



Building Links

**Exploring District Child Protection Structures and Services as sustainable means of linking
Community Child Protection Mechanisms and National Child Protection Systems
in developing countries.**

Presentation to the XIX ISCPAN International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect

9 – 12 September 2012 Istanbul, Turkey

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Overview

The presentation shares the key findings of a small scale, exploratory research project that was conducted earlier this year. The research explored thinking and practice in the international child protection sector on building effective and sustainable links between formal and informal child protection systems in low resource countries.

Societies have developed a range of mechanisms to deal with issues of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect experienced by children and young people¹. Some are informal, such as grandparents caring for a child when the parents are unable to do so and traditional elders mediating disputes involving children. Some are formal, such as the State stepping in to remove a child from the care of abusive parents by Court order made under the State's Child Protection Law.

Both theory² and experience tell us that better protection of children can be achieved if the formal and informal spheres work together. However, successfully linking them has been identified as a significant challenge by international agencies³. This has particularly been highlighted as a problem in recent years as the international child protection sector has adopted 'the systems approach' as the main focus of its work. This approach entails supporting governments to build or strengthening child protection systems within a country.

Through the work of Global Child Protection Service⁴, we have observed the problems that arise as a result of the lack of linkage between formal and informal child protection systems and felt that research on this issue was needed to better protect children in low resource countries. The results of the research are presented here, not to provide definitive answers, but to add to the dialogue,

¹Consistent with the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989, children and young people in this presentation refers to persons under age of 18 years.

² For example – (i) ecological models of child development such as those based on the work of Bronfenbrenner, U (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*. Harvard University Press and (ii) Systems theory applied to child protection – see paper *Adopting a systems approach to child protection: key concepts and considerations* (January 2010) Chapin Hall, University of Chicago and American Humane Society for UNICEF.

³ Most recently for example in the working paper *Strengthening Child Protection Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa* (July 2012) prepared for the Inter-agency Group on Child protection in sub-Saharan Africa – see copy at www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/strengthening_child_protection_systems_in_sub-Saharan_Africa.pdf

⁴ A child protection consultancy firm - see www.gcps.org.uk

propose some ways forward and identify areas that need further exploration. We therefore welcome and encourage your feedback, comments and questions.

Structure of the presentation

The presentation is in two parts:

Part 1 – Sets out key terms and concepts, provides an overview of the broader child protection context in which the research took place, and describes the research methodology.

Part 2 – Briefly discusses the key findings and highlights suggestions for future practice and research.

PART 1

Key terms and concepts

There is no international consensus on the definition of a **Child Protection System**⁵. For the purpose of the study a child protection system was defined as: *a collection of interlinking components or parts at different levels in society such as the family, community, national level - that are organised around the common goal of preventing, responding to, and mitigating the effects of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect of children*⁶.

The **informal child protection system** refers to child protection practices or mechanisms undertaken by children themselves, families, communities. These mechanisms are often referred to in the sector as **Community-based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs)**⁷. CBCPMs can be either endogenous, that is arising from within the family or community itself, or they may be introduced from outside. Over recent years, the program work of some development agencies has included establishing CBCPMs such as child welfare committees usually within village settings.

For the purpose of our research the **formal child protection system** is the child protection system that is constructed and implemented by the government and is intended to have nationwide reach. In some countries it may include international organisations and/or local non-government organisations (NGOs) involved in child protection endorsed by, and subject to supervision and regulation by the government. Further in some countries, groups such as traditional and religious leaders and community committees have clearly defined roles both within the formal, as well as in the informal systems.

⁵ For example – UNICEF in its 2008 Global Child Protection Strategy defines a child protection system as: “a set of laws, policies, regulations and services, capacities, monitoring and oversight needed across all social sectors – especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice – to prevent and respond to protection related risks. At the level of prevention, the aims of the system include supporting and strengthening families to reduce social exclusion and to lower risk of separation, violence and exploitation”; World Vision International in its 2011 discussion paper *Systems Approach to Child Protection* defines a child protection system as: “a set of coordinated formal and informal elements working together to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and other forms of violence against children”

⁶ Based on the definition in Wulczyn, F. and D Daro, J. Fluke, S. Feldman, C Glodek, K. Lifanda (2010) *Adapting a systems approach to child protection: key concepts and considerations*. Chapin Hall, University of Chicago and American Humane Society. New York. Paper commissioned by UNICEF.

⁷ For the purpose of our research Community-based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs) were defined as processes (either endogenous or externally established) used within in a community or neighbourhood in order to achieve the goal of protecting children of that community or neighbourhood, either generally or from a particular manifestation of violence, abuse, exploitation or neglect. ‘Community’ is used in this context to mean a geographic community or a community of interest (e.g. a particular cultural or ethnic group within a mainstream society).

From a systems perspective, both the **formal** and **informal** are considered components or subsystems of the overall child protection system within a country. An important aspect of thinking about child protection in terms of “systems” is the emphasis placed on the interconnected relationships between the components. For a system to achieve its end goal all of the components need to be working together.

In our research we sought to identify the role that formal district level child protection structures and services could play in building the links between the formal and informal subsystems. For the purposes of the study, the **district level** was defined as the main or most substantive sub-national level of government administration that has responsibility for child protection. This is the level at which formal government child protection services and structures interface with people and communities. In some countries this level may be termed the ‘province’, ‘municipality’ or ‘county’.

Broader context of the research

Thinking about child protection from a “systems” perspective is relatively recent amongst international agencies⁸ working on child protection. Traditionally, child protection programming in developing countries has focused on single issues such as child trafficking, street children, child labour, or HIV/AIDS. Although such efforts produced some substantial benefits, this approach often resulted in fragmented child protection responses, implemented in limited geographical areas that were not sustainable after donor funding ceased. Further, the approach was marked by numerous inefficiencies and substantial areas of unmet need. For example, the sensitive issue of violence within families was rarely addressed.

Following various calls for a more systematic approach to dealing with child protection, most significantly the recommendation in the 2006 UN Violence Against Children (VAC) Study for a more holistic, systemic approach that emphasises prevention, there has been a shift in the way that the sector is attempting to address child protection. Rather than funding and supporting the single-issue programs mentioned earlier, the systems approach aims to strengthen the overall child protection system in the country. The adoption of a new global strategy on child protection systems by UNICEF in 2008 was a significant turning point in the shift to the new approach⁹.

Although the “systems approach” adopts a holistic consideration of a country’s child protection system, the work of the lead international agencies, at least to date, has concentrated mainly on working with national governments to develop or strengthen formal child protection systems. Despite this, as yet, there is no consensus, on the nature and scope of a formal child protection system in developing countries, or on what it means to effectively link¹⁰ the formal and informal subsystems.

⁸ The term “agency” or “international agency” is used to refer to both UN bodies and International non-government organisations (INGOs) either individually or collectively.

⁹ UNICEF Child Protection Strategy, 2008: This is not to say that work on systems was not occurring beforehand. For example UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office started on a systems approach to child protection beforehand and published a child protection child protection systems programming tool in 2008.

¹⁰ For the purpose of the research linkages are defined as “points of connection” between elements of a child protection system. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the lack of agreed definition or discussion of this term within the international development child protection sector, the term was deliberately defined broadly so as not to limit discussion on this point during the interviews.

Although there is recognition of the significant challenge in linking the two subsystems, there is currently very little research exploring this point. The ethnographic studies on informal CBCPMs conducted in 2011 in Sierra Leone by Professor Mike Wessells for the Interagency Working Group on Child Protection and in the Province of Aceh, in Indonesia by the Centre on Child Protection at the University of Indonesia, are the current exceptions.¹¹

The Research Project

The research was based on five key research questions that were formulated to collect information on what child protection specialists considered to be effective and sustainable links between informal CBCPMs and the formal child protection system in low resource countries; whether they viewed district level child protection structures and services as an important component of such links; and what practises and/or strategies are being used to facilitate this linkage.

Methodology

The research consisted of a literature and documents review, and in-depth, loosely structured interviews with child protection specialists. The child protection specialists included independent consultants and/or researchers as well as staff working within international agencies, such as Child Protection Advisors or Child Protection Program Managers at the global, regional level or country levels. The interview data was analysed for recurrent themes in light of the key research questions.

The research focused on low resource countries in Africa and Asia.¹² However given that some of the research participants had significant experience working in the Pacific region, experiences from that region have also been captured in the results.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, we do not claim the literature and document review is exhaustive. A significant limitation is that the main language of both authors is English and as such this excluded the consideration of documents (and the conduct of interviews) in other languages.

Research sample

As work on child protection systems strengthening is relatively new, the study sample was purposefully selected to ensure that those interviewed had knowledge and experience on such work. A total of 24 practitioners were interviewed.¹³ The interviews were conducted via skype or telephone. Each interview was on average an hour in length.

This exploratory research does not, therefore, reflect the views of all involved in child protection systems strengthening work, such as representatives of national governments and local civil society

¹¹ *An Ethnographic Study of Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms and their linkages with the national child protection systems of Sierra Leone* (2011) Study conducted by the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity and lead by Prof Mike Wessells (A further 2 ethnographic studies have been commissioned by the Interagency Working Group on Child Protection to take place in East and Southern Africa (Kenya) and Southeast Asia); The Centre on Child Protection, University of Indonesia (2011) *An ethnographic study of Community Based child Protection Mechanisms in Aceh*

¹² Low resource country was defined in our study in line with the World Bank definition of 'low income countries' which is based on a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita measure. Based on 2011 GNI figures, the most recent available revision of the categories, low income countries are those with a GNI per capita of US\$1 025 or less.

¹³ The final sample group interviewed consisted of 7 consultants and/or researchers; 8 UNICEF in country, regional or headquarter staff; 1 UNHCR headquarter staff; 8 INGO staff working across Africa, Asia and the Pacific made up of 5 child protection specialists working for Save the Children, 2 for Plan international and 1 for World Vision International.

organisations, children and young people, and community members. Eliciting the views of these stakeholders will be an important next step.

PART 2:

Key findings

Linkage between the formal and informal subsystems

Child protection mappings and assessments conducted to date in various countries as part of the initial phase of systems strengthening, as well as recent ethnographic studies, demonstrate a “disconnect” rather than a linking between the formal and informal child protection systems in low resource countries.

The child protection mappings reveal, on the whole, very poorly functioning formal systems.¹⁴ Generally, there is an array of national laws, policies, action plans and frameworks developed by central governments over the years, which tend to be uncoordinated and be poorly implemented on the ground. Services may exist in the capital or other large urban centres, but the presence and impact of such services diminishes as one moves away from the centre. The presence of services and other interventions at a sub national level depends on the nature and functioning of decentralisation processes in a particular country, but generally coverage is low and they are of poor quality.

Agency established and/or supported CBCPMs, including those mandated in law, have not being identified as significant mechanisms used by people in communities use to address child protection problems they identify, either through the mappings or the ethnographic studies¹⁵. The mappings and studies confirm that most people in communities use informal endogenous community based mechanisms, rather than the formal child protection system to address the children protection issues they identify.

Based on the mappings, a lack of outreach of the formal system is an obvious problem. Looking closer at the reasons why people do not use the formal system to report incidences of violence or to access support services for children, the lack of physical access is certainly a contributing factor, particularly for people living far from urban centres or district townships. Transportation difficulties, including the high cost of transport and the time taken for travel, are often cited by people as impediments to using the services.

However, other reasons are given for not using the formal system, even when it is within reach. These include: not trusting the police or government; seeing the services as those of “outsiders”; seeing no utility in seeking redress through the formal system because the remedies do not provide

¹⁴ Systems strengthening to date has been focused in sub – Saharan Africa. A total of 24 child protection mappings were undertaken to May 2012; Final Conference report by Joshua Dankoff (10 June 2012) - *Conference on systems strengthening in Sub-Saharan Africa: Promising Practices, lessons learned and the way forward*. Dakar, Senegal, 7 – 9 May 2012. Mappings have and are continuing to be supported in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. For more information, visit <http://wiki.childprotectionforum.org/CPS+Dakar+Conference>

¹⁵ See references at footnote 10 above. Also reflected in (i) Wessells, M (2009) *What are we learning about protecting children in the community? An interagency review of the evidence on community-based child protection mechanisms in humanitarian and development settings*. Save the Children Fund; and Save the Children (2010) *Strengthening National Child Protection Systems in Emergencies through Community Based Mechanism: A discussion paper*. See copy of publications at <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/content/child-protection>

benefits to the family or community, compared with informal processes. Further, cultural attitudes often mitigate against certain matters such as family violence and sexual abuse being addressed outside the family or community¹⁶. These reasons point to a lack of trust and shared meaning between formal and informal subsystems, matters that cannot be addressed simply by increasing the level of outreach of the current formal system.

The ethnographic studies undertaken in 2011, have highlighted that community concepts such as childhood, child rearing, safety and protection are very different from those reflected in the formal systems in the locations studied. For example in Sierra Leone, the study found that “children were defined, not according to their age, but to the individual’s dependency, role or activities¹⁷.” This was reflected in, amongst other things, the widely held view that once young people become sexually active, they are adults because by definition, sexual intercourse is an adult activity¹⁸. This view of childhood has a direct impact on what people consider to constitute child sexual abuse. These community concepts are very different from those used by the formal system and from international child protection standards that promote individual rights and children’s best interest. In contrast, local practices in low resource countries tend to emphasise and promote community harmony.

In many of the African countries in which mappings have taken place, the current formal child protection systems are those based on western child protection models put in place prior to independence. In other countries, formal systems based on western models have been introduced as part of international aid efforts, for example in some of the Pacific Island nations. The models were introduced without any real adaption to the cultural, political and economic context of the country. As such, many of the systems throughout Africa resemble the Anglophone, child protection statutory model, or the Francophone family services model¹⁹ depending on the country’s colonial history, rather than reflecting a shared meaning of child protection and related concepts with the local population. This lack of shared meaning is a significant fundamental contributing factor to the current disconnect between the formal and informal systems²⁰.

Current thinking and practice on how to better link the formal and informal child protection subsystems in low resource countries.

A number of key recurring themes emerged from the interviews.

Key theme 1. The need for formal child protection systems to be built on community practices for child protection.

Rather than referring to specific practices and strategies for linking, the vast majority of participants expressed the view that formal child protection systems need to build on the endogenous child protection practise within communities, In order to achieve this, agencies and governments needed

¹⁶ See for example references at footnote 11.

¹⁷ Wessells, M (2011) at footnote 11 above

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Freymond, N. and G, Cameron (Eds)(2006) *Towards Positive Systems of Child and Family Welfare: International comparisons of child protection, family services and community care systems*

²⁰ A point also identified in Wessells, M (2011) in the context of the ethnographic work in Seirra Leone and by Child Frontiers in relation to West and Central Africa - see for example Child Frontiers (2011) *Mapping and Assessing Child Protection Systems in West and Central Africa: A five Country Analysis Paper*. See copy at http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/West_Central_Africa_CP_Systems_5_Countries_Analysis_Paper_FINAL.pdf

to focus their work with communities, which was not adequately occurring in systems strengthening work to date.

Further, most participants indicated that only if a culturally appropriate formal child protection system exists within a country can the question be addressed of developing “effective and sustainable” practical links such as referral mechanisms and services that people will use.

Importance of not “romanticising” community practices

Along with the strong emphasis on the need to build on community practices, there was the recognition by the majority of the participants that community practices should not be “romanticised”. That is, it is important to recognise that not all endogenous community child protections practices are positive for children. The need to engage with traditional and religious leaders as well as with government was stressed. There was also a general recognition that systems strengthen and cultural change takes time and that this should be allowed for in agency programming.

A few practitioners also emphasised the need for agencies to engage with communities through a more respectful dialogue, which in their view was often missing in the process of introducing “human rights” and “child rights” to communities. This view is in line with findings in the literature that point to a backlash in many communities to notions of “child rights”, attributing this backlash to the didactic way in which many agencies have introduced such concepts to communities²¹.

Other key themes that emerged from the interviews are:

- Key Theme 2. The importance of district level elements of the formal child protection system in linking the formal and informal.
- Key theme 3. The use of social workers, including para-social workers/welfare workers in linking, and the need to ensure culturally and contextually appropriate social work practices.
- Key theme 4. The low level of governance generally, and capacity in child protection in particular, across all level of government as key barriers to developing culturally and contextually appropriate formal child protection systems, and hence to building links.
- Key theme 5. The lack of technical child protection expertise amongst international agency staff undertaking systems strengthening work as well as the lack of a common understanding of “child protection systems” and the “systems approach to child protection”. These were considered key barriers to developing culturally appropriate child protection systems and links between the formal and informal.
- Key theme 6. The lack of coordination between international agencies and the demands of donors as barriers to working in a systematic way with governments and communities to develop culturally and contextually appropriate child protection systems.

²¹ See for example references at foot note 10 above; and Wessells, M (2005) *Children’s rights, Development and Rights – Based Approaches: The Way Forward*: Children & Poverty Working Paper 5. Christian Children’s Fund

Conclusion

Our research highlighted that a shared meaning between the formal and informal child protection systems is the fundamental factor to consider in terms of developing the linkage between the two. Without this shared meaning, people in communities will continue as they currently do, to rely on community practices to address their child protection concerns, despite the existence of a formal system.

Our research also highlighted that at this early stage of systems strengthening, practitioners directly involved in this work and in many cases involved at the forefront of the work, place great importance on the need to build community based, culturally and contextually appropriate formal child protection systems. Further, that it is only within this context that we can move to meaningful talk about building “effective and sustainable” practical links between the formal and informal child protection systems. A basic message that we believe is important in all societies – rich or poor.

The challenge for international agencies is to continue to explore and support systems strengthening that helps firstly, to shift and keep the focus at the negotiating table with governments and donors on the need to build formal child protection systems on positive endogenous community practices and secondly, to ensure those working on the ground are able to translate this need into effective, concrete practices that are also respectful of local communities.

Suggested next steps

Practice

Based on our research we make the following four key suggestions for future practice as a way of improving the role of district level services and structures in facilitating better linkage between the formal and informal child protection systems in low resource countries:

1. *Agencies to support district level child protection services and structures to act as the lead in learning about and documenting community child protection practices.*

Subject to in-country conditions, international agencies should support district level elements of the formal system to take the lead in learning, exploring and documenting local endogenous concepts, understandings and practices in relation to child protection. Accompanying this there should also be support to ensure that the information collected is fed back into formal legal, policy and service development at both the district and central government levels. Further, support should also be provided to ensure that briefings on such work by government are shared with communities so as to build mutual trust and understanding.

Consideration should be given to undertaking such work at the district level in collaboration with State universities or other higher learning institutions in the country or region, as a way of also increasing the capacity of national institutions on child protection. Information gathering at the district level in conjunction with local learning institutions should, wherever possible, be linked to work to increase the social welfare workforce capacity that has commenced in some countries.

2. *International agencies to expand their discussion on the nature and scope of the formal child protection systems to include consideration of endogenous CBCPMs.*

It is strongly suggested that the current discussion amongst international agencies on the nature and scope of formal child protection systems should be extended to include consideration of endogenous CBCPMs, rather than focusing on the “common key components” and standard notions of linkages reflective of child protection systems already existing in industrialised nations. To be effective it is imperative that any such consideration is informed by learning based on genuine participation of people in communities, including children. Significant reflection and incorporation of the findings from the ethnographic studies currently supported by the Interagency Working Group on Child Protection is certainly a positive starting point.

3. *District child protection services and structures should move from reactive crisis responses to proactive prevention work with communities, building on positive community practices.*

The district level should be supported by agencies to move away from predominantly responding to child protection crises and instead place greater priority on proactive prevention by supporting parents, families and communities to care for and protect children based on positive community practices. For example, by facilitating supports for extended family care and/or working with traditional local leaders to increase their awareness and capacity in relation to child protection.

4. *The use of local NGOs (including community and faith based organisations) to assist with increasing the capacity and outreach of district level child protection services and structures while government retains overall responsibility for oversight and setting standards.*

The work referred to in points 1 and 3 above as well as other work can be undertaken directly by District level official or employees and/or by government working with or through local NGOs (including community and faith based organisations) by way of contract for service, partnership agreement, or other culturally appropriate engagement. In such cases the government – whether at central or district level should retain the overall responsibility for oversight and setting service standards. If appropriately undertaken this would have the effect of increasing the capacity and outreach of the formal system. International NGOs have a role to play both in assisting governments to develop standards and monitoring and evaluation tools, as well as supporting capacity building and in some cases institution building, among government at all levels and among local NGOs.

Research

We make the following three key suggestions in terms of future research. The sector should support research to:

1. Develop a typology of formal child protection models operating in more communitarian based societies to complement and add to the current literature on models existing in western industrialised societies which tend to privilege the individual. The research could

start with a critical analysis of the Community Care Model²² that is used amongst some First Nations People. Such research should be used to add to and inform further learning and capacity building in the international development child protection sector.

2. Document alternative practices and processes undertaken in developing countries and recently emerged middle income countries, for example Thailand and the Philippines, for building formal child protection systems, with a focus on learning about linking the formal and informal child protection systems.
3. Explore effective and sustainable models for establishing externally supported CBCPMs outside the village setting – for example, in peri-urban, urban communities and IDP camps, that build on positive community child protection practices and link to the formal system.

We welcome your comments and feedback.

In ending we wish to acknowledge all the participants who agreed to take time out of their busy schedules and very generously shared their ideas and reflections with us for this research. Without their generosity our research project would not have been possible.

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²² From categorisation in Freymond and Cameron (Eds) (2006) – see footnote 19 above.