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Building Positive Futures: Exploring a peer research approach to study leaving care in Africa

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Document Version:
Other version

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Building Positive Futures



**Building Positive Futures:
Exploring a Peer Research Approach to Study Leaving Care in Africa.**

Kelly, B. van Breda, A., Santin, O., Bekoe, J., Bukuluki, P., Chereni, A., Frimpong-Manso, K., Jacobs, D., Luwangula, R., Maanyi, M., Makadho, B., Muchiendza, T., Pinkerton, J. & Ringson, J.

August 2020



For me it was a marvellous moment to go back to SOS CV and interview other young people in care... I was interviewing a person with a situation very similar to mine and they could share anything with me because we grew up in the same environment... I had to be professional but I got to be an inspiration at the same time.
(Billy, Peer Researcher, South Africa)



1. What was the project about?

The Building Positive Futures project was a pilot study that sought to test a range of quantitative and qualitative research tools for use in leaving care studies in Africa, including a peer research approach. As there have been few previous African studies on care leaving, the research team hoped to develop our understanding of how best to conduct cross-country care leaver studies in Africa and to offer insights to other researchers planning care leaving studies that may incorporate a peer research approach in Africa and beyond.



The research team included academics from Queen's University Belfast in the UK, University of Johannesburg in South Africa, University of Ghana and Makerere University in Uganda who worked in partnership with SOS Children's Villages (SOS CV) who facilitated and supported the study. The study was funded by the UK Government's, Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Queen's University Belfast and undertaken in Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

This report outlines the peer research approach adopted and summarises the findings of the pilot of the peer research methodology. It has been co-written with the care-experienced peer researchers who worked alongside the academic research team on the project.



2. What were the main peer research questions?



The study sought to adapt and test a peer research approach previously used in the You Only Leave Once (YOLO) study in Northern Ireland (Kelly et al., 2017, 2018), with consideration of the diverse contexts for leaving care in each country. The main peer research questions were:

Can we train, prepare and support young people who have already left care to be peer researchers on the project?

What are the benefits and challenges of a peer research approach in care leaver studies in Africa and beyond?



3. How were the peer researchers recruited and prepared?

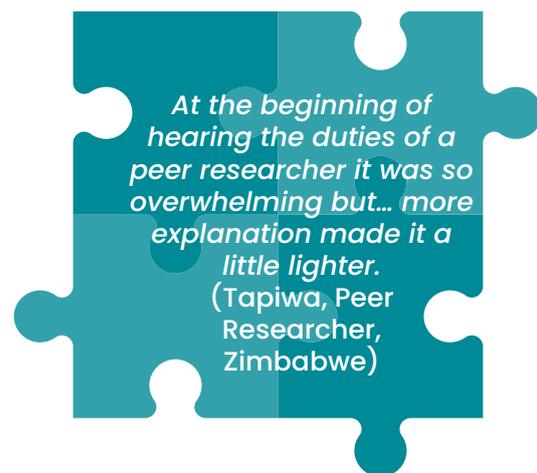
A cascade training approach was adopted beginning with training on the YOLO peer research method for the academic researchers in September 2019. Academic researchers then worked with SOS CV to recruit and train peer researchers from each country.

SOS CV posted an advertisement for young people who had left care at least one year ago and who were interested in becoming a peer researcher to get in touch. In Uganda, SOS CV asked for young people who had reached third level education and in Zimbabwe, five Ordinary Level subjects were required, including English and mathematics. In South Africa and Ghana, there were no educational requirements. Interested young people met with the lead researcher in each country to find out more about the role and then attended formal training which incorporated an assessment of their research skills before being offered the position. Some young people who came forward for the role later opted out, before or during training, due to other commitments or lack of interest in the role.

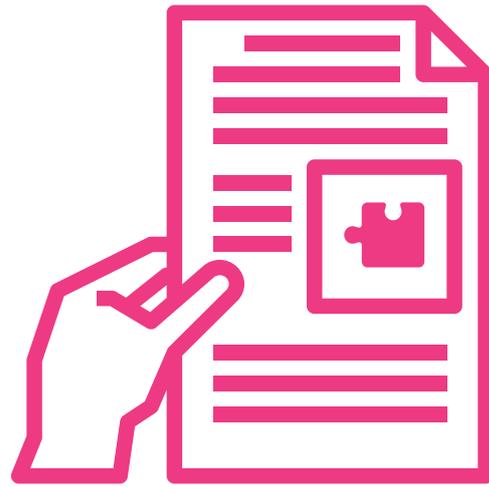
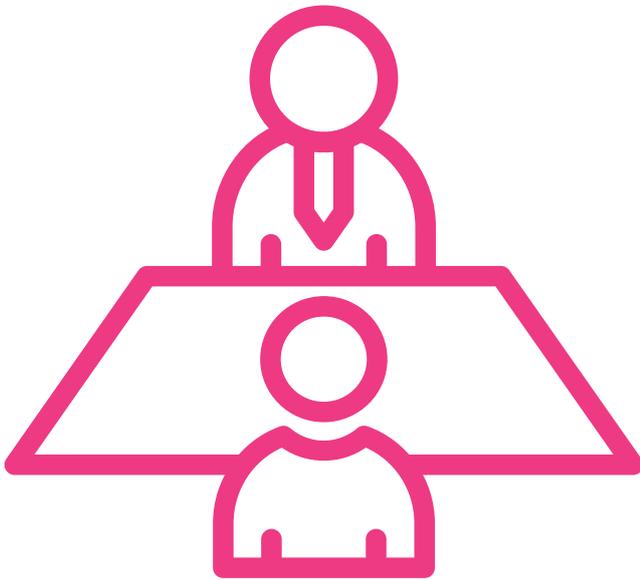
Those with higher level qualifications found it easier to complete training and engage with the questions. However, those with lower levels of educational qualifications had a lot in common with participants who were struggling with their education and demonstrated a high level of empathy. On reflection, the research team concluded that educational requirements were not necessary, as individuals who were unable to fulfil the peer research role usually opted out at the training stages or could be de-selected during the assessment phase following training.

In total, 12 peer researchers were recruited and trained, including eight males and four females, aged between 21 and 31 years old. The time since these peer researchers had left care themselves ranged between one and seven years. Time since leaving care was deemed to be more important than age, as some older peer researchers may have stayed in SOS care for a longer period until they finished education and their leaving care experience could still be recent.

The preparatory training was delivered over 2-3 full days or four half days and included presentations from the lead researchers in each country, question and answer discussions, and numerous interactive role play activities. This stage of training also helped to clarify the role of a peer researcher and provide further reassurance:



In most countries, SOS CV staff were also in attendance to learn more about the peer research process and the training provided, and to provide input on the SOS CV context. By the end of training, all the peer researchers demonstrated a sound understanding of the study and research tools.



4. How did the peer researchers collect data?

The study used semi-structured and unstructured interviews and questionnaires to collect data. The peer researchers were primarily employed to lead on the interviews with young people, however, some of them also assisted with the administration of the questionnaires, translation of interviews, analysis of interview transcripts and presentations of findings to key stakeholders.

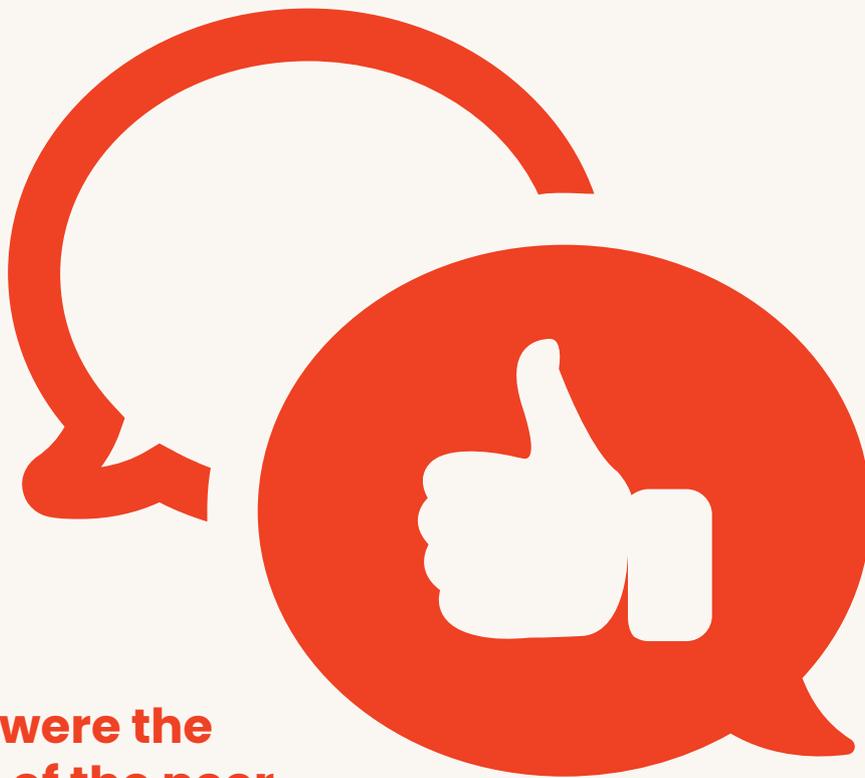
An academic researcher usually accompanied the peer researcher to and from interviews and provided support as required during interviews, particularly for the early interviews when peer researchers often felt nervous. This role usually involved asking some follow-up prompt questions or engaging in a private discussion of very sensitive issues (e.g., previous abuse or trauma). This joint approach helped to provide support and build the expertise of the peer researcher, particularly in relation to asking difficult questions about emotional issues, past trauma or disability. It also offered choice to the participant if they preferred to speak to the academic researcher alone.

Careful planning, a flexible approach and adequate resources were important, including provision of practical support (e.g., transport and food), coordination of the complex scheduling of interviews and consideration of risk and safety measures (e.g., avoiding travelling long distances alone). Debriefing after interviews was also important, as it provided an opportunity to give feedback to peer researchers, to boost their confidence and to reflect on areas for development before the next interview:



Peer researchers were advised that they could access external advice and support from the UK-based YOLO trainers at any time, however they all preferred to access support from the academic in their country, because they were familiar and locally available. Peer researchers received a payment for their time and any other costs, such as meals or transport. Some peer researchers conducted more interviews than others due to their availability, other work or education commitments or distance from the fieldwork sites.



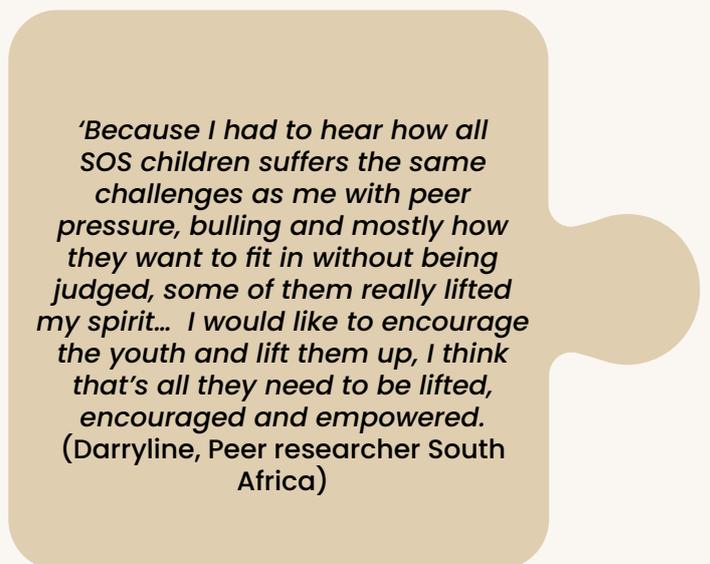


5. What were the benefits of the peer research approach?

A positive experience of peer research was reported across all four countries. At the beginning, peer researchers were nervous and unsure during the interviews, so they stuck closely to the written questions and prompts on the semi-structured interview schedule. Over time, however, their confidence grew and they became more flexible in their interviewing approach:



Peer researchers enjoyed learning about research, meeting other care leavers and travelling to new areas. They also reported that the young people's stories and resilience was motivating and uplifting. In addition, peer researchers felt that the research experience was 'therapeutic' as they recognized that other young people had faced similar challenges and obstacles as they had:

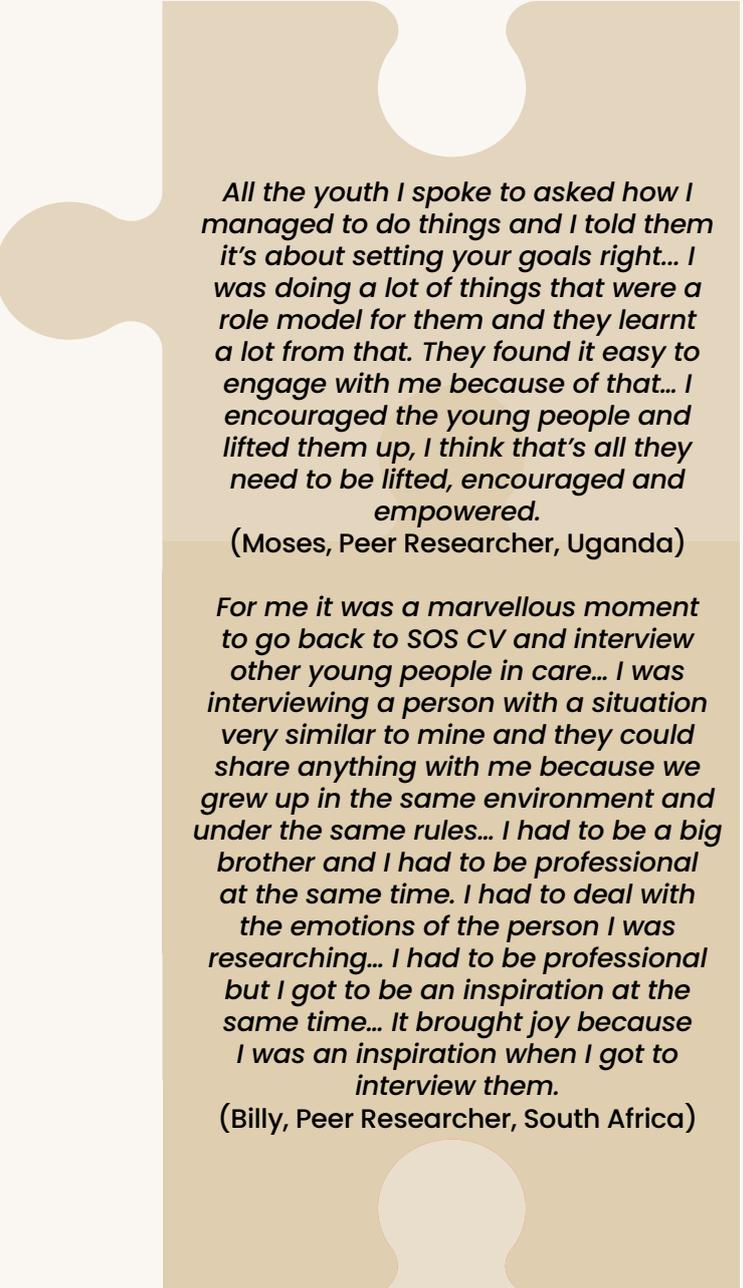




We got tokens and that was important, but most importantly we had a very good research experience.
(Tapiwa, Peer Researcher, Zimbabwe)

Practically, the peer researchers appreciated the role of the academic researcher who coordinated interviews and supported them as they gained more experience of the role. Prompt payment for the role by vouchers or money was also important and showed the peer researchers that their role was formally valued:

The peer research method also benefitted the study, as it helped to gather rich data on the experiences of the care leavers. Peer researchers quickly developed a rapport with young people and helped them to feel calm and at ease. The peer researchers helped young people to tell their story in a supportive way by showing that they understood what the young person meant or what they had gone through. Peer researchers were also said to be viewed as role models for participants:



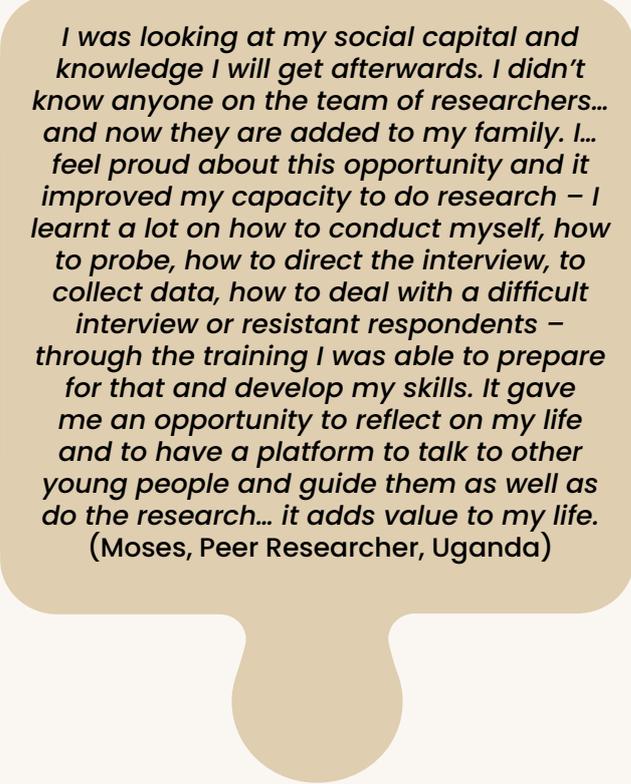
All the youth I spoke to asked how I managed to do things and I told them it's about setting your goals right... I was doing a lot of things that were a role model for them and they learnt a lot from that. They found it easy to engage with me because of that... I encouraged the young people and lifted them up, I think that's all they need to be lifted, encouraged and empowered.

(Moses, Peer Researcher, Uganda)

For me it was a marvellous moment to go back to SOS CV and interview other young people in care... I was interviewing a person with a situation very similar to mine and they could share anything with me because we grew up in the same environment and under the same rules... I had to be a big brother and I had to be professional at the same time. I had to deal with the emotions of the person I was researching... I had to be professional but I got to be an inspiration at the same time... It brought joy because I was an inspiration when I got to interview them.

(Billy, Peer Researcher, South Africa)

Academic researchers also learned a lot about leaving care experiences from listening to the experiences of the peer researchers. Towards the end of the study, two of the peer researchers joined the academic research team for a final workshop in Nairobi and presented on the peer research approach to senior managers and policy makers at a launch event. Four of the peer researchers also worked on this report and a short version of the main study report. On reflection on the overall experience, the peer researchers felt that engagement in the study had broadened their knowledge base and skill set, expanded their own networks and improved their employability.



I was looking at my social capital and knowledge I will get afterwards. I didn't know anyone on the team of researchers... and now they are added to my family. I... feel proud about this opportunity and it improved my capacity to do research – I learnt a lot on how to conduct myself, how to probe, how to direct the interview, to collect data, how to deal with a difficult interview or resistant respondents – through the training I was able to prepare for that and develop my skills. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on my life and to have a platform to talk to other young people and guide them as well as do the research... it adds value to my life.
(Moses, Peer Researcher, Uganda)



6. What were the challenges of the peer research approach?

Overall, the peer research approach was a success, however, there were some challenges along the way. At the start, it was hard to recruit a diverse range of peer researchers, as it was difficult to contact young people who had moved on from care and more males than females came forward for the role. Matching the gender of the participant and peer researcher was sometimes important due to cultural sensitivities and to provide a comfortable and supportive context for the interview. The team was thankful to SOS CV for their help with recruitment, but relying on one organization can lead to bias, so it is recommended that recruitment of peer researchers could be processed through a broader range of organisations and networks. It is also helpful to recruit more peer researchers than required at the outset, since some young people left the project early when they found full-time work or education or simply moved on to other interests.

During fieldwork, we aimed to ensure that the peer researcher did not know the young person they were interviewing. However, this was not always possible in Zimbabwe and Ghana, as the peer researchers grew up in SOS CV with shared networks. In South Africa and Uganda, this was less of a problem because the homes where young people lived were far apart.

Even when the peer researcher and participant knew each other, we often went ahead with the interview, because we had only a small number of peer researchers in each country and often no-one else was available. When the peer researcher and participant knew each other, the academic researcher checked with the participant that they were still happy to proceed with the interview and reminded the peer researcher to avoid personal bias and maintain confidentiality.

Peer researchers reported that knowing the participant was beneficial, however, as it made it easier to build a rapport. Being matched with a young person from the same community also meant peer researchers were more likely to understand the participant's cultural background and to speak the same language. However, some peer researchers who interviewed in homes where they were not known felt that they were treated with greater respect, although this meant they had to travel very long distances and at a higher cost. These issues need careful consideration in future research.

Many of the participants discussed their experiences of trauma and abuse during the interview. Peer researchers found these discussions difficult and some participants preferred to share these experiences with the academic researcher in private, perhaps due to a fear of upsetting the peer researcher or because they knew the peer researcher. Peer researchers felt they required additional training on how to manage these difficult situations and emotive topics:

*During the interviews you could meet a young person who faced abuse during childhood, these young people did not open up and it was difficult to have a conversation with them.
(Tapiwa, Peer researcher, Zimbabwe)*



7. What are the messages for future care leaver studies using peer research?

The peer research approach was effective. Peer researchers helped to develop a close connection and empathy with participants and a more authentic approach to the design of tools and analysis of data. Peer researchers also learned new skills, experienced employment and enjoyed taking part in research.



Comprehensive training, debriefing and ongoing support is essential for all peer researchers. Issues relating to the safety of peer researchers as they travel to conduct interviews and confidentiality when peer researchers know the young person they are interviewing also need careful consideration.



The study also found it helpful for academic and peer researchers to work in pairs to build confidence, offer feedback and assist with the practicalities of transport and safety.



The peer research process was helpfully supported by SOS CV. Future cross-country studies should identify such partners in their own countries, which may include SOS CV again, but could also involve other providers and care leaver networks to recruit a diverse group of peer researchers.



Peer researchers are often keen and able to take on additional roles, such as translation, verification of transcripts, analysis and presentations to key stakeholders, which can be of much benefit to the research team. Future studies should offer a range of peer research roles as the research progresses, in accordance with the interests and abilities of individual peer researchers.



Cultural norms related to gender or age-related seniority can impact on young people's engagement in interviews with a peer researcher. The pairing of peer researchers with an academic researcher helps to negotiate the effects of power imbalances based on age or gender, as peer researchers can reassure young people that they are keen to hear their story, whilst also offering choice about whether to be interviewed by the peer or academic researcher, or both.



Future projects should recruit more peer researchers than required at the outset to allow for drop-out as the project progresses. It is also important to recruit peer researchers with diverse backgrounds (e.g., age, gender, culture). Applying an educational requirement is not essential, however, peer researchers should have left care at least one year previously to allow some time since their own transitional experience.



The practical challenges of coordinating and supporting the peer researchers and administering payments promptly was greatly helped by having an experienced local academic researcher who could respond promptly to peer researchers.



More follow-up training for peer researchers would help to build their skills for dealing with sensitive issues during fieldwork.



Although costly and time consuming, future studies should also aim to bring cross-country teams together for in-person workshops at key stages of their research process.





8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the peer research process worked very well in our project and is recommended for future care leaver studies. The peer researchers helped young people to feel comfortable and speak openly about their experiences. Peer researchers also developed new skills, confidence and insights into leaving care. Peer researchers also described the experience as therapeutic as they could relate their past experiences to others. However, future peer research approaches should consider increasing the level of follow-up training offered during the research process and the support given on how to manage difficult or sensitive issues. The key messages from this pilot peer research study outlined above should inform and encourage others who are planning care leaver studies to incorporate a peer research methodology. We conclude with a reflection from Billy on his experience as a peer researcher on this study:

Growing up in an orphanage there are things we don't share and... now I know that when people want to share you need to listen and help them when you can because it's not about one person – we are one another's strength... I have a lot to share and... I never thought that... such things like this would take me seriously and I am still learning and eager to learn.
(Billy, Peer Researcher, South Africa)



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