

# An introduction to care reform



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## What is care reform?

Care reform involves improvements to the legal and policy framework, structures and resources that prevent family separation, support families to care for children well, and determine and deliver alternative care.<sup>1</sup>

The goals of care reform are informed by international standards, including the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.<sup>2</sup> Based on these standards, care reform aims to ensure that children are looked after well in families and not unnecessarily separated from parents or other family members that care for them. Care reform also aims to give children a range of alternative care choices – ideally family based – in cases where they cannot be looked after by parents.<sup>3</sup> These choices, often called a “continuum of care”, might include the following.<sup>4</sup>

- Care by extended family or friends of the family (known as kinship care).

- Foster care, which is a formal arrangement where the courts or social workers place children temporarily with another family.
- Supervised independent living, where older children live alone or in small groups with the support of adults.
- Small scale, family-like residential care.

Care reform seeks to end the use of institutional care as this is known to be harmful to children.<sup>5</sup> Children in institutional care live in large facilities and are cared for collectively, usually by staff working in shift-systems. Children follow a common set of rules, sleep in dormitories, and are often isolated from wider communities. Whilst this form of residential care is problematic, smaller scale and more family-like residential care can offer an appropriate care option for some children. However, small group homes should not be used for children under three years old, who need the love and individualised attention of a family.<sup>6</sup>

# What are the different components of care reform?

Evidence from across the Eastern and Southern Africa region suggests that effective and comprehensive care reform involves the following.<sup>7</sup>

- Developing an over-arching strategy and plan on care reform guided by evidence, costed, and funded.
- Engaging a range of actors, including care leavers, children, caregivers and others with lived experience, and establishing coordination mechanisms.
- Involving communities in care reform, and changing social norms that do not support family-based care.
- Promoting the participation of children, care leavers and caregivers.
- Developing policies, legislation, and guidance related to care.
- Strengthening the social service workforce to support the better protection and care of children.
- Ensuring that there are gatekeeping mechanisms in place to make decisions around children's care and determine what forms of assistance children and caregivers require.
- Building a range of prevention and response services, including services that strengthen families, support the reintegration of separated children, and provide alternative care.
- Financing reform and addressing public finance reform to redirect resources towards family care.
- Establishing accountability mechanisms and monitoring frameworks, and monitoring progress through establishment of management information systems.

Although ending the use of institutional care may be a key component of care reform, this should not be the only focus or end goal of reform.

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## Why care reform?<sup>8</sup>

- 1 Violence in the home harms children.** Abuse in families has a lasting impact on children's wellbeing, affecting their health and capacity to form relationships well into adulthood.<sup>9</sup>
- 2 Institutional care is extremely damaging to children.** Institutional care prevents children from forming a bond or attachment with a caregiver, harming children's cognitive, language and physical development. Children in residential care are also highly vulnerable to abuse.
- 3 Institutional care is often externally imposed.** Institutional care was brought into the Eastern and Southern Africa region from outside. It is anathema to local values around the importance of family and community in children's upbringing.
- 4 Children have the right to be well cared for and not unnecessarily separated from families.** These rights are recognised in international conventions and in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.
- 5 Inadequate care stops children and societies from reaching their full potential.** Children who are abused or separated from parents often do less well in school and suffer physical and mental health problems as both children and adults. This affects their capacity to contribute to societies, with an impact on the achievement of broader development goals.
- 6 Care reform enables the more effective use of resources.** For example, institutional care is far more expensive than providing support to families and family-based alternative care.
- 7 Care reform can be used as a starting point for wider improvements in the protection of children.** For example, care reform can be used to improve or expand social services.

# How to start care reform

Evidence from countries in the region with care reform under way suggests several starting points for reform.<sup>10</sup>

- Gather evidence on the existing situation, including learning from caregivers, children, and young people who have grown up in alternative care.
- Understand and build on strengths, in particular the enormous contribution of relatives and communities in caring for children who cannot be looked after by parents.
- Learn from other countries in the region and beyond.
- Bring in a range of stakeholders to coordinate, plan for/strategise, support and implement reform processes; these stakeholders should include those working in the child protection, education, health, justice, and social protection sectors.
- Ensure buy in from those with the power to promote reform. This includes high level political will, and the support of service providers, social workers, and donors.

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## Endnotes

1 Better Care Network and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (2015) *The role of social service workforce development in care reform*. BCN: New York.

2 UN (1989) *Convention on the rights of the child*. USA: United Nations; UN General Assembly (GA) (2010) *Guidelines for the alternative care of children*. USA: United Nations.

3 UN GA 2010.

4 Ibid.

5 van IJzendoorn, Marinus H. et al. (2020) *Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children 1: a systematic and integrative review of evidence regarding effects on development*. *The Lancet Psychiatry* 7(8), 703–720.

6 UN GA 2010.

7 UNICEF (2021) *Caring systems. Maximising synergies between care reform and child protection system strengthening*

*in Eastern and Southern Africa*. Nairobi: UNICEF.

8 From: Better Care Network and UNICEF (2020) *It's time for care. Prioritising quality care for children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges, opportunities and an agenda for action*. New York: UNICEF and Better Care Network and UNICEF.

9 It is acknowledged that violence against children also occurs in other settings and across all contexts.

10 From interviews with government and UNICEF country offices, and from UNICEF, Changing the Way We Care and the Government of Rwanda (2021) *Care reform in Rwanda. A virtual study tour*. Nairobi: UNICEF; UNICEF, Changing the Way We Care and the Government of Kenya (2021) *Care reform in Kenya. A virtual study tour*. Nairobi: UNICEF; UNICEF, Changing the Way We Care and the Government of Uganda (2021) *Care reform in Uganda. A virtual study tour*. Nairobi: UNICEF.

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