

Child Welfare In Developing Nations: Understanding And Monitoring The Pace Of Reform

In recent years, developing nations in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia have moved toward reforming their child welfare systems, paying closer attention to foster care, community-based social services, and other alternatives to the common Soviet-era practice of placing children from vulnerable families in state-run institutions.

The progress of reform, however, is uneven across nations. Considerable differences exist in nations' rates of developing alternatives to institutionalization, rewriting national child welfare policy, financing reform, and other critical issues.

Measuring the progress of reform is important to international agencies concerned with improving child welfare in developing nations. However, without a reliable tool for assessing child welfare reform across countries, agencies have been denied the depth of understanding necessary to more precisely target interventions and evaluate their effectiveness.

One agency interested in such a tool is USAID, the principal U.S. agency for providing humanitarian and other assistance to improve lives within developing countries. Last year, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) began to investigate the idea of creating an index that could advance the understanding of child welfare and child welfare reform in 21 nations undergoing critical social transition in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. OCD's work is part of a larger USAID contract awarded to Washington, DC-based Creative Associates International, Inc., and subcontracts to the School of Education at Pitt, that focus on issues related to the region's social transition.

The project pertains to the nations of Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Montenegro, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

This Special Report explores the need for developing a comprehensive strategy for assessing child welfare and reform in those developing nations, the challenges involved, and the model of strategic analysis that emerged from the OCD research.

The Problem

Social transition is in various stages in these nations. One practice many of these nations are abandoning is the heavy reliance on institutions to house children who are no longer living with their parents for one reason or another.

During the Soviet era, communist regimes enforced a child welfare system that encouraged families who had difficulty caring for their children to place them in state-run institutions. Those who gave up custody of their children included parents with a disabled child, low income parents, the unemployed, and parents with substance abuse problems and mental health. Large institutions were widely used to house these "social orphans," often in poor conditions that resulted in attachment disorders, developmental deficits, and diminished prospects for stable relationships or employment.

In Russia, for example, 70% of the children in three state-run St. Petersburg orphanages were found to be physically or mentally delayed at the beginning of a collaborative project launched in 2000 by OCD and Russian researchers to promote the social-emotional development of children in the institutions. Researchers found that little attention had been given to the social-emotional development of children in orphanages that otherwise offered adequate medical care, nutrition, safety, staff: child ratios and other resources. Three years after interventions and structural changes were implemented at one of the orphanages, the social-emotional development of its children significantly improved, as did their health and physical growth.¹

As the countries move away from the centralization

and wholesale institutionalization of the past, they are developing alternatives such as foster care, kinship and guardian care, domestic adoption, reunification with biological parents, and community-based social services. In several countries, particularly Russia, international adoption has also removed children from state-run institutions and placed them with families in the United States and other nations.

Child Well-Being

Most available indices related to children in the region focus on child well-being and offer a picture of the general health, education and economic status of children. For example, the European Union Index of Child Well-Being, one of the most ambitious, ranks countries using 51 indicators in 23 domains that include relative child income/poverty, parental unemployment, health at birth, immunizations, educational attainment, housing problems, and child mortality.

USAID's interest, however, is in developing a method of assessing child welfare – issues related to vulnerable children whose care is provided by government, social organizations, and other non-relatives due to family issues such as financial hardship, substance abuse, mental health problems, child abuse and neglect, and family disintegration.

Child Welfare Reform

OCD researchers determined that understanding the status of child welfare in a country requires looking at indicators reflecting children not living with parents, their care arrangements, and issues such as child abuse and neglect. In addition, signs of progress related to child welfare reform need to be examined, including information related to the policies, services, monitoring and implementation of reforms.

However, creating an index for comparing child welfare and reform across nations presents a number of challenges. Individual situations vary from nation to nation. Gaps between stated policy and implementation are common among nations in the regions. Measuring the progress of reform requires data gathered over a period of time, rather than a single-point-in-time snapshot. Available information related to child welfare reform is scattered across national ministries, statistical agencies, and other sources. Missing information is a problem.

In addition, child welfare issues are politically and emotionally charged in the 21 nations OCD examined. The changes made within countries and the attention they receive are often influenced as much by ideology and value as data, and policies and indicators are often ambiguous as to what is associated with the best interests of children.

An Approach To Monitoring Child Welfare Reform

The central challenge was to develop a strategy that accounts for both quantitative and qualitative information, makes room for judgments and ambiguities, and allows for a one-time snapshot as well as a sustainable process of gauging the progress of child welfare reform in the region over time.

Researchers determined that it was crucial to embrace the guiding principle for those who act on the behalf of children stated in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

Such an emphasis meant that for each indication of change in the child welfare system, the methodology would focus on the question, "What evidence exists to show that the action taken serves the best interests of the child?"

Few indicators of child welfare are routinely collected by international organizations or individual countries, including data on important issues, such child abuse and neglect. Also, it is not always clear at first glance whether certain indicators are in the best interests of children. For example, whether an increasing foster care placements is in the best interest of children depends on the quality of the foster care system as well as the quality of other care options.

OCD researchers concluded that a comprehensive strategy for understanding child welfare and reform defies using a single index of quantitative data. Instead, they proposed a three-tiered strategy that pairs multiple statistical indicators with qualitative information about policies, systems, and outcomes collected within each country.

The strategy begins with a "marker of child welfare" that offers a single quantitative index of the percentage of children without permanent parental care within a country, then progresses to an examination of a broader set of interpretive indicators, and finally to an intensive analysis of child welfare within individual nations by experts in the field.

Child Welfare Marker

As a general measure of child welfare, a marker was created from an existing international data base² that captures the percentage of children within each country who are without permanent parental care – the primary global child welfare problem in the region.

The marker, while imprecise, provides a simple between-country comparison of the estimated percentage of children ages birth to 17 years who are not permanently in the care of their parents, including children in orphanages or

other residential care settings, children with disabilities in similar care arrangements, and children in foster-care. The marker can also be presented to show the rate of non-parental care relative to each nation's economic resources.

One benefit of the marker is that the percentage of children without parental care can be unambiguously interpreted: Fewer children without parental care is in the best interests of children and the country.

Using data from 2000-2004, the marker shows Russia, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Romania with the highest rates of children without parental care and Albania and Turkmenistan with the lowest. Used alone, however, the marker is limited in the depth of understanding it can provide. For example, although Russia, Belarus, and Moldova were among the nations with the highest rates of children not in the custody of their parents, the marker does indicate whether these nations are among the worst or best at coping with these children or at making progress toward improving their care systems.

Interpretive Indicators

Most countries in the region are attempting to care for children living without parents.³⁻⁴

The next level of analysis includes indicators of alternative care arrangements that offer insight into how countries care for these children. In addition, indicators of factors that lead children to be separated from their parents are examined to help target prevention efforts, including financial inability, single/teenage mothers, children with disabilities and adolescent problem behavior.

The percentage of children in each alternative care arrangement and trends in those numbers over time help in understanding the nature and progress of a country's efforts toward dealing with children without parental care. As a basic first strategy, available indicators are plotted over years to show the numbers and rates of children in three major care alternatives: residential institutions, foster care/guardianship arrangements, and adoptions.

When applied to the 21 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, the indicators show that institutionalization is still the predominant alternative to parental care in the region. In only five nations, the number of children in foster care is greater than or equal to the number in residential care, but the use of foster care is rising noticeably in only three countries.

Adoption represents only a small fraction of the children in formal care in all countries. The small number of domestic and international adoptions suggests a general lack of permanency planning for children in foster care, even in countries where the use of foster care is increasing.

Nevertheless, preferences were not assigned to any alternative care arrangements. Researchers state that determining whether a certain type of care arrangement is positive or negative in terms of the best interests of children requires additional information about the quality of all available care options as well as more information related to the policies, services, capacity of professional personnel, and systems for monitoring and evaluation within each country.

Within-Country Analysis

To complete the analysis of child welfare and reform in the 21 developing nations, a third level was designed to take a more specific, expert, and subjective look at what each country is doing in four general areas found to be critical to increasing capacity and improving the child welfare systems in the region.

Those areas are described in a previous analysis of five countries in the region as the "four pillars" – policy and legal framework related to child welfare, structure and types of programs and services, professional personnel capacity, and outcomes and performance indicators.⁵⁻⁶

This level of analysis is the most complex, subjective, and expensive of the three proposed, and the information gained is limited to each individual country. However, it recognizes the complexity of child welfare across developing nations where progress is uneven, available information is scattered, and circumstances and events unique to individual nations can profoundly influence the progress of reform.

No index of child welfare statistical indicators is produced at this level. Instead, researchers suggest that informed professionals in each country conduct an analysis based on the "four pillars." In the area of policy, for example, the issues they would explore include whether policies exist for care alternatives and prevention, whether they promote family and community care over institutionalization, and whether there are adequate incentives for adoption, foster care, guardianship and reunification with birth parents. Service-related issues include whether a country has services and programs that promote care alternatives, protection and prevention; whether they have sufficient capacity and financial support; and whether they meet international standards of practice. Other issues include looking at whether a nation has monitoring and evaluation systems for child welfare; whether risk, progress, and outcomes are assessed; and whether quality information is produced that is useful.

Researchers suggest this intensive analysis provides a deeper, nation-specific understanding of child welfare issues and the progress of reform, as well as information directly related to steps a country could take to improve care arrangements and prevent the separation of children from their

parents. It also helps to clarify data from earlier stages of analysis. In one example, when data from the first two levels of analysis were shared with a USAID Mission professional and a social worker working with non-government organizations in Romania, they explained that the dramatic rise in children in institutions seen from 2000 to 2001 was not a sign of worsening conditions, but the result of a change in Romanian law that required officials for the first time to include children with disabilities when reporting residential care populations – a clear step forward in the country's monitoring of its child welfare system.

Taken together, the three levels of analysis provide a strategy for examining child welfare in developing nations that progresses from the simple to complex, objective to subjective, inexpensive to expensive, and from measures that can be used to compare countries to those limited to more closely examining conditions within individual nations. At the same time, it progresses from less to most useful for understanding a country's child welfare reform efforts and targeting future resources. To date, this strategy stands as the most comprehensive proposed for understanding child welfare and reform in developing nations. In the project's second phase, researchers are expected to assemble detailed profiles of child welfare and reform within the 21 developing countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

References

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This Special Report, written by Jeffery Fraser, is based on the report cited above. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:

¹ St. Petersburg – USA Orphanage Research Team. (2005). Characteristics of children, caregivers, and orphanages for young children in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology: Special Issue on Child Abandonment*, 26, 477-506.

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³ Davis, R. T. (2005, October). Promising practices in community-based social services in CEE/CIS/Baltics: A framework for analysis. Washington, DC: Aguirre Division of JBS International, Inc. for USAID.

⁴ Davis, R. T. (2006). Emerging practices in community-based services for vulnerable groups: A study of social services delivery systems in Europe and Eurasia. Washington, DC: Aguirre Division of JBS International, Inc. for USAID.

⁵ Davis (2005), op. cit.

⁶ Davis (2006), op. cit.

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