



INSIGHT

Strengthening Networks of People with Lived Experience of Care

Introduction

Care leavers, young people who are or have left a formal care placement¹, are one of the most important stakeholder groups in a care reform² process; a group whose experience, expertise and insights should be at the center of shaping the reform and advocacy agenda nationally, regionally and globally. Whilst the importance of engaging care leavers and ensuring meaningful participation is recognized within the sector, in practice, methods of engagement vary. Efforts can fail to

legitimately empower and enable meaningful participation or limit to inviting care leavers to illuminate existing agendas through the sharing of personal experiences. In situations where care leavers are excluded from the places where the agenda setting takes place or where power for change exists, participation risks being tokenistic or, in the worst cases, exploitative.³

¹ Often referring to children who are leaving residential care facilities such as “orphanages” through reintegration, placement in an alternative family environment or independent living.

² The changes to the systems and mechanisms that promote and strengthen the capacity of families and communities to care for their children, address the care and protection needs

of vulnerable or at-risk children to prevent separation from their families, decrease reliance on residential care and promote reintegration of children, and ensure appropriate family-based alternative care options are available.

³Better Care Network. (2020) [Meaningful Engagement of Care Leavers in Care Reform.](#)

*Changing The Way, We Care*SM (CTWWC) is a global initiative designed to promote safe, nurturing family care for children, including reforming national systems of care for children, strengthening families, family reunification and preventing child-family separation, development of alternative family-based care, and influencing others to build momentum towards a tipping point of change for children. CTWWC was launched in 2018 as a Global Development Alliance (GDA) funded by USAID, the MacArthur Foundation and the GHR Foundation, and implemented by Catholic Relief Services, Maestral International and other key partners such as national governments, Better Care Network and Faith to Action.

The initiative has demonstration work in Kenya, Guatemala, Moldova, Haiti, and India. Regional and global influence and engagement builds from and pushes out the demonstration learning to other countries in Latin America, Eastern and Southern Africa and Europe. The 2023 program year was the 5th of five years of the GDA funded work and an important year of learning.

Over five years *Changing the Way, We Care*SM (CTWWC) has worked to understand, practice and document participation and engagement that goes beyond a symbolic effort. One of CTWWC's first publications was guidance developed together with the [Kenya Society of Care Leavers](#) involvement of care leavers, and which focuses on how to engage care leavers in care reform⁴. This guidance suggested that strengthening networks of care leavers was an important commitment for initiatives like CTWWC to make and need to be documented to understand the processes involved as well as preconditions for success.

Engaging people with lived experience, including care leavers, by facilitating development of and strengthening networks is an important part of care reform. Sustainability of care leaver involvement throughout the care reform process, beginning to end, can be facilitated through these key structures that lead to sustained participation.

Reflection Research

In 2023, CTWWC set out to conduct reflective research on the formation of care leaver networks in multiple countries, in order to produce a cross-country learning product with insights on:

- How networks of care leavers form.
- Pre-conditions or supportive contexts for network formation.
- Challenges to forming and maintaining networks.
- Factors of success in forming and maintaining networks.
- How organizations like CTWWC can help network formation and strengthening.
- Lessons for future network formation.

The reflective research, itself, was conducted through an exploratory design, gathering information from discussions, interviews and small focus group discussions. The team engaged to undertake the exploration included a representative of the care leaver community in each country, the CTWWC participation lead (a staff position within CTWWC), and a facilitator. Reflection focused on Guatemala, Kenya, Moldova and Uganda. The team used a participatory and collaborative approach focusing on ensuring that voices, perspective and learnings from care leavers themselves would be reflected in the data gathering and analysis. The team had an orientation on data collection tools, methodology and safeguarding and ethical conduct in data

⁴KESCA and CTWWC. (2018). [How to Engage Care Leavers in Care Reform](#)



collection. In total, the respondent groups included six focus group discussions with care leavers, interviews with four CTWWC staff and six government staff, as well as discussions with an additional six stakeholders defined as supporters of care leavers. The exercise had a secondary purpose of building capacity of young professionals to conduct social science research.

Formation of Networks

There were different ways that networks were formed in the four countries. In Kenya for example, KESCA started by a small group of care leavers who self-mobilized to create a forum for supporting other care leavers upon exiting care and to provide a unified voice for young people who spent some, or all, of their childhood in residential care. After initial mobilization and getting together regularly, the group explored registration as a formal network. Care leavers in Guatemala, Kenya and Uganda all agreed that registration and working towards creating formal structures provided them with opportunities to pursue a collective advocacy agenda, without which, they did not feel they would have formed a network. The potential that networks have in creating spaces where care leavers could discuss their issues with people of similar background and experience drove wider willingness to participate in the formation process.

In Uganda, the process started with non-governmental organizations (NGO) identifying care leavers as they engaged residential care

centers, probation and welfare officers, social workers and civil society organizations involved in care reform. The second stage of network formation involved outreach, sensitization and ensuring that care leavers knew about network formation and could tell others. A core group was established, supported by the NGOs, to steer network activities and generate more interest in all regions of the country. This core group was supported to conduct a gap analysis to understand challenges of becoming a formal network, as well as to explore ways of structuring the network to respond to the different perspectives of the members. The core group is working towards collaboratively defining the network's objectives, structure, and potential activities, and registration to ensure activities conform to country policies and laws.

In Guatemala, CTWWC really led the formation of the care leaver network. Initially the government agencies involved in care reform were providing contacts for residential care facilities, and they contacted the young people who had left their care. Through these agencies and facilities, CTWWC provided sensitization about forming a network. The young people who were interested in the idea came together for a workshop, and eventually worked together with CTWWC staff on a vision and mission, as well as strategic activity plan. They later registered as a formal network.

"It is important for the networks to position themselves well to be known by the government and others in the care reform sector." Kenya

In Moldova, the process started with a call for care leavers to join a network, led by one NGO. Once those who were interested had been identified, a concept for the participation and involvement of young people as a network was shared with them during a workshop. Additional activities included the NGO developing trainings for care leavers and hiring a coordinator for the network.

Pre-Conditions or Context for Network Formation

There was consensus across countries on the pre-conditions necessary for care leaver network formation. A consistent theme in the interviews and focus group discussions, was the need for government support and their seeing the value of care leaver participation in care reform. Government support was said to be needed in facilitating formal registration and providing capacity building. In some cases, funding for network formation activities was also a critical catalyst, without which several of the networks may not have formed. This mostly came from NGOs. There was need for material and financial support, and support for different platforms, for care leavers to convene. During the COVID-19 pandemic support for virtual connection was particularly important.

“We would not have started the network or even be able to access any government office without the help of these organizations because we don’t have any connection to lead us there.” Uganda

Another key pre-condition mentioned was the availability of information about care leavers who can be engaged in networking and pursuing a collective agenda. In Kenya and Uganda, the research found a need for care leavers to have support to access information and communications (such as airtime provided by NGO or other funded kinds of projects). Without these ways for care leavers to receive information and engage with others its likely a more formal network would not have formed.

Across the countries, the research found that successful formation and sustaining of networks requires a clear and shared purpose, goals and objectives, and open communication around the benefits of participating in the network. Equally important was clear messaging around what networks are not or what benefits they do not provide. While processes for defining leadership and governance structures were found to take a lot of time and discussion, they were important to outline if they network was going to be formal, recognized and sustained over time. This includes defining how care leavers will be involved in

processes of governance, leadership and management.

Challenges

In all the countries, network formation processes were affected by multiple factors including not knowing where or how to identify and connect with care leavers, and struggles to stay connected once people raised their hands to be part of a network. The fact that being part of a network is voluntary, for many care leavers having time to engage could be a challenge. In Kenya, there were efforts to strengthen collaboration with residential care facilities and ensure young people turning eighteen years and leaving care knew about the care leaver networks which they could join, what they offered and how to join.

“We tried to address funding challenges by conducting resource mobilization to secure funding including through donations, and in-kind support.” Uganda

In Kenya, Guatemala and Uganda network formation, functioning and sustainability was affected by the lack of a clear agenda or purpose, things to do together as a network. This resulted sometimes in limited consensus. Some members wanted a stronger focus on advocacy, while others wanted the network to provide direct services to care leavers. In all three countries, this was being addressed through support from NGOs to develop and validate visions, missions and strategic plans, which outline network priorities and activities.

Lack of optimal group coordination, unclear leadership and limited funding affected network formation in all the countries. Since most of the activities, even just getting together as a group, required funding this was noted as the biggest constraint to network sustainability. Limited funding being available, was complicated when networks were not registered and/or did not have structures or processes sufficient to facilitate fundraising or financial accountability. Most often the network membership is spread geographically and without resources for traveling convening were difficult or only those living close to one another would meet. During the COVID-19 pandemic, movement restrictions meant that resources were needed virtual convenings but lack

of reliable network connectivity in general, and lack of access to technology tools and money for internet for specific members, also made this challenging. Funding for meetings and connectively have been key support provided by donors and NGOs. The network representatives interviewed mention NGOs and governments can help build their capacity around leadership and fundraising.

Limited cohesion among the care leavers in the network was another signification challenge across the countries. This was felt to emanate from the fact that it was the common factor of having been in residential care that brought them together; but was also a primary factor in mistrust, power dynamics and conflicts that came up. Not all care leavers wanted to be “grouped” with other care leavers; and some, who were leaving a non-residential form of care, did not feel they belonged. The networks tried to address this through a focus on common agenda, rather than differences. They found it helpful to hear testimonials from care leavers about how they found involvement with networks beneficial. Discussions about mission and vision were helpful when they included conversation on “who belongs” and “who doesn’t belong” and what “belonging” means.

Lots of different challenges around lack of clarity of purpose for networks came through in the interviews and focus group discussions. Network formation processes were sometimes affected by care leaver’s expectations that participation would bring material benefits. The realisation that participation in networks did not result in access to material benefits sometimes resulted in reduced commitment from some. This challenge is complicated by the fact that care leavers do often struggle to live independently after leaving care and can be having difficulty with employment, housing, food security and meeting other basic needs.

Administrative challenges resulted in delays with registration, and this affected progress and

“One of the challenges has been accountability and being clear about the group’s objectives.”
Guatemala

morale. Networks that worked with NGOs to get support for registration seemed to feel this challenge less than those who were trying to form “on their own.”

Some care leavers outlined challenges related to limited clarity of network objectives around how individuals would participate, and when and how they could benefit from activities implemented by networks. Some of the challenges including lack of resources, the absence of a strong leadership structure, lack of a clear, collaboratively developed agenda, and lack of well-defined policies and procedures for participation and selection. It could lead to internal feuding and, when not addressed networks failing, which did in fact happen in Moldova and Uganda. A key lesson for Uganda was that there needs to be a clear and well communicated agenda for network formation, developed collaboratively, with time for members to understand and make commitments. In Moldova, the key lesson was that care leaver networks are likely to succeed if there is a structure dedicated to driving the network’s agenda and bringing others along.

Success Factors

There was consistency across the countries on the factors of success for network formation. In Kenya, for example, the relationship with the government has been important and allowed the network to be formally constituted (registered) and see their purpose and value in the national care reform conversations. Care leavers interviewed outlined that having the control and freedom to decide how they wanted to form was critical – in other words, networks were likely to succeed when they were care leaver led. Success was also attributed to the background support from NGOs who provided technical and logistical assistance, and resourced the network formation process.

The presence of care experienced youth in large numbers (especially in Kenya and Uganda), whose voices needed to be heard, contributed towards successful network formation. That is to say, the very strength in numbers was a factor in their success. The networks provided a critical “voice” and collective outlet for communicating the multiple challenges faced by care leavers. This was

felt to be important in all contexts as otherwise care leavers felt there would have been no way to bring the issues to the policy agenda. It was felt that the very existence of a “mass of movement” of young people with lived experience who wanted to see change and advocate for others who are still in care really brought people together.

Another key success factor relates to clarity of objectives and aspirations for the networks. When in place, this clarity was thought to contribute to increasing the willingness of the care leavers to participate actively and voluntarily. The peer-to-peer approach or idea of “a network of care leavers, by care leavers, for care leavers” was a critical success factor, as care leavers sought engagement with those who had similar life experiences. Further, the peer-led model of functioning for the networks was felt to provide opportunities not only for young people to connect with each other but also to build their

“Young people see the opportunities and success they can have by working together, which has a major impact in motivating them.” Moldova

capacity in leadership and other life and professional skills.

Seeing the need for training and skills development and the opportunity that networks could provide in this sense, were critical success factors in network formation. These served the dual purpose of providing important information to care leavers while also providing them with opportunities to practice the very skills necessary to take their network forward. In Moldova, the quality of training provided to care leavers in the network was cited as an important factor in successful network formation – it motivated care leavers to want to come together for the opportunities it would provide.

A success factor across both Guatemala and Moldova was direct support from people dedicated to helping a care leaver network to form. In Guatemala, this was a CTWWC staff member who could organize agendas, deal with logistics and support events, registration, etc. In Moldova, a person was recruited with dedicated time to monitor the work of the network. The facilitated processes of setting a clear agenda for the network, as well as ensuring that the agenda



Photo by Schimbator Studio for CRS

was well pursued and outcomes were documented, was said to be a factor of success.

NGO Support

CTWWC and other NGOs played a significant role in network formation processes in all countries. The key role they played seemed to be around creating the platforms and frameworks to facilitate dialogue on the need for and purpose of care leaver networks. This was critical because in several of the countries there were no reported formal structures for care leaver engagement prior to NGO care reform involvement. In addition to creating platforms, NGOs supported the process of identifying and bringing together care leavers. However, there were differences in the support provided; for example, KESCA did not receive much support when they first started in 2007, while more recent networks like the *Unidos por el Cambio* in Guatemala had direct resourcing as they started.

In Guatemala, Moldova and Uganda, support was provided for the initial meetings of care leavers, which helped to set clear agendas and outline strategies and agreed activities. This was critical in a context where many of the young people did not have any prior involvement with networks. NGOs supported processes of building understanding on the importance of being legally constituted and

being properly registered. In all countries there was mention of progress being made in registration.

CTWWC also supported Kenya and Guatemala with trainings and capacity building of networks, seeming to have an understand that in order to sustain as a network any lack of competencies necessary to effectively drive aspirations of a group would need to be addressed. In Guatemala, support was also provided by the government's National Adoption Council, which provided the care leaver network with a physical space to operate. The Secretary of Social Welfare facilitated access to children within care. This allowed network members to engage with those still in care and create awareness about existence of the network.

In summary, the NGO support seemed to be instrumental and helpful.

“NGOs supported the association to formally register in order to be legally recognized, lobbied for funding to cover incidental and registration fees, built capacity of the leadership structures to spearhead the activities to ensure proper governance and leadership.” Uganda

CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

- Networks, by nature, involve convergence of different people and different perspectives. Formation of networks needs to consider how to meaningfully involve people with these different perspectives. Networks should invest time in activities that include team building, facilitating group cohesion, and other activities of trust building, while NGOs should support these kinds of strengthening activities.
- Investments by care leaver networks, donors and NGOs, alike, in the development of a shared understanding and appreciation for meaningful participation within the care reform sector could go a long way in helping strengthen networks since the success factors hinge directly on moving beyond 'tokenism'.
- Network strengthening should prioritize peer-to-peer methodologies of care leavers themselves being empowered to identify each other, exchange on needed and available support services, identify their leadership and capacity needs, and agree on the resources needed (and wanted) to sustain the collective group effort.
- Networks need to use collective decision-making process to determine the network governance, leadership and coordination structures that work best for themselves. This contributes towards ensuring that networks remain relevant and responsive to their needs of their current and future member. NGOs supporting networks must always put care leavers in the driver's seat of decision-making.
- A committed core group of care leavers willing to take on leadership roles is crucial for driving the network's development. Once the core group of care leavers is in place, investments should be made towards building their capacities so that they are empowered to effectively contribute to the network's activities and sustainability.
- It is important to put in place leadership renewal and succession plans. This should be included in the constitution as well as within strategic plans. Proactive planning about leadership policies and succession planning provides for successful leadership transition and network growth.
- Invest in creation/strengthening of clear and effective communication channels so that network members are informed about and engaged in network activities.
- Fundraise and support research, mapping, and documentation to understand needs, challenges, and gaps. This will contribute towards data-driven advocacy by care leavers.
- Collaborations and partnerships with NGOs and external partners enhance the network's resources, expertise, and potential impact. Non-government organisations can and should play a pivotal role as a support system for bringing together care leavers and establishment of the network.

Need to know more? Contact *Changing the Way We Care* at, info@ctwwc.org or visit changingthewaywecare.org

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