Editorial

Nurturing the Future: Unraveling the Complexity of 10 Years of Alternative Care in the SAARC Region

Introduction

Over the past decade, the South Asian region has witnessed remarkable efforts in reforming child protection systems from institutions as the first resort to providing a wide range of family-based. This tenth anniversary edition of the journal gives a real, raw, and compelling view of UN defined Alternative Care in Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Authors from Afghanistan were asked to participate, but due to the current socio-political climate, did not feel comfortable. This scholarly journal edition seeks to delve into the multifaceted process of child protection system reform by examining the challenges, progress so far, and lessons learned from the past 10 years providing a direction forward.

But First Let's Start with, 'What is Alternative Care?'

'Alternative care' refers to the provision of living arrangements for children who cannot live with their biological parents or immediate family members due to various reasons, such as abuse, neglect, abandonment or the inability of parents to provide adequate care. Alternative care serves as a substitute for a child's family-based care and aims to provide a nurturing, safe and supportive environment for their overall development and well-being. Alternative care can include but is not limited to family preservation, sponsorship, kinship care, adoption, foster care and institutional care.

The concept of alternative care emphasises the importance of ensuring that children grow up in a family-like setting whenever possible, as it is generally recognised that family-based care offers the best conditions for a child's emotional, social and cognitive development. Alternative care options can include foster care, kinship care (care provided by relatives or extended family members), guardianship, or adoption. These arrangements aim to provide children with stable and loving relationships, individual attention, and opportunities for personal growth and self-identity.

It is important to note that alternative care is considered as a temporary or transitional solution, aiming to either reunite the child with their biological family or facilitate their placement in a permanent family setting. Efforts are made to

ensure that alternative care arrangements respect the child's rights, maintain their cultural identity and support their connections with their biological family whenever possible and in the best interest of the child.

Alternative care should be implemented in accordance with international standards, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. These guidelines stress upon the importance of individualised care plans, regular monitoring and support services to promote the child's well-being and successful transition to a permanent family setting.

Furthermore, alternative care systems often prioritise the deinstitutionalisation of government-run, private and unregulated/unmonitored childcare institutions, aiming to move away from large-scale residential institutions and promote community-based care options. This shift is based on research and evidence that emphasises the detrimental effects of institutionalisation on a child's development and highlights the importance of family-based care as the preferred option.

Overall, alternative care within the child protection context focuses on ensuring that children who cannot live with their biological families receive appropriate and nurturing care in a family-like environment. It aims to provide them with stability, protection and opportunities for growth, while striving to reintegrate them into a permanent family setting whenever feasible.

Now Back to System Reform and this Edition

Imagine being asked to summarise your entire country's work of alternative care over 10 years in 3,500 words or less? That's what we asked these brave and ambitious authors to do. Each country's article, understandably, takes a different approach in tone, focus areas and level of data/details in summarising the past 10 years of alternative care work. However, all articles have a have a common outline—introduction, scope of alternative care and different forms of alt care in your country, history and evolution of alternative care in the country, role of stakeholders involved in alternative care, good practices on alternative care, country-specific challenges in alternative care and recommendations and way forward.

Setting the Tone and Giving Context

To dive into each country's article, an overview of the reform of a child protection system, which is in motion in each country, is an important context to frame each country's report.

The need for reform in child protection systems arises from the inherent vulnerabilities faced by children, who are often unable to advocate for their own rights. The past decade has witnessed a growing awareness of the urgent need to

address systemic weaknesses and gaps in the region's child protection infrastructure. However, it is important to acknowledge that reforming such intricate systems is a long-term process, one that demands commitment, persistence and collaboration from all stakeholders.

Child protection systems, much like any complex human institution, are subject to cyclical patterns. While progress is made in certain areas, challenges and setbacks can emerge, leading to a re-evaluation of existing strategies. One key factor to the entire idea of Alternative Care is that the work must hinge on the responsibility and importance of family.

Alternative care implementation and shift is all about change-management and systems theory. As you read each article, please consider the following components of implementing alternative care in a child protection system. I recommend looking for these aspects of change in each article to help you position the trajectory of alternative care:

1. Holistic Approach: Child protection system reform should adopt a holistic approach that encompasses prevention, intervention and post-intervention support. By addressing the root causes of child vulnerability and providing comprehensive services, we can create a robust system that safeguards children at every stage.
2. Legal Frameworks: Effective child protection system reform requires strong and comprehensive legal frameworks that clearly define children's rights, outline responsibilities of duty bearers and establish mechanisms for accountability. Legislation should be regularly reviewed and updated to address emerging challenges.
3. Multi-sectoral Collaboration: Collaboration among various sectors is crucial for the success of child protection system reform. Governments, civil society organisations, healthcare professionals, educators, law enforcement agencies and communities must work together to share resources, expertise and responsibilities to create a coordinated and responsive system.
4. Prevention and Early Intervention: Emphasising prevention and early intervention is key to reducing the incidence of child abuse, neglect and exploitation. Investing in initiatives that promote positive parenting, education, community support and early identification of risks can help break the cycle of harm before it begins.
5. Child Participation: Genuine child participation should be at the core of any child protection system reform. Children's voices and perspectives must be heard, valued and integrated into decision-making processes to ensure that reforms are child-centered and inclusive.
6. Capacity Building: Strengthening the capacity of professionals, including social workers, law enforcement officials and healthcare providers, is essential for effective implementation of child protection reforms. Training programs, professional development and supervision mechanisms should be established to enhance skills, knowledge and ethical practices.

7. Data and Evidence: Robust data collection and analysis systems are vital for evidence-based decision-making and monitoring the impact of reform efforts. By tracking indicators such as prevalence rates, service utilisation and outcomes, policymakers can identify gaps, measure progress and refine strategies accordingly.

8. Specialised Services: Child protection system reform should prioritise the development of specialised services tailored to the unique needs of different vulnerable populations, such as children with disabilities, child victims of trafficking or those from marginalised communities. These services should be accessible, culturally sensitive and survivor-centered.

9. Awareness and Education: Raising public awareness about child protection issues and promoting a culture of child rights is essential. Comprehensive public education campaigns, school-based initiatives and community outreach programs can help change attitudes, reduce stigma and foster a protective environment for children.

10. Monitoring and Evaluation: A robust monitoring and evaluation framework is crucial to assess the effectiveness and impact of child protection system reform. Regular evaluations, independent audits and feedback mechanisms should be in place to identify strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement, ensuring that reforms remain dynamic and responsive.

By considering these compelling factors (ones that will inevitably evolve as the field learns, makes mistakes and iterates), child protection system reform can move beyond rhetoric to concrete action, providing a framework that truly safeguards the rights and well-being of children.

The Complexity of Moving from Child Case Management to Family and Community Case Management

One additional theme you'll find across all the country reports, is the shift to family-based care. Because of the word limitations and broad topic area, what the countries may not fully report is the complexity and often resistance that systems place on moving from case managing individual children to case managing families in communities. In most reports, you'll see the reduction in size and prioritisation of institutions is either planned or has begun. Embedded in this change is the way each individual child is treated. In order for the UNHCR definition of alternative care to truly be realised in a country, in this author's opinion, the case management system needs to be fundamentally uprooted and redesigned. Traditionally, in an institution, a file was kept on an individual child that included things like a clothing inventory, assessment, maybe a case plan and other social work-based documents. Family was contacted on holidays and had a wide variety of levels of engagement from none to constant; often not based on the child's best interest but rather on the resources available and the mindset of decision makers. Now, with the introduction of family-based care, a child's file should include a thorough examination of their family, the environment in which their family lives and all

reasonable efforts to return the child to the family when in their best interest. This work is complex to say the least as the work becomes intersectional and multidimensional in ways never organised into the binary and transactional child protection systems that until recently (and arguably still) dominated the SAARC countries.

Turning this Edition into Systemic Change for the Next 10 Years and Onwards

We must recognise that child protection systems are deeply embedded within the cultural, social and political fabric of each country.

What works in one nation may not necessarily yield the same results in another. This journal edition aims to foster cross-cultural learning by providing a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange among scholars, practitioners and policy-makers. By appreciating the heterogeneity of contexts and the diversity of reform strategies, we can develop a deeper understanding of the complex factors that influence the effectiveness of child protection systems.

As we embark on this exploration of child protection system reform in South Asia, it is essential to acknowledge the tireless efforts of individuals, organisations and governments dedicated to safeguarding the rights and well-being of children. Their commitment and perseverance serve as a guiding light in this complex and transformative journey.

It is an almost impossible task to match the rhythm and capacity of a child protection system with the ever-changing needs of humanity. However, in a world with the rapid development of artificial intelligence, fluid identities and opening borders we must be humble, moral and diligent in our critical analysis of the systems that are built to protect us. This overview of alternative care in South Asia over the past 10 years will hopefully cast a vision for the next 10 years and beyond. I hope that each reader will think about their own biases and proclivities when they read this edition and think about how they, today, can make an impact for positive change in child protection systems. The world is ours to sustain and it'll take us all working together to realise change, concurrently, at child, family, community and system levels.

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