Research Paper

Essence and Scope of Strengthening Community-Based Preventive Child Care and Protection Systems in India

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Abstract

This article reflects different programmes and resource components that may be promoted to keep children with either their own family or within alternative family care, satisfying the rights of their overall development. In India, the concept of promoting family-based care mechanisms through government systems has not been fully realised, owing to lack of synergy between resource allocation and existing government programmes, policies and plans of action for child protection. Additionally, the common public discourse is that Child Care Institutions (CCIs) offer suitable care and protection for children outside the parental care. CCIs continue to be identified as the ultimate and the most common response for children at risk. This practice nullifies the scope to explore opportunities for the child to live with their family or in any alternative family care mechanisms. Child in Need Institute (CINI),[1] partnering with Hope and Homes for Children, have analysed the vulnerability factors that led children to arrive at the selected CCIs in Ranchi and Khunti districts of Jharkhand in India. While working with children in the communities, CINI endeavoured to understand the drivers and vulnerabilities leading to family/child separation and what mechanisms could address the vulnerabilities at source and prevent separation. CINI promoted a participatory governance process with the involvement of community-level institutions along with children's and women's groups, incubating safe spaces for children that aided in identifying, tracking and promoting multi-sectoral development plans for children at risk.

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Keywords

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Background

India houses the largest child population in the world that constitutes 39 per cent of the country's population (Chandramouli, 2011). National policies acknowledge that children deserve resource allocation to uphold their rights with a critical focus to ensure their survival, good health, development opportunity, security and dignity. Among the major causal factors behind children facing vulnerabilities are lack of parental care, incidence of death of one or both parents, abandonment, lack of guidance and aspiration or choice for better livelihood opportunities, displacement due to industrialisation or armed conflict, trafficking or unwillingness of the family to provide care. The Constitution of India provides that the state shall direct its policy towards ensuring 'that children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment'.

Low Emphasis on Promoting Community-Based Preventive Mechanisms

Children are subjected to varied challenges and vulnerabilities for their survival, health, nutrition and protection in a diverse country like India (UNICEF, 2016). The National Plan of Action for Children (Ministry of Woman and Child Development, 2016) acknowledges the importance of strengthening communities and families to support children and to ensure their overall survival, well-being, protection and development. In spite of multiple policies, plan of action for children supported by legal provisions to safeguard the best interest of children in India, the fundamental programming to uphold the basic rights of children, especially those in vulnerable circumstances, is yet to be implemented at the community level (UNICEF, 2016). Children outside the family safety net are subjected to increased risks of threats to their well-being, lower educational attainment and poor developmental outcomes. Although it is usually accepted that preventive response mechanisms are crucial for reducing the vulnerability of children who are outside the family safety net, there is a lack of clarity on the most effective preventive response strategy for early identification of the immediate need of the child (Boothby et al., 2012). Existing policies explicitly fail to articulate how to ensure the best interests of the child, establish preventive response mechanisms that will strengthen the

family safety net and provide appropriate care for children who are in vulnerable conditions (Fluke et al., 2012).

Reliance on Institutionalisation

In India, the care system is overwhelmingly reliant on the state and privately supported institutions, with placements into institutional care as the default option for children in these situations. The issue is further compounded by the increased reliance on the institutional-based care and low emphasis on the process of enquiry and due diligence before determining the need of the child to enter institutional care under the Juvenile Justice system. The shortage of reintegration options, alternative care arrangements, prevailing state-level conditions and coordination of child protection mechanisms often compels the child welfare committee to opt for institutionalisation as a first response for children outside the family care and in need of care and protection. Although the negative effects of institutional care are well documented, in the absence of family-based alternative care mechanisms, institutional care will continue to be a default placement option for children. Institutionalisation is not supportive of children's neurological, physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development. It leads to poorer developmental outcomes (Fluke et al., 2012).

Purpose of the Article

The Child In Need Institute (CINI), in partnership with Hope and Homes for Children, has been implementing a project titled 'Strengthening Family-Based Care and Alternative Care System in Jharkhand' since 2017. CINI has selected Ranchi and Khunti—the two districts in Jharkhand—to implement the project. The project has targeted four selected Child Care Institutions (CCIs) for the required support to promote effective restoration and rehabilitation of children in need of care and protection in family-based care, including alternative family care within the given Juvenile Justice framework. There is also a field intervention in ten slums of Ranchi district and twenty villages of one of the interior block (Murhu) in Khunti District to promote community-based preventive programming within the Integrated Child Protection System (ICPS) framework. Based on CINI's experience, the present article examines different interventions or facilitation components to reduce the over-reliance on the institutionalisation as a measure of immediate response to children in need of care and protection. The paradigm shift would mean optimum and effective reallocation of resources towards building community-based preventive systems, incubating the component of family-based alternative care mechanisms.

Programmatic Approach

The vulnerability factors identified by CINI through participatory mechanisms demonstrates that children are found at risk in the community and CCIs in the absence of an enabling environment that promotes their rights and development. CINI's study in the selected CCIs has also revealed the existence of implementation gaps in the gatekeeping and restoration mechanisms as mandated under the Juvenile Justice framework of the country. Under the given backdrop, CINI is implementing a programme in Jharkhand in two selected districts—Ranchi and Khunti. It adopts CINI's core institutional approach to building Child-Friendly Communities. The CINI method is premised on the rights-based programmatic principles of child participation, inter-sectoral convergence, accountability of duty bearers and preventing separation. CINI works together with communities (including children, adolescents, their parents and other community-based institutions), local self-governments, duty bearers and other actors to develop a safety net for children and adolescents to ensure their well-being and prevent them from falling into situations of risk.

Towards Strengthening the Preventive Systems for Child Protection

CINI's programme has two critical focus areas for promoting a robust preventive system within the current policy framework in India.

a. To promote the rights-based preventive programming at community level within the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) framework.

The critical elements for promoting the community based strategies are as follows:

- Creating *safe space for children* with a service package designed for their overall empowerment, promoting sports and entertainment, effective engagement with parents and the larger community, promoting needed life skills, required exposure, skill-building and career planning and linkage with relevant government services. CINI has facilitated to mobilise the community to initiate the safe space for children utilising the existing spaces available in schools/Anganwadi Centres/Panchayat Bhawan, etc., with the permission from the respective authorities.
- CINI facilitates the *capacity development of children, community-level institutions and duty bearers* to identify, prioritise, coordinate and address the identified issues with a strategic focus to promote the required participatory governance and accountability at the local context. The peer-led empowerment processes are followed for reaching out to the children's group. Cascade training approach along with handholding support plan is followed to strengthen the Child Protection Committees at the village/urban context and facilitation is extended for the required convergence

between these community groups, elected representatives and the relevant service providers for addressing the identified issues of the children with their active participation.

- *Vulnerability assessment and local solutions* are generated through these community-based eco-systems. The process was formalised with the Department of Women and Child Development to strengthen the effective functioning of the Village Level Child Protection Committees under the ICPS. Early identification of vulnerabilities by community aids to generate localised solutions and also refer cases to the Block/District Level Child Protection Committees, which require specialised convergent actions. The process also helps in strengthening the linkage mechanism with relevant government services and create a platform for children to raise their concern at appropriate community platforms, including their traditional Gram Sabha (Village Council), that attracts the attention of elders of the village to ensure the needed responses for the identified vulnerable children.

b. To promote the principle of institutionalisation as a measure of last resort, as stipulated by Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, by strengthening the effective gatekeeping and restoration of children at their own family or with alternative care mechanism at community level.
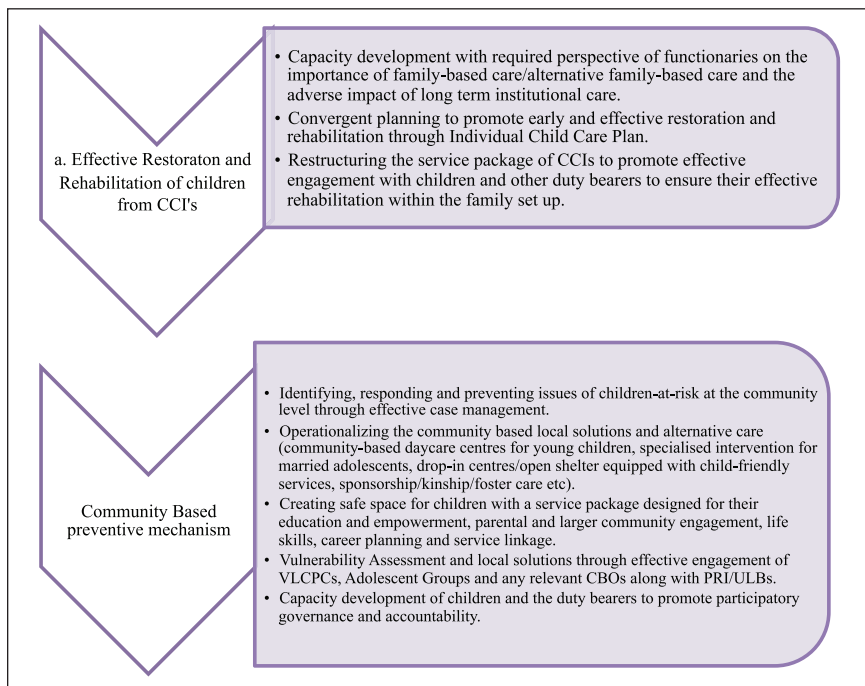

a. Effective Restoraton and Rehabilitation of children from CCI's

- Capacity development with required perspective of functionaries on the importance of family-based care/alternative family-based care and the adverse impact of long term institutional care.
- Convergent planning to promote early and effective restoration and rehabilitation through Individual Child Care Plan.
- Restructuring the service package of CCIs to promote effective engagement with children and other duty bearers to ensure their effective rehabilitation within the family set up.

Community Based preventive mechanism

- Identifying, responding and preventing issues of children-at-risk at the community level through effective case management.
- Operationalizing the community based local solutions and alternative care (community-based daycare centres for young children, specialised intervention for married adolescents, drop-in centres/open shelter equipped with child-friendly services, sponsorship/kinship/foster care etc).
- Creating safe space for children with a service package designed for their education and empowerment, parental and larger community engagement, life skills, career planning and service linkage.
- Vulnerability Assessment and local solutions through effective engagement of VLCPCs, Adolescent Groups and any relevant CBOs along with PRI/ULBs.
- Capacity development of children and the duty bearers to promote participatory governance and accountability.

Figure 1. Towards Strengthening the Preventive Systems for child Protection

Source: The Authors.

The critical elements for promoting this strategy are as follows:

- *Technical support is provided for the capacity development* of all the systemic actors within the Juvenile Justice framework to generate a common understanding and build perspective on the importance of family-based care and the adverse impacts of the long-term institutionalisation. CINI also extends technical assistance to Police personnel, District Child Protection Units (DCPUs), caregivers within the childcare institutional setups and Child Welfare Committees, in identification and assessment, besides improving referral mechanisms.
- Facilitation is extended for *strengthening the existing convergent decision-making platforms within the childcare institutional setups that is, Home Management Committees and the Children's Management Committees,* which lead to the prompt identification of gaps that hinders the speedy expediting of languishing cases, determine the immediate restorable cases/ the cases which can be referred to the Sponsorship and Foster Care Approval Committee for Sponsorship and Foster Care/the cases which can be referred for Aftercare and the cases which can be restored with their families with sponsorship support. The case management and speedy restoration is facilitated through a structured restoration calendar in coordination with the childcare institutional staff and members of the DCPU.
- Process has been initiated with the government authorities to facilitate selected childcare institutions with a road map for *extending their restructured service package* into a community-level childcare mechanism, expediting the family reunification processes, thereby promoting required emergency care at those institutions rather than long-term institutional care.
- The project team has successfully created a *convergent platform at the district level* to facilitate the dialogue with the District Social Welfare Officer, DCPU members and representatives from CCI, members of the Sponsorship Foster Care and Approval Committee and Alternative Task Force on status of childcare institutions in the context of restoration and discussing the challenges and alternative care arrangements.
- *A technical working group* has been constituted comprising of the officials working under Juvenile Justice Systems in Ranchi and Khunti, along with the involvement of the representatives from the selected CCIs. The working group has decided to develop a way forward plan to reduce the over-reliance on institutionalisation and strengthen community-led protection systems with the alternative local solutions.
- This technical group has started implementing few action points and will consider other required micro-level processes for the following critical five steps towards a well-coordinated *deinstitutionalisation mechanism*: (1) engagement with stakeholders, including children; (2) assessment of situations of children as per mandated process; (3) service development for CCIs with better community connections and engagement; (4) transition phase of CCIs with effective engagement of relevant

stakeholders and (5) ensuring monitoring and evaluation on restructured services to the children by the CCIs.

Observations from the Field

Through these interventions, 1,148 children were identified as vulnerable, out of which, 44 per cent children were having a single parent, orphanhood accounted for 5 per cent and school dropout accounted for 21 per cent of the total vulnerable children. With the community-based programming, local stakeholders jointly facilitated to link 493 children and their families with existing government services. These services ranged from enrolment in schools, health and nutrition centres, counselling and life skills, livelihood schemes for elders, sponsorship care, etc. The family members took support from the project team to prepare and produce documentation required for sponsorship linkage. Process has been initiated to link another 116 cases with identified government schemes and services.

Twenty children have been found to be victims of substance abuse and linkage mechanisms with relevant services and support are under process. Similarly, at the CCI level, around 50 per cent of the total children in the selected CCIs have been identified who are in touch with at least one of their parents. Processes are being followed to reunify the children with their families, with or without sponsorship support, through a case management approach.

Discussion

The article has only considered the field level observations, and the secondary data were reviewed for certain recommendations. It is felt that Indian states need to develop a state-wide approach to promote preventive childcare and protection systems, recognising state-specific contexts, with a clear road map for transitioning states away from their reliance on institutional care and development of an intervention for the prevention of the separation of children from family-based care mechanism. The following measures may be considered for the same:

- Orientation and perspective building of systemic actors on the merits of family-based care/alternative family-based care, and the demerits of prolonged stay at institutions should be focused upon. The critical consensus amongst these actors will enable them to take decisions in favour of deinstitutionalisation. The need of exploring non-institutional alternatives was well acknowledged in the national consultation on Juvenile Justice Systems (UNICEF, 2016).
- Community-based programming for creating a child-friendly environment calls for having the combination of child-friendly services and technical support to promote the same. Inter-sectoral convergence mechanism

within government systems, along with the engagement of private sectors, can be facilitated to develop such packages of services at the community set up.

- For making the Child Protection Committees under ICPS framework effective, collaborating with the children's group along with other community-based organisations converging with other government machineries and systems will be critical. Within the current policy framework in India, such services and programming can be promoted by introducing the facilitators at the panchayat/ward level. Leveraging of resources from other relevant government departments or schemes, or partnership with NGOs for better community engagement, needs to be considered as one of the options for ensuring such facilitation. National-level consultations on Juvenile Justice Systems have acknowledged the importance of the professional worker to reach out to family for the needed support to the children. In that consultation, adoption of a participatory approach, involving the community, also emerged as a proposed solution to ensure that vulnerable children are protected and their rehabilitation is supported (UNICEF, 2017).

- For ensuring effective gatekeeping, documentation gaps at the systems level needs to be addressed. Effective documentation and case management can aid in expediting the process of hot spot mapping, family tracing and reintegration. The resource allocated under the current policy framework for such activities seems to be inadequate, and the need to undertake comprehensive rehabilitation and case management plans has been acknowledged by the policy makers and different development partners (UNICEF, 2016).

- State-specific guidelines on alternative care mechanisms need to be supplemented with micro-level protocols for ensuring effective integration of children in alternative family care mechanisms, to mitigate any risk and uncertainty in following such processes. It is expected that the accomplishment of family-based care mechanisms, as acknowledged in the revised ICPS framework and Juvenile Justice Act 2015, can be made possible with the aforementioned intervention components, along with needed resource allocation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Note

1. CINI is a national level development organization working to facilitate in establishing child-friendly communities through its work on health, nutrition, child protection and education for the last forty-five years in India.

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