

Handbook for Implementing Alternative Care of Children Guidelines launched in New York

Hosted by the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations, UNICEF, The Better Care Network and the NGO Committee on UNICEF Working Group on Children without Parental Care, the launch of the handbook *'Moving Forward: Implementing the 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children'* at UNICEF House in New York on the 11th April 2013 marked a milestone in the affirmation of children's rights.

The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children were unanimously welcomed at the UN General Assembly in 2009 to provide "orientations for policy and practice" to address the situation of children who are deprived of parental care or who are at risk of becoming unnecessarily separated from their families. They are grouped around two principles: that alternative care is genuinely needed (the necessity principle) and that, when this is so, it is provided in an appropriate manner (the suitability principle).

Drafted by an international team led by the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) with supervision from an expert steering group that included representatives from International Social Service, SOS Children's Villages International, ATD Fourth World, Better Care Network, Family for Every Child, RELAF, and UNICEF, the Handbook provides practical guidance on moving forward on the road to alternative care provision for children. It highlights implications for policy-making where national governments should provide leadership as well as contributes examples of what is already being effectively done on the ground. Hundreds of professionals from governments, NGOs, UN agencies, and academia fed into the drafting process, which includes promising practices from over 70 countries. The handbook was field tested in Argentina and Malawi facilitated by RELAF, Family for Every Child, and the Better Care Network Malawi.

The significance and anticipation of the handbook was reflected in its launch in New York, which was attended by more than 85 people, including delegations from permanent missions to the United Nations and social sector organizations. The event was introduced by **Susan Bissell, Associate Director for Child Protection at UNICEF**, who began by recalling the history of collaborations and the leadership shown by a number of governments, in particular Brazil, that led to the development of the Guidelines and the UN General Assembly welcoming them in November 2009 on the 20th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Regina Maria Dunlop, Brazil's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, discussed Brazil's own reforms of its alternative care system following a major survey undertaken by the Federal Government in 2002 that highlighted that "*on average a quarter of Brazilian children living in shelters were there because of the impoverished conditions of their families*", and that further research had shown that "*half of the children had been living in institutions for more than two years, shifting from a temporary and exceptional situation to an eventually permanent one, with severe consequences to their development*". Ms. Dunlop highlighted Brazil's key role as Coordinator of the Group of Friends in the development of the Alternative Care Guidelines at the international level, and its continuing work to share experiences with developing countries embarking on similar reforms.

Jennifer Davidson, Director of CELCIS, reminded the audience that the launch of the handbook was both a celebration "*of yet a further step to closing the gap between international policy and local realities for children and families*", but also a "*further call to action [...], given the seriousness of the issue —of the lifelong, personal and societal impacts when we get it wrong for these children*". She presented the different purposes of the handbook and its structure, including the 15 topics through

which the Handbook ‘streamlines’ some of the core provisions of the Guidelines by providing more in-depth explanations to ensure clarity and impact.

Cecilia Anicama, from the office of the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative on Violence against Children highlighted that the protection of children without parental care is a key priority of the mandate of the Special Representative and that her office works in close collaboration with a wide range of actors, including regional organisations. Referring to the body of research showing that children without parental care are at heightened risk of violence and discrimination, in particular children in institutional care, she called for greater recognition of the fact that the *“protection of children from violence and their protection from being without parental care are not only human rights imperatives, and essential dimensions of the rule of law and good governance; but they are also questions of smart economics and sustainable inclusive social development.”* Ms. Anicama commended the Handbook as *“an essential tool that will help to design, assess and evaluate national policies and practices to achieve these goals”* She also announced that the UNICEF regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean together with her office and regional organizations are to launch a Call for Action to end the institutionalization of children under the age of three in that region.

Makmur Sunusi, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Social Affairs in Indonesia also gave an inspiring account of his country’s experience in reforming the alternative care system, responding to the CRC’s recommendations and using the Alternative Care Guidelines as a major reference. The Guidelines have already been used as a basis to develop National Standards of Care for Child Welfare Institutions and, according to Mr Sunusi, *“the Guidelines and the Implementation Handbook will be there to support [Governments] as a major reference for policy change, for the development of standards and services, and as monitoring tools to measure progress.”* Referring to the important role Indonesia is playing as part of the consultations on the post 2015 Development Agenda, Mr. Sunusi quoted from the meeting of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons earlier in the year, stressing that this Agenda is *“first and last about people; the lives they are able to lead, the education they can benefit from, the health they can enjoy and the families they can raise”*. As a result, he emphasized the need to place family strengthening and child protection at the core of governments’ new stated commitments and targets for this framework.

Today there are more than two million children living in residential care facilities¹, and yet at least 80% of these children have at least one living parent. There are many children at a high risk of being unnecessarily separated from their families, and many more requiring alternative forms of care. For all such children, the risks of exploitation, abuse and other violations of their rights are significantly higher than children in strong and supported parental or alternative care. The ***Moving Forward Handbook*** is a source of renewed optimism and practical support to ensure the effective implementation of the Guideline’s, to provide a global platform for sharing practical experiences, and ultimately to secure appropriate care for all children. The Handbook was first launched on the 7th March 2013 in Geneva at the Human Rights Council and a number of other launch and dissemination events are being planned across the globe to highlight the importance of this new tool to support the implementation of the Guidelines.

¹ UNICEF, Progress for Children, A Report Card on Child Protection, September 2008, p. 19