

Community-Embedded Child Protection: Lessons from China's Child Directors System for Global Policy Innovation

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Abstract

The Child Directors System represents a landmark innovation in China's child protection framework by institutionalizing grassroots personnel dedicated to safeguarding children in need. Established under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the system appoints trained individuals in villages and communities to identify, refer, and coordinate services for vulnerable children. This study examines its origins, institutional design, and mechanisms. It highlights broad coverage, early intervention, and multi-sectoral collaboration as key strengths. Through structured training, fiscal support, digital tools, and performance incentives, the model improves accessibility, responsiveness, and service integration. The analysis shows that the system functions as a bridge between national policy and community realities. It offers transferable lessons for countries with dispersed populations and limited social work resources.

Keywords: Child Directors System, child protection, community-based services, social welfare innovation

1. Introduction

The purpose of child protection is to prevent or shield children from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect (NUICEF, 2024). In practice, community-level child protection mechanisms are gaining increasing recognition for their proximity, efficiency and sustainability. They are organizational systems within local communities that safeguard children's well-being through the collaborative efforts of networks or individuals. While national legal frameworks and central agencies remain indispensable, the most vulnerable children, especially those in rural and marginalized areas, often lie beyond the direct reach of state services. By contrast, community-level action is better suited to support children at risk. It can reach large numbers of children and enable early detection of risks, rapid intervention and sustained social support in the very environments where children live. Such models are typically low-cost and therefore more sustainable (Wessells, 2009).

China's Child Directors System is one of the most significant grassroots child protection innovations in the past decade. Established as a dedicated position at the village or neighborhood level, Child Directors identify, support, and advocate for children in need, with particular attention to left-behind children, children in difficult circumstances, and those at risk of abuse or neglect (Yan, & Zhang, 2022). Since its formalization in 2016 by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the system has expanded nationwide, integrating volunteers, grassroots governance structures, and public service networks into a coordinated protection mechanism.

This article provides a case-based policy analysis of the Child Directors System, focusing on its origins, institutional design, operational mechanisms, and positive outcomes. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative policy analysis and case study approach. It draws upon a range of secondary sources, including official statistics and government reports issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, policy guidelines, and peer-reviewed academic studies published in recent years. These materials were selected for their relevance, reliability, and contribution to understanding grassroots child protection in China. The analysis is guided by an institutional and governance framework, emphasizing how formal mandates, fiscal commitments, and community-embedded practices interact to shape system effectiveness. In addition, the paper situates the Chinese model in a broader comparative context, drawing on community-based child protection experiences from Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. This perspective highlights the distinctive institutional features of China's approach while underscoring its potential relevance and transferability internationally.

2. Origins and Development of the Child Directors System

The origins of the Child Directors System can be traced back to early policy experiments in several provinces during the late 2000s, when the rapid socio-economic transformation of China led to unprecedented internal migration. Millions of rural parents migrated to urban centers in search of work, leaving their children in the care of grandparents or other relatives. By 2020, China had 71.09 million migrant children and more than 66.93 million left-behind children (NUICEF, 2021). These children often faced emotional deprivation, educational disadvantages, and heightened vulnerability to abuse or neglect. For instance, Research shows that left-behind children face a heightened risk of abuse. Those with both parents absent experience much higher rates of neglect and emotional abuse compared with their peers. Such maltreatment is strongly linked to later psychological and behavioral problems (Wan, & Pei, 2020).

To address these challenges, the Ministry of Civil Affairs recognized the urgent need for a structured, institutionalized child protection mechanism and launched pilot projects that appointed dedicated personnel at the village and community levels. These pilots demonstrated that localized, full-time workers could markedly enhance case identification and welfare coordination. The full-scale rollout of the Child Directors pilot laid a foundation for refining subsequent policies and ensuring comprehensive child welfare (Xu, 2015). In 2016, the MCA issued the Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Children in Difficulty, which formally established the position of Child Directors in every administrative village and urban community, complemented by Children's Supervisors at the township or sub-district level. This created a two-tiered structure embedding child protection within China's grassroots governance framework. By the end of 2020, China had 48,000 township (sub-district) Children's Supervisors and 667,000 village (community) Child Directors, achieving full coverage (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2021).

The institutionalization of the Child Directors role marked a decisive shift in China's child welfare strategy, from ad hoc, reactive responses toward a proactive, community-embedded, and government-backed model. It also reflected the state's broader commitment to modernizing social governance, emphasizing early intervention, interdepartmental coordination, and inclusive social services (Yan & Zhang, 2022).

3. Institutional Design and Core Responsibilities

The Child Directors System is structured to ensure clarity of roles, accessibility for families, and effective linkage with higher-level authorities and specialized services. It operates through a three-tiered framework (Xia, 2021). At the village and community level, Child Directors serve as the primary point of contact for children and families, undertaking direct monitoring of living conditions and overall welfare, with particular attention to those classified as children in difficulty. They maintain individual case records and ensure that local child welfare databases are regularly updated. At the township and sub-district level, Children's Supervisors provide guidance, training, and technical support to Child Directors, while also coordinating cross-sectoral responses involving education, health, public security, and civil affairs departments. At the county level, Civil Affairs Departments oversee the recruitment, training, and performance evaluation of both Child Directors and Supervisors, allocate funding and resources for child protection activities, and ensure integration with broader social assistance and welfare programs.

Serving as the most grassroots operational unit of China's child welfare and protection system, the Child Director is a frontline child-protection practitioner, also known as a paraprofessional grassroots social worker. Recruited from urban neighborhoods and rural villages, the role is typically filled by female members of urban residents' or villagers' committees (Guan, Zhang, & Zhao, 2024). The Child Director plays a pivotal role in bridging national policy with community realities. Through institutionalized design, the position embeds child protection responsibilities into the routine functioning of grassroots governance. On one level, Child Directors are tasked with the early detection and reporting of risks to children. They conduct regular home visits to collect and update child information and enforce mandatory reporting protocols, ensuring that risks, such as abuse, neglect, school dropout, or loss of guardianship—are promptly identified and escalated to supervisors and protection institutions. This early detection secures valuable time for crisis intervention.

On another level, as frontline service providers embedded within their local communities, Child Directors are central to ensuring the "last mile" implementation of child welfare policies. Their work targets key groups, particularly left-behind and vulnerable children, and encompasses raising awareness of child rights and relevant legal protections among community members; accurately assessing the needs of children and their families across areas such as social assistance, healthcare, education, and psychosocial support; facilitating access to essential resources; and organizing diverse protection and care activities, including home-based support, emotional assistance, and, when necessary, material aid (NUICEF, 2015; Xu et al., 2021). They also mobilize residents, social organizations, and other stakeholders to participate in child protection efforts, fostering a locally anchored support

network.

The core responsibilities of Child Directors are clearly defined in national policy documents and standardized guidelines, reinforced through specified duties, streamlined reporting procedures, supervisory mechanisms, and digital case management tools. This framework positions the Child Director not only as a direct protector of children but also as a connector who links at-risk children to the welfare services they require while strengthening shared community responsibility.

4. Mechanisms Ensuring Effective Implementation

The sustainability and effectiveness of the Child Directors System rest on a set of interrelated mechanisms that institutionalize support, capacity building, and accountability.

4.1 Training and Capacity Development

Capacity building of Child Directors is crucial for constructing a rural child service and protection network that involves multiple actors and narrows the developmental gap between urban and rural children (Yang & Li, 2022). To compensate for limited professional expertise, China has established a top-down, systematic training system. Local governments at all levels are required to provide comprehensive pre-service and in-service training. For example, the *Three-Year Action Plan for Improving the Quality of Care Services for Rural Left-Behind and Vulnerable Children in Guangdong Province* stipulates that provincial and prefectural civil affairs departments must organize at least one demonstration training each year, while county-level departments must deliver annual training that covers every Child Director.

Training modules cover legal and policy frameworks, operational standards, and practical skills. The “Child Directors Induction Manual” and the four-tier training system developed by the China Institute of Philanthropy at Beijing Normal University have served as standardized templates nationwide. On this basis, localities add differentiated components. Jilin Province, for instance, has adopted a “professional social worker plus Child Director” model in which social-work agencies provide supervision and mentoring, shifting services from relief to proactive support. Many regions have also introduced digital learning platforms that transcend geographical barriers, enabling Child Directors in remote areas to access up-to-date resources. These measures have transformed the once informally trained “barefoot child social workers” into skilled practitioners able to identify risks, assess needs, and deliver interventions effectively.

4.2 Financial Support

Stable and sustainable funding is essential for ensuring both quality and long-term effectiveness. Following the principle of shared responsibility, both central and local governments fund the program. Fiscal authorities include allowances, training expenses, and essential equipment for Child Directors in their annual budgets. For example, the 2025 Budget of the Guangdong Provincial Child Rescue and Protection Center allocated RMB 390,000 for “Capacity Building for Grassroots Child Protection Teams” and RMB 260,000 for “Vocational Skills Training for Child Protection Personnel.” Since 2012, Ruili City in Yunnan Province has included Child Directors’ remuneration in the municipal budget, providing an average monthly allowance of RMB 1,130. These allowances not only cover daily work-related expenses but also enhance the attractiveness of the position and contribute to personnel retention. In addition, charitable funds such as the China Welfare Lottery Public Fund serve as important supplementary financial sources. For instance, in 2021, Yongzhou City in Hunan Province allocated RMB 3.24 million from municipal-level charitable funds, with counties and districts providing matching funds based on actual needs. This was used to purchase services from third-party social organizations, implementing a “1 Child Director + 1 Social Organization + 1 Volunteer Team” model to operate local Children’s Homes. Such diversified funding channels together provide a robust material foundation for the operation of the Child Directors System.

4.3 Information Systems and Case Management

An efficient digital information system is the key to improving the management effectiveness of the child directors network. By integrating data and applying intelligent analytics, the speed and accuracy of child-protection responses are systematically enhanced. The National Child Welfare Information System, operating as the national digital hub, has established a dynamic data network that covers county, township, and village levels. Through cross-departmental interfaces, it links information resources from civil affairs, education, public security, and other agencies to create a comprehensive child database combined with an intelligent monitoring and early-warning mechanism. The “one child, one file” dynamic management system provides Child Directors with multidimensional data to deliver precise services, shifting child protection from reactive response to proactive intervention. Building on this foundation, localities have launched their own digital innovations. Jiangsu province, for example, developed the “Su Tong Chengzhang” one-stop mobile service platform for Child Directors. The

platform integrates data collection, monitoring and early warning, needs assessment, and targeted services, enabling full-process digital management of child-protection work. Since its launch, 8070 newly identified children in need have been promptly enrolled in policy safeguards. In 2024, cross-departmental data matching verified and registered 754000 migrant children.

4.4 Multi-Sectoral Collaboration

The system relies on a broad and robust network of multi-sectoral collaboration. In China, the model has gradually established a cross-departmental, multi-tiered, and cross-sectoral child protection system through institutionalized coordination mechanisms and the integration of diverse actors. Under the government-led collaborative framework, the civil affairs department serves as the lead agency, institutionalizing a regular “joint meeting” mechanism that brings together education, public security, judicial, and health departments to ensure the efficient functioning of the “information sharing–joint action–service referral” process. Leveraging their respective professional strengths, these departments coordinate in key areas such as educational assistance, legal protection, and healthcare services, enabling an effective response to highly complex, multi-faceted child protection cases and significantly enhancing the system’s overall responsiveness.

At the same time, The Child Directors mechanism actively integrates into broader social resource networks, forming a diversified “Child Director Plus” model of collaboration. Social organizations, volunteer groups, enterprises, and grassroots communities participate extensively through mechanisms such as government procurement of services and partnerships on philanthropic projects, thereby alleviating structural constraints in public service provision at the grassroots level. The “Child Director Plus” model is “one-core, multi-actor”: it places the Child Director at the center, taps the advantageous resources of all relevant stakeholders in the rural setting, and integrates multiple forces for joint collaboration, thereby advancing the construction of a rural child protection system (Yang, & Li, 2022). For example, in Qingdao’s West Coast New Area, the “Children’s Supervisor + child directors + Social Organization + Volunteers + Community + Project” operational model has effectively strengthened the child protection network and successfully addressed schooling and household registration issues for several children with special needs.

4.5 Performance Evaluation and Recognition

To guarantee the efficient operation and continuous improvement of the Child Director System, local governments have widely established scientific and institutionalized performance-evaluation mechanisms. Civil-affairs departments at township and county levels conduct regular assessments of Child Directors, gauging their effectiveness in case identification, service delivery, and community mobilization. The evaluation outcomes serve not only as decisive criteria for contract renewal and post adjustment but are also directly linked to training opportunities, commendations, and resource allocation, thereby forming an institutionalized chain of positive incentives. For example, Sishui County in Shandong Province has implemented the “two measures and one checklist” system, tying subsidies to service quality and realizing the principle of “more work, more pay; better performance, higher reward,” which significantly strengthens the positive correlation between work results and income and effectively motivates Child Directors’ initiative and sense of responsibility. In Jiangsu Province, performance evaluation is integrated with career development: awards achieved in practical-skills competitions are incorporated into the professional-title review and honor-granting system, allowing outstanding practitioners to receive provincial honorary titles and additional points for promotion (Wei, 2024), thus markedly enhancing the post’s professional appeal and social recognition.

5. Positive Outcomes

5.1 Expanding Service Coverage

A central accomplishment of the Child Director system is its significant broadening of both the reach and accessibility of child-protection services. Tens of thousands of professionally trained Child Directors have been stationed in villages and communities, including remote rural areas and mountainous regions with limited transportation, thereby overcoming the geographic barriers that historically constrained traditional child-welfare systems. By maintaining a grassroots presence, Child Directors can provide immediate responses. For vulnerable children, they also serve as an identifiable, trustworthy, and consistently available channel for seeking assistance. This deeply embedded network effectively resolves the “last-mile” problem that conventional child-welfare services struggled to address, dramatically increasing disadvantaged children’s access to essential support and fully embodying the caring principle that “no child should be left behind.” Beyond facilitating proactive identification and the professional delivery of child-welfare services, the Child Director System, through sustained policy backing and institutional development has become a landmark milestone in China’s efforts to construct an inclusive child-welfare and protection framework.

5.2 Risk Early-Warning and Early Intervention

The implementation of the Child Director System has markedly enhanced the capacity for early identification of child-related risks and timely intervention, accelerating a paradigm shift in child protection from reactive remediation to proactive prevention. Through institutionalized, routine home visits, systematic information gathering, and mandatory reporting mechanisms, the system can swiftly detect and report a spectrum of child-safety risks, such as school dropout, neglect, and abuse before they escalate. Leveraging a dynamic “one-child-one-file” information system and regular household monitoring, child directors conduct continuous surveillance of priority groups, enabling rapid capture and transmission of risk indicators. This “early detection–prompt reporting–early intervention” chain not only heightens the efficiency of crisis response but also reduces the likelihood of long-term harm to children, thereby substantially strengthening the preventive function of the child-protection framework.

5.3 Enhanced Service Delivery

The nationwide rollout of the Child Director System has markedly improved disadvantaged children’s access to multi-dimensional services and substantially raised the integration and efficiency of service provision. In their day-to-day practice, Children Directors weave together resources from education, health, social assistance, psychosocial support, and legal aid, using inter-agency referral and coordination mechanisms to reduce fragmentation and duplication across the service chain. For children confronting multiple adversities, Child Directors conduct comprehensive needs assessments and tailor individualized support plans (Yan, & Zhang, 2022). This case-level, precision-oriented model not only sharpens the relevance and effectiveness of interventions but also significantly lowers the administrative barriers that vulnerable children and their families traditionally face when seeking help. Consequently, it ensures that children receive holistic, timely, and efficient support, greatly enhancing both the accessibility and the efficacy of services.

5.4 Increased Community Awareness and Participation

Beyond improving service delivery, the Child Director System has assumed an educative and mobilizing role within community governance. Through active publicity campaigns and direct outreach, such as lectures, distribution of informational materials, and door-to-door awareness drives—Children Directors have markedly elevated residents’ understanding of children’s rights and the relevant legal framework. This sustained educational effort has embedded child-protection norms in the collective consciousness, cultivating a sense of shared responsibility among families, neighbors, and the wider community. Recognizing that child protection is not a state monopoly but a common obligation, local residents increasingly report concerns and offer support. Children Directors’ cultivation of trust encourages children to disclose problems and families to seek assistance, thereby expanding informal surveillance and support networks. This shift from top-down policy enforcement to bottom-up social co-production has enhanced both the responsiveness and the resilience of the child-protection system.

5.5 Strengthened Institutional Coordination

The institutionalization of the Child Director System has embedded it deeply within the existing grassroots governance framework, powerfully enhancing collaboration between the civil-affairs department and other relevant agencies. Through clearly defined mandates, regular joint meetings, and real-time information-sharing protocols, communication between civil affairs, education, health, public security, and justice has become more fluid and effective. When cases involving child protection emerge, Child Directors can promptly coordinate with public-security and judicial organs to safeguard the child’s physical safety and legal rights; when obstacles to schooling or health care arise, they liaise swiftly with education and health departments. This institutionalized inter-sectoral cooperation dismantles traditional silos and co-creates a coherent, responsive, and resource-integrated ecosystem for child protection, ensuring children receive comprehensive and seamless support.

5.6 Limitations and Ongoing Challenges

While the Child Director System has achieved wide recognition and measurable progress, it is also important to acknowledge several ongoing challenges. Many Child Directors enter the role without a formal background in social work, and although systematic training has been rolled out nationwide, professional expertise in specialized areas, such as psychosocial support or child rights advocacy, still requires further strengthening. In addition, differences in local fiscal capacity mean that resources, allowances, and support services are not always consistent across regions, which may affect the uniformity of implementation. At the community level, Child Directors often need to balance welfare tasks with other governance responsibilities, occasionally leading to blurred role boundaries. Finally, while digital platforms have enhanced efficiency and monitoring, they also bring new demands for data management and raise questions about workload and information coordination. Acknowledging these

challenges alongside the system's strengths provides a more balanced understanding and points to directions for future capacity-building and policy support.

6. Lessons for Global Child Protection Practices

6.1 Government Leadership with Community Embedding

The key to the Child Director System's success lies in its effective integration of child protection into the grassroots governance framework, rather than relying on temporary interventions by external projects or NGOs. By establishing full-time child directors posts in every village and community nationwide, the model guarantees the accessibility, legitimacy, and sustainability of child-protection services. Government leadership confers the necessary authority, policy guarantees, and stable fiscal resources, enabling large-scale and long-term operation. At the same time, Child Directors, rooted in local communities, gain an intimate understanding of cultural contexts and specific needs, allowing them to deliver targeted and human-centred support. This strategy of embedding child-protection responsibilities within the state governance system while leveraging grassroots community strengths effectively overcomes the common pitfalls of traditional child-welfare models, such as uneven resource distribution, limited project lifecycles, and difficulty reaching the "last mile" and offers an important exemplar for building a durable, stable, and universally inclusive child-welfare network.

6.2 Institutionalization through Clear Mandates and Funding

The long-term viability and effectiveness of the Child Director System rest on its well-defined institutional design. First, binding national policy documents explicitly delineate the role's responsibilities, operational procedures, and authority limits, thereby preventing the confusion and inefficiency that often arise from role ambiguity. This clear mandate provides child directors with both legal grounding and standardized protocols for daily practice. Second, the system secures stable, earmarked funding through joint central and local government appropriations, covering operational costs and allowances for every post. Andela, M. and van der Doef, M. (2019) point out that when the resources provided by the work environment meet individuals' developmental needs, they foster positive work behaviors and performance. Such sustained fiscal commitment not only constitutes tangible recognition of the position's importance but also serves as a critical incentive for attracting and retaining competent, dedicated personnel. The combination of a predictable funding stream and a transparent policy framework creates the organizational and material bedrock for a large-scale, grassroots child-protection network, ensuring continuity and professionalism in safeguarding children.

6.3 Capacity Building as an Ongoing Process

Terziev et al. (2017) pointed out that social workers in the context of lifelong learning and continuing vocational training could increase their qualifications and competency and ultimately improve the quality and effectiveness of social work practice. The Child Director System treats capacity-building not as a one-off training event but as an ongoing, systematic process. Recognizing that many appointees lack prior social-work backgrounds, the system employs multi-tiered, multi-modal training delivered at regular intervals to steadily upgrade their professional skills and overall competence. Curricula are comprehensive and in-depth, covering key domains such as child-rights legislation, crisis-intervention techniques, psychological first aid, casework methodologies, and data recording and management. These modules are designed to cultivate composite capabilities in risk identification, needs assessment, and appropriate intervention and support. Innovatively, an online-offline blended learning platform has been established, overcoming geographic constraints and ensuring that even Child Directors in the most remote areas can readily access the latest, high-quality training resources. This sustained investment in, and differentiated supplementation of, professional expertise not only maintains service quality but is also cultivating a grassroots workforce with solid professional standards—an approach of substantial practical value for countries with limited resources and dispersed populations.

6.4 Leveraging Digital Tools for Efficiency

The Child Director System effectively utilizes digital tools to significantly improve work efficiency, management quality, and data transparency. By integrating a national database for children in need and developing user-friendly mobile applications, Child Directors can achieve real-time case reporting, progress tracking, and cross-departmental information sharing. This digital management approach streamlines administrative procedures, minimizes delays and errors inherent in manual processes, and provides a reliable evidence base for policy-making and data-driven decisions. Furthermore, digital tools facilitate more effective interaction between children and social workers, fostering a better environment for children to express their emotions and views, which helps to build trust (Östlund, Lindstedt, Cürüklü, & Blomberg, 2024). This optimization of grassroots service delivery not only reduces the administrative burden on Child Directors but also makes the entire child protection network more

efficient, transparent, and traceable. It offers a viable path for other countries to enhance the effectiveness of their grassroots governance with limited resources.

6.5 Fostering Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

An effective national child-protection system must rest on robust cross-sector coordination and collaboration among government, non-governmental organizations, and all other relevant stakeholders (Freire-Garabal Núñez, 2023). The successful practice of the Child Director System underscores the critical importance of inter-sectoral collaboration and demonstrates how such cooperation can be concretely structured. By establishing key coordination posts—such as child-protection supervisors—the model has created a formalized and routine collaborative network that ensures the civil-affairs department maintains close and efficient links with pivotal actors in education, health, public security, justice, and community organizations. This institutionalized mechanism effectively breaks down departmental silos and information fragmentation, enabling children facing multiple adversities to receive comprehensive, integrated support. Serving as grassroots connectors, Child Directors are able to pool and deploy resources from diverse agencies to deliver seamless, continuous services for children. Experience shows that only by constructing an efficient, child-centred collaborative system can truly holistic and robust child protection be realized (Ball, McElwee, & McManus, 2024).

These elements can offer valuable insights for countries with scattered rural populations, diverse cultural contexts, and limited professional social-work capacity. China's experience shows that, given political commitment, modest fiscal resources, and community participation, it is possible to build and sustain a large-scale, grassroots child-protection network.

6.6 Comparative Insights

While the Chinese Child Director System has distinctive institutional features, its broader relevance becomes clearer when viewed alongside community-based child protection practices in other regions. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, community child protection committees have long played a role in safeguarding children, relying primarily on voluntary participation and customary authority structures (Wessells, 2009). Similarly, in Latin America, grassroots organizations and neighborhood networks often act as informal safety nets for vulnerable children, compensating for the limited reach of formal welfare services. These models demonstrate strong community ownership and cultural legitimacy but frequently struggle with sustainability, limited training, and insufficient integration with formal state systems.

By contrast, China's approach institutionalizes community-level child protection within the national governance framework, ensuring full territorial coverage, standardized responsibilities, and predictable fiscal support. It combines the advantages of community proximity with the authority and resources of the state, thereby overcoming the challenges of fragmentation and short-termism often seen in other regions. At the same time, China has innovated by embedding digital tools and performance evaluation into grassroots practice, mechanisms rarely found in comparable models in the Global South.

This comparative perspective underscores that the Child Director System is not merely a localized experiment but a potentially transferable governance innovation. For countries facing dispersed populations, resource scarcity, or weak professional social work capacity, China's model illustrates how government-led institutionalization, when combined with grassroots embedding, can enhance both the sustainability and effectiveness of child protection.

7. Conclusion

The Child Director System has emerged as a vital pillar in China's evolving child protection architecture. By institutionalizing dedicated child protection roles at the grassroots level, backed by training, resources, and interdepartmental collaboration, the model has significantly improved the reach, responsiveness, and comprehensiveness of services for children in need.

Its success lies not only in the breadth of its coverage but also in the depth of its community integration. The system bridges the gap between national policy and the lived realities of children in villages and urban neighborhoods, embodying the principle that child protection is most effective when it is both locally rooted and systematically supported.

Taken together, this article contributes to the international child protection literature in three ways. It provides an in-depth case study of the institutional design and operation of Child Directors System, an innovation that has received limited attention outside the country. It advances theoretical understanding by linking grassroots practice to institutional and governance analysis, showing how state-led community embedding can enhance sustainability and effectiveness. Finally, it offers a comparative perspective by contrasting China's experience with community protection mechanisms in other regions, thereby extending the applicability of lessons learned and enriching

debates on how child protection can be strengthened globally.

For policymakers and practitioners worldwide, the Child Directors System offers a compelling example of how to operationalize community-based child protection at scale. While adaptations will be necessary to fit different legal, cultural, and resource environments, the core principles: government leadership, community embedding, institutionalization, and cross-sectoral collaboration are universally applicable. As the global community continues to strive toward the goals of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, such grassroots innovations provide both inspiration and practical pathways for action.

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