

CHILD SPACE ORGANIZATION, NAIROBI, KENYA

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INTRODUCTION

Supported by the ARISE responsive challenge fund, the African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC) worked with Child Space Organization to reach out to children heading up households in the attempt to address the vulnerabilities and marginalities they face. Child headed households (CHHs) refer to families that have a minor as the head of the households. CHHs are vulnerable to health and wellbeing challenges. These challenges can broadly be divided into three categories: Biological and physical challenges; strategic challenges (i.e. children's limited levels of autonomy and dependence on adults); and institutional invisibility due to a lack of voice in policy agendas. This brief presents key activities, outcomes, lessons and recommendations.

KEY ACTIVITIES

1. Recruitment of child head of households through Community Health Promoters (CHPs)

Beginning in May 2023, CHPs were introduced to the project. We worked with CHPs to co-plan sessions and recruit CHHs. CHPs recruited a total number of 30 CHHs (14 boys, 16 girls) within Korogocho, for enrolment to the Smart Children Club at Child Space.



2. Joining SMART clubs and training on values, skills and rights

Between June and October 2023 the CHHs joined various SMART Clubs all facilitated by trained coaches, including life-skills, values, rights, chess, dance, modelling and art. The children chose which clubs they wished to join themselves. Therapy sessions were also offered to CHHs.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Context specific social protection:** Effective support to the child headed households should include context specific social protection measures to strengthen community systems and safety nets. For example, there is a need for poverty reduction through youth and CHH appropriate economic strengthening activities.
- Child-care support and extra hands in taking care of younger siblings:** This will ensure that the CHHs will not worry about taking care of their siblings.
- Therapy:** Therapy is essential and should be given to the children to relieve trauma and stress. The community and interested parties should work together to provide the child with the help they need to overcome psychological damage.
- Sustainable programs:** Interventions which promote sustainable solutions to CHHs should be put in place. This includes the development of programs which address the needs of adolescents, as well as skills training for children in child headed households on issues of reproductive health, children's rights, drug abuse, home management and conflict solutions.
- Resources to support CHHs:** National and county governments should prioritise child-headed families and allocate resources to support them. Neglecting these families can lead to negative outcomes such as prostitution, crime, and domestic violence. Government intervention is crucial to prevent such consequences.

“Children heading households have been marginalised for a long time and it feels like they do not exist. People around them have normalised the role they have had to take up (that of being the bread winner). The community has acknowledged the impact of our program on CHHs. National and county governments should pay more attention to the child headed families.”

Executive Director, Child Space

3. Dialogue with CHHs in SMART Clubs

Between June and October, as part of their participation in the clubs, a series of discussions were had with CHHs. Here the children were encouraged to voice their urgent needs, and the role of different actors in addressing these challenges. The challenges mentioned included: poor housing conditions, lack of medical support, starvation, lack of parental love and affection, lack of protection and care, social exclusion and stigmatisation.



4. CHHs in mental health camp

In August 2023, together with other SMART club members, CHHs were screened and assessed, and included in a mental health camp which included a mentorship and academic program, as well as art and dance therapy. The mental health camp ran for two weeks, reinforcing the importance of supporting the health and wellbeing of CHHs.



5. Environmental skills development

In July 2023, Child Space Organization co-hosted an event on "Inclusion of Children in redefining roles in water, sanitation, hygiene and solid waste management in informal settlements". The sessions included community cleanups led by children in the SMART clubs, debates, facilitated discussions, storytelling, creative art activities and group therapy. Children acknowledged their responsibility for their environment.



6. Children Climate Summit

In September 2023, children from the SMART club joined the Children Climate Summit in Nairobi. Outcomes from the summit contributed to proceedings and the communique at the African climate summit (ACS23) and COP 28.

Outcomes at the summit under the auspices of urbanisation and urban child included:

- A Communique/Outcome statement with policy recommendations and advocacy to be shared with governments, researchers, academia, civil society and regional bodies during the ACS23 scheduled for 4-6, September 2023 and COP 28 scheduled for 30 November-12 December 2023;
- Increased involvement of children in climate architecture, action and policy interventions;
- An action plan on children's involvement in climate and climate related issues.

7. Home visits to Child Headed Households

During a series of home visits in September 2023, it was observed that child headed families faced several challenges. The families struggled to meet their basic needs, such as clothing, enough food, educational resources, water and sanitary towels for the girls.



8. Twitter chat about child heads of household

Child-space organization co-hosted a Twitter chat discussing children headed households in October 2023. The discussion brought together interested actors to highlight intersecting health and wellbeing challenges, experiences of, and opportunities for CHHs. It was also an opportunity for those involved in to advocate for the rights of child headed households.



KEY OUTCOMES

- Urban marginalised people are better able to come together, identify their priorities on health and well-being, and develop action to achieve these.
- Stronger relationships between community organisations, between urban marginalised people and government/other organisations/ community.
- Increased accountability and responsiveness to meet priorities of urban marginalised people from local government, community-based and development organisations.
- Sustained inclusion of childheaded households into SMART-clubs and children programs.

KEY LESSONS

- **CHHs are resilient.** Children living in informal settlements are resilient and they will do anything, such as work, to ensure they access basic needs for themselves and/or families.
- **The CHPs are key players** in identifying children who are heads of households;
- **The CHHs can be easily mainstreamed and included effectively into children's programs.** Programmes in SMART clubs are helpful to CHHs. For example, some of the CHHs are undergoing therapy, thereby improving their mental wellbeing.
- **CHHs play a key role in referring other CHHs to SMART clubs and children's programmes.** As CHHs continue engaging with the clubs, their attendance improved. The CHHs were noticed to be withdrawn and nervous during the first sessions of the mental health camp, this changed towards the end of the camp where they were seen to be more flexible and courageous.
- **CHHs require comprehensive support that goes beyond financial assistance.** Access to education, healthcare, and emotional well-being is equally important. Actors should aim to provide a holistic safety net for these children.
- **CHHs face intersecting challenge.** This includes adverse childhood experiences that require consistent counselling services. Some of these children's cases are complex (some do not go to school; some need further assessment at a mental health facility) but the funds to expedite this is a big challenge.
- **CHHs cannot thrive without collaborative support.** Collaborative efforts between the community, government, and other organisations are essential to address the complex issues these families face.
- **Miniature adults:** CHHs perform the responsibilities of adults at a small scale, including fending for family, caring for older persons, young children, and the chronically ill persons at home.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

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ABOUT ARISE AND THE RESPONSIVE CHALLENGE FUND

The ARISE Hub – Accountability and Responsiveness in Informal Settlements for Equity – is a research consortium, instituted to enhance accountability and improve the health and wellbeing of marginalised populations living in informal urban settlements in low-and middle-income countries.

The ARISE vision is to catalyse change in approaches to enhancing accountability and improving the health and wellbeing of poor, marginalised people living in informal urban settlements.

ARISE is guided by a process of data collection, building capacity, and supporting people to exercise their right to health. ARISE works closely with the communities themselves; with a particular focus on vulnerable people living in the informal settlements; often overlooked in many projects and initiatives.

ARISE was launched in 2019 and is a 5-year project. It is implemented in four countries: Bangladesh, Kenya, India and Sierra Leone. Through a £1 million Responsive Challenge Fund, ARISE provided small grants to organisations that test innovative approaches to improving health and wellbeing linked to the ARISE Theory of Change.

ABOUT APHRC

The African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) is a leading pan-African research institution. Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, the centre seeks to drive change with evidence led by a growing cadre of research leaders from across Africa.

APHRC has for the last two decades run numerous research projects and generated evidence that has shaped policy and practice across African countries. The center has actively engaged policymakers and other key stakeholders to achieve measurable policy impacts informed by rigorous evidence-based research.

ABOUT CHILD SPACE ORGANIZATION

Child Space Organization believes that the formation of sustainable community mentorship programmes for children and young people in safe and nurturing environment results to adoption of positive rewarding behaviours resulting in improvements to the larger community through the reduction of social vices. Active child participation enables children and young people to use their voices on matters that affect them and access to platforms that meaningfully nurture talents.

