings indicate that older children, girls and especially non-biological children experience lower levels of well-being and are at risk of receiving lower quality care. These existing inequalities limit the extent to which these groups of children benefit from the VUP.
- **The VUP Public Works component may compromise carers' abilities to provide high quality care.** Findings suggest that the work requirement of PW can add to the existing strain on households' abilities to provide high quality care. As a result, children may go unsupervised or take over their parents' work and care responsibilities at the expense of their schooling and leisure time.
- **The potential misuse of cash transfers on alcohol negatively affects household relations and children's care.** Findings reflect concerns amongst adults and children about spending of transfers on alcohol and subsequent household conflicts and family separation. The VUP is not considered a cause of alcoholism but the use of transfers for purchasing alcohol has been identified as an unintended negative side effect with repercussions for children and their care.
- **Cash transfers as an incentive for foster care can have positive and negative effects.** Findings indicate that respondents (when asked about financial incentives as a means to support foster care) considered that transfers could provide necessary material support but could also lead to perverse incentives and 'commodification' of children. Policy initiatives using transfers to incentivise foster care should be undertaken with great care.

## Recommendations

- **Strengthen the link between the VUP and social work or child protection services.** A stronger link between the VUP and social work or child protection services could help the programme maximise its positive impacts and minimise its negative side effects and perverse incentives in terms of child well-being, quality of care and family separation and reunification. The ongoing child care reform in Rwanda and the concurrent expansion of social services offer momentum and opportunities for establishing such linkages. Options for further exploration include the local deployment of social workers or home-based carers, serving as focal points that can refer vulnerable children and household members to appropriate services including the VUP.
- **Firmly integrate solutions for child care and care responsibilities into the VUP and particularly into its PW component.** The PW component of the VUP does not currently offer solutions for carers who are trying to balance care responsibilities with work requirements. Options for facilitating such a balance include providing child care facilities at the PW sites or making child care and early childhood development (ECD) services an element of PW activities. Pregnant and lactating women could be temporarily moved into DS or be relieved of their work requirement. Improved child care options and provisions for pregnant and lactating women would improve the quality of care for children and could help avoid family separation.
- **Use training and sensitisation within the VUP more strategically to address issues around children's care and well-being.** Strengthening and widening the coverage of sensitisation efforts could help to further improve the quality of care for children. The current roll-out of training and sensitisation within the VUP is promising, with sector leaders around the country being trained in using the training and sensitisation manual. Improvements should be made in terms of standardising sensitisation efforts across all sectors included in the VUP and strengthening the capacity of staff and volunteers involved. Strong monitoring of those efforts and continued support for ongoing capacity building, particularly in terms of more complex issues around child well-being and children's care, will be imperative for making these efforts effective. This holds particularly true as a number of problems identified in this report (unequal care between biological and non-biological children, gendered patterns of care, misuse of money on alcohol) are largely caused by sociocultural factors.

