

The systems approach to child protection¹

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Question

1. *What is the systems approach?*
2. *What evidence is there on the outcomes of taking a systems approach to child protection?*

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¹ This paper is the second part of three-part study on child protection undertaken for DFID. The first and third papers are 'Issues to consider in designing a child protection system', and 'Examples of effective child protection systems in practice'.

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1. Summary

There are a number of principles for systems design and operation that can be applied across a range of social sectors (Wulczyn et al 2010: 2, 10-18; Delaney et al. 2014: 13-14). These principles include:

- Organising all systems components around a common goal or vision in order to provide the strategic direction for system implementation (Delaney et al. 2014: 13; Wulczyn et al. 2010: 2, 11).
- Defining the activities of each system on the basis of a specific set of functions, structures and capacities that interact and influence each other (Wulczyn et al 2010: 2, 12-13; Delaney et al. 2014: 13), while also establishing clear systemic boundaries, roles and responsibilities in order to ensure accountability and good governance (Delaney et al. 2014: 14).
- Involving a wide range of different actors as part of the system, including across and within sectors in horizontal and vertical networks (Delaney et al. 2014: 13; Wulczyn et al. 2010: 10).
- Ensuring that the shape, functions and actions of the system should always be grounded in the context in which it operates, and make sense to the communities who are the end users (Wulczyn et al. 2010: 2, 11).

These basic principles of design are reflected in the system-based approaches to child protection services in a development context as outlined in a range of framework, guideline and programme assessment documents (Forbes et al., 2011; UNHCR 2010; Save The Children 2008; World Vision 2011; Wulczyn et al. 2010; Delaney et al. 2014). These documents also provide an overview of the range of components required for systems implementation, including, for example, legal frameworks; regulation and standards; budget allocation; mechanisms for coordination across government and between sectors; a skilled child protection workforce; robust data; and strong mechanisms for the engagement of children, communities and the general public in systems design. However, some commentators (Stuckenbruck 2018; Krueger 2014; Thompstone et al. 2014) critique the extent to which these principles are reflected in child protection systems development programmes implemented over the last decade.

There is limited evidence of the impact of a systems approach to child protection in a development context. Across many contexts and national settings, the consensus is that the necessary legal and policy frameworks for child protection are in place at national level, but programme implementation and service delivery still lags far behind (Stuckenbruck 2018: 12). Many reviewers consider the systems approach to child protection in low-resource settings to be a work in progress (Thompstone et al. 2014; UNICEF 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Kruger 2014; Wessells et al. 2014). This is in part due to practical and/or logistical factors that have hampered progress, such as capacity limitations at national state level in many countries (Stukenbruck 2018).

There is a significant gap in the availability of evidence, making an assessment of the impact of a systems approach extremely difficult (Krueger et al. 2014; Krueger 2014: 30; Stuckenbruck 2018). Much of the research and monitoring and evaluation focuses on systems-development programmes delivered by international agencies, rather than on national state-led child protection systems. In addition, there has been more focus on reporting on progress in the attainment of

targets associated with systemic development rather than with child protection outcomes (Kreuger et al. 2014). This is reflected in the evidence presented in a range of key regional surveys featured in this review (Thompstone et al. 2014; UNICEF 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Davis et al. 2012), as well as in other examples of evidence included in this review (e.g. Krueger 2014; Delaney et al. 2014; Ethicore 2017). Within the time available, the review was only able to identify limited examples where overviews of child protection systems development inputs are accompanied by evidence of impact on child protection, rather than just outcomes in terms of targets associated with systems strengthening.

The reviewed evidence was frequently produced as part of programme assessments commissioned and published by international agencies, but undertaken by external researchers using mixed-method approaches. As discussed above, while the evidence reviewed was of good quality, there were also certain limitations to the content provided.

The evidence and commentaries on evidence gathered and included in this review did not discuss gender or disability.

2. What is a systems approach?

Defining a systems approach within the social sector

In outlining the key elements of a systems approach, Delaney et al. (2014: 13-14) provide a number of principles for systems design and operation that can be applied across a range of social sectors, including justice, health and education, as well as child protection. Many of these are supported by Wulczyn et al (2010: 2, 10-18). Both also highlight there are important lessons about systems development in other sectors, such as health and justice, that can be applied to child protection.

These principles include acknowledging, firstly, that all systems should be made up of a collection of different components organised around realising a common goal or vision. This provides the strategic direction for system implementation, articulates how the different components of the system fit together and reinforce each other and helps frame systemic strengthening activities (Delaney et al. 2014: 13; Wulczyn et al. 2010: 2, 11).

Secondly, each system is characterised by specific sets of functions, structures and capacities. These define how the system will operate in practice on a day-to-day basis (Wulczyn et al 2010: 2, 12-13). In a well-designed and functional system changes to one component have an effect on all the others. The different components of the system are constantly interacting with and influencing each other. For example, in the context of government social sector systems, changes in laws or financial resources will have an impact on the kind of services that are provided, the standards or guidelines that regulate these services, and the roles and responsibilities of the different actors involved (Delaney et al. 2014: 13).

Thirdly, each system involves a wide range of different actors, including across sectors in a horizontal network, and within sectors in a vertical network. All have essential functions to play, and a principal feature of an effective system is that it takes into account and clearly defines the

complementary role of all actors rather than creating divisions or contradictions between them (Delaney et al. 2014: 13; Wulczyn et al 2010: 10).

Fourthly, social service systems do not exist in isolation and are constantly interacting with other systems. In the context of child protection, examples include the justice, social welfare, education and health systems (Delaney et al. 2014: 13). However, as different systems exist alongside and interact with each other it is important to establish clear boundaries for each system, and define its structures, its functions, the necessary capacities and resources to enable it to operate in an optimal way, and the management and governance of the system. This promotes greater accountability: if the different actors know what they are responsible for then it is easier to hold them to account (Delaney et al. 2014: 14). In this regard, Wulczyn et al (2010: 2, 11-14) also highlight the importance of mechanisms for coordinating the interaction of agencies and other actors across the various subsystems, and for adaption and flexibility across all actors in responding to systemic and contextual change.

Fifthly, while there are a series of guiding principles for system development, Delaney et al. (2014) state that there is no one way to design a system, and the shape, functions and actions of the system should always be grounded in the context in which it operates. For example, child protection systems need to fit with their context and make sense to the communities who are the end users. Wulczyn et al (2010: 2, 11) go further, stating that all systems should in fact reflect a nested structure of child protection based on families or kin, who live in communities, which exist within a wider societal system. In either case, the way laws are framed, policies designed and services are delivered needs to reflect the socio-cultural context and be understood as being beneficial or adding value to the protection of children. If they do not, there is significant evidence that they will not be used (Wessells et al. 2015; Krueger et al. 2014; Thompstone et al. 2014).

Systems approaches to child protection services

The child protection sector has developed rapidly over the past 15 years. From initially being mainstreamed within other sectors, through issue-based programming with specific groups of vulnerable children, there has been a move towards providing a more comprehensive solution to meet the diverse protection needs of children through a systems approach. At a practical level, there has been a consensus on the shift away from an issue-based approach, with a growing awareness that issue-based child protection responses may deal with specific problems, but does so in a fragmented manner that fails to provide comprehensive protection for all children. A shift to a systems approach to child protection implies taking a more holistic, sustainable and long-term system-wide approach that addresses the wider vulnerabilities of children and their families and includes preventative strategies (Forbes et al. 2011: 1).

Wulczyn et al (2010) suggest the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has had a strong influence on the development of a systems approach to child protection. It reports that efforts around child protection have traditionally focused on single issues such as child trafficking, street children, child labour, emergencies, institutionalization of children, HIV/AIDS, or sexual abuse. Although these have generally produced some benefit to the focus group, such a diffused approach has often resulted in a fragmented protection response, which is in itself inefficient and results in pockets of remaining, unmet need. They argue that any strategy to reduce the number of street children, for example, would need to address the immediate protection needs of street children but would also need to address the risk factors that push

children into living on the street. This illustrates the need for a holistic view of child protection and, rather than taking each child safety concern in isolation, promotes a systems approach.

Save The Children (2009) also report that the earlier focus on single issues of child protection has informed current practice and led to a better understanding of how to work with children affected by different circumstances. It stresses that many children do face multiple problems, for example a child that has been the subject of abuse or violence at home and is now living on the street and in conflict with the law, and that whilst a single focused approach may resolve one issue it seldom provides a comprehensive solution. This focus on single issues can be perpetuated by governments and donors who favour one issue for a time and then change funding and interest to another centre of focus. The report suggests that whilst there may continue to be a need for issue-based programmes, focusing only on single issues can prevent the development of more effective and long-term responses to child protection problems and there therefore is a need to combine both approaches. It also finds this may be particularly relevant in emergency settings.

In this context, there is significant evidence of an emerging systems-based model of child protection within international development. For example, the terminology of a 'child protection system' is now almost universal in many countries in East Asia and Pacific (Thompstone et al 2014: 74). Numerous agencies including UNICEF, Save The Children and UNHCR are described as investing considerable energy and resources in defining and implementing a systems approach to child protection (Forbes et al. 2011: 1). However, this transition to a systems-based approach is still at an early stage of investment, development and application.

However, as yet there is no internationally agreed definition of this systems approach to child protection. The reviewed evidence suggests there is general agreement that the main aims of a systems approach to child protection are to strengthen both the protective environment around children, as well as the capacity of children themselves to fulfil their rights to protection from abuse, neglect and other forms of violence and ensure their well-being. At the same time Wulczyn et al (2010: 2) found enormous variation in what stakeholders perceived as appropriate activities for a child protection system and in the degree to which responsibility for such activities was shared with other community and governmental entities.

Davis et al. (2012: 15-16) summarise the work of a range of international agencies in defining the key elements and processes associated with building and strengthening child protection systems in order to provide guidance to national governments. They conclude that these various child protection system frameworks utilize similar structural components and processes with varying levels of complexity. For example:

- The UNHCR framework (UNHCR, 2010) emphasises a functioning child protection system that is informed by children's views and experiences and strengthens families in the care and protection of their children.
- The Save The Children approach (Save The Children, 2008) is summarised as outlining the critical components of national child protection systems and emphasising the importance of community-based mechanisms at the grassroots level that allow for immediate action. It also connects child and family support mechanisms in the community with child-friendly services at all levels, regulated by quality standards and

delivered by the government or accredited social agencies, which helps in scaling up and providing wider coverage in the short term.

- World Vision's approach (World Vision, 2011) is seen as similar, linking laws, services and capacities with a circle of care concept and utilizing a child-focused resilience and participatory approach which stresses coordination, cooperation and collaborative mechanisms.

Davis et al. (2014: 16) conclude that, ultimately, these frameworks are designed to provide guidance for national governments and international organizations by highlighting components that would be found in any child protection systems and, hopefully, stimulate stakeholder discussions on the implementation of system-strengthening initiatives within their own contexts. They highlight that the application of any framework must reflect the national and local context, including cultural diversity, resources and level of stability.

Delaney et al (2014:11) refer to the Terre des hommes' thematic policy, *Enhancing Child Protection Systems (2012)* which defines a child protection system as: '*a coherent set of actions and actors, in which the child is the starting point, and which aims to guarantee the rights and well-being of the child by constructing synergies within and between protective environments*'. This reinforces the comprehensive nature of a systems approach which, according to Forbes et al. (2011: 2), should aim to strengthen both the system to protect children, whilst at the same time strengthening children's capacity to fulfil their rights to be protected from abuse, neglect and violence. They suggest a systems approach to child protection should be sufficiently flexible and robust to implement a wide range of interventions for the benefit of all children in various situations, while simultaneously addressing, promoting and advocating for the interests of significantly under-represented, marginalised or vulnerable children in a particular situation or context. This is similar to the approach taken by Save The Children (2008), indicating that whilst child protection systems are a more comprehensive, adaptable and sustainable response than issue-based programmes, they are not mutually exclusive of each other. They argue that local or national child protection systems can be strengthened where issue-based child protection programmes and services are integrated into them.

Further to this, Forbes et al. (2011: 1-2) describe a systems approach as addressing child protection more holistically, bringing greater focus on prevention, and strengthening the critical roles and assets of the key actors responsible for child protection. Importantly, it also utilises a programming approach that integrates and connects with activities for advocacy, humanitarian emergency and long-term development programming while working at all levels of the ecology of the child.

Wulczyn et al. (2010: 2, 21-23) remind us that child protection relies on people and organisations being properly equipped to carry out the work. They place child protection systems within the context of the economic, social, political and cultural systems and also within the broader system of social protection. This means child protection systems need to collaborate with and respond to other systems they are operating alongside.

This is a theme raised by many others in a range of international contexts, including Save The Children (2008), Krueger et al. (2014), Thompstone et al. (2014) and Wessells (2015). Research has emphasised the different ways in which child wellbeing, child protection and family welfare are understood globally, emphasising the child protection systems in all contexts mirror the cultural and institutional contexts in which they have evolved (Freymond & Cameron 2006). The

emerging body of evidence has emphasised the need for donors and practitioners to include non-western typologies of national child and family welfare systems in their thinking and explore the caring practices of families and communities (Krueger et al. 2014).

However, in discussing the evolution of systems thinking for child protection services between 2008-2018, particularly in low-resource or developmental settings, Stuckenbruck (2018: 10) highlights a number of issues that emerged from this 'first wave' model of development for child protection systems, including:

- Placing too much emphasis on government accountability, particularly when many governments suffered from weak technical and managerial capacity.
- Emphasising state-led legal and policy development while neglecting systems for implementation and service delivery.
- At a design level, creating a false dichotomy between issues-based models and systems-based models.
- Inadequate research on social and cultural practices and expectations, leading to many systems being developed with an incomplete understanding of contextual conceptions and existing informal practices for child protection.

Stuckenbruck also points towards recent evidence of greater understanding of these factors, particularly in relation to ensuring greater contextual relevance of services (Stuckenbruck 2018: 11). In support of this, in an evaluation of child protection programming in South East Asia, Krueger (2014: 12) notes that key global strategy frameworks for child protection systems developed as part of the first wave (e.g. Save The Children, World Vision International etc.) would have benefitted from updating in response to such emerging learning on child protection systems.

System components within child protection services

Save The Children (2008) stress the need for systems to have the means to identify those children at risk of having their rights violated and by whom. It is fundamental to know who is in need of protection, why and the action that needs to be taken. They suggest child protection systems are made of a set of coordinated components that work together to strengthen the protective environment around each child. These components include:

- a strong legal and policy framework for child protection that are compliant with CRC and other international good practice
- adequate budget allocation
- multi-sectoral coordination at different levels across government and between sectors
- effective regulation, minimum standards, and oversight
- child-friendly preventive and responsive services
- a skilled child protection workforce, that is supervised and regulated
- robust data on child protection issues and good practices
- is responsive to children's voice and participation
- requires an aware and supportive public

Similarly, a report by UNICEF (2013) in association with UNHCR, Save The Children and World Vision outlines a child protection system to be comprised of: human resources, finance, laws and policies, governance, monitoring and data collection, together with protection and response services and care management. They identify the different actors involved to be: children, families, communities, those working at subnational or national level and those working internationally. They consider the most important component to be the relationships and interactions between and among these components and these actors within the system. They claim therefore it is only really the outcomes of these interactions that comprise the system. On behalf of World Vision International, Forbes et al. (2011: 4-10) outline a similar selection of key functions, as does Stuckenbruck (2018: 9), who places an additional emphasis on accountability as a key function.

A report by Child Frontiers (2016) on behalf of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action identifies that, based on a review of definitions from various organisations, child protection systems consist of collection of components set in a specific context that are connected around a common goal to protect children. In terms of how these components interact, the review concludes that, as mechanisms, they:

- operate at different levels from child to government and to international actors
- operate at varying levels of formality
- are unique to the context in which they exist – reflecting and influenced by sociocultural norms, perceptions and behaviours
- operate according to how the different components and actors perceive their role and how these are perceived
- change, adapt and evolve in line with changes in the external environment and internal changes within the system
- rely significantly on collaboration with other sectors and systems to deliver a full range of child protection measures

3. Assessing available evidence of outcomes of a systems approach to child protection

Many reviewers (Thompstone et al. 2014; UNICEF 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Kruger 2014; Wessells et al. 2014) consider the development of systems approaches to child protection in many low-resource settings as a work in progress. There is also increasing recognition of the shortcomings of a number of initial approaches to systems development that have been utilised over the last decade, and that anticipated evidence of impact and results have suffered as a consequence. Across many contexts and national settings, the consensus is that the necessary legal and policy frameworks for child protection are in place at national level, but programme implementation and service delivery still lags far behind. There is currently discussion of why a focus on systems-based approaches has not delivered more tangible results for children, and suggestions that there may be a return back towards taking more of an issues-based focus to child protection (Stuckenbruck 2018: 12). This last point is supported by Tew (2017: 11) who, in

his review of international development aid spending on child protection, cites a significant list of country-specific child protection programmes funded by donors, all of which can be categorised as issues-based rather than system-wide.

Stuckenbruck (2018: 14) argues that the reasons behind this general situation rests on a number of key logistical factors at national level:

- There is an ongoing and significant shortfall in the professional cadre of child protection workers and others in the social welfare workforce, from leadership to front-line workers.
- In many settings, those ministries held responsible for coordinating child protection systems (typically 'social welfare' ministries) are chronically under-resourced, have no central convening power, and no capacity for implementation, oversight and governance of services.
- Due to systemic weaknesses at local state level, civil society and the non-formal community-based sector continues delivering critical services to communities, but with little or no oversight or regulatory action from government.

These conclusions are supported by evidence of systemic limitations from a range of contexts, including Thompstone et al. (2014), Krueger et al. (2014) Wessells (2015) and Prickett et al. (2013). In essence, in such contexts, current reform models are advised to advocate for an emphasis on service provision through *governance* rather than *government* (Stuckenbruck 2018: 18).

One of the major challenges in assessing the impact of a national systems-based approach to child protection is limited evidence (Krueger et al. 2014; Krueger 2014: 30). In many contexts, there is 'almost non-existent data' available on the demand for child protection services or on the expected outcomes for children, for a number of reasons (Stuckenbruck 2018: 19).

Firstly, evidence on the impact of taking a systems approach to child protection is still relatively limited, partly because systems change at national level is a long-term process and it will take time for it to be possible to measure the substantive results. In many cases, it is too soon for evidence of a programme's ultimate effectiveness, especially those programmes with a long-term projection of results (Krueger 2014: 30).

Secondly, the general lack of capacity within the child protection sector at national levels often means that any data currently collected remains unanalysed or processed and does not lead to increases in knowledge or understanding of the sector (UNICEF 2015a: 15; UNICEF 2015c: 16). On this basis, it is difficult for existing systems to design or plan prevention and response services adequately, or to develop M&E frameworks that can inform discussions over evidence of impact (Stuckenbruck 2018: 21). However, it is also the case that, in a discussion of M&E frameworks, Davis et al. (2012: 48-56) provide a range of country-based examples of approaches to monitoring and evaluation within child protection across sub-Saharan Africa, including examples from Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, South Africa, Benin, Namibia, Togo and Madagascar.

Thirdly, based in part on the existing limitations facing government-based systems (Stuckenbruck 2018: 14) and the relatively new conception of child protection at state level, especially in the form espoused by international organisations (Krueger 2014: 9), evidence related to wholly domestic and state-led child protection systems is most unlikely to be available. Importantly, the

majority of available country-level evidence relates instead to child protection programming and systems development undertaken by international agencies (Krueger 2014: 9), including, for example, Save The Children, Terre des Hommes, UNICEF, World Vision and others.

Some evidence of outcomes

In term of outcomes, evidence on the reported impact of taking a systems approach to child protection is divided into two main sets of outcomes:

- The establishment of necessary child protection mechanisms and systemic components.
- Improved child protection outcomes for children.

Impact on child protection systems

In general, assessment of existing child protection systems tends to focus on whether the system adheres with a theoretical model, is suited to national and sub-national context, and, to some extent, an assessment of its capacity. This is the case, for example, with Thompstone et al's survey of 14 national child protection systems from countries across East Asia and the Pacific (Thompstone et al. 2014), with UNICEF's studies in Ghana, Kenya, Senegal and Tanzania (UNICEF 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d), and with Davis et al's study of child protection systems strengthening across sub-Saharan Africa (Davis et al. 2012). The UNICEF documents provide substantial data-based evidence outlining child protection needs and the areas of focus in each context, but their emphasis is on how this data has informed the systems development process, rather than how the systems development process has impacted on addressing those needs.

Interestingly, similar patterns on the availability of evidence also appear when looking at assessments of the impact of sub-systemic components associated with child protection in low-resource settings, such as capacity building for social workers, community leaders and local systems building. For example, in Eyber et al. (2018), Ross et al. (2015) and Muriuki & Moss (2016), any presentation of outcomes focuses on the attainment of input targets – e.g. numbers trained, evidence of understanding or good practice, establishment of key mechanisms – and does not provide evidence of impact in terms of child protection outcomes.

As a result, there is less emphasis within assessments on how well systems are functioning in practice (Krueger et al. 2014). For example, in an evaluation of three Save The Children programmes in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Papua New Guinea, Krueger (2014: 30) acknowledges that some evidence demonstrates the delivery of specific inputs and levels of progress (e.g. numbers of training sessions, people trained, modules developed and children's clubs established) but notes that such indicators generally measure programme processes and do not demonstrate *impact*. He also noted a tendency for such programmes to rely on the use of 'statements' or 'stories' as the primary measure for demonstrating the impact of large-scale programmes with ambitious goals. Similar examples can be found in Save The Children's own publications on child protection programming, such as the China case study 'Promoting Justice for Children in China' (Save The Children, 2014).

However, in assessing the contribution made to child protection systems under Save The Children's Cambodia, Lao PDR and Papua New Guinea programmes, Krueger (2014) notes a broad range of issues that have undermined their effectiveness in supporting the development of

a functioning child protection system. Firstly, he notes a generally unclear delineation between child protection and children's rights at programme level. The programmes are ostensibly focused on child protection, as defined by their titles, objectives and results frameworks, but in reality maintain an equally, if not more, important emphasis on issues associated with child participation and the promotion of children's rights. This, he concludes, is largely as a result of Save The Children's institutional priorities (see, for example, Save The Children 2010) rather than based on country needs (Krueger 2014: 10, 11). This emphasis on children's rights is, in its turn, reflected in the evidence presented, with those programmes showing evidence of responding to a wide range of rights issues while being 'seriously limited' in addressing core child protection issues (Krueger 2014: 12).

Secondly, Krueger (2014: 13) states that these programmes appear to have only made a limited consideration of each of their different legal, systemic and cultural contexts. Although cultural and social aspects are of great relevance in all three countries, Krueger states that there is no evidence in the programme documentation on an appreciation of this, even though these concepts have deep and widespread ramifications for the work of child protection (Krueger 2014: 26). On this basis, he concludes that the systems approaches developed under these programmes are not fully viable for delivery at national scale (Krueger 2014: 27).

Thirdly, Krueger concludes that, across the three countries, the Save The Children programming did not fully engage with the existing state frameworks – primarily due to those frameworks' existing weaknesses – and, as a result, operated outside of the child protection system rather than regard its programmes as integral parts of the system. As such, they were not fully in a position to contribute to systems development as understood from a child protection perspective rather than an institutional or programmatic perspective (Krueger 2014: 29). These design issues combined with human resources constraints had a negative impact on programme design, implementation and innovation, affecting the long-term sustainability of these programmes (Krueger 2014: 17, 31).

In another example, Delaney et al. (2014), reporting on Terre des Hommes' programming, discusses their activities in terms of working towards outcomes in system strengthening, rather than their impact on child protection outcomes. Delaney et al (2014) state that, in Albania, Terre des Hommes' national programme established laws, rules, procedures and standards for service provision through developing a national protocol for protecting children and the recognition of Child Protection Units at district level. This has provided a more solid basis for garnering state support for the services, thereby increasing the financial resources available for child protection. The establishment of child protection network meetings at local and national levels contributed to enhanced cooperation between child protection actors. Finally, a national in-service training curriculum, developed in conjunction with the University of Tirana and including a specific focus on minimum standards for service provision, is available to all child protection agencies, thereby contributing to the training of practitioners and the improvement of service quality (Delaney et al. 2014: 22). However, while these systemic targets have been achieved, there is no reported evidence of the subsequent impact on service delivery.

Impact on child protection outcomes

Within the time available, the review was only able to identify limited examples where overviews of child protection systems development inputs are accompanied by evidence of impact on child protection, rather than just outcomes in terms of targets associated with systems strengthening.

World Vision's project in Sunsari and Udayapur districts set out to create a sustainable and localised child protection system aligned with government priorities, as a means of addressing issues arising from local weaknesses in Nepal's national child protection system (Ethicore 2017: 8). A systems development *project* rather than a full national programme, it firstly worked with local government staff (the district Child Rights Officer) to strengthen otherwise non-functional local legislative bodies (the District Welfare Board). Following this, it then facilitated inter-government department dialogue to encourage the establishment of prescribed local community-based structures to whom child protection cases could be reported (Village Development Committees VDCs and Village Child Protection and Promotion Committees). Once the system was in place, the project then worked with the community-based committees to ensure full understanding and ownership of the system, and also brought in the local agents from a range of other sectors (police, health workers, school management committees and teachers) to strengthen systemic planning at the village and district levels (Ethicore 2017: 9).

Community participation and ownership was at the core of the project, and other key features associated with delivery included:

- Facilitating dialogue and collaboration between government departments to implement local child protection structures
- Fostering multi-stakeholder engagement at multiple levels to build a sense of community responsibility for child protection, and an understanding of the systems and structures in place to address child protection issues.
- Enhancing the capacity of various community groups as well as local cross-sectoral agents,
- Taking a child centred approach by building the capacity of children to recognise abuse, listening to children and encompassing their feedback into programme design, and designing local structures around the needs of children for more relevant local services.

(Ethicore 2017: 10)

The reported evidence of outcomes within the target districts include an increase in the reporting and resolution of child protection cases - from zero cases reported to 421 cases reported and resolved between 2011 and 2016, with many others being informally resolved in communities. In addition, qualitative data gathered also reports a substantial increase in children's identification of and resistance to abuse and increased community trust in mechanisms for the reporting and referral of child abuse cases (Ethicore 2017: 11). Finally, in terms of sustainability of the system, the project reports that formal systems for child protection established and running at district and village level, in the form of 2 functional district boards and 13 functional village committees, together with 15% of those villages' yearly development budgets allocated to child protection (Ethicore 2017: 12). The study concludes that this approach of using law-mandated national and district structures to create a sustainable child protection system at local level can work well in

countries where the government has already put in place specific child protection policies, but is struggling with their implementation (Ethicore 2017: 13).

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