Promoting learning on reintegration of children into family-based care: implications for monitoring approaches and tools. Experiences from the RISE learning network

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ABSTRACT

Between 2015 and 2018, the RISE Learning Network facilitated learning on approaches, practices, methods, and tools that promote recovery and reintegration of children affected by sexual exploitation. Spanning three regions (Sub-Saharan Africa, South Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean), the RISE Learning Network implemented two learning projects. The first project focused on monitoring (M&E Learning Project) and aimed to generate understanding of approaches and tools that could effectively monitor children and families' reintegration outcomes. The specific purpose of RISE is to promote learning on reintegration of children affected by sexual exploitation; however, the remit of this Learning Project was to generate evidence on the reintegration of children who have been separated from their families for a range of reasons. This is to ensure that learning from different, but often related, areas of work can be included and compared to strengthen understanding of what successful reintegration of children could look like. The mid- and end-term reviews of the M&E Learning Project have captured lessons learned on how practitioners can approach monitoring of reintegration to mainstream it into their programme cycle. Key lessons learned include the importance of focusing on monitoring outcomes through participatory tools and the benefit of flexible, peer-to-peer learning approaches between practitioners using a variety of monitoring tools. This learning contributes to the nascent evidence base on what effective and efficient capturing of reintegration outcomes on children can look like, in addition to strengthening understanding of what successful reintegration for children and families means. The learnings can inform programming; monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks; and other interventions around reintegration to ensure the holistic wellbeing of children and families.

Introduction

The context

Article 39 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), along with other international and regional instruments, outline the duty of States to 'promote'

recovery and reintegration for children affected by violence, exploitation, and neglect. Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in the reintegration of children who have become separated from their families. The Guidelines on Children's Reintegration define reintegration as 'the process of a separated child making what is anticipated to be a permanent transition back to his or her family and community (usually of origin), in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging and purpose in all spheres of life.' (Inter-Agency Group on Children's Reintegration, 2016: Page, p. 1).

A number of research projects, consultations and initiatives have been developed with the aim of better understanding children's experiences of reintegration and developing guidelines for practice (Asquith & Turner, 2008; Inter-Agency Group on Children's Reintegration, 2016; US Government International Assistance for Children in Adversity, 2011; Wedge, 2013). Research with children affected by, or associated with, armed conflict has produced the most evidence in regard to the impact of reintegration programmes on children (Betancourt et al., 2008, 2010; Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, 2006; Burman & McKay, 2007; Jordans et al., 2012: McKay, Veale, Worthern, & Wessells, 2010). These studies on children affected by, or associated with, armed conflict highlight how reintegration programmes which support children individually and build community acceptance can lead to children gaining confidence, skills and a positive outlook as they progress in their reintegration journey, allowing them to carve out positive futures (Cody, 2017). Yet understanding children's experience of reintegration within other groups of children, such as those from the streets, involved in trafficking or from residential care, remains challenging. Reintegration is not a short-term process that starts and ends with the child being placed (back) in their home. Often, once children return home or integrate into a new family, they lose contact with the organisation(s) that may have provided them with support or services. Despite the responsibility of the State in promoting reintegration, in reality, in most settings, it is non-governmental organisations, including faith-based organisations, that provide the majority of support for children outside of parental care. Yet in a context of limited resources and high caseloads, these same organisations are challenged to take on the role of monitoring children's holistic wellbeing once they have been reunified and the child or family stops receiving the organisation's support.

In 2013, a survey was undertaken with 51 professionals based in 21 counties who had experience of working on reunification programmes with children affected by adversity. The key challenges identified by this group in terms of M&E of outcomes for children were the short-term project cycles; the fact that children move on, which makes it hard to follow up; the difficulty in developing measurable qualitative indicators that capture children's holistic wellbeing; the lack of resources and training to plan and carry out M&E activities; the complexity of reintegration programmes and the difficulty in determining what 'success' looks like (Cody, 2013). These findings were confirmed by the RISE Learning Network's scoping, undertaken in 2015, which further identified the lack of children's involvement in M&E, and the focus on the individual child, and not on the child's broader family environment, as key challenges to understanding reintegration outcomes (RISE Scoping Report, 2015).

As reintegration is a holistic long-term process it cannot be measured with one indicator. Some organisations fall into the trap of reporting that they have 'reintegrated' a certain number of children, when in fact they may have simply reunified those children

with family members. Understanding reintegration requires a thorough understanding of the child's and family's holistic wellbeing. This involves understanding the different areas of children's development and needs (i.e. social, cognitive, emotional, and physical) (URBIS, 2011). It involves understanding reintegrated boys' and girls' experiences, engagement and integration within the family and community, and whether they are discriminated against when accessing education, healthcare, protection services or employment. It requires understanding of children's trauma that led them to be separated from their family, their current degree of resilience and sense of self-worth, and how, together with age and gender, these influence children's ability to form and sustain positive and healthy relationships with family and community members upon reintegration.

Out of recognition that stable and secure family environments translate to better and sustained outcomes for children (Anda, Butchart, Felitti, & Brown, 2010; Sherr, Roberts, & Gandhi, 2017; Woodhead, 2006), there has been increased investment in reforming childcare systems that promote deinstitutionalisation and strengthen and expand family-based alternatives (Better Care Network and UNICEF, 2015; Newton, 2017). Although we are beginning to build a picture of what children, who have accessed support prior to and during the reintegration process, feel is important to them (Cody, 2017; Veitch, 2013), our understanding of what 'successful reintegration' looks like is based on limited evidence (Wedge, 2013). The RISE Learning Network aims to contribute to these discussions.

The RISE learning network and the M&E of reintegration toolkit

From 2015 to 2018, Family for Every Child, Retrak and the International Centre: Researching Child Sexual Exploitation, Violence and Trafficking at the University of Bedfordshire, jointly implemented the RISE Learning Network. Owing to the complexity of M&E of reintegration (Corcoran & Wakia, 2016; Wedge, 2013), and the limited capacity of many organisations seeking to carry it out, the RISE Monitoring and Evaluation of Reintegration Toolkit (hereafter Toolkit) has been developed to provide ideas, examples, and suggestions of how organisations could collect data with, from and about the children and adolescents they work with.[1]

The Toolkit was developed to offer a wide range of tools and indicators, needed to provide relatively simple ways of capturing data on children's holistic wellbeing. The Toolkit recognises that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to M&E and provides guidance on what could be measured to assess reintegration outcomes, and how this information could be collected. Eight areas are included to raise awareness on the various elements that influence whether reintegration is successful: basic needs, shelter, and protection; legal support; health care; psychosocial support; education; economic strengthening; family strengthening; community sensitisation. For each of these areas, objectives, outputs, outcomes, and selected indicators are presented, along with examples of methods, 'how to' guides explaining specific methods in more details, tips on various issues or approaches, and a list of key resources.

The RISE Learning Network facilitated a Learning Project focused on piloting the Toolkit in three regions: Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and South and Central Asia (SCA). The aim of this Learning Project was to

identify and consolidate learning from practitioners on approaches that facilitate monitoring of reintegration, particularly with respect to generating understanding of the outcomes of reintegration on children and families.

Methods

RISE created an opportunity for practitioners to pilot the tools presented in the Toolkit and to identify whether they were effective to capture reintegration outcomes in a way that could influence implementation. It was also an opportunity to generate dialogue, understanding, and commitment to the value of capturing and using this type of data. Communities of Learning (CoL) with interested learning partners were created in the three regions and facilitated by the RISE regional coordinators; twelve partners participated from SSA, six from SCA, and six from LAC.[2] The learning partners provide a broad range of recovery and reintegration services,[3] and targeted children and young persons between the age of 7 and 25 years who have been separated from their families and communities as a result of sexual exploitation and trafficking, forced labour, street-associated living conditions, and various other forms of abuse, violence and neglect. The children and young people that were being supported by the learning partners were located in a range of settings, including in vulnerable family and street-living contexts, transitional housing/rehabilitation programmes (e.g. shelters, residential programme facilities, and drop-in centers), foster care and other family-based placements, child rights clubs in schools, and community-based structures. These organisations were represented in the learning project mostly by senior programme managers or M&E officers. In the case of learning partners where both the senior programme manager and M&E officer participated, differing approaches of these roles to generating learning and conducting M&E was noted as a challenge to identifying why and how the learning partner would participate in the M&E Learning Project. This highlights the need to have regular conversations within organisations to generate a common understanding of how to approach and mainstream reintegration into programming and monitoring efforts to ensure positive outcomes for children and families.

Children were not interviewed or directly involved in the learning project, as it fell outside the project's scope. While the impact of the learning project is expected to benefit the children the learning partners work with, the focus of the learning project was on strengthening practices by practitioners to support children in their reintegration.[4]

Each of the regional CoLs identified what tools they would pilot based on organisational mandates, capacities, and interests, as well as the contexts wherein they operate. In addition, members of the CoLs committed to sharing their learning through mid- and end-term reports and participation in periodic topic-based webinars, online meetings, and peer-to-peer learning sessions. Peer-to-peer learning sessions utilised a combination of peer mentoring and peer exchange approaches, and were facilitated among learning partners who were adopting an existing tool/approach and/or those who were already using the tool.[5] Recognising that engagement in the CoL was voluntary, and not linked to any financial support, organisations across the three CoL were clear from the outset that their involvement would be dependent on the amount of space, flexibility and technical support given by RISE, and their existing workload.

The CoL in the SSA and SCA regions started the piloting in October 2016; the LAC region in August 2017. Mid- and end-term questionnaires were developed by the coordination team of the M&E Learning Project and disseminated to all the CoL members. The questionnaires gave space for members to annotate the process and results of piloting the tools, and how these have impacted on their understanding and approach to M&E of reintegration. A total of 22 (91%) mid-term open-ended questionnaires in the 3 regions and 14 (88%) end-term open-ended questionnaires in the SSA and SCA regions were returned via email to the RISE Regional Coordinators.[6] The questionnaires were designed with the expectation that they would take between 30 and 40 minutes to fill in. In some cases, the questionnaires were either preceded or followed by an online discussion with the same members of approximately 1 hour, based on the questionnaire, which were facilitated and coordinated by the RISE Regional Coordinators. Notes from these discussions were taken by a member of the coordination team. The responses to the questionnaires, along with notes from the online discussions, were reviewed by one of the Regional Coordinators who highlighted common themes from the data, which were then reviewed by the rest of the coordination team. Findings from the regional consultations and findings from the regional consultations with learning partners in the three regions prior to the implementation of the learning project informed the development of general codes. Each Regional Coordinator used these codes to then, through inductive reasoning, further populate the codes based on the questionnaire results and discussions from their region; this approach allowed for cultural and contextual nuance of the findings. The Project Coordinator and M&E Advisor acted as a Delphi panel during the analysis of the mid-term questionnaires, and the Project Coordinator provided peer review of the end-term report. The results of these mid- and end-term reviews inform the findings of this article.

The consolidation and analysis of experience from practitioners provides significant insights on innovative examples and lessons learned for monitoring reintegration, especially in low resources settings, which are key to refining the Toolkit. However, it is recognised that this analysis alone is not a rigorous piece of research. It would also have been ideal to hear from children themselves to verify the validity of the monitoring tools which piloted, however, this was not possible within the resources available for this learning project. Nonetheless, the lessons learned, including the process of identifying that learning, remain an important contribution to those operating beyond the RISE Learning Network, especially as care reform initiatives are increasingly taking root across the globe.

Results

Process to generate learning

Learning was most effectively generated by organisations who were able to apply monitoring approaches in a flexible manner (i.e. without the confines of strict timeframes, donor agendas, and rigid reporting structures that do not align with the organisations' own processes). Moving at their own pace allowed organisations the opportunity to self-reflect, learn and accordingly adapt, which was noted as beneficial in strengthening organisational understanding and commitment to monitoring and reintegration as

processes, rather than as one-off activities. It further strengthened a participatory approach, with children and families, to jointly undertake monitoring, and reinforced the importance of working 'with' rather than 'for' children. A learning partner from India observed: *'while designing the reintegration programme we should have a discussion with children for whom we are planning the reintegration. It is important to understand how they want to be reintegrated and what their understanding of reintegration is.'*

In the absence of any costs to fund participation in the CoL and in line with the participatory nature of the RISE Learning Network, peer-to-peer learning was identified to be the most effective way for learning partners to be actively involved and motivated throughout the CoLs. Through this process learning partners have grown in terms of understanding and capacity to monitor outcomes of reintegration as experienced by children, from initially having focused on monitoring quantitative programme outputs, activities or services provided. This shift in thinking has encouraged learning partners to put children and families at the centre of the M&E process, as well as ensure that monitoring is continuous throughout the life of the reintegration intervention. As a learning partner from Uganda observed: '*We initially used to focus on quantitative data like tracking the number of children identified for reintegration, those successfully reintegrated, and those being retained in their families after reintegration. Now we know about the qualitative monitoring perspective, which is vital for any monitoring process for reintegration … the process showed us the significance of closely following up on children reintegrated.*' A learning partner in India further noted '*successful reintegration is where the entire family all knows, feels, acknowledges and avails support throughout the reintegration phases.*' A learning partner in Nepal similarly noted that '*successful reintegration is when one person will be identified as an individual and shall be widely accepted by society; they will not be seen as victims of violence.*' In addition, a learning partner from Zambia noted the importance of not just understanding but also operationalising successful reintegration, in terms of measuring children's wellbeing before, during and after reintegration: '*There is a need to track the progress of the child continuously during the recovery and reintegration process. It should cover all aspects of the child's wellbeing, including emotional and spiritual wellbeing while we are monitoring reintegration.*'

The pragmatic nature of the RISE Toolkit, together with the bottom-up and flexible approach to piloting its methods, was noted by participating organisations as crucial for cross learning, innovation, and creativity. Participants noted that cross-learning, especially with peers, is an effective way to inform and enrich programming, but they highlighted that this does not often happen due to organisations' heavy workloads, and the lack of a person or organisation available to initiate and sustain cross-learning. RISE Regional Coordinators were able to facilitate opportunities for cross-learning through linking, facilitating and following-up on initial discussions between organisations with similar interests and challenges. The recognition that there are 'others like me out there' enabled frank exchanges of organisational approaches and discussions as to what the key gaps in M&E of reintegration are, and enabled thinking as to how organisational monitoring approaches and tools should accordingly be strengthened to monitor reintegration outcomes. The peer-to-peer learning process generated awareness across regions that M&E approaches should better monitor reintegration outcomes (i.e. changes in the lives of children and families) and not just on programme outputs or activities. A learning partner in Kenya shared: '*We are investing more in having meetings with*

family members during rehabilitation and explaining the case management process so that they can clearly understand their role and the importance of us working together … We have learned that using the institutions established in a community to protect children after reintegration is crucial. The different institutions also hold the family accountable so that when one person fails, there is another person to remind them of the goal.'

Learning about M&E tools that aim to capture reintegration outcomes

Learning has also been generated relating to specific tools that can monitor children's and families' wellbeing upon reintegration. While household's income level is important to indicate whether children's basic needs (such as clothing, protective shelter, nutritious food) are being met, using tools to measure psychosocial wellbeing underscores the need to measure and understand children's wellbeing more holistically. Amongst the SSA CoL, 58 per cent and 40 per cent of learning partners chose to focus on piloting tools that measure psychosocial and economic wellbeing, respectively. In the SCA CoL, 70 per cent and 15 per cent chose to focus on tools that capture this data, respectively. The findings presented below from the RISE Learning Network are in line with researchers' and policymakers' current focus of jointly addressing household poverty and caregivers' capacity to nurture and care for children as a means to prevent family separation and facilitate the successful reintegration of children into family-based care (Chaffin, Kalyanpur, & Noman, 2014; Cluver et al., 2014; Daly et al., 2015; Laumann, 2015).

For example, the Grain Pot tool[7], using the image of a familiar household item, can be used to track and manage household finances, including for households with reintegrated children (RISE M&E of Reintegration Toolkit, 2016, p. 70). The tool was being used by learning partners in Nepal, Ghana, and Uganda. Through the use of this tool, learning partners were able to show that beneficiaries progressively improved in their understanding and management of finances, due to better tracking of expenditures and savings. In addition, beneficiaries had greater understanding of their rate of savings, and how this could be increased or reinvested to expand household incomes. It was also useful in better understanding of household sources of income, and how to diversify these in order to maximize opportunities and better support households. As a result, they became better positioned to financially support their households and address their families' needs, including those of reintegrated children. As one learning partner summed up: *'the tool has influenced the re-design of our monitoring efforts in our micro-grants programme … our micro-grants beneficiaries can save money to expand their seed capital to better cater for reintegrated children.'*

Learning partners in Kenya and Zambia piloted the use of diaries to track the emotional wellbeing of children and to assess the results of psychosocial support (PSS) and other interventions prior to and after reunification (RISE M&E of Reintegration Toolkit, 2016, p. 83). The children were provided with personal diaries and asked to record their social and emotional progress, which was used to identify and track the recovery progress and ascertain the level of preparedness for reunification (Kenya case) as well as level of adjustment within family and community settings post-reunification (Zambia case). The Kenyan learning partner used the diaries in Nairobi to assess the impact of psychosocial support and shelter services on 13 girls affected by trafficking, with the aim of strengthening their resiliency before their return to their families and

communities. The learning partner noted that '*to achieve our objectives we knew that we needed to ensure the diaries were introduced in a way that would interest the children. We chose to introduce it through a storytelling workshop conducted by a poet and author …* *this was fruitful in getting a better understanding of how the girls see themselves* The learning partner in Zambia piloted the tool with 25 children in three schools in Lusaka. Both learning partners noted that the use of diaries created a medium for children to freely express their thoughts, fears, and goals; seeking children's inputs in this regard allowed children to feel safe and respected, and allowed them to participate more proactively in their reunification process. In addition, through reviewing the diaries, both learning partners were able to better assess and improve the quality of their PSS interventions, resulting in more targeted and personalised support through general and/ or trauma counselling during the reunification process.

The learning partners in the LAC CoL run shelters and homes for children affected by trafficking and sexual exploitation among other forms of abuse and exploitation and identified the need to understand children's experiences and perceptions of the services they offer in order to ensure the reintegration process included the voice of children. Learning partners piloted the use of a suggestion box, where children were able to share experiences, complaints, and suggestions; these allowed staff to give children a voice, listen to them, and engage with them in a participatory rather than directive manner. For example, in a shelter in Paraguay, this resulted in staff being trained on safeguarding dos and don'ts, in Costa Rica it led to more time for recreational activities for children, in Bolivia, it led to girls being able to choose their own roommates, which decreased the level of peer-to-peer bullying. As one LAC Learning Partner noted, '*when we started opening the [suggestion] boxes, we also had to work on our capacity as adults running the shelter, to receive criticism. Now we listen to each other and to the children.*'

Conclusion

The aim of this RISE M&E Learning Project was to contribute to the understanding of what successful reintegration of children into family-based care means, and to try out and generate awareness of various methods that can monitor the outcomes of reintegration on children's wellbeing. This learning is an important contribution to current care reform efforts for which there is a need to agree on sets of monitoring indicators and methods and evaluation approaches, and to provide training to staff who will roll these out. The learning and case studies from RISE have informed the refinement of the Toolkit, which can be used to inform and guide the monitoring of reintegration of children who have been separated from families as a result of violence, exploitation or neglect in the home; HIV and AIDS and other epidemics; political instability, food insecurity and natural disasters. The Toolkit promotes participatory monitoring tools that capture children's and families' views on the support they receive and how this impacts their wellbeing, including emotional wellbeing, and their financial skills and security throughout the process of reintegration, and not just at the point of reunification. Focusing on outcomes and the process of reintegration is important to strengthen understanding of what successful reintegration looks like, from children's and families' viewpoints, and how this can be best supported. The RISE M&E Learning Project has also demonstrated the value of a peer-to-peer, reflective and flexible learning process which

creates space to change organisations' mindsets towards monitoring of reintegration, to reflect on what the results tell them and to accordingly adapt the way services and support are offered. Further work is still needed to promote these messages around effective monitoring of reintegration, as well as to build confidence and capacity within agencies supporting children and families in this way. Efforts should also be made to build from these practitioner insights to undertake robust evaluations and research of reintegration to provide a firm foundation for future interventions.

Notes

1. The Toolkit was compiled and written by Claire Cody in 2013 as part of Home: The Child Recovery and Reintegration Network, hosted by the UHI Centre for Rural Childhood, Perth College. The Toolkit was edited and updated by Joanna Wakia in 2016 as part of the RISE Learning Network, after which it was further refined based on experiences and lessons learned coming from RISE M&E Learning Project.
2. However, a total of three partners from the SSA and SCA regions dropped out due to staff turnover or change of leadership for the project.
3. Such as family tracing and reunification, livelihood and grants support, psychosocial assistance, medical care, life skills training, legal aid, shelter care, formal/informal education placement, and community outreach.
4. The voices of children and young people to recommend improving reintegration was covered through another RISE Learning Project, which involved rigorous and ethical research engaging young people affected by and reintegrated from child sexual exploitation.
5. Learning partners piloting a tool already being used by other partners within the CoL were mentored by those with the relevant experience. There were also situations where learning partners using a tool for the first time would connect with and learn from others who were also using the tool for the first time; they either connected in one-on-one meetings or during online progress meeting.
6. The LAC end term review is yet to be completed.
7. Self Employed Women's Association and the Coady *International Institute. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: A Manual for Village Organizers*.Coady International Institute.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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