

Changing THE WAY WE care

LEARNING BRIEF: Influencing How Governments Care for Children in Moldova and Guatemala

Supporting governments to provide quality family-based care is a key part of care reform. In many countries, governments provide services directly to children and families and/or regulate services provided through non-governmental organizations. As a result, to have a lasting impact on the way children are cared for, actors like CTWWC must work closely with governments to strengthen the ways in which these governments work with children and families.

In Moldova, CTWWC has built an effective relationship with the government, which is continuing even after significant government turnover, through building relationships with government and non-governmental actors to develop a common vision, plan and voice. In Guatemala, CTWWC is focused on strengthening effective collaboration and communication between each of the four government agencies mandated to care for children by accompanying agency leaders and using evidence from demonstration areas to empower leadership of key care processes within the government.

Getting to a common vision, plan and voice in Moldova

In 2021, the government of Moldova changed to a new ruling party, resulting in turnover of government staff, cabinet members and parliament. To build relationships with the new government, CTWWC met with interim ministers and State secretaries to advocate for the new government to continue prioritizing the care of children. CTWWC also formed strategic partnerships with non-governmental organizations to complement efforts and advocate with a common voice. This led to a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) that outlines how CTWWC will support the government for the year ahead. Negotiating this MOU took five months and a great deal of discussions and compromise, but it sets the foundation for an effective working relationship.

The government intends to allocate resources to the care of children through their priorities in the forthcoming National Child Protection Program 2022-2026 (NPCP). CTWWC's relationship with the government has allowed the initiative to support the development of these priorities. First, CTWWC shared research about the care system, including the situation of children in residential care, which has provided contextual evidence to inform government decisions on care reform priorities. Secondly, CTWWC supported the government to mobilize 134 people from 96 different structures involved in caring for children, including local public authorities, civil society organizations (including those working with people with disabilities and faith communities) and international organizations to share their perspectives on priorities for children's care. Participation of such a wide variety of actors ensured national priorities are relevant for different sectors across the country. For example,

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promoting child rights through community leaders (e.g. faith leaders, influencers, etc.) is now included as a national priority due to their involvement.

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Using evidence from demonstration areas to influence national government

In Guatemala, child protection does not have one mandated governing body that generates guidelines or changes to be applied at a general level, across all necessary government bodies. Instead, the different activities and functions are divided across four institutions – the Secretariat for Social Welfare (referred to as SBS, its Spanish acronym), the Attorney General (PGN), the courts (OJ), and the National Adoption Council (CNA). None of these institutions can take on an overall leadership role for fear of causing the other agencies to feel threatened. In other words, they each focus on their specific remit instead of coordinating and leveraging each other's expertise.

There are also structural issues that affect the performance of these agencies, mainly due to a lack of budget and a shortage of human resources. This translates into limited salaries, challenges in recruitment and retention of personnel, and workloads that exceed capabilities. All this contributes to poor case investigations, late responses to reports and reintegration processes that are not followed up on. Further, there is limited political will to allocate more resources. The Congress prioritizes other issues when evaluating the general budget and the Executive Branch does not present concrete proposals or exert pressure to increase resources to invest in children.

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Despite all these challenges, CTWWC has managed to use evidence to positively influence institutions to implement a case management methodology and develop strategic plans, guidelines, and training processes. An example is the implementation of the reintegration process of cases of children with more than 5 years in residential care. This process was carried out with the Judicial Branch in the department of Zacapa. Twenty-five cases of children assigned to

the Court of Children and Adolescents of Zacapa were analyzed. After its analysis, a classification was carried out to determine the situation of each case (child), subsequently identifying the best care option to pursue. Family alternatives were identified for 10 cases, five presented challenges that require support from other services, four were closed because they reached the age of majority and could be supported in independent living, and four had already begun a reintegration process. This highlighted that 40% of the cases analyzed had a family connection that could care for the child but that had not been actively explored until that point. This strong evidence of effectiveness made the Judicial Branch decide independently to replicate this process in other municipalities with a vision of implementing it at the national level in the long term.

CTWWC Guatemala is at a critical moment of transition as it moves towards the possibility of closure of activities in the next fiscal year. This creates the need to transfer capacities to government partners and ensure the sustainability of care reform efforts after the exit of the initiative's activities in Guatemala. For this reason, CTWWC Guatemala has focused on strengthening collaboration, building ongoing and effective communication between the agencies,

taking a role of accompaniment, and transferring leadership of key processes to the agencies. For example, CTWWC Guatemala has been accompanying SBS with the construction of the Strategic Plan 2021-2023 of the Temporary Family Foster Care program and working together with PGN with the implementation of the Protection Plan that will prevent unnecessary family separation through improved gatekeeping.

Our experience has taught us that inter-agency coordination, including with local government, is essential and can be improved through simple approaches like field visits, study tours and the use of different meeting forums. As we participate in inter-agency technical meetings, we advocate using our on-the-ground experience, analysis, and awareness to ensure the children's best interests.

Conclusion

This brief reflects learning from 2019 to 2021. While working with governments can prove challenging, CTWWC believes it is a must to sustain care reform in the long-term. It is critical that we invest the time and resources into these government systems. We believe this is best done through relationship building, actively supporting and accompany governments to achieve their priorities and providing targeted technical assistance to influence government policies and services whilst keeping in mind that broad systemic change takes a long time.