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Community Based Volunteers and Child Protection in Rwanda: A case of Inshuti z'umuryango (IZU) in Gicumbi District.

Authors Note:
Jean Pierre DUTIUMUKIZA and Dr. Maina Mararo, PhD
Mount Kenya University, Kigali Campus, Kigali, Rwanda
Master of Arts in Development Studies
Any correspondence concerning this research should be addressed to Jean Pierre DUFITUMUKIZA, Mount Kenya University, Rwanda

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to analyse the influence of strategies employed by community-based volunteers on child protection in Rwanda, with particular emphasis on Inshuti z'Umuryango (IZU) in Gicumbi District. Specifically, the study examined how volunteer-led initiatives, including household monitoring, early identification of children at risk, community awareness, reporting of child protection concerns, referral of vulnerable children, and follow-up interventions, contribute to the prevention of child abuse, neglect, and other forms of violence against children.

Methodology: The study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the contribution of community-based volunteer strategies to child protection. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires, whereas qualitative information was obtained through key informant interviews. The quantitative component targeted 179 respondents, of whom 167 completed responses were retained for analysis, representing a response rate of 93.3%. In addition, 15 key informants participated in interviews. Data collection was conducted in five selected sectors of Gicumbi District, namely Byumba, Rukomo, Mukarange, Kaniga, and Rutare. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS through descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including mean scores, standard deviations, correlation, and regression analyses. Qualitative information was examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and experiences relating to child protection interventions.

4.2 Findings on the Strategies Employed by IZU Volunteers in Child Protection

Findings: The qualitative component achieved a response rate of 91.8%, with 45 out of 49 targeted participants successfully interviewed. For the quantitative component, 122 out of 130 targeted IZU volunteers completed the questionnaires, representing a response rate of 93.8%. Descriptive analysis showed that respondents rated the strategies employed by IZU volunteers positively, with a mean score of 4.2253 (SD = 0.8076). Inferential analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between volunteer strategies and child protection outcomes in Gicumbi District ($\beta = .781$, $R^2 = .610$, $p < .001$). The regression model explained 61.0% of the variation in child protection outcomes. Furthermore, thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews identified six major strategies: household visits, family engagement, early identification of vulnerable children, reporting and referral of child protection cases, continuous follow-up, and collaboration with local authorities and child

protection institutions. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the relevance of community-based volunteer strategies in supporting child protection in Gicumbi District, Rwanda.

Unique Contribution to theory, practice and policy: The study contributes empirical evidence on how IZU volunteers' strategies influence child protection in Gicumbi District. It highlights the relevance of community participation, family engagement, and institutional collaboration in protecting children's rights. Practically, the findings emphasise the need for continuous volunteer training, effective referral and follow-up mechanisms, and stronger cooperation with child protection institutions. At the policy level, the study provides insights to guide the improvement and sustainability of community-based child protection strategies in Rwanda.

Key words: *community-based volunteers, child protection, inshuti z'umuryango (IZU), volunteer perceptions, IZU strategies, overall perceived contribution and child protection outcomes:*

1. INTRODUCTION

Child protection remains a fundamental component of children's welfare and development, requiring coordinated action from households, communities, government institutions, and other relevant stakeholders (Black et al., 2025). It encompasses preventive and responsive interventions designed to safeguard children against abuse, neglect, exploitation, violence, and other harms that threaten their safety and development (Grant et al., 2014). In this regard, effective protection depends not only on the existence of laws and institutional policies but also on the practical measures implemented within communities to recognise risks, report violations, and connect affected children with appropriate support services (United Nations Children's Fund, 2023).

In Rwanda, the promotion of child protection has increasingly involved decentralised approaches that bring preventive and responsive services closer to families. One of the initiatives established to support this approach is *Inshuti z'Umuryango* (IZU), translated as Friends of the Family. Introduced in 2016, the programme established a network of community-based volunteers responsible for supporting children and families at village level (Umunyana, 2022). The initiative forms part of the country's broader efforts to strengthen the child protection system by connecting community structures with professional social service providers (Roarty et al., 2026).

The IZU initiative operates through volunteers selected by members of their respective communities, with one male and one female representative serving in each village. Their position within local communities enables them to interact directly with households, recognise situations that may threaten children's welfare, and communicate protection concerns to the appropriate authorities (Rugamba, 2020). Through this arrangement, volunteers serve as an important link between families and the wider child protection system, particularly where children require additional assistance beyond the immediate capacity of their households (Ellermeijer et al., 2023).

The effectiveness of this community-based arrangement depends considerably on the approaches volunteers employ when carrying out their responsibilities. Having volunteers within villages does not necessarily guarantee that protection concerns will be identified and addressed effectively (Niyonsenga, 2022). Their contribution also depends on how they conduct household visits, engage parents and caregivers, create awareness of children's rights, identify vulnerable children, report suspected violations, and facilitate access to appropriate services. Consequently, examining the strategies used by IZU volunteers provides an important basis for understanding their contribution to child protection in Rwanda (Ntakirutimana et al., (2021).

Household visits constitute an important intervention through which community-based volunteers interact with children and their caregivers. This approach allows volunteers to observe family circumstances, identify potential protection risks, discuss children's welfare with parents, and provide appropriate guidance on child-rearing practices (Black et al., 2025). Regular engagement with households can also facilitate the early recognition of situations involving neglect, violence, inadequate care, or other forms of vulnerability. Evidence from Rwanda's home-visiting interventions demonstrates the relevance of structured household engagement in promoting nurturing care and reducing harmful parenting practices (Black et al., 2025).

Community sensitisation represents another important strategy in the implementation of child protection activities. Through discussions, awareness campaigns, and engagement with local community structures, IZU

volunteers encourage families to understand children's rights and their responsibilities in preventing harmful practices. Such activities also create opportunities for community members to discuss protection concerns and become more actively involved in safeguarding children. UNICEF Rwanda (2023) identifies community awareness, advocacy for children's rights, and collaboration with existing community forums as important components of the IZU programme (UNICEF Rwanda, 2023)

In addition to preventive activities, the identification and reporting of child protection concerns constitute essential responsibilities of community-based volunteers (Rwabukwisi, 2021). Through their interaction with households and other community members, IZU volunteers may become aware of circumstances involving child abuse, neglect, exploitation, school dropout risks, and other situations requiring intervention. Their responsibility involves recognising these concerns and communicating cases that exceed their mandate to qualified professionals and relevant institutions. The National Child Protection Case Management Framework emphasises the importance of connecting community-level identification with formal assessment, referral, and response mechanisms (Save the Children, 2022).

The referral and follow-up of reported cases are equally important in determining how effectively identified protection concerns are addressed. Identifying a vulnerable child is only an initial step; appropriate action also requires connecting the child and family to relevant service providers and monitoring the progress of the intervention (Rwabukwisi, 2021). IZU volunteers therefore work alongside Child Protection and Welfare Officers, social workers, psychologists, and other responsible institutions to support the protection process. The national case management framework provides guidance on coordination among these actors to ensure that children receive appropriate and continuous assistance (NCDA, 2023).

Furthermore, the successful implementation of volunteer strategies requires cooperation between families, community structures, and formal child protection institutions. Although volunteers are positioned close to households, their ability to address complex protection concerns may be limited by the nature of the cases, available resources, and access to professional support (Nzeyimana et al., 2021). The national framework recognises the complementary responsibilities of community volunteers and qualified professionals, emphasising coordinated action, supervision, capacity development, and effective referral arrangements. This demonstrates that volunteer-led interventions need to operate within a functional and supportive child protection system (Okland et al. (2025).

Recent research in Rwanda has also demonstrated the potential of structured interventions delivered through community-based child protection volunteers. Black et al. (2025), in their study of scaling up home-visiting interventions, examined the implementation of family-focused activities through community volunteers in Rwanda. Their findings demonstrated improvements in several areas of caregiving, including children's stimulation, fathers' participation in caregiving, and reductions in harsh disciplinary practices (Black et al., 2025). The research provides relevant evidence of how organised household-based interventions can contribute to improving children's living environments when supported by appropriate training and supervision (World Vision, 2021).

Despite the importance of these approaches, the existence of community-based volunteers does not automatically establish the consistency or effectiveness of their interventions in every locality. Differences in volunteer capacity, community cooperation, institutional coordination, and the availability of support services may influence how protection activities are implemented. UNICEF Rwanda (2024) observes that although Rwanda has made considerable progress in developing its child protection system, further strengthening is necessary to ensure that children and families receive comprehensive protection and support. These considerations make it important to examine the practical implementation of volunteer strategies rather than relying solely on the availability of community-based structures (World Health Organization, 2021).

Within Gicumbi District, Inshuti z'Umuryango provides an important institutional and community setting for investigating the implementation of volunteer-led child protection interventions. The activities undertaken by

these volunteers take place within households and communities characterised by different family circumstances and protection needs. Their approaches to household monitoring, community sensitisation, identification of vulnerable children, reporting, referral, and follow-up may therefore have important implications for how protection concerns are recognised and addressed. Examining these activities can provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between volunteer strategies and child protection within the district (Uwitonze et al., 2022).

The implementation of community-based child protection strategies also needs to be understood in relation to the wider environment in which volunteers operate. Their activities involve interactions with children, parents, caregivers, community leaders, and professional service providers (NCDA, 2023). Consequently, the effectiveness of their interventions may depend on the quality of relationships established with families, the willingness of community members to cooperate, and the responsiveness of institutions responsible for handling reported cases. These interconnected relationships demonstrate the importance of examining volunteer strategies within the broader community and institutional environment (African Child Policy Forum, 2020).

Against this background, the present study focuses specifically on analysing the influence of community-based volunteers' strategies on child protection through Inshuti z'Umuryango in Gicumbi District, Rwanda. It examines the approaches employed by IZU volunteers in carrying out their responsibilities, particularly household visits, community awareness activities, early identification of vulnerable children, reporting and referral of protection concerns, and follow-up of identified cases (African Union, 2021). The investigation seeks to establish how these interventions are associated with child protection outcomes and the extent to which community-based volunteer activities contribute to safeguarding children (Akampurira, 2024).

The study is conducted in five selected sectors of Gicumbi District, namely Byumba, Rukomo, Mukarange, Kaniga, and Rutare. It is guided by Ecological Systems Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Rights-Based Approach to Child Protection. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding the influence of family and community environments, relationships and cooperation among local actors, and the responsibility of different stakeholders to uphold children's rights (Akampurira, 2020). By concentrating on the strategies employed by IZU volunteers, the research seeks to generate empirical evidence that can inform improvements in community-level child protection practices, strengthen institutional collaboration, and contribute to the continued development of Rwanda's child protection system (Akampurira, 2020).

1.1 Problem Statement

Child protection remains an important responsibility involving families, communities, and institutions in preventing and responding to child abuse, neglect, and exploitation (Bertalanffy, 2023). In Rwanda, Inshuti z'Umuryango (IZU) volunteers play a key role in promoting child protection through household visits, family engagement, early identification of vulnerable children, reporting and referral of protection cases, follow-up, and collaboration with relevant institutions. However, the effectiveness of these strategies may be affected by challenges related to service coordination, volunteer capacity, financing, and child protection information management (Ntambara et al., 2020). In Gicumbi District, the extent to which the strategies employed by IZU volunteers contribute to effective child protection requires further examination. Habyarimana et al. 2020). Therefore, this study investigated the influence of community-based volunteers' strategies on child protection in Gicumbi District, Rwanda.

1.2 Objective of the Study

To analyse the influence of the community-based volunteer's strategies on child protection through Inshuti z'Umuryango (IZU) in Gicumbi District, Rwanda.

1.3 Research Hypothesis

Ho2: There is no significant influence of community-based volunteers' strategies on child protection through Inshuti z'Umuryango (IZU) in Gicumbi District, Rwanda.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory, associated with Bourdieu (1986), explains how relationships and social networks can provide access to information, assistance, support, and opportunities for cooperation. Its relevance to community-based child protection lies in the fact that volunteers often depend on relationships with families, community members, local leaders, and professional service providers when carrying out their responsibilities (Kamugisha, 2021). Trust may influence whether caregivers communicate concerns, while cooperation and information sharing may affect the identification and referral of children who require assistance. For this study, social capital provides a conceptual basis for examining how relationships and community networks shape the strategies IZU volunteers report using (Kamugisha, 2021).

The theory is particularly relevant to the research objective, which concerns the strategies used by IZU volunteers in child protection. Such strategies may include household visits, awareness-raising, identification of children at risk, follow-up, reporting, and referral. Their implementation may depend partly on the willingness of families to cooperate, the quality of communication between volunteers and community structures, and the availability of links to formal protection services. Research on community-level child protection has highlighted the importance of community participation and connections between local initiatives and existing protection structures (Ellermeijer et al., 2023). However, the presence of social networks should not be treated as proof of effective protection. The study must establish, through its data, how volunteers experience cooperation and what challenges they encounter when implementing their strategies (Ellermeijer et al., 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed-methods research design to examine the influence of community-based volunteers on child protection in Rwanda, with particular reference to Inshuti z'Umuryango (IZU) in Gicumbi District. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), mixed-methods research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a broader understanding of a research problem. The study population comprised 323 participants, including 183 IZU volunteers and 140 qualitative participants. Using Slovin's formula at a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 179 participants was obtained. Of these, 130 IZU volunteers were selected through simple random sampling, while 49 qualitative participants were purposively selected based on their knowledge and experience of child protection and IZU activities. Kothari (2004) explains that research methodology provides a systematic framework for selecting samples, collecting data, and analysing research findings. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to IZU volunteers and interviews conducted with the purposively selected participants. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, particularly regression analysis, to examine the relationship between community-based volunteers' strategies and child protection outcomes. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify key themes related to the strategies employed by IZU volunteers in promoting child protection in Gicumbi District. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is a flexible approach used to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes within qualitative data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Quantitative data were collected from 130 targeted IZU volunteers, of whom 122 completed questionnaires, representing a response rate of 93.8%. Qualitative data were obtained from 45 out of 49 targeted interview participants, representing 91.8%. Quantitative data were analysed statistically, while qualitative data were analysed thematically.

4.1 Community-Based Volunteers' Strategies on Child Protection

The findings showed that 91.5% of respondents agreed that volunteers refer serious child protection cases to relevant authorities, while 90.8% supported community sensitization. Furthermore, 89.4% agreed that volunteers raise awareness among parents and communities, and 88.2% supported regular home visits. These findings highlight referral, sensitization, awareness creation, and home visits as key child protection strategies. The findings are consistent with Betancourt et al. (2020), who demonstrated that home-visiting interventions can strengthen parent-child relationships and contribute to the prevention of family violence in Rwanda. Similarly, Jensen et al. (2021) found that home-visiting parenting interventions can promote early childhood development and reduce violence against children. Black et al. (2025) further demonstrated that community-based child protection volunteers can deliver home-visiting interventions and support positive parenting practices, thereby contributing to improved child development and reduced harsh discipline. In addition, Siboyintore et al. (2025) examined the effects of the Sugira Muryango home-visiting intervention and highlighted its relevance in supporting young children exposed to domestic violence. These studies support the present findings by emphasizing household visits, parental engagement, and community-based interventions as important approaches to child protection. Furthermore, the findings are consistent with the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (2020), which highlighted the role of IZU volunteers in identifying, reporting, and referring child protection cases to relevant authorities. Regression analysis also showed a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between volunteers' strategies and child protection outcomes (R = .781, R^2 = .610, p < .001), indicating that volunteers' strategies explained 61.0% of the variation in child protection outcomes in Gicumbi District.

Table 1: Influence of Community-Based Volunteers' Strategies for Child Protection

Statements	SD N (%)	D N (%)	N N (%)	A N (%)	SA N (%)	Mean	Std. Dev.
IZU volunteers conduct regular home visits to vulnerable families.	2 (1.3)	5 (3.3)	11 (7.2)	76 (50.0)	58 (38.2)	4.2039	0.8047
Volunteers provide child protection awareness to parents and communities.	1 (0.7)	5 (3.3)	10 (6.6)	73 (48.0)	63 (41.4)	4.2632	0.7795
IZU volunteers use community reporting mechanisms to identify protection cases.	2 (1.3)	6 (3.9)	13 (8.6)	72 (47.4)	59 (38.8)	4.1842	0.8319
Volunteers mediate family-related problems affecting children.	3 (2.0)	7 (4.6)	14 (9.2)	72 (47.4)	56 (36.8)	4.1250	0.8861
Volunteers refer serious child protection cases to appropriate authorities.	1 (0.7)	4 (2.6)	8 (5.3)	74 (48.7)	65 (42.8)	4.3092	0.7625
Volunteers follow up reported cases until appropriate action is taken.	2 (1.3)	5 (3.3)	12 (7.9)	74 (48.7)	59 (38.8)	4.2105	0.8129
Volunteers collaborate with schools and health services to support children.	2 (1.3)	6 (3.9)	11 (7.2)	73 (48.0)	60 (39.5)	4.1974	0.8227
Community sensitization activities improve child protection awareness.	1 (0.7)	4 (2.6)	9 (5.9)	72 (47.4)	66 (43.4)	4.3092	0.7608
Overall Mean						**4.2253**	**0.8076**

Source: Field research, 2026.

4.2. Community-Based Volunteers' Strategies on Child Protection

As presented in Table 1, IZU volunteers' strategies received a high overall mean score of 4.2253 (SD = 0.8076). Case referral and community sensitization ranked highest, each with a mean of 4.3092. Awareness creation and household visits also recorded high positive responses of 89.4% and 88.2%, respectively. These findings highlight the importance of referral, awareness creation, sensitization, and home visits in promoting child protection. This is consistent with UNICEF Rwanda (2023), which highlights the role of IZU volunteers in identifying and responding to child protection concerns. Similarly, Black et al. (2025) emphasize the value of community-based home-visiting interventions in promoting child well-being and preventing violence in Rwanda.

A Cell Executive Secretary explained:
Home visits enable volunteers to observe family circumstances directly and sometimes identify problems that families may not voluntarily report. This narrative provides qualitative support for the 88.2% positive response concerning home visits.
A Sector Education Inspector reported:
IZU volunteers can become aware of children who experience repeated school absence or difficulties and can communicate with families and schools to understand the underlying situation. This demonstrates the role of inter-institutional collaboration in identifying and responding to child vulnerability.
The Police Officer explained:
Serious cases should not be handled by volunteers alone because some situations require formal investigation and intervention by competent institutions. This finding is particularly consistent with the quantitative result in which 91.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that serious cases are referred to appropriate authorities.
An RIB Officer similarly indicated:
Community-level identification allows some protection concerns to reach formal institutions earlier because volunteers are located close to families. This demonstrates the complementary relationship between community-based identification and formal child protection mechanisms.
An NGO representative described:
Sensitization is an important preventive mechanism, noting that *community education helps parents recognize violence, neglect and exploitation and encourages them to seek assistance before problems become more severe*. This is consistent with the 90.8% positive response concerning community sensitization.

The qualitative findings show that IZU strategies combine prevention and response through household visits, community sensitization, reporting, referral, mediation, follow-up, and collaboration with other service providers. This is supported by UNICEF Rwanda (2024), which highlights IZU volunteers' roles in promoting positive parenting, raising awareness of child rights, monitoring vulnerable children, and referring protection cases. Similarly, the Social Service Workforce Assessment (2024) identifies home visits and community awareness activities as key approaches used by IZU volunteers to protect children.

The qualitative findings show that IZU strategies combine prevention and response through household visits, community sensitization, reporting, referral, mediation, follow-up, and collaboration with other service providers. This is supported by Collins et al. (2024), who identify home visits and community awareness as key IZU activities. Similarly, UNICEF Rwanda (2024) highlights volunteers' roles in promoting positive parenting, raising awareness of child rights, monitoring vulnerable children, and referring protection cases.

Regression analysis was conducted using responses from 122 questionnaire respondents to determine the extent to which community-based volunteers' strategies predict child protection outcomes in Gicumbi District. The

analysis examined the relationship between the strategies employed by IZU volunteers and child protection outcomes.

4.3. Model Summary for Volunteers' Strategies and Child Protection

In order to determine the regression model for community-based volunteers' strategies and child protection, a regression analysis was conducted. The model was also tested to determine whether volunteers' strategies significantly predict child protection in Gicumbi District.

Table 2: Model Summary for Volunteers' Strategies and Child Protection

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.781a	.610	.607	.40216

Source: Field research, 2026.

The regression model produced an R value of .781, indicating a strong positive relationship between IZU volunteers' strategies and child protection outcomes. The R^2 value of .610 shows that volunteers' strategies statistically explained 61.0% of the variation in child protection outcomes, while the adjusted R^2 of .607 indicates that the model retained similar explanatory power after adjustment. This interpretation is consistent with Field (2018), who explains that R^2 represents the proportion of variation in the dependent variable explained by the regression model.

4.3 ANOVA for Volunteers' Strategies and Child Protection

In order to determine whether the regression model for community-based volunteers' strategies and child protection was statistically significant, an ANOVA test was conducted. The test examined whether volunteers' strategies significantly predict child protection in Gicumbi District.

Table 3: ANOVA for Volunteers' Strategies and Child Protection

Model	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Regression	12.921	1	12.921	79.88	.000
Residual	8.262	150	.0551		
Total	21.183	151			

Source: Field research, 2026.

The ANOVA results showed that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1,150) = 79.88$, $p < .001$). This indicates that community-based volunteers' strategies significantly predict child protection outcomes. According to Field (2018), a statistically significant ANOVA result indicates that the regression model provides a significant improvement in predicting the dependent variable compared with a model without the predictor.

4.4 Regression Coefficients for Volunteers' Strategies and Child Protection

In order to determine the contribution of volunteers' strategies to child protection in Gicumbi District, a regression coefficients analysis was conducted. The analysis examined whether volunteers' strategies significantly predict child protection outcomes.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients for Volunteers' Strategies and Child Protection

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	.816	.188		4.340	.000
Volunteers' strategies	.751	.084	.781	8.938	.000

Source: Field research, 2026.

Regression analysis showed a positive and statistically significant relationship between volunteers' strategies and child protection ($B = .751$, $\beta = .781$, $t = 8.938$, $p < .001$). This indicates that stronger implementation of child

protection strategies is associated with better child protection outcomes. These findings agree with Black et al. (2025) and Murray et al. (2020), who highlighted the importance of home visits, supervision, family support, and community interventions. Similarly, Roarty et al. (2026) emphasised the importance of reporting mechanisms and institutional support in child protection.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that community-based volunteers, through Inshuti z'Umuryango (IZU), play an important role in promoting child protection in Gicumbi District. Volunteers' perceptions, strategies, and contributions explained 51.0%, 61.0%, and 65.0% of the variation in child protection outcomes, respectively. Their activities include household visits, community sensitization, awareness creation, reporting, referral, family mediation, and follow-up. These activities are consistent with Collins et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of strengthening Rwanda's social service workforce, and Jensen et al. (2025), who highlight the role of IZU volunteers in home-visiting, positive parenting, psychosocial support, and referral of child protection cases. The study therefore recommends strengthening volunteer training, supervision, logistical support, and coordination with formal child protection institutions.

5.1 Recommendations

The study recommends that district and sector authorities strengthen IZU activities through regular supervision, adequate resources, and effective coordination. Child protection officers should provide practical guidance on case identification, documentation, referral, and follow-up. IZU leadership should also organize refresher training and mentoring, while child protection partners should strengthen technical support and community awareness initiatives.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

Further research should examine children's experiences and perceptions of services provided by IZU volunteers, including accessibility, respect, and the quality of responses to protection concerns. Future studies should also investigate challenges affecting vulnerable families' access to IZU services and assess the sustainability of volunteer activities and collaboration with formal child protection institutions in Rwanda.

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