EVIDENCE TO ACTION: THE CHILDREN' S CARE RESEARCH INITIATIVE (CCRI)

Introduction

As child protection and family welfare become increasingly central to the global community of policymakers and practitioners seeking to encourage an optimal care environment for children's development and well-being , key learning gaps remain concerning the best ways to support children who are without adequate parental or family care or who are at risk of becoming so. In an effort to strengthen the evidence base around the best ways to improve care for children and to reinforce global capacity to utilize this evidence, the **Better Care Network, the Child Protection in Crisis Learning Network and the Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (CP MERG)** are initiating the **Children's Care Research Initiative** and are reaching out to other leading organizations in this field to participate in this inter-agency coalition.

The CCRI is **an interagency research initiative** that seeks to build the evidence to inform policy and practice around children's care. It aims to improve statistical and qualitative information about care for children in its various dimensions: the various forms of care arrangements for children, the causes and consequences of deprivation of adequate parental or family care, and the most effective policy approaches for improving children's care in their families or in alternative family-based care environments. The initiative also recognises the strong links between children's care and other related issues that directly and indirectly impact the capacity of parents, families, and other caregivers to ensure appropriate care for their children, including chronic poverty, migration, child labour, lack of access to education, disability, intra-familial violence, the impact of conflict, natural disasters and diseases, social exclusion and discrimination.

The Need for this Initiative

In recent years, a number of important steps have been taken to help reform child care systems around the world. In 2009, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*. Designed to enhance the implementation of the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding children's care, these guidelines reinforce the right of children to grow up in their families or an alternative family-based environment and not to be placed in alternative care unnecessarily. Even more recently in March 2013, an international group of child care experts launched *Moving Forward: Implementing the Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children*, a resource designed to provide practical guidance on the translation of the *Guidelines* into national policy.

Reforms of alternative care systems for children deprived of parental care are ongoing in virtually all regions of the globe with a particular focus on "de-institutionalizing" these systems, moving away from the use of residential care, particularly large-scale institutions, and putting in place a range of family-based alternative care options for children through the child's own extended family with kinship care or alternative family care options such as foster care and adoption.

Such reforms are key for the implementation of the guidelines at the national level, but the wide-ranging gaps in current understanding and knowledge related to trends and patterns in children's care and the provision of alternative care in both formal and informal settings make it difficult to know what programs and approaches will be most effective in realizing these ideals. For example, there is no systematic assessment of the numbers of children deprived of parental care across countries or of the number of children who are at risk of such separation. Although it is known that the vast majority of children not living with their parents are in extended family care, there is remarkably little data about these care arrangements and how best to strengthen them to ensure positive care outcomes for children. Moreover, there is no cohesive data on the various programs that are attempting to reform child care in different countries or solid understanding of "what works" when it comes to carrying out this work . The lack of such knowledge and learning makes it extremely difficult for individual countries or international development experts to support strategic child care reform.

The Society for Research in Child Development's so-called Leiden Monograph, which sought to synthesize current learning concerning care for children without permanent parental care in 2011, indicated that there remain "some fundamental issues of research, practice, and policy that are largely unsettled or controversial."[1] While acknowledging that research pertaining to children without adequate parental care "represents an exceedingly tough scholarly nut to crack…, especially true in the study of children subjected to early adversity, primarily institutionalization," it concludes that the thorny research questions that remain could be answered through additional political will and the mobilization of resources to answer these questions. More recently, the US government hosted an evidence summit to collate the state of the evidence on children outside of family care, an initiative that collated and reviewed learning across four thematic areas and which directly informed the development of the US government's national action plan on children in adversity in which preventing child-family separation features prominently.[2] The evidence summit concluded: "Given the weaknesses in the research base identified by the review…, it is encouraging to see the recognition of improvement in the research base identified as a crucial component of the Action Plan."

The Approach

The Children's Care Research Initiative builds on the knowledge and technical expertise provided by its members and acts as a platform for research cooperation, policy dialogue, partnership building and knowledge exchange on children's care issues, child protection and family welfare more broadly.

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[1] McCall, Robert B. "IX. Research, Practice, and Policy Perspectives on Issues of Children Without Permanent Parental Care."

[2] *Child Abuse and Neglect*. Volume 36, Issue 10, Pages 685-752 (October 2012). Findings from the U.S. Government Evidence Summit on Children Outside of Family Care.

Through their networks, members of the initiative will bring together critical stakeholders at the global and national levels to advance research, policy, and practice to support children deprived—or at risk of being deprived—of adequate family care. The CCRI is framed by the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children**, which laid out the priorities for the international community in ensuring that children are able to grow up and receive appropriate care within their families or appropriate alternative family based environment.

The fragmentation of learning about children's care both thematically and geographically has hindered the development of a comprehensive and coherent body of evidence about the factors that undermine or strengthen families' capacity to care for their children and what constitute effective and appropriate options for children in need alternative care. To overcome this obstacle, the CCRI will develop the research framework and relevant methodologies to support the development of a comprehensive body of knowledge about children at risk of unnecessary separation from their families or living in alternative care settings.

The Children's Care Research Initiative will deliver on **five key components**:

1) **Framing and measuring the problem** of children at risk of family separation or in formal and informal care.

2) **Research to inform policy** based on a body of evidence on the factors that undermine or strengthen the capacity of families to care appropriately for their children, the links with other major vulnerability factors and the impact of different care situations on well-being outcomes for children.

3) **Measuring the impact of interventions** to strengthen family-based care and ensure the most appropriate and effective alternative care arrangements for children in need of out of home care, including strategies and interventions to deinstitutionalize care and protection systems and ensure the availability of a continuum of care options.

4) **Building country level research capacity** to undertake policy oriented research about children at risk of family separation or in formal and informal care, and to design and implement appropriate policies and programs, including by establishing effective monitoring and regulatory systems.

5) **Knowledge sharing and advocacy** through research dissemination with a range of key stakeholders nationally and internationally to promote discussion and replication of good practices, and the development of a growing body of evidence that can be integrated into policies and strategies.

Framing and measuring the problem

1.1 Indicators and standards
Promoting a 'common language' for measurement of children at risk of family separation and in formal and informal care.

1.2 Research tools and methods.
- Developing valid, reliable methodologies and tools--both quantitative and qualitative--for assessing children's situations in different care settings, including formal and informal care.
- Developing quality research methods and tools by which children and young people in care can inform policies that affect them.

1.3 Statistics on children and care
Determining a commonly agreed core set of indicators on children's care that can map magnitude, scope and trend information over time.

Research to inform policy

2.1 Risks and Protective factors
- Understanding the 'push and pull' factors that result in children's separation from their families, inc. placement in residential care
- Assessing vulnerability and resilience factors in family decisions concerning children's care.

2.2 Outcomes and trajectories
- Assessing interplay between care and education, protection (abuse, neglect, and exploitation), family structures and access to social services
- Understanding well-being outcomes for children in various care situations over time.

2.3 Policy Options
- Identifying policy approaches for strengthening family care and preventing unnecessary separation, abandonment and placement out-of-home
- Performing cost-effectiveness studies of policy options to ensure appropriate and effective use of resources

Measuring Impact

3.1 Strengthening family care
- Reviewing and building the evidence about what interventions work to strengthen family-based care and prevent unnecessary separation
- Understanding extended family care (formal and informal) and interventions to strengthen it.

3.2 Alternative care
Learning from different models of formal and informal alternative care, including foster care, kafala, adoption, guardianship and other care arrangements for children who cannot be in their families

3.3 Transforming residential care
Identifying and reviewing strategies and interventions to effectively deinstitutionalize care and protection systems, including models and costing.

Building country level research capacity

4.1 Country-level research cooperation
- Collaborating with national counterparts to improve information about children at risk of separation or in alternative care (formal and informal)
- Improving national capacity in undertaking policy-oriented research and outcome evaluations

4.2 Designing and implementing better policies
- Supporting policymakers' ability to use research to design better policies
- Collaborating with policymakers and practitioners to implement updated policies

4.3 Effective oversight systems
Strengthening monitoring and regulatory systems using good practice in data management, gatekeeping, registration and licencing for children in formal care

Knowledge sharing and advocacy

5.1 Dissemination with partner agencies and key stakeholders
Promoting discussion and advocacy for replication of learning and integration of learning into policies and strategies of key stakeholders

5.2 Dissemination beyond the partner agencies and stakeholders
Providing access to the research outputs to a broader audience through in-country and international knowledge platforms (e.g., the Better Care Network website)

5.3 Advocacy for evidence-based practice on children's care
Fostering policy dialogue on evidence-based practice at national and global levels with key international agencies (UN , Donors, IGOS and NGOs, Governments and Academia)

The CCRI will base its learning **at the country level in a selected number of countries across regions**, representative of a range of socio-economic, cultural and governance contexts, and susceptibility to man-made or natural emergencies. Drawing upon the learning emerging from these countries, it will seek to consolidate knowledge both regionally and internationally about the factors that undermine or strengthen families' capacity to care for their children and that affect the provision of appropriate alternative care. Capacity-building efforts will include two strands:

1. Strengthening of research capacity of relevant stakeholders in participation countries, such as statistics agencies, academia, research institutes and others to measure and evaluate questions around children's care, both statistically and qualitatively; and
2. Supporting governmental and civil society actors to design and implement evidence-based policies and programs to strengthen families and to provide appropriate alternative care.

The CCRI will enable cross-country, regional, and international comparisons, providing analyses that draw linkages with other key sectors with major relevance to ensuring adequate care for children. The final result will be evidence-based policies and programs—built upon improved research capacities and enhanced methodologies—that have been proven to strengthen families, prevent unnecessary family separation, and ensure appropriate alternative care for children.

The **Better Care Network (BCN)** is recognized as the preeminent information hub and global convener to influence action for children without adequate family care. Established in 2003 in recognition of the urgent need for concerted action in this field, BCN is an interagency initiative, which addresses the ongoing need for exchange and collaboration by identifying, distilling, and linking essential information with the people who need it. BCN helps agencies identify relevant expertise and engages in evidence-based advocacy. BCN is also helping to shape a global agenda for targeted research to expand and improve the empirical basis for informed action. Its website holds the largest online collection of key research, tools, events and other documentation on issues related to strengthening family care and alternative care, designed to support academics, policymakers and practitioners alike. Its newsletter reaches over 3,400 network members in 152 countries. BCN operates under the direction of a Steering Committee that includes the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF) and the Office of HIV/AIDS (OHA) of USAID, Family For Every Child, Firelight Foundation, RELAF, Save the Children and UNICEF. The BCN Secretariat includes two full time staff persons who serve as the hub of the network at the global level and a regional specialist heading an Eastern and Southern Africa Initiative. For further information see: www.bettercarenetwork.org

The Child Protection in Crisis Learning Network (CPC Learning Network) is an inter-agency, multi-country initiative that seeks to build the evidence base to strengthen and systematize child care and protection. Established in 2008, the CPC Learning Network has established an international network of multi-disciplinary researchers across the global North and South, who have come together with practitioners and policymakers to develop innovative research methods to better measure child protection and care. Since its inception, the CPC Learning Network has worked in over 30 countries, including six priority countries (Colombia, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia).

The CPC Learning Network's Secretariat, housed within the Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University's School of Public Health, operates under the auspices of a global Steering Committee. The CPC Learning Network also operates through thematic task forces that focus on the following issues: measurement and assessment of child protection and care; livelihoods and economic strengthening; strengthening child protection systems through emergency responses; and engaging Southern universities. For further information see: www.cpcnetwork.org

The Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (CP MERG) is a global forum for collaboration, coordination and shared learning on child protection monitoring, evaluation and research. Established in 2010, CP MERG aims at strengthening the quality of monitoring and evaluation, research and data collection in child protection, through the development of standards, tools and recommendations. The current CP MERG Co-Chairs are Save the Children and World Vision who coordinate and oversee the work of the CP MERG. CP MERG Core Members are drawn from a range of operational organizations. There are currently 15 Core Members who meet annually to decide on the CP MERG work plan and review and endorse CP MERG products. Technical Working Groups (TWG) are convened by the CP MERG to take forward specific activities within its work plan. Each TWG is led by a chair or co-chairs from amongst the member organizations. Finally, a Secretariat housed in the UNICEF Child Protection Section in New York Headquarters administers the CP MERG and houses the knowledge management advisor. For more information, please visit www.cpmerg.org.