



The Positive Deviance Approach to Worrisome Children and Youth Issues



Pointers for Policy Action in Kenya

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This brief policy note is a plea to adopt a new way of thinking and doing to improve the lives and futures of marginalised boys and girls in Kenya. It draws on the Positive Deviance (PD) approach, which demonstrates that even in the most intractable situations, wholesome solutions can be found and effectively applied; solutions that fit in the local cultures, are accepted by the communities; are within their reach; and do not require additional resources. It is recommended that, initially in Kwale and Nairobi regions, PD training, research and dissemination capacities be built up, which would generate and spread knowledge on the PD approach and train professionals with decision-making responsibilities.

¹This policy note is partly based on the training- or 'Positive Deviance working sessions' given by Rona Jualla and Nico van Oudenhoven in Kwale and Nairobi in April, 2011. These sessions were part of the project 'Fighting Violence to Ensure Education for All', which was financed through the Millennium Fund of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This project was implemented under the lead of Plan NL, together with Plan Kenya, DCI/Ecpat, CHI, Irewoc and ICDI. Some 40 Kenyan child and youth specialists-hailing from local governments, international and local NGOs, CBOs and educational establishments contributed to these working sessions. Their comments and suggestions are incorporated in this paper.

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On Positive Deviance

The notion of PD rests on the finding that in every disadvantageous community, there are always a few individuals, who against all expectations, have found better ways in offsetting the harmful effects of their environment and have realised solutions in overcoming inherent threats and risks that in the main have somehow eluded other members of the same community. They succeed in doing so by, and this is a crucial point, employing practices and behaviours that are within the reach of their peers. These behaviours and practices are available in the community and can be sustained locally and do not require external inputs.

In the 1990's many young children in Vietnam suffered from severe malnutrition. In rural villages starvation was almost universal. However, there were always a few parents whose children thrived normally. It was found out that these parents [the positive deviants], unlike their neighbours, fed their children three or four times a day, rather than two times, which was common practice. As young children have small stomachs, those who were fed twice daily, took in much less than those fed three or four times.

In Bangkok, the majority of young sex workers -many of them still girls- are at a greater risk of contracting HIV-AIDS or other sexually-transmitted diseases. As they are easily intimidated, they don't have the skills to convince their mainly foreign clients to use condoms. Yet, a few [the positive deviants], succeed in doing just that. They tell their customers that 'it is to protect them (the customers) against diseases that they [the young women] may carry'. The clients usually heed this warning.

The idea is so simple that it deserves repeating as it runs the risk of being overlooked or played down as being too trivial, too self-evident. Yet, when applied, it reveals itself as an extremely powerful tool to attain meaningful and durable development. And, what is more, the PD approach is also a highly rewarding process as it draws on available resources and validates the strengths of local people, rather than promoting external accomplishments or ideas, and, this is the crux: it's about things that actually work. It is also a most beautiful route as it focuses on enabling and beneficial practices rather than dismal and depressing ones.

In both cases above, a seemingly simple act resulted in spiralling change behaviour. The act in each instance was not phenomenal but in their own right they were both quite creative and almost spurred out of a natural necessity. How can these random acts of creativity be replicated? It cannot and that is where the PD process comes in. It is an attempt to effectively map out the process to discovery; to identify that singular act which can possibly result in a ripple effect of change.

It is customary to distinguish various steps in initiating and implementing the PD approach; usually these comprise:

- Definition of the problem and of a successful solution, for example: the perceived problem is that 'the teachers beat our children often as a way of disciplining them' and the solution 'teachers use non-punitive methods to discipline our children'.
- Identification of people [positive deviants] who have already found and practice the successful solution, in the example above, the identification of teachers who maintain order in the classroom without resorting to violence.
- Review and gaining understanding of the successful practices and verification that these are acceptable to the community and within their reach. Thus, the above teachers may use dialogue, respect, humour and play as means to keep their pupils in line and teachers, school administrators, parents and the children comprehend why this works better and embrace these as 'theirs'; and finally an even more delicate and challenging step:
- Sharing of the findings with the larger community and disseminate these to other communities who grapple with the same problems. Thus, the positively deviating parents and teachers may reach out to other locations and engage their peers in talks about 'disciplining without the cane'.

Critical to the process, and this cannot be over-emphasized, is that all activities, discussions and expressions of emotions, be part of the regular and common repertoire of all the members of the community, as well as that they are shared with all people who matter. The firsts three steps are relatively easy and feasible and they can boast on a good deal of experience; the task of going to scale, of reaching larger numbers, is still one to be resolved and calls for more study and practice.

The most significant and valuable feature of the Positive Deviance approach is, of course, that it is extra-ordinarily successful in tackling exceedingly obstinate social problems. Although most of the know-how and achievements have been realised in the field of nutrition, there is sufficient evidence to state that it can be used in many other fields. Documented cases are, among other; combating female circumcision, hospital infections, marginalisation of former girl soldiers, and infant mortality². Kenyan children- and youth specialists³ felt that the following issues were amenable for the PD approach and indeed, the list could have been more exhaustive:

²See for more details the standard publication on *Positive Deviance The Power of Positive Deviance* by Pascale, Sternin and Sternin (2010) and the earlier, still relevant UN study by Zeitlin, Ghassemi and Mansoor (1990). The place to visit is, of course, the Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI). The Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI) is a network organization which is dedicated to amplifying the use of the Positive Deviance (PD) approach to enable communities worldwide to solve seemingly "intractable" problems which require behavioural and social change. A web-based community of practice, including information from PD projects can be accessed at: www.positivedeviance.org. Other instructive documents are those by Marsh et al (2004), Singhal (2010), Spreitzer and Soneshein (2004), as well as a Power Point Presentation PPP on Positive Deviance [author unknown], see www.positive-deviance.org/ppt/SixDs_en.ppt.

³See footnote 2. At the end of the training sessions on the Positive Deviance approach, the participants were asked to identify critical issues concerning children and families and that were open to the PD Approach.

Integrity within the civil service	Physical education in schools	Poor Hygiene and sanitation	Harmful cultural practices
Safe places to play	Child help line	Sexual abuse	Witchcraft and child sacrifice
Male circumcision	Domestic violence	Parents in conflict with the law	Children in conflict with the law
Female Genital Mutilation	Life skills	Peer pressure	Climate change
Alcoholism	Alcoholism among slum dwellers	Media and Child Protection	Calamities
Male infidelity	Harm reduction	Insecurity	Environmental degradation
Discipline without the cane	Sex tourism	Gender inequality	Divorces
Education and the girl child	Domestic violence	Substance and drug abuse	Irresponsible parents
Development of the 'whole' child	Forced labour	Child malnutrition	Negligence
Educational achievements by children in slums	Forced early marriages	Child trafficking	Non-custodial sentences

It can be argued with confidence that the PD approach could and should be applied to all these areas. It appears to be a constructive and effective methodology as well as an attitude on child development, which should be introduced to all those who are worried and concerned about the well-being and healthy development of children.

A format for Positive Deviance action

Although the PD approach is unassuming and straightforward in its conceptual make-up, it is a rather sensitive and delicate process that demands a lot of thoughtfulness and subtleness on the side of the external agents who introduce this way of working and thinking to a community. Especially, it is required that these persons refrain from pushing their own ideas or are critical of the practices they encounter. Their primary objective is to respectfully listen to the members of the community, and allow them to discover or unearth positive practices that are already part of their cultural and social capital and hold on to them. It is also the community that sets the pace; the outside facilitators' task is to follow.

The above last few lines are common to the standard rhetoric of most development agencies; however, it should also be stressed that the PD approach is not just a matter of pronouncing feel-good words, but requires a good deal of effort, patience, intelligence and experience at every twist and corner. It also does not imply either that outside interventionists are completely at the whims of the communities, they certainly can devise strategies, mobilise resources and develop proposals.

Thus, although the content and pace are determined by the community, a programmatic approach to going the PD road is feasible, and it is possible to draw up a global action plan with budget and time line for reasons of planning and finance. The format, with the necessary local adaptations, could also be used for project proposals to be submitted to potential donors.

Raw Format for Planning Positive Deviance Approaches to Worrisome Children's Issues

[Here: Name of Issue]

How to eliminate [name of issue] through the Positive Deviance approach

This project proposal promotes the Positive Deviance approach as a practical, feasible, culturally-acceptable, and sustainable and no-costs solution to the hitherto intractable issue of [name of issue].

[Here description of Issue in some detail]

Kenya, a signatory of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, has over the last years, developed policies that seek to protect children from all harm, but these have hardly have their intended effect as laws and regulations are not enforced. Other measures, including [here specific information] have been introduced and tried but to little effect. It is against this backdrop that this project has been developed as it proposes to follow a new, innovative approach that builds on the strengths and the assets of the specific target group, in this case [names of particular stakeholders].

Positive Deviance

Positive Deviance (PD) is an approach to behavioural and social change based on the observation that in every community there are individuals or groups of people (so called Positive Deviants) whose behaviours and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers even though they have access to the same resources and face similar challenges. In the international development and health sectors, PD has been used to address issues as diverse as childhood malnutrition, neo-natal mortality, girl trafficking, school drop-out, female genital mutilation (FGM), MRSA infections in hospitals and HIV/AIDS; there is now sufficient evidence that PD could also be successful in tackling educational and psycho-social issues.

Six key steps

The project will begin in a community/setting [here specific information and details about a concrete region or community where this issue is rampant]. The project will move through the following six steps:

- Development of case definitions [here specific details pertinent to the issue].
- Identification of four to six people who have achieved an unexpected good outcome [here specific details pertinent to the issue].
- Interviewing and observing these people to discover uncommon behaviours or enabling factors that explain the good outcome [here specific details pertinent to the issue].
- Analysis of the findings to confirm that the behaviours are uncommon but accessible to those who need to adopt them [here specific details pertinent to the issue].
- Design of behaviour change activities to encourage school-based adaptation of the new behaviours [here specific details pertinent to the issue].
- Monitoring of the implementation of these activities and evaluation of the results [here specific details pertinent to the issue].

Upon completion of these six steps, the evaluation of the results will be close studied by the project implementers and, together with relevant stakeholders, a proposal will be drafted that will spell out how to use experience gained to reach larger audiences. This will be separate initiative not covered by the present project format.

This project could be started and completed within the space of three months, taking up some 22 days of actual work.

Time table 'Eliminating [Name of Issue]'													
Steps													Days on Task
Case Definition													2
Identification													6
Interviews													3
Analysis													2
Design													5
Evaluationtable													4
Total days on task													22 days

Budget '[Name of Issue] and the Positive Deviance approach'					
Days on task	Travel	Administration	Hospitality	Contingencies	Total
Total costs				KES	

This action plan should, of course, function as a rough guideline whose content should be fully determined by the community and which should be fashioned to accommodate individual issues. The formulation of a 'dissemination' strategy and finding support for it is not taken into account. This is, indeed, a challenge that still has not been met completely. One strategy is to 'hop' from community to community, from situation to situation –think, for example, of banning corporal punishment in basic schools, but this may turn out to be both expensive and time consuming. Another idea is to use 'positive deviants' as models in TV programmes, but hitherto there is little or no experience to be guided by.

Positive Deviance and Violence Against Children

All the three spheres⁴ in which violence against children occur, seem amenable to the PD approach. Thus, there are always Positive Deviants to be found among communities where forms of direct violence, such as beating and other forms of punishing children by parents, older family members, teachers or public figures, for instance the police, are common. The same goes for expressions of cultural violence, such as the accepted discrimination, neglect and abuse of children with mental or physical impairment, the beating of pupils by their teachers as a disciplinary method or child labour. Even with the more hidden structural practices, such as low budget allocations for upgrading of teachers or safe play grounds, there are always favourable exceptions initiated and maintained by the community. There is little guidance to go by, but this should not be deterrence for action. It is also a fertile field, where quick, real and durable progress can be made.

Recommendation

There is impressive work being done in the field of Positive Deviance, but so far this seems mainly restricted to agricultural and nutritional issues⁵; 'worrisome' issues pertaining to the lives of boys and girls in Kenya are less attended to, maybe because they are more of a psychosocial nature. Yet, they are also particularly suited for the Positive Deviance approach. The task ahead now is to support and strengthen the skills of the numerous professionals, agencies and organizations that strive so hard to meet the many challenges that these children are faced with.

It is, therefore, recommended that a Training, Research and Dissemination Capacity be built up.

Such a capacity should promote the notion of Positive Deviance, enable people and their institutions to familiarize, understand and work effectively with the PD approach, collect and disseminate practices and generate new knowledge.

This is the only recommendation in this policy brief; it is meant to be a short but a powerful one and it is hoped that when implemented a force will be created with great potential. Once this capacity is in place, other suggestions and proposals for action by all stakeholders will emerge as a matter of course and they will undoubtedly see the relevance of these and act accordingly if they are willing and able to do so, without further prompting.

Plan Kwale and Plan Nairobi as initial Training, Research and Dissemination Centres (PD Hubs)

It is suggested that Plan Kwale (PK) and Plan Nairobi (PN) take the lead in building up the recommended training, research and dissemination function or 'PD Hubs'. Their staff has already been engaged in organizing training sessions on the subject and have succeeded in familiarizing a cadre of highly-motivated mid-career professionals who occupy key posts in various agencies and groups working for marginalized boys and girls. Also the national Plan organisation, Plan Kenya, has significant experience in following the PD approach in addressing malnutrition in children⁶. At a later stage, and with their effectiveness and feasibility proven, centres in other locations could be contemplated. The advantage of starting two PD Hubs simultaneously under a shared administrative umbrella is that they will be from Day One embedded in a solid managerial structure and in a position to mutually support and learn from each other.

In each PD Hub, designated people should be allocated to function as 'anchors' or resource persons for the PD approach. Among others, they should, as their main assignments:

- have a thorough understanding and appreciation of the theory and practice of PD;
- have the skills, motivation, authority and the remit to train their colleagues, both within their organisations or from other agencies, in PD and to give guidance as to the programmatic direction of their organisations;
- maintain a data base of resource people, relevant networks, literature and instructive practices;
- have the capacity to formulate research questions and organize action research activities;
- participate in pertinent networks, locally and internationally;
- promote to practitioners, researchers and policymakers and other relevant stakeholders, PD as a viable, culturally-sensitive, sustainable and locally-supported tool for positive intervention benefiting boys and girls;
- establish, maintain and 'feed' a PD Epistemic Community⁷ in the country.

The PD Hub staff will be trainers of trainers, and seek to build up 'PD capacity' within other organisations and agencies, both non- and governmental. However, they should also be able to advocate the PD philosophy to a wider audience as the PD approach is a radical departure from common human development practice. Given the dearth of experience and useful information on PD, it is mandatory that the PD Hubs collect material and document and share case studies, set a research agenda and connect with the research community to generate new knowledge. This function, producing more information, data and insights into PD is crucial as this approach is still not very well understood and cannot boast on wide experience to draw from. The first research question that comes to mind, of course, is why 'positive deviants' demonstrate 'positive deviant' skills and behaviour; having access to the same resources and facing the same challenges as their mainstream neighbours. A special area of interest should also be how to bring successful activities to scale as the understanding of how this best could be done is especially lacking. The formation of a 'Positive Deviance Epistemic Community' is urged as this will form the both the platform that ultimately will carry and carry out PD activities, but also form the soil from which new impulses will have to come.

Another promising solution coming from the outside?

The practice and theory of international development is rife with promises and 'solutions' as to how the poverty, wretchedness, misery and misfortunes of many people, including children, can be remedied; they are typically trumpeted with a great deal of hoopla and commotion, and accompanied by learned studies, knowledgeable experts –characteristically from well-to-do backgrounds, and significant amounts of project monies. Typically, too, is that these solutions fade away, leaving behind an even more bewildered and disabused population, and to make place for yet again a new wave of highly-alluring miracle interventions. So, is this Positive Deviance approach yet another panacea for the world's disenfranchised boys and girls? This is hard to say and a lot of humbleness and caution is called for. There are, however, also signs of hope and optimism. Although the push to follow the PD approach may come largely from the outside and the local capacity be built up with external assistance, the solutions themselves are genuine to the people themselves, are created by them, in line with their daily lives and within their emotional, cultural and economic reach. This, indeed, may justify further exploration and experimentation, and, in the ultimate analysis, investing some hope and faith, if not confidence, in the outcomes.

⁴Galtung (1969) distinguishes the following 'forms' of violence: direct, cultural and structural.

⁵See, for example Obote Ochieng (2007) and 'PD Hearth Kenya', www.positivedeviance.org/projects/nutrition.html?id=173.

⁶See: 'PD Hearth Kenya', www.positivedeviance.org/projects/nutrition.html?id=173.

⁷Our definition of an Epistemic community has its roots in the one proposed by Haas (1992); in his view, an EC consists of diverse people who have:

- A shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members;
- Shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain and which then serve as the basis for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes;
- Shared notions of validity — that is, inter-subjective, internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise; and
- A common policy enterprise -- that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced.

Thus, an epistemic community may be seen as a group of people who do not have any specific history together and could comprise a network of professionals from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. Where would we like to differ, if only in degree and less so in substance, is to the following:

- We would like to emphasize the motivational and emotional commitment of the members of the community. Everybody who cares about the wellbeing and healthy development of children would be welcome to join; following from this
- We place less prominence on 'certified' professionalism. We see everybody with a credible track record of involvement in VAC work as bona fide;
- What matters is that all play the same kind of music, the instruments do not really count;
- We would further like to stress the importance of diversity both in disciplines, backgrounds and social status (or power) and at the same time the need to accept each other as complete equals;
- We promote the emergence of numerous VAC epistemic communities that are organically interlinked;

The following seems essential in establishing a PD Epistemic Community?

- A critical mass of like-minded, like feeling people;
- A structure that brings people together, sets the agenda, records developments and informs the members.

Messages to GOs, NGOs, the Media and other concerned agencies

The priority remit of governmental agencies, national and local, should be to advocate the Positive Deviance approach in their policies and in their dealings with organizations directly working with children. They could do this not only by rendering financial support, the sort of activity that is usually recommended but difficult to follow, but rather by having their staff trained, sharing information, encourage NGOs to offer training opportunities, opening access to networks, facilitating the emergence of the PD Epistemic Community by connecting relevant people. It should also impress on international donors to 'go the Positive Deviance road'.

NGOs and, even more so, CBOs are in the ideal situation of addressing 'worrisome child and youth issues', in engaging the pertinent community, group or structure, where these issues massively prevail and, essentially, identifying the Positive Deviants and, with the community, finding out what their special skills and behaviours consist of whether they are both acceptable and within the means of the others, trying to get them taken on board by them and monitoring its progress. CBOs and NGOs should also document and share their experience and actively participate in the PD Epistemic Community, to which they also should invite members of the communities they work in. Some children's NGOs, such as the Plan's offices in Kwale and Nairobi, could assume training functions.

International development and donor agencies, depending on their mandate and means, should support the PD efforts by both governmental agencies and NGOs and CBOs and get them in touch with developments elsewhere. Above all, they should provide the enthusiasm, encouragement, validation and 'breathing space' that are such vital ingredients for people and groups who are keen to start a new initiative but do not have the wherewithal and are already overloaded with rafts of other pressing assignments.

A grateful as well as a helpful role is destined for the media, as they are in a number one position to bring to the fore the positively deviating solutions that their nation's own people have found to protect and guide their children.

There is one common message for all parties concerned about the wellbeing of children, though, and that is that Positive Deviance requires notably a change in attitude towards research, a different way of looking at child intervention programmes and a re-orientation as to how to deal with marginalized groups and communities. In following the Positive Deviance approach, external agents –whether working for governmental agencies, international donor organisations or local NGOs and CBOs, will seek guidance from the Positive Deviants from the communities, rather than from knowledge accumulated outside the communities. The Positive Deviance approach also provides everybody with a measure of hope and optimism; these are important commodities for people who are wont to be overwhelmed and feel made impotent by myriads of problems, many of which seem intractable or only to get worse.

If the suggestion of creating PD Hubs within their offices is accepted, Plan Kwale and Plan Nairobi may wish to enlist external support to this end. Earlier training sessions have shown that the notion of PD is readily taken on board; however it also revealed that longer and more intensive training and, most importantly, the opportunity delve deeper into the literature and to work on concrete issues with real people in communities, is needed to enable staff to internalize the philosophy and methodology and take on the assignment sketched above. If deemed appropriate, ICDI may assist in this process.

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