



WHAT IS WORKING

Evidence of effective child protection systems in practice



SUMMARY

This reader is based on a review of the evidence analyzed by K4D Research Helpdesk on effectiveness of child protection systems in low resource settings. The review drew largely on evaluative papers, academic papers and grey literature produced as part of programme assessments commissioned and published by international agencies. The Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development Programme (K4D) of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) provides quick access to evidence and analysis on development policy and programme questions through rapid response and emerging issues reports.

Keywords: Child protection, child protection system, effectiveness, evidence, ineffectiveness

Introduction

Prevention of violence against children (VAC) hinges greatly on proactive measures taken by key stakeholders to develop mechanisms and strategies that keep children safe in homes, schools and communities. These child protection systems require regular modification as old problems are resolved and new threats emerge, thus the systems must remain robust and relevant for prevention efforts.

What are child protection systems?

Child protection systems are the formal and informal structures and functions put in place to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. Child protection systems involve national and local governments, schools, communities, children, civil society actors and a host of other stakeholders whose combined efforts are aimed at preventing and responding to violence against children in all settings.

Box 1: Hindrances to effective child protection systems

1. Data Availability

- recent establishment of systems approach to child protection limits the amount of data available
- low capacity of national systems to gather and process data

2. Quality

The quality of evidence is affected by

- Lack of standardized data collection due to absence of uniform definitions of systemic child protection approaches
- Questions on the validity of measured outcomes owing to insufficient attention to contextual factors in programme design

| Formal Child Protection Systems | Informal Child Protection Systems |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws, policies, strategies and programmes to protect children • Institutional framework to coordinate, monitor and provide oversight for child protection • Formal fostering, guardianship & adoption of children • Juvenile justice • Child protection services by CSOs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parenting • Family and kinship care for children • Traditional, cultural and religious practices that provide a safe and caring environment for children • Community-based mechanisms and practices for protecting children e.g. para-social workers who volunteer to respond to child protection issues |

Sources of overall effectiveness at a systems design level

Multi-sectoral approach

Taking a multi-sectoral approach to child protection that addresses capacity building and system strengthening needs while also targetting harmful social norms

Example: Bringing together sectors that compliment each other to produce positive child protection outcomes for children; these include gender, education, health, etc

Integration of child protection

Integrating child protection into existing inter-sectoral programmes that combine longer term social change with short term tangible 'entry points'

Example: Child protection issues are integral part of the various sectoral strategies and plans

Prevention and response

Addressing both prevention and response in the range of child protection services provided

Example: The system should be effective in responding to the needs of children but at the same time promote prevention of the perpetuation of VAC

Programme design

Understanding and considering underlying socio-economic, cultural and political determinants as a critical part of programme design

Example: Promotion of globally tested and proven approaches such as the INSPIRE Package would help to achieve this

Sources of ineffectiveness at programme level

The sources of ineffectiveness include:

- isolated and vertical programmatic responses, which are ineffective and inefficient when compared to more holistic interventions; (for example, programmes that are issue-based focusing on a single component of what could constitute a system)
- weaknesses in applying results-based planning and management; (for example, when VAC prevention actors undertake activities without clear logic simply because that is how they have always done things)
- lack of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Improving effectiveness

The range of interventions which evidence suggests can improve effectiveness among existing child protection systems include:

- strengthening systematic capacity and coordination mechanisms in order to improve the effectiveness of partnership and community mobilization efforts
- planning for and implementing meaningful participation of children, families and communities more systematically;
- strengthening equity-based programming to address any noted gaps in provision
- reviewing and improving child safeguarding and associated ethical policies.

Further Reading

Davis, Rebecca; McCaffery, Jim & Conticini, Alessandro. 2012. Strengthening Child Protection Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. Lessons Learned and Practical Steps 69-74.

Joynes, C. & Mattingly, J. (2018). A systems approach to child protection. K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

Wessells, M. G. (2015). Bottom-up approaches to strengthening child protection systems: Placing children, families, and communities at the center. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 43, 8–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.04.006>

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Box 2: Effectiveness of child protection systems

Evidence on effectiveness is divided into two sets of outcomes:

1. Outcomes linked to putting in place necessary child protection system and its components
2. outcomes linked to improved child protection results

Evidence of the effectiveness of child protection systems in low-resource settings is focused on the first set of outcomes. This is due to:

- A historical focus on process and output indicators for interventions rather than on impact on children.
- Assessment of effectiveness based more on inputs or processes than outcomes or impact.
- Assessment of whether the system adheres with a theoretical model, is suited to the national and local context, and, has the capacity to function according to the framework design.