

Reconsidering child protection systems: Critical reflections

Bill Forbes, Alexander Krueger, Nicole Behnam, Philip Cook, Mike Wessells and John Williamson

Introduction

Action for the protection of children has made great progress especially since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force in 1989, despite multiple challenges and relatively limited resources. The efforts to strengthen the protection of children have progressed through numerous conceptual and practical phases over the years. This paper examines the most recent large-scale development in child protection work—the shift from individual child protection projects towards strengthening national child protection systems.

This conceptual shift has reoriented the efforts of international NGOs, the United Nations and governments throughout the developing world, with important implications for the well-being of children. It has sparked a fertile series of programmatic experiments, concepts and working approaches, along with numerous practitioner debates. And it has introduced important new questions to the field of child protection, prompting international organizations to deal differently with issues of data, workforce, financing, sustainability and feasibility. This shift at the global level, however, has encountered new challenges for implementing sustainable policies and programmes at country and local levels.

For the purpose of stimulating reflection, dialogue and debate on the best ways to go forward in strengthening child protection, this paper looks at how international agencies can respond to some of the emerging challenges. The challenges appear to be surmountable, although some major shifts in approaches might be necessary. Left unaddressed, they could possibly undermine the utility of international strategies in child protection, along with the credibility of the international child protection field. This paper thus explores a way towards constructive solutions that could enhance positive outcomes for children and families.

Section 1 of the paper describes a number of key challenges to child protection system strengthening efforts. It draws attention to the need to rebalance the emphasis, towards the functions of child protection systems and away from an overemphasis on structures. Based on the authors' experiences in a variety of national settings, Section 2 proposes a set of principles and examples of system-strengthening efforts for addressing the challenges. Section 3 outlines the policy implications of the alternative approaches suggested in the second section.

This paper only sketches constructive alternatives to current challenges; it does not propose full solutions. As a starting point, the authors suggest it is important to admit what we collectively do not know and embrace a spirit of learning to strengthen the child protection practice.

Section 1: Critique of trends in child protection systems work to date

Budgets, human resource and agency capacity and the multisector needs constitute the typical everyday challenges identified in efforts to strengthen child protection. While recognizing the validity of these challenges, the authors step outside of those issues in this section to concentrate on their shared perception of how child protection efforts have often been conceptualized and approached. The authors' experiences and perceptions tended to converge on the following common critical review of contemporary child protection.

Ambiguity of concepts and terms

Ambiguity in concepts and terminology underlie many system development efforts. This has laid the foundation for confusion of objectives as well as approaches, theories and their application. The word 'system' has become common in child protection discourse, strategy, programming, policy and advocacy. But there is no common understanding of its meaning, allowing for almost any initiative to be appropriated as part of 'strengthening the child protection system'. Three frequently used terms—a 'systems approach to child protection', a 'system building approach' and 'child protection system strengthening' are often used interchangeably. Yet, in our opinion, they imply different focuses, assumptions and approaches, which are seldom acknowledged.

For this paper, a 'systems approach to child protection' means using systems theory to inform the way actors work for child protection (which infers that change is dynamic and unpredictable, with interrelated components, and that adding or changing one element potentially affects others in unanticipated ways). Contrast this with 'child protection systems strengthening' or 'child protection systems building', each of which has sometimes come to imply construction of predetermined components and the use of some sort of blueprint. The lack of precision in terminology contributes to a conceptual confusion and corresponding shortcomings in practice.

Child protection systems, like other systems, are complex, interrelated and dynamic. However, the vagueness and confusion in terminology has contributed to child protection systems being perceived as discreet, tangible and structured entities. For example, a number of international organizations define and describe child protection systems by the totality of their components (laws, structures, human and financial resources, services, information management systems, etc.). In the authors' view such descriptions do not acknowledge the fluid nature of the relationships among the components. This common structural representation of systems has tended to define not only discussion but also programmatic approaches, which currently include mapping, developing and/or strengthening child protection systems. See the following definitions for clarity of terms used in the paper.

Working concepts and terminology, as applied in this paper

Child Protection, this paper uses the UNICEF definition of child protection: "Preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse; [which] is essential to ensuring children's rights to survival, development and well-being." See UNICEF Child Protection Strategy, 2008:

www.unicef.org/protection/CP_Strategy_English.pdf. This is a commonly used definition by international organizations and is only used here as a working definition.

Child protection system borrows from Wulczyn et al. (2010) and refers to "structures, functions, capacities and other components ... assembled in relation to a set of child protection goals".

A systems approach is the application of systems concepts and theories to various phenomena and problems, in this case, child protection. It is based on the theories of systems thinking. The methods of such an approach are used for research, evaluation and informing planning and actions, and they are applied in a wide range of disciplines. They can be applied to child protection as well.

Child protection system strengthening refers to the strategies, programmes and activities that have been conceived to strengthen and improve the functioning of child protection systems, with the assumption that this will lead to better outcomes for children and families. It is also often referred to as child protection system building. This does not refer to a programmatic approach, but it is an objective of some interventions.

A blueprint-driven approach is based on approaches that rely heavily (although sometimes implicitly) on blueprints or models of structures of an 'ideal' child protection system. The blueprint-driven approach tends to be informed by a mechanistic understanding of a system and a linear process for change. This approach assumes that determining the form of a system will generate its related functions.

A function-driven approach is an approach that aims at understanding, reinforcing and/or replicating key functions in a particular context. These approaches may be informed by systems thinking in order to deal with complexities of change in the context.

Focus on structures rather than functions

Some practitioners question whether many current approaches to systems strengthening have oversimplified what needs to be a dynamic process that recognizes and grapples with the inherent complexities of enhancing protection for children. The authors observe that a focus on child protection systems as a way to integrate relevant action was a positive conceptual shift and has had some positive impact on the field. However, specific challenges have emerged regarding how such systems have been understood and the resulting efforts to strengthen child protection.

The challenging implications of implementing a dynamic, multifaceted approach to child protection become evident when contrasted with common approaches to child protection system strengthening efforts, which often have a heavy focus on structures, at the expense of functions.¹ The following elaborates on some of the resulting challenges.

Challenge 1: Application of a mechanistic, blueprint-driven approach

Based on the problematic perception of child protection systems as tangible and replicable structures, many international child protection programmes emphasize the establishment or strengthening of formal (especially governmental) structural components. In what the authors have observed, much of the child protection system discourse and action has been shaped by a blueprint-driven approach focusing on governmental and other formal structures. A corresponding lack of grounding in the prevailing realities of families and communities has often failed to lead to better outcomes for children.

This heavy attention to structures can ignore or lead to the marginalization of less formal social and cultural elements, which are critically important to an effective child protection system, although they are more complicated to work with at scale. When child protection systems are perceived as comprising mostly formal organizational elements, what emerges is a cookie-cutter compliance approach that includes potentially dangerous misunderstandings about how child protection systems develop and function contextually. In this approach, it is assumed that there are optimal systems, blueprints and models for the protection of children and that they can be replicated anywhere in the world, or that there is simply one way of interpreting child protection.²

In many cases, these idealized models are implicit, and practitioners may not acknowledge or even be aware of the assumptions underlying a structural emphasis in child protection work. But in reality, a child protection system incorporates dynamic relationships among their formal and non-formal³ elements and is particular to its context. And child protection systems do not respond to predictable and universal laws of physics as mechanical engines do.

*“In science, when human behavior enters the equation, things go non-linear.
That’s why Physics is easy and Sociology is hard.”*

Neil deGrasse Tyson

¹ A similar discussion was framed as structuralist versus functionalist approaches by Wessells and Williamson (2014).

² For a wider discussion on the non-universality of the concept of child protection and different models or orientations or systems typologies, see, for example, Freymond and Cameron, 2006; and Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes, 2011.

³ For this paper, we use the term ‘formal’ to refer to the official, structured elements of most child protection systems, which have a statutory or other government mandate. Non-formal thus refers to contextually determined elements as well as organic societal elements, such as families, communities and their leaders, faith-based institutions, community groups, children’s groups and children’s ‘natural advocates’.

Although attention to structures has value, it encounters a mix of conceptual and practical problems when it is not balanced with adequate focus on the functions that such structures perform. A blueprint-driven approach begins with the assumption that a set of predetermined structures will fulfil the goal of protecting children. Compliance with an ideal model and its features has often become the driving force behind efforts to strengthen child protection systems.⁴ This approach is supported by long checklists, designed to help analyse and reinforce the system. However, this leads to a more mechanistic compliance way of thinking or to an inordinate focus on establishing the *form* (through predetermined structures) rather than identifying and promoting the *functions* of protection. Instead of form following function, the form becomes an end and function is assumed.

As in many other development fields, a blueprint system fails to work over time because although the form has been replicated, the intended function does not materialize.⁵ As a result, child protection agents focused on compliance establish child protection structures that look encouraging and familiar in form but often fail in the essential function of protecting and caring for children.⁶ In reality, a national child protection system is not tidy. A child protection system is not a predetermined, intentionally created set of structures and interactions among governmental bodies and civil society organizations. Rather, it is a *de facto* set of dynamic relationships that exist and affect the safety and well-being of children. As such, it should be defined by function *as well as* structure—rather than exclusively or primarily by structure.⁷

Emphasis on structure can suffer from a top-down approach that gives too little attention to the cultural and social contexts. In this manner, national-level designers create the blueprint for ‘the system’ and marshal the necessary resources; then the relevant government ministries issue directives to their different administrative levels to implement the structures and make the designated relationships between the components work effectively. Most often this linear change does not happen as planned or proves ineffective. Even though structures are established, it seems from observed experience across a variety of countries that, because the approach misses key contextual factors, there is little substantive change in the lives of children.⁸ The approach also marginalizes communities, who typically have little or no voice in the process but are fundamentally regarded as beneficiaries or as people who need to be brought into line with the new system. Rather than building upon the helpful and positive aspects of existing family and community systems, this approach imposes a system from the outside.

From the authors’ observations, this has often resulted in the replacement of child protection outcomes as the ultimate sign of the success of a child protection system; the establishment or improvement of system components becomes a proxy for outcomes at the level of the child. There is a growing body of research that underscores the hazards of emphasizing outcomes that affect the system but have little bearing on children’s lives. For example, research on the impact of child protection interventions on the lives of working children reveals a variety of harms that resulted when remote concepts of children’s best interests were imposed on children who needed and wanted to earn a living.⁹ Similarly, a forthcoming publication of research by Howard on anti-trafficking programmes in Benin presents a striking portrayal of a system that, in seeking to protect vulnerable children, is further hurting and marginalizing these boys and girls.¹⁰ Finally, Boyden, Pamkhurst and Tefere make a strong argument against imposing punitive, abolishment-oriented approaches against harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation and early

⁴ See Child Frontiers, 2016.

⁵ Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews, 2012.

⁶ Krueger, Thompstone and Crispin, 2013.

⁷ Wulczyn et al., 2010.

⁸ Child Frontiers, 2016.

⁹ Bourdillon et al., 2010.

¹⁰ Howard, 2016.

marriage, because the approaches used are driving the harmful practices underground or transforming them into other risks for children.¹¹

A number of researchers associated with the findings on the unintended harms resulting from a child protection system strengthening approach recommend a stronger emphasis on understanding the complexity of children's lives and applying a well-being orientation to protection. Such a well-being orientation places heavy emphasis on prevention rather than a focus on crisis management and risk reduction.¹²

When child protection methods and approaches are predefined or even imported, they are often expressions of Western values or cultural views that overlap and sometimes contradict or undermine a social reality that deals differently with child maltreatment.¹³ But national child protection systems cannot and should not all look alike. There are important differences in underlying values, strategies and support that will not allow a blueprint that is 'pasted on' to a new context to be absorbed in any meaningful or ultimately effective way.

"Every family, community, and nation has a child protection system in place that reflects the underlying cultural value base and diversity within that context. As such, a particular child protection system manifests a combination of cultural norms, standards of behavior, history, resources and external influences that over time reflect the choices participants have made regarding their system."

Wulczyn et al., 2010, p. 2

A blueprint-driven approach assumes that the State-citizen relationship is the same everywhere. But country to country, many populations do not have the same view of nation or even rule of law and thus do not have the same relationship and expectations of the role of the State in daily life. For example citizens (particularly those in rural areas or in marginalized groups far from the centre of power) may accept the State but contest or resent the government, which is perceived as unreachable, ineffective or even exploitive, and therefore not recognize formal social services as legitimate. Or they might trust the support or intervention of traditional or faith leaders above those of the government. This has to do with the politics of power and people's view of the legitimacy and appropriateness of the current government. Expectations on the role of the State or government agencies in having any role in family matters and/or child welfare and protection vary substantially from context to context. The dynamic between State and citizens needs to be understood and made explicit as it should inform all child protection system strengthening efforts.

A standardized model or blueprint (even when implicit)¹⁴ of a child protection system is an inadequate approach that cannot respond to or even take into account the complexity of human lives or existing social dynamics and child protection situations in different contexts. It also tends to displace a focus on outcomes for children with a focus on structural changes, which, as previously noted, are an inadequate proxy. Not only are imported solutions that do not recognize local complex realities not likely to work, they are likely to do harm.¹⁵

¹¹ Boyden, Pamkhurst and Tafere, 2012.

¹² Bissell et al., 2008; Myers and Bourdillon, 2012.

¹³ Freymond and Cameron, 2006.

¹⁴ The authors to this paper acknowledge that in many instances practitioners are not aware of promoting a specific model of child protection.

¹⁵ Freymond and Cameron, 2006; Bourdillon et al., 2010; Howard, 2016.

Challenge 2: Limited recognition and inclusion of local context

Understanding cultural, historical and economic variations across contexts and appreciating their complexity is a recognized development principle that is too often ignored in current international child protection practice. The typical explanations of weak coordination, weak capacities and limited investment (political and financial) fall short of fully explaining why national child protection systems often fail to achieve expected results. In what the authors have observed across a variety of national settings, a more compelling explanation for the challenges is that too often efforts to strengthen child protection systems are not genuinely rooted in local realities; nor do they regularly reflect endogenous stakeholders' worldviews.

Typically—but with notable exceptions, only a few people are involved in the decision-making around the development or strengthening of a child protection system. They tend to be experts, designers and/or centrally positioned system actors who share similar perspectives. A self-reinforcing dynamic ensues in which the analysis by specialists suggests a technical solution involving the introduction, increase or strengthening of the formal elements of the system. Beyond this relatively small group of people, other stakeholders with knowledge of the context tend to be left out of discussions, or they are brought in for largely superficial contextualization of content.¹⁶

This imbalance of power towards specialists defining the problems and the allocation of resources to address them, and the corresponding marginalization of those who are directly experiencing the problems, is itself a fundamental weakness in many child protection efforts. A mechanistic approach to child protection, along with the overlooking of local perspectives and assets, have led to a progressive conflation of child protection systems work with support for government and policy work.

Unfortunately, the authors' experience suggests that sometimes the legitimate aspiration of improving a child protection system pushes communities', families' and children's capacities, needs and aspirations to the periphery. Their ownership and investment in the system is reduced, and the system is professionalized in compliance with externally designed structures. The results are therefore less appropriate, relevant, feasible, effective and sustainable.

In some contexts, the proposed child protection system models include mismatched concepts, priorities and types of assistance. Often, those intended to benefit do not use the services or mechanisms that comprise the system, even when they are aware of their existence.¹⁷ In addition, endogenous or pre-existing approaches that promote the well-being of children and prevent and respond to child protection threats may be undermined, although they often persist alongside newly established child protection system structures.¹⁸ The imported models remain underused and in a perennially underdeveloped status, waiting for resources and capacities that rarely materialize.

In some cases, community care and protection practices are recognized, but only superficial links are forged with the formal national child protection structures. Seldom does work on child protection begin with serious inquiry on how a society frames child maltreatment and what current protective practices exist, how they function, what they seek to do and how stakeholders want to achieve child well-being.

There must be recognition that local practices often are based on different principles and worldviews. These practices cannot be simply *connected* to formal elements of the system, because

¹⁶ Krueger et al., 2015.

¹⁷ Kostelny et al., 2013; Krueger, Thompstone and Crispin, 2013.

¹⁸ Child Frontiers, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e, 2012, 2013, 2014b; Wessells, 2011, 2015.

they are divided not only by a physical gap but also by conceptual and normative meanings. They cannot be linked unless they are somehow *reconciled*. But this reconciliation cannot just be 'logical consistency' on paper, forcing one side to conform. An effective child protection system has to be owned by local people because it is meaningful and relevant to their daily realities.

Identifying what will make a truly viable system depends on a thoughtful understanding of the local context. And developing a viable and sustainable system that protects children should not just give lip-service to 'building on existing assets' while actually supporting an externally imposed system. The process should identify and formally recognize community assets and reinforce them as a means of helping to develop the system in a way that fits local realities and is likely to be sustainable.

Challenge 3: Inadequate focus on and inappropriate conceptualization of the role of families, communities and children

A major drawback of the blueprint-driven approach is that it tends to marginalize family and community systems, which individually have limited geographic reach and are not easily captured as distinct structures but collectively are the front line of prevention and response to child protection issues. Instead, a structural emphasis tends to focus on what the system architects and engineers had intentionally designed and put in place. Family and community systems do not fit this mould because they have evolved on their own over time and through organic decision-making. Systems designers may regard these pre-existing systems as problematic because they are inherently diverse and messy, in that they are neither uniform nor under tight government control. And they may use approaches that are not framed by or consistent with national laws or the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Understandably, few designers of a national child protection system would want to be held accountable for actions over which they have little control. Even though families and communities in some cases harm children, it is nonetheless true that in most settings they are the first line of prevention and response and do much of the 'heavy lifting' in regard to everyday child protection. In this respect, family and community elements are central to the actual, functional child protection system within a country.

Both families and governments have legal responsibility to protect and ensure adequate care of children. But the primary responsibility is recognized as being with the family, while government is supposed to support families, and has the ultimate duty to ensure protection and care if the family fails or if a child is separated from their family. Yet, many current system strengthening efforts and models are designed as if the State were the primary duty-bearer and thus empty the family of power over its problems. Families and communities often end up in the background as only beneficiaries or groups to be changed, and not as active agents who have their part in framing their problems, acting upon them and finding and participating in the solutions. Centralized system strengthening approaches have tended to shift this power of intervention and decision-making to the State, creating de facto tension. Finding a respectful balance seems like a more appropriate response.

Unfortunately, families are sometimes portrayed as part of the problem rather than the solution, with families then being approached primarily as potential perpetrators of violence against children instead of the primary child-caring actors. In many contexts, the conceptualization of families and communities as the primary sources of children's problems risks portraying them in an unfair light and undermining their critical role in child protection.

Family and community are not only parts of a functioning child protection system, but they are the core. Governmental and programmatic activities significantly contribute to children's safety to the extent that they strengthen relevant capacities of families, communities and children. Families are the first and primary actors in guiding and protecting children and in responding to problems when they occur. When they are left out or marginalized, this undermines the ultimate goal of achieving outcomes at the child level. It is also true that the most immediate threats to children's safety come from families and communities, so governmental and programmatic activities are more likely to be effective when they help change the harmful treatment of children. Fortunately, there are signals of increasing attention to strengthening the role of families in child protection, as indicated by the growing emphasis on supporting and improving parental capacities.¹⁹

Conclusion

The problems described thus far include the often implicit assumptions about an ideal system blueprint and the subsequent quest for compliance with preconceived, standardized and measurable solutions and structures. Based on what the authors have observed across a variety of contexts, child protection work in international settings has become increasingly dogmatic, eroding the capacity and recognition of the importance of contextualization and critical thinking. In terms of rhetoric, almost all practitioners recognize the need for adaptation to the local context. Yet, actual child protection work often reflects a power imbalance towards outside experts, with limited and superficial adaptation of designs and plans to local situations. It seldom incorporates fundamental concepts and beliefs prevalent in the local context into the discussion.

Considering the challenges highlighted here, it seems that one of the reasons why many of the child protection system models (be they imported or top-down designed) do not work is because they seek to reproduce or replace the functions of the family and community with a formal structure that does not resonate with or generate confidence among those it is intended to serve. This cultural blindness, combined with a mechanistic linear understanding of change in the sector, creates serious challenges for the effectiveness of child protection policy and practice internationally.

To overcome these challenges, child protection efforts need to acknowledge that a system that protects children already exists in every context, with the family and community at its core, and that strengthening child protection requires starting work from within that system to increase its efficacy, as measured by improved outcomes for children. The contexts that constitute the daily reality for children, families and communities need to regain a prominent position—they must be the driving force behind child protection system initiatives.

There is a pressing need for more reflective spaces to debate and discuss how these implications can be created and cultivated and what feasible theories and approaches will result in legitimate and sustainable changes for children.

Section 2: Approaches, principles and applied examples

Fortunately, the challenges discussed in the previous section are not immovable and can even be avoided through alternative approaches and following several useful guiding principles for constructive practice. This section elaborates on two important approaches to child protection efforts and then explores three principles relating to how the problems described in Section 1 can be addressed (with examples to demonstrate how they have been handled in practice).

¹⁹ Daly et al., 2015.

The examples included here derive from individual authors' experiences across a variety of settings. They are not necessarily unique and do not pretend to represent all of the promising experiences, innovations and thoughtful applications of the principles emerging from the field. Our experiences over time and subsequent conversations on how to learn from them and apply certain principles evolved into extended debate, which led to this paper and interest in expanding the dialogue and the voices included. As a group (the authors), our views of these principles and examples vary considerably. And that is the point of this section: rather than offering a new orthodoxy, we want to present diverse views, examples and strategies regarding how to enable better outcomes for children and families. This diversity and the dialogue this paper hopes to stimulate are part of the ongoing inquiry into how to best achieve those outcomes.

Outcome-focused approach to accountability

Efforts to strengthen child protection ultimately must focus on real and measurable improvements in child well-being. While intermediate measures, such as access to and quality of child protection services, might serve as helpful monitoring indicators, it is critical that accountability frameworks include actual measurement of impacts on children and families as the highest indicator of their effectiveness. *If the function of a child protection system is to protect children and enable their well-being, then the accountability of the system must be gauged by the outcomes for children.*

One way to achieve this is to monitor outcomes for children at a population level. This would look at the rise or fall of risk and protective factors that determine whether children are resilient or vulnerable. Because children's well-being is inextricably connected with that of families and communities, a key question to ask is: How well does the system do in supporting families and communities? Approaches taken to achieve accountability should engage children, families and communities in ways that give them a sense of voice and agency and that is guided by their lived experiences.

Because the aim is system strengthening at scale, this monitoring should include, as much as possible, a national (or a wide area) quantitative measurement of outcomes for children. Limitations must be taken into account regarding how population measurements can mask differing experiences of vulnerable populations; thus, periodic research or targeted monitoring of outcomes among such groups is also necessary. Accountability practices should use a mix of grounded, rigorous methods that combine surveys and participatory processes that enable learning about values, practices and perceived assets and challenges of local people. To enable ongoing accountability as well as a sense of ownership in the system, the data should be regularly fed back to children, families and communities in a respectful manner that invites community discussion and action and that allows their perspectives to be heard regarding the lived realities behind the statistics.

A re-focus on function

To make progress towards the ultimate purpose of improving child well-being outcomes, a function-driven approach to strengthening a child protection system concentrates less on structures than on what actually is working to protect children. A more balanced view will give adequate consideration to function: how various practices, mechanisms, social norms, groups, institutions and processes actually affect children's safety and well-being. From this standpoint, the most relevant characteristics of a child protection system are not predefined organizational structures and entities. Instead, what is most important is the function of those structures and their actual meaningful impact on children's safety, well-being and recovery following exposure to violence, abuse, neglect

or exploitation.²⁰ This emphasis informs and leads to the recognition and strengthening of meaningful structures.

This approach calls for an adjustment in how child protection systems are conceptualized. It views a child protection system not in terms of 'what is supposed to happen' but rather in terms of what does happen—the real collaborative actions by different stakeholders for improving children's safety and well-being. The challenge for governments, service providers, international organizations and anyone else who aims at strengthening the child protection system is thus to re-conceptualize their respective roles and move ahead by looking at what is already functioning and learning about what needs to be in place to support children and families, and communities. Then they need to engage with a variety of stakeholders to systematically determine what should and can be done to better protect boys and girls in different settings and circumstances. This would mean engaging with parents, teachers, religious leaders, various community groups (including youth), local leaders and traditional structures (among others) as well as personnel and structures within the formal system.

Giving primary consideration to function does not assume that all the actors within a child protection system are driven by a common goal of protecting children. Some may not regard their actions as 'child protection' or as part of a national collective vision of protecting children. Indeed, they may be acting according to very different, culturally constructed beliefs and values, yet what they actually do affects child protection and wellbeing. An approach centred on function can work through an organic, evolving set of interconnected behaviours, programmes and policies.

Based on the function-driven perspective, we thus suggest the following definition for consideration as a useful starting point:

A child protection system includes the actors and mechanisms in a geographic area, beginning with families, children and community, who consistently interact in ways that protect children from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation and support recovery from such harm.

Such a contextualized approach has value because it is more likely to fit the realities of the context and to encompass mechanisms, practices and relationships that are locally owned and sustainable and not imposed from the outside.

Integral to a function-driven approach to understanding and working with child protection systems is an emphasis on learning and evidence. The important elements and functions are not defined by structural categories, although they can be influenced by particular structures in a given area. Instead, relative importance is determined by the elements that interact to make children safer. In this respect, the approach is humble because it assumes, as outsiders, we come to a national context likely not knowing what the actual functioning system is, and thus we need to learn about it.

In contrast, approaches that give primary emphasis to structure do little to invite a spirit of learning about the functions of existing child protection systems, especially if they are not part of the designers' vision. The function-driven approach challenges actors to understand what actually works in protecting children—without romanticizing local actors, practices and mechanisms, whose actions may have negative as well as positive effects on children. Their value in children's protection must be established empirically. Practices that are evaluated and found to not improve children's safety and well-being are not promoted and are even discouraged.

²⁰ This was recognized conceptually in Wulczyn et al. (2010) and has been given empirical support in Wessells (2015) and in Wessells et al. (2015).

The sharp contrast between structure-driven and function-driven approaches presented here may create the impression of an either/or choice when actually there are valuable interrelations and synergies between the two approaches. Strengthening systems certainly requires attention to structures, which can in turn influence function and outcomes. At issue, though, is whether a primary focus on intentionally designed structures is the best means of strengthening a child protection system. Both approaches might have to consider similar aspects. But an approach that considers function first seems to have more chances of reflecting the context and adequately addressing opportunities and limitations.

Thus, we move to the following three principles, which can be applied to child protection system strengthening efforts that are attempting to take an outcome-focused approach to accountability and are primarily shaped by an emphasis on functions.

Principle 1: Apply a systems approach to child protection efforts

A systems approach to child protection has tremendous potential to overcome many of the problems with a structure-driven approach outlined previously. It is important to reiterate, though, that adopting a systems approach is not necessarily the same thing as making efforts to strengthen a child protection system. A systems approach offers several methods that allow for the recognition and appreciation of the context and its complexities, taking a more measured approach to analysis and planning, with fewer a priori assumptions. Currently, there is rigorous and well-developed discourse around the implications of systems theory that unfortunately has not been sufficiently applied in the child protection efforts.²¹

Seeing a system as a dynamic set of processes, relationships and functions rather than fundamentally as structures opens opportunities to understand and respond to the complex and changing realities in which people live and operate. Practitioners applying a systems approach explore different perspectives and recognize the desired function of different elements, also taking into account their own position within that system.

To understand why such deeper examinations and applications are necessary, we must first understand basic systems theories and models. While such an approach may initially seem overly theoretical, when pragmatically applied, it is useful in understanding the basics of what building a functional and effective child protection system entails. There are many different frameworks for systems approaches, and some may be more useful than others, depending on the context and the type of work being done. However, any systems approach to child protection work should build upon the common characteristics of all systems theories, described as follows.²²

a. Interrelationships

All elements (apparent and implicit) of a situation are linked to each other in a complex web of relationships of different strengths and significance.

Key questions that help us understand the interdependence of a system with other systems and the wider context (social, cultural, political, economic, historic, etc.), how its individual parts form a whole or how we might address a particular issue include:

- What is the relationship of the system to the larger social, political and economic contexts in which children and families are living?
- What is the relative position and function of the system with other systems?

²¹ A good introductory reference is Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011).

²² These examples were developed applying the system approach to work on child protection systems, based upon the framework outlined in Williams and Hummelbrunner (2011).

- What is the role of one part of the system in relation to the others?
- What is my (or my agency's) role in the context of many other functioning parts?
- What is the nature of the relationships (strong or weak, important or less important) among parts?
- How important and strong are the links between various parts? Why so?
- How do the various parts affect each other as the change process unfolds?
- What are emergent opportunities and challenges?

b. Boundaries

Any system has boundaries or limits that determine what is considered inside or outside of it. These are determined by the most important and meaningful interrelationships and the decision that some relationships are not as important and should be left out. The boundaries also depend on the ever-changing interrelationships and perspectives (next section) and therefore may not be objective or static. Instead, they are fluid, depending on the point of view. For example, if we take a functional perspective to analysing a child protection system, boundaries might include elements that aren't generally considered as part of a child protection system, like health services, school or education within families, but they contribute to the achievement of better child protection outcomes for children. Also, it is important to appreciate that from a public policy perspective, boundaries need to be drawn and budgets need to be allocated (which necessarily follow other boundaries).

Key questions include:

- Functionally, what is a part of the system and what is not?
- Who decides the limits of the system?
- What is the scope of the system? Is it narrowly defined as child protection or is it a wider scope of child welfare and well-being? What are the main functions of the system?
- Who are the main actors who influence the system?
- What are the implications of leaving some actors or relationships out or of including some actors who are relevant to child protection but not typically considered as child protection actors?

c. Perspectives

Perspectives are the multiple and differing points of view that exist in a given situation. If these are highly consistent, the system is more cohesive, clearly articulated and shared. However, in social settings, perspectives tend to be very different. This can have substantial implications for the system and its characteristics, as well as its use and function. The differences between local perspectives on how to achieve child protection results and those represented by a blueprint-driven approach is often one of the primary reasons that the latter efforts do not deliver intended outcomes.

Taking into account multiple perspectives clearly shows that a system is not just a static and tangible entity or set of structures. Definitions of boundaries are dependent on perspectives, and perspectives influence interrelationships. Understanding perspectives can assist us to better appreciate the relative position and actions of different aspects or components of the system. This will allow us to make better decisions and plans on how to influence a system to deliver stronger child protection outcomes.

Key questions include:

- Whose perspectives are the most influential?
- Whose perspectives are the most relevant to ensuring children's well-being?
- Whose perspectives influence decisions and outcomes for children?
- Whose perspectives contradict or significantly differ from each other?

- Whose perspectives are not reflected in the existing system and what are the implications of this?

These three characteristics will shape a systems approach. Referring to them can help us to look at a system as a set of processes and relationships that operate within a local context dynamically and organically, thus overcoming the challenge of getting lost in the form of a child protection system and the predetermined checklists. Instead, we are able to focus first on understanding its actual functions. This not only responds directly to the interrelationships, perspectives and the boundaries of the system but brings back the emphasis on child well-being outcomes in context.

One of the strengths of adopting a systems approach is also reflected by the increased appreciation and understanding of the relationship of the child protection system to the whole social, political and economic reality in which boys and girls and men and women live. The effectiveness of any national system depends not only on its 'internal' functioning but also on its relationship to the larger, 'external' environment in which it is situated. Reducing poverty, discrimination and social exclusion (to name only some issues) is inseparable from developing a child protection system that works. Indeed, some practitioners and academics have concluded that referring to a discreet child protection system is an unnecessary and confusing intermediate abstraction and that all child protection activities might be better understood as imbedded in other systems that are focused on improving child well-being.²³

But even if one maintains the integrity of the concept of a child protection system, situating the national child protection system in this context and clarifying functional interrelationships with the larger social, political and economic fabric would ensure complementarity and convergence of initiatives that deliver results for children and families.

Another advantage of adopting a systems approach to child protection is that it pushes practitioners and organizations (national and international) to consider themselves as interrelated within the system in some way. A systems approach brings to the forefront the relative function, weight and contribution of every actor or agency involved in the system strengthening effort. For programmes aiming to work on child protection systems, it is essential to question how our work relates to others' work and how and to what extent it contributes to or undermines positive child protection outcomes.

These are not revolutionary ideas. Applied to the international development setting, they reflect basic and proven development principles²⁴ that have often been overlooked in child protection efforts. When applied, they can productively challenge the current ideas of linear change and the implicit blueprint-driven way of working that has become prevalent in the child protection discourse and programming.

EXAMPLE: Child Frontiers-applied systems approach to child protection

The use of a systems approach rather than a blueprint-driven approach had a marked influence on the methodology that Child Frontiers, in collaboration with UNICEF, adopted for the mapping and assessment of child protection systems in West Africa.²⁵ This method of child protection system assessment has since been used by Child Frontiers in Asia and the Pacific, leading to a series of critical findings, such as the coexistence of different and sometimes incongruent systems in the same locations.²⁶

²³ Myers and Bourdillon, 2012.

²⁴ Ramalingam, 2014.

²⁵ Child Frontiers, 2010c.

²⁶ Systems incongruence is discussed in Krueger et al. (2013); an assessment of the child protection system using a variation of this method has been carried out in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Lagos State, Lao People's Democratic

This mapping exercise is not compliance driven and does not use checklists but promotes a comprehensive appraisal of what is there, how and why it is functioning. From the start, it places emphasis on the experiential and existing aspects of factors that increase child well-being and safety. It includes insights on the national child protection system from the perspective of institutional agents as well as of caregivers, boys, girls and local leaders. These assessments reveal the different components of the existing system, their interrelationships (or lack of them) and boundaries, according to different perspectives, thus pointing at their consistency and contradictions and shedding light on why national systems experience the challenges and successes that they do.

Building on this learning, Child Frontiers developed a tailored method of iterative analysis and consultation to reframe the child and family welfare systems²⁷ in contexts in which Western models were not working.²⁸ Supported by UNICEF, the implementation process began in 2011 in the Pacific region and has since been improved and further tested in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste and most recently in Togo.

In these different experiences, the practitioners and researchers at Child Frontiers, UNICEF and in each government were challenged to work with local populations' perspectives to find ways to reframe each national system that were effective, made sense to the population and were adapted to the context. The policy development method was thus designed to avoid a top-down, technocratic child protection system design process and overcome some of the challenges of bottom-up approaches (especially in regard to replicability and scale of impact). This required involving a wide range of coalitions from the central and local levels to reframe a system that makes sense to all.

A technical working group at the national level, composed of a small number of local representatives from government, religious organizations, civil society and international organizations, began working with systems theory principles as background for determining options for their own child and family welfare system. Data and evidence about the existing assets, perspectives and contextual opportunities were the foundation of the group's reflections. Local worldviews, concepts, beliefs and perceptions constituted the foundation of the process. Child Frontiers supported the process as facilitators and not as experts providing solutions.

This approach was designed to ensure that the perspectives of boys and girls, caregivers and leaders in communities were centrally considered in the formation of a national system. The international agents were deliberately not the dominating voice in the discussions, and the starting point was to analyse available evidence on how the population understands and deals with child maltreatment, as well as their conceptualization of the role of the family, the community and the State. Local and national perspectives and the aspirations to fulfil and realize international commitments (the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights frameworks) were taken into account in a delicate balancing exercise. Practices perceived not to be in line with the Convention or other international instruments were the object of several discussions and taken very seriously. These were acknowledged as challenges that needed to be better understood and considered from the perspectives of the community, families and children, making them an aspect of dialogue and

Republic, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste and Togo. The published reports are available at www.childfrontiers.com.

²⁷ This terminology was intentionally used as an alternative to child protection system because it was normally associated with a specific way of understanding and dealing with child maltreatment. The term 'child and family welfare system' could include many different understandings and perspectives.

²⁸ This iterative consultations process method was inspired by the Advocacy Coalition Framework for Policy Development (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and has been adapted to the necessities of individual country contexts.

discussion within the national system. In most cases, however, controversial practices were recognized as a problem that could be dealt with in a constructive process. This approach thus avoided a starting point of confrontation with communities and families. The approach was to seek and agree common ground about child welfare and protection among the different coalitions and build upon it.

The different coalitions or interest groups then engaged in systematic consultation to verify the acceptability of the options (regarding system functions, boundaries and institutional set-up) articulated by the technical working group and to propose alternatives where necessary. Options proposed by the technical working group were often hybrid approaches, including the integration of available formal services and community mechanisms. The working group in Kiribati, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and, to a certain extent, Ghana recognized the centrality of family and community and proposed formal services to complement, and not replace, their functions and practices.

This approach started national-level stakeholders in a process of deconstructing their existing child protection system as described in national policy documents (which had largely been based on ‘best practices’ from abroad and driven by a compliance mentality) and to rearticulate a system that began with local perspectives and worldviews. Reframing these policy processes created great excitement within government, civil society and traditional leadership as well as with decentralized institutional agents who interact directly with families and children. Further consultations with children and caregivers indicated a high degree of acceptability and satisfaction. Structuring the discussion based on what exists, especially on what was already functioning at the family and community levels, allowed the emerging ‘new’ system to only minimally rely on formal specialized services, thereby reducing the resource gap so often experienced by child protection system efforts. The child and family welfare system in these countries is conceptualized to work from day one. They are not designed to wait for new resources or capacities to be developed.

The solutions and specific processes are to be validated through real-life scenarios. The testing phase, which has begun in some of the countries, will document the process of finding local solutions to locally defined problems, by local agents, within a contextually appropriate and feasible national approach. Because of the nature of the framework, further local adaptation is possible. As long as strict procedures and guidelines are avoided at the start, room for innovation and creativity remains.

While this example shows an approach to system strengthening through policy development, it should not be read as suggesting that child protection system work is just about working on policy and with government. In fact, this approach begins with a policy process but roots it into the daily reality of children’s and families’ lives, thus bridging the gap between them and institutional agents. It moves from considering functions that exist and how could they be improved for supporting and protecting boys and girls to redefining the structures of a national child and family welfare system.

Principle 2: Consider children’s perspectives and experiences in child protection efforts

The starting point for all child protection efforts must be a deep understanding of ‘the child’ in context, which must be largely informed by children’s perspectives. This dynamic, holistic approach to understanding and supporting child protection fits well with the functionalist systems approach outlined previously. In particular, it sharpens the importance of understanding context in children’s lives—of the broader ecology in which they live and of the various systems, dynamics, relationships, perspectives and processes at play within this ecology.²⁹ Within these dynamic contexts, particular

²⁹ Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dawes and Donald, 2000.

children may be highly vulnerable or resilient, depending on their balance of risk and protective factors. It is the task of child protection programming to enable a preponderance of protective factors, thereby creating a safe environment in which healthy development can occur. This approach might broaden the boundaries of what is typically considered a child protection system.

A priority, then, in strengthening a child protection system is to take an ecological child-centred approach that features children's voice and agency and utilizes their perspectives to guide all proposed efforts. The terms 'ecological' and 'child-centred' have both been overused, to the point they risk losing their meaning and relevance. Also, child-centred approaches, which are not built on an understanding of the ecology around children, risk isolating children and interventions while helping to protect them from the risks within the systems in which they live.

Nonetheless, this paper proposes an ecological, child-centred approach, but one that begins with learning systematically about the lived experiences of children across the age spectrum and in a variety of settings. This approach emphasizes including those who are most vulnerable and 'invisible' and who may never come into contact with formal service providers. This approach also ends with measuring outcomes at the child level to understand the success of the system rather than measuring success by the establishment of system components. What is learned can tell us much about whether the system as it exists truly protects children and supports their well-being, or is unlikely to be used by particular vulnerable children.

Engaging children in ongoing child protection monitoring is central to this process. The Child-Centred Accountability Protection Evaluation (developed by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development, or IICRD) and other child-led assessment tools should assume a central part of this process.

Most children exhibit remarkable resilience amid adversity.³⁰ A child-centred approach recognizes this as well as the important role that children should have in their own protection. This participatory approach engages children, communities and stakeholders in identifying and assessing the challenges, gaps and assets or strengths they experience at the different layers of children's social ecology in their community and country. The approach supports the gathering of local evidence, perspectives, interrelationships and understanding of the system. And it also builds the knowledge, awareness and capacity of all stakeholders on the factors affecting both the vulnerability and well-being of children and young people in their community and/or in the country.³¹ Child protection systems must value the perspectives and relationships of children and recognize children as central actors as well as beneficiaries—serving their interests rather than the political, sectoral or other interests that often define discussions of child protection.

This process of evolving agency and capacity is, to a certain extent, shaped by the Western social constructions of childhood and child-rearing practices and by notions of risk and protection. Although this view can conflict with local beliefs found in many developing countries—in which child-rearing emphasizes interdependence, group harmony, reciprocity and mutual responsibility—ways have been found to bring them into harmony.³² A solid understanding of perspectives and interrelationships in children's agency in relation to their safety can inform how to navigate this apparent tension between local and international perspectives. The first step is to recognize that cultural differences in child-rearing often go unrecognized by child protection programmes applying a legalistic, medical or welfare approach. Those who consider themselves experts often derive their understanding from a Western conceptual foundation that ignores local knowledge and traditions,

³⁰ Boothby, Strang and Wessell, 2006; Fernando and Ferrari, 2013; Panter-Brick and Leckman, 2013; Ungar, 2008.

³¹ Cook and Du Toit, 2005; Nelems and Currie, 2012.

³² Examples of this harmonization include Cook and Heykoop, 2013.

perhaps even considering them harmful.

EXAMPLE: International Institute for Child Rights and Development: Circle of rights in Thailand

One example that demonstrates engagement of children in a systems approach to strengthening child protection focused on understanding and combating harmful aspects of information and communication technologies (ICT) in Thailand. As the role of the internet grows around the world, so too do children's risks from engaging with ICT. To address these risks and to develop innovative systems of protection and social support, IICRD, in partnership with Plan International and other children's organizations, created the Child Protection Partnership. This global action research and advocacy initiative functioned to understand the unique and emerging threats posed by ICT-related sexual exploitation. It involved young people in finding solutions to these risks and in applying the results of the research to strengthen child protection system efforts in Thailand.

The goal of the Child Protection Partnership was to reduce and, where possible, eliminate ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation by building on good practices and technology across public and private sectors. The approach had three entry points:

- Equip law enforcement, government and other supporting bodies or organizations to better address ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation.
- Connect vulnerable boys and girls to protective mechanisms and services that prevent and address ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation.
- Foster a coordinated systems approach among stakeholders, facilitated by the Child Protection Partnership, to prevent and address ICT-enabled child sexual exploitation.

A challenge emerged in applying the results of the research because there was no single government ministry responsible for ICT and child protection, making it difficult to define boundaries and interrelationships within the system. Responsibility for child protection is dispersed across various ministries, including the Ministry of Human Security and Social Development, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry for Welfare, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education. Initially, government actors were reluctant to engage because they thought ICT-related threats (sexual exploitation) most often originated from visiting foreigners. However, as it became apparent during the research with children that threats from Thai citizens were more prevalent than those from foreigners, they began to engage more meaningfully.

The Child Protection Partnership developed innovative ICT child-led protection policy round tables at the municipal, provincial and national government levels and included representatives from the appropriate government, private and civil society sectors. This group explored children's perspectives on ICT threats as well as potential assets and opportunities to strengthen the protection of children from these threats. The group consulted with the government-led child protection steering committee and helped shape child protection policies on the safe use of ICT and on judicial, evidential and prosecutorial technical issues related to child protection and ICT. The process was led by children, youth and community leaders, who mapped the legal and policy environments and developed cross-ministry policy briefs that closed formerly overlooked protection and judicial loopholes.

At the local and national levels, Plan, UNICEF, the Royal Thai Police, the Department of Local Administration and the Ministry of Education worked with boys and girls aged 10–18 along with community leaders to develop a variety of actions across Thai society in support of child protection. These included school-based curricula on the safe use of ICT, peer-to-peer early warning systems for children involved in migration, strengthened community policing to enhance early intervention systems and equipping law enforcement officers with appropriate technology and tools to identify, arrest and successfully prosecute local and international sex offenders. Although the final evaluation

of the Child Protection Partnership indicated that these interventions had positively strengthened the systems of support for vulnerable children, a subsequent evaluation conducted by an independent agency four years after completion of the project found a drop in system sustainability. This was attributed to a variety of reasons, including staff turnover, a lack of ownership of some partners to project objectives and the significant political turmoil in Thailand that affected local capacity for government-community partnership. These after-effects underscore the complexity and challenges of sustaining long-term systems change, especially at the national level in countries undergoing political upheaval.

Principle 3: Families and communities are central to child protection efforts

As recognized under the previous principle, in a well-functioning social environment, the family and community and children’s capacities are the core of a child protection system. Measures by governments, NGOs and other actors to improve children’s safety are likely to be effective largely to the extent that they influence and strengthen the care and protection that families and communities engage in. Neuroscience research has provided scientific evidence that confirms the experience-based insights of practitioners focused on child well-being—that a caring and protective family environment has a positive biological effect on risks to and resilience of children.³³ This further highlights the critical importance of placing the family at the forefront of child protection efforts. Families are the first and primary line of protection for a child—even if they do not label their efforts as child protection. Parents and extended families shield younger children from harm; they teach children good behaviour and how to avoid hazards; and they provide support in handling problems, such as sexual harassment or threats of violence.

As emphasized in the third challenge, the authors do not intend to idealize families. Instead, there is recognition that they are centrally important to both protecting and causing harm to children. While their influence typically diminishes during adolescence, it is generally significant throughout childhood and remains important throughout life. Many programmatic interventions intended to benefit children are mediated through the family and are effective, or not, largely to the extent that they affect the various ways that families act in relation to their children. For this reason, it is even more important to recognize the centrality of the family and its power within the child protection system and ensure that its function, role and responsibilities are not overtaken by the power of specialized services or the State.

Communities are critical parts of a child protection system. They include valuable protection resources, such as natural helpers, customary and religious leaders, teachers, elders, nurses and neighbours, who respond to and prevent harm to children, directly and/or through the family. When a family is unable to resolve a problem, it may look to community mechanisms or religious leaders for guidance or assistance in handling the problem. On a daily basis, it is family and community resources rather than formal services that support most children. Indeed, most children grow up without ever interacting with a social worker, psychologist or police officer.

An implication then is that a primary role of local, national and international child protection actors is, in the first instance, to strengthen caring and protective capacities of families and communities. Where family and community are unwilling or unable to take an effective protective role, external actors need to intervene—but with attention to enabling children to benefit from family care. While lip service is often given to the important role of families, these priorities are in practice usually reversed, with formal, external actors typically seen as the focus of child protection, and family and community-level efforts taking a backseat to them.

³³ For most relevant neuroscience evidence, see the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004, 2010 and 2015) and see www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Children's well-being cannot be achieved without appropriate levels of family and community well-being. To protect children, then, it is important to promote the well-being of families and communities in both policy and practice. This often brings us to domains and systems beyond child protection; but this is the context in which a child protection system sits. The interrelationship with other systems and the external environment is as important as the internal functioning of the child protection system. Operationally, this means developing a national system that is centred on strengthening families economically and on improving or supporting parenting capacities to measurably improve children's care and development; regularly counting children in residential facilities, 'on' the street or in harmful child labour; eliminating social exclusion of vulnerable groups; and developing case management systems to enable children who are outside family care to reintegrate into their own or an alternative family.³⁴

EXAMPLE: World Vision works with communities to end child sacrifice in Uganda³⁵

Child sacrifice is one of the most extreme manifestations of violence against children. World Vision Uganda works in a sub-county of about 139,000 people, where the highest rate of child sacrifice in the country had been recorded. In these communities, traditional healers would sacrifice and mutilate children. Their body parts were used in rituals in an effort to secure spiritual power for increased wealth, good luck in business, healing, etc.³⁶ Until recently, child sacrifice was terrorizing these communities, with numerous incidents of child abduction and murder per month. World Vision, which had prioritized child protection in its strategy, realized that not only was child sacrifice destroying the lives of directly affected children and their families, it had caused a climate of fear that resulted in families keeping children out of school and locked in homes, thereby undermining the future of children across the affected districts.

World Vision worked with communities to develop contextually appropriate and effective ways to combat such practices. After extensive consultation, the community decided to adapt positive traditional and cultural methods to work to end child sacrifice. At the same time, they wanted also to transform harmful cultural beliefs and attitudes and strengthen the capacity of local actors to stop child sacrifice. World Vision has since gone on to apply insights from this process to influence national policy so that the broader child protection system reflects lessons from this community engagement. The following describes some of the strategies that the communities and families developed that integrated the three system characteristics outlined previously (interrelationships, boundaries, perspectives).

Localized Amber Alert system: Rather than working through an externally imposed blueprint of child protection structures and procedures, World Vision engaged communities in a reflective process that drew from good practices in other contexts. The process remained fundamentally focused on local perspectives, relationships and assets that made sense and was feasible to the local populations. World Vision worked with community members, children, government staff and community leaders to develop a localized version of the Amber Alert.³⁷ This localized warning system uses traditional means (including tribal drumming) to mobilize the entire community in the event of a suspected child abduction. When anyone notices a child is missing, they grab whatever they can find (two sticks, a pot and spoon, a bucket and rock, etc.) to beat out a specific alert rhythm

³⁴ An example of this is the United States government Action Plan on Children in Adversity, in which agencies are collaborating with host governments, national and local actors in six countries to develop and strengthen such approaches and measure the outcomes. See www.usaid.gov/children-in-adversity.

³⁵ World Vision Uganda, 2015.

³⁶ Fellows, 2013; Bukuluki, 2010.

³⁷ The US-based Amber Alert system utilizes radio, SMS text messages, television and other means to mobilize entire states to look for an abducted child. The Amber alert system was named in honor of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was abducted while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas and was later found murdered. See www.amberalert.gov/.

and start a traditional shout (or ululation) for help. Everyone who hears it takes up the same call and rhythm. Child protection committee members start beating on large traditional drums commonly known as *gwanga muje*.³⁸ These are traditionally drumming tribes, and now drums have a pivotal part in addressing child sacrifice. The shouting and drumming sets off an early warning response and everyone drops what they are doing and starts looking for the missing child.

For wider coverage, alert messages are relayed through megaphones erected in strategic locations. A network of child protection actors in different villages are alerted, as are the police and radio and television stations. Extending the typical boundaries of a child protection system, motorcycle taxi drivers block all the roads in and out of the village and start searching cars. Through this inspiring contextualized version of what could be called a 'reporting and referral mechanism', dozens of children have been saved from child sacrifice.

Social norms change: In addition, World Vision facilitated community-led conversations about the beliefs and attitudes underlying the practice of child sacrifice, leading to pledges to end the practice. Great effort was made to explore the perspectives and interrelationships related to child sacrifice. Thousands of community members have taken part and made the pledge. World Vision also worked with the Traditional Healers Association to help people understand that there is no basis in the belief that human blood is more powerful than chicken blood in traditional ceremonies—a belief that had led to the dramatic increase in child sacrifice in recent years. World Vision helped the Association to establish a registry, a constitution and a certification process and identity cards for healers who will not perform child sacrifice. They also established a traditional healers' task force, which has led to the arrest of many false traditional healers. Children have also been learning how to protect themselves, raising awareness about child protection issues and reporting cases of abuse through local children's clubs.

Strengthening the local child protection system: The third component worked on strengthening local child protection committees comprising government officials, tribal chiefs, school and health authorities, religious leaders, other non-formal leaders and representatives from child-led structures, like the child parliament. Even though these committees were established through national child protection policies, they often did not effectively engage with many of the hardest issues confronting children. Through this initiative, the committees were strengthened to lead the process of follow-up support to child survivors of sacrifice attempts and to facilitate the legal process against abductors when they are caught. In addition, they work to prevent child sacrifice. For example, they realized that children who are out of school and engaged in child labour in the fishing industry are particularly vulnerable to child sacrifice and other protection issues. They began an initiative to stop child labour and return children to school, resulting in 67 children being re-enrolled in 2015. Through their efforts, there was a 50 per cent increase in reported abuse cases in 2015 and a 67 per cent increase in cases proceeding through the legal system.

Most importantly, no child in this sub-county was killed for child sacrifice in 2015. Residents report that child sacrifice is truly being ended in their communities. The community has become a safer place for all children, with passionate leaders and community members who are now taking on all types of threats to children. At the national level, successful advocacy efforts based on the learning from this project directly contributed to revision of the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2009) to explicitly prohibit child sacrifice. The project also led to the government banning media advertisement by known violent traditional healers and witch doctors, the establishment of an Anti-Human Sacrifice and Trafficking Force under the auspices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and a government commission of inquiry into ritual murder. The Ministry of Gender developed a draft

³⁸ Meaning, 'community come'.

National Plan of Action Against Child Sacrifice, and lessons from the project were incorporated into the development of national guidelines for managing child sacrifice and child trafficking incidents across the country.

The project put communities at the centre of the systems approach to strengthen child protection, building on local perspectives and interrelationships, redefining boundaries of who contributes to child protection, measuring real outcomes for children and utilizing local experience to shape national policy.

EXAMPLE: Community ownership and non-formal–formal collaboration—Combating teen pregnancy in Sierra Leone

As the Inter-Agency Learning Initiative on Strengthening Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Child Protection Systems discovered, there are two critical strategies for making communities central in a systems approach: community ownership and enabling non-formal and formal collaboration. A 2009 global review of community-based child protection mechanisms reported that ownership—defined as the extent to which communities see the work for vulnerable children as their own and take responsibility for it—as the most important determinant of effectiveness and sustainability.³⁹ Many NGO-led efforts, however, only achieve low to moderate levels of community ownership. The same review reported that community-based child protection mechanisms are more effective if they link and collaborate with higher-level actors (at the district or province level, for example) in the formal (government-led) child protection system. Such collaboration can be valuable in, for example, referring difficult cases or enabling ongoing capacity building.

In pre-Ebola Sierra Leone, community-ownership of a child protection effort was enabled by a process of ‘slow facilitation’, coupled with community decision-making and action. Trained facilitators lived in rural communities and asked questions designed to stimulate dialogue among people having different perspectives and enable an inclusive process in which children's voices mattered. Using a mix of open community discussions and small group discussions (among teenage girls), residents for the first nine months discussed which harm to children they wanted to address through a community-driven intervention that included collaboration with actors in the formal child protection system. Using information from ethnographic learning⁴⁰ and from their own experience, they elected to concentrate on teenage pregnancy out of wedlock, which stemmed from a mixture of consensual sex among teenagers and sexual abuse by older men. Having heard of the work by Marie Stopes International, they chose to address teenage pregnancy through a combination of family planning, sexual and reproductive health measures and life skills training. NGOs provided the needed capacity building of community-selected peer educators. The District Medical Office, with support and follow-up by nurses from local health posts, provided contraceptives.

In line with the community implementation plan, teenage boys and girls conducted role plays and group discussions that showed, for example, the negative life outcomes associated with having impromptu, unprotected sex and the good outcomes that young people achieved when they chose to stay in school, took steps to prevent pregnancy, treated each other with respect and built a positive, longer-term relationship. Additionally, parents and children had constructive discussions about puberty, pregnancy and pregnancy prevention. Following 15 months of implementation by the community members, there were promising results of reduced teenage pregnancy, increased use of contraceptives, reductions in school drop-outs and improved relations between villagers and the government health posts.⁴¹

³⁹ Wessells, 2009.

⁴⁰ Wessells, 2011.

⁴¹ Wessells, 2015.

The improved relations between communities and district-level government actors are noteworthy because they provide a potential platform for scaling up community-driven interventions. Also, they have helped to repair the long-standing divide and tensions between rural communities and the government and developed common ground between non-formal and formal approaches. Community-government collaboration on a shared goal is a useful means of setting the stage for the dialogue and problem-solving that contributes to the reconciliation of non-formal and formal approaches.

To succeed and to have a wider impact, reconciliation efforts should take place also at the national level. Local efforts such as this initiative may be useful in creating the political will and space for national initiatives. An enabling environment for this inter-agency collaboration was created by multiple national initiatives. UNICEF and Child Frontiers, for instance, were helping to redefine the child protection system to include greater emphasis on community efforts. And the president of Sierra Leone launched a national initiative to end teenage pregnancy that likely created increased political will for a new, more collaborative approach between the government and communities.

Section 3: Conclusions

Effective approaches to strengthen child protection systems need to concentrate on outcomes for children and utilize a systems approach to promote change, based on adequate attention to function rather than predominantly to structures. The featured examples were chosen to illustrate the challenges and principles proposed in this paper. But these are merely indicative, because practitioners are still learning how best to strengthen child protection. Among ourselves we have had numerous debates regarding the principles emerging from the practice of strengthening child protection and how best to apply them. As offered in the beginning, the intent of this paper is primarily to stimulate reflection, continued dialogue and creative solutions on how best to strengthen child protection.

The following proposed policy implications are presented not as prescriptive recommendations, but as summative points to advocate for policy and planning discussions. Based on the arguments presented in this paper, we ask that donors, planners and implementers concerned with child protection consider the following.

1. Use a contextualized approach to strengthening child protection systems, rather than imposing structures and a prescriptive, blueprint-dominated process. Recognize complexity, local perspectives and worldviews, and build on interconnections of different actors. Work within and with the context rather than considering it fundamentally a limitation to child protection efforts.
2. Begin with the centrality of children, families and communities and work from there rather than starting with prescribed formal elements and then trying to link them to the community.
3. Recognize and respect local perspectives, worldviews and strengths as much as possible when developing solutions for child protection issues. Apply a strengths and well-being perspective to inform and guide the current deficit and pathology orientation to child protection.
4. Consistently, clearly and effectively measure the ultimate success of child protection system efforts at the level of child outcomes.

Postscript: Current trends and implications for action on violence against children

A final note is included here on current efforts within the child protection sector and the support of the violence-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Experts and practitioners are increasingly placing emphasis on the belief that violence against children can be ended and that there are solutions—rather than always focusing on the prevalence, intransigence and complexities of child protection issues. This, like the earlier shift towards systems, is potentially a useful change in the discourse and can lead to exciting efforts in the child protection sector.

To shift the discourse away from problems and towards solutions, UNICEF launched *Ending Violence Against Children: Six Strategies for Action*⁴² in 2014 to help support the achievement of the SDG goals. In addition, there has been increasing recognition of the important contributions to preventing violence that can come from the public health sphere. In 2015, the World Health Organization published *Violence Prevention: The Evidence*,⁴³ a series of briefings on prevention and what the evidence says about effective interventions, based on the idea that “despite the fact that violence has always been present, the world does not have to accept it as an inevitable part of the human condition”. The engagement and leadership of actors beyond child protection has brought important new perspectives, multisectoral collaboration and a focus on evidence to the efforts to prevent violence against children.

This emphasis on solutions has culminated in the creation of the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children,⁴⁴ which brings together multiple actors and stakeholders to “deliver the vision of a world where every child grows up free from violence and exploitation” (p. 2). As the strategy document states, “The ... partnership ... [will] begin the process of uniting a global grassroots coalition behind the need to find, invest in and implement solutions that will end violence against children” (p. 24). The search for solutions is instrumental to these efforts, with the recent publication of *INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*⁴⁵ and a ‘solutions summit’ planned for 2017. The expectation is that by proposing solutions that have been proven to work, achieving the SDG goals to end violence is a realistic expectation.

The desire to provide solutions that work to eradicate violence against children is admirable and important. However, there is an inherent, though not inevitable, danger that the pressure to produce solutions rapidly and across contexts could default to importing top-down, implicitly blueprint-driven approaches. To avoid this, all global partnership efforts to end violence against children can recognize the importance and applicability of the principles described in this paper. These hold true for the solutions discourse as well as for related systems efforts. Sufficient attention and effort will have to be made to ensure that implementation of solutions is contextualized, utilizes a systems approach, recognizes children and families as central and measures outcomes at the level of children. The solutions discourse thus can help remedy overly prescriptive systems efforts.

Author biographies

Bill Forbes is the Director of Child Protection for World Vision International, providing leadership to efforts to strengthen prevention and response to abuse, exploitation and neglect of children. Previously, Bill led the World Vision Peace and Justice Program in Cambodia for eight years, with a special focus on trafficking, sexual

⁴² UNICEF, 2014.

⁴³ WHO, 2010.

⁴⁴ See www.end-violence.org/.

⁴⁵ WHO, 2016.

exploitation and abuse of children. He studied International Development at Fuller Theological Seminary and Cornell University.

Alexander Krueger is a founder and co-director of Child Frontiers. Over the past 20 years, he has been involved in child welfare and protection in emergencies and development with a range of international organizations, focusing on children affected by armed conflict and natural disasters. With Child Frontiers, he has worked with governments across West Africa, South-East Asia and the Pacific to establish long-term visions for contextually appropriate and sustainable child and family welfare systems. Alexander's experiences in diverse settings in support of families and children have prompted his interest to further explore and improve child welfare policy and practice in the international setting to arrive at approaches that are meaningful and respectful to the people they are supposed to serve.

Nicole Behnam is currently the Senior Technical Director for the Violence Prevention and Response Unit at the International Rescue Committee. Previously, she served as the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Senior Advisor at the PEPFAR Office of the Global HIV/AIDS Coordinator. Prior to that position she was a Senior Technical Specialist for Child Protection at World Vision. She has worked and lived in places as various as Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Mozambique and Afghanistan, always focused on programmes responding to violence against children. Nicole has an MA degree in German literature from Harvard University, an MA in international development and economics from Johns Hopkins and a PhD in education from the University of Pennsylvania.

Philip Cook is the founder and current Executive Director of the International Institute for Child Rights and Development and Faculty at Royal Roads University, Canada. He has been involved in children's rights and child protection for more than 25 years, partnering with diverse governments, UN agencies and civil society organizations, including child-led organizations. IICRD promotes a 'bottom-up' approach to child protection systems strengthening that leads with children, their families and communities in various cultural and situational contexts. Philip is a self-described research-practitioner, and his publications, lectures and public speaking draw from IICRD's rich experience of working with many child protection practitioners, children, families and communities on issues of human adversity, human resilience and human well-being.

Mike Wessells is a long-time psychosocial and child protection practitioner and also a researcher on community-driven approaches to child protection. He is also a professor in the Program on Forced Migration and Health at Columbia University.

John Williamson is a specialist in programmes for especially vulnerable children, particularly those without adequate family care. He is one of the organizers of the Better Care Network and the Washington Network for Children and Armed Conflict and has written or collaborated on publications on alternative care, child soldiers, children affected by AIDS and psychosocial issues among conflict-affected populations.

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