

# Evidence of effective child protection systems in practice<sup>1</sup>

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Chris Joynes & Helen West  
Education Development Trust  
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## Question

1. *Are there specific country examples of an effective child protection system?*
2. *How much evidence is there on how well systems are functioning in practice in low resource settings? (as opposed to considering to what extent they adhere to a theoretical model)*

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

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## 1. Summary

A major challenge in assessing the impact of a national systems-based approach to child protection are the current limitations in both the availability and quality of evidence (Krueger et al. 2014; Krueger 2014: 30; Combaz 2013: 1).

Firstly, in terms of availability of evidence, in many state-based contexts, there is 'almost non-existent data' available on the effectiveness of systems in delivering outcomes for children (Stuckenbruck 2018: 19). Reasons for this include:

- the relatively recent establishment of a systems approach to child protection limiting the amount of data available (Wessells, 2014; Krueger et al., 2014)
- the low capacity of existing national systems to gather and process data (UNICEF 2015a: 15; UNICEF 2015c: 16; Combaz 2013: 3; Stuckenbruck 2018: 21; De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012)

Secondly, in terms of quality, there are a number of underpinning challenges, including:

- variable definitions of systemic approaches to child protection, particularly among programmes led by international agencies rather than host states, leading to differing standards and foci for data gathering (Krueger et al. 2014; Wulczyn 2010: 2; Wessells 2014)
- an inadequate consideration of contextual factors as part of programme design, leading to questions over the validity of measured outcomes (Child Frontiers 2011; Krueger 2014: 13)

Further to this, where evidence is available, the bulk of evaluative documentation focusses on programme effectiveness in terms of establishing necessary child protection mechanisms rather than in terms of impact on child protection outcomes (Wessells 2014; Combaz 2013: 4). Similar patterns 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 and community leaders, or localised systems development (for example, in Eyber et al. 2018, Ross et al. 2015, and Muriuki & Moss 2016). In cases where there have been stronger success indicators, these remain at a project level and are not nationally representative (for example, the Nepal case in Ethicore 2017).

In general, available evidence on effectiveness of child protection systems in low resource settings does not provide substantial information on the links between given systemic development practices and improved outcomes and impact for children (Combaz 2013: 1-2). Given the lack of consistency and comparability in both systematic approaches and the evidence base, it is difficult to generalise on what is effective and what is not in child protection programmes (Davis et al., 2012: 9; De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012).

In this context, it is difficult to definitively point to a specific national system that could be defined as effective. Instead, it may be more useful to focus on specific strategies that have been found to be effective in limited resource contexts (Crispin 2018). A 2012 UNICEF meta-synthesis points to a range of programme-specific factors that contribute to or shape effectiveness in child protection systems in low-resource settings (De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012). In general terms, the UNICEF report's findings are upheld by the evaluation of case studies from a broad range of

national contexts from around the world (i.e. Thompstone et al. 2014; Krueger et al. 2014; Child Frontiers 2011; UNICEF 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d).

This rapid review drew largely on evaluative papers, academic papers and some grey literature. 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 gathered and included in this review did not discuss gender or disability.

## 2. A discussion of issues regarding evidence on child protection systems in low-resource settings

One of the major challenges in assessing the impact of a national systems-based approach to child protection are the current limitations in terms of both the availability and quality of evidence (Krueger et al. 2014; Krueger 2014: 30; Combaz 2013: 1).

In terms of *availability of evidence*, in many state-based contexts, there is ‘almost non-existent data’ available on the demand for child protection services or on the expected outcomes for children (Stuckenbruck 2018: 19). Research suggests that this due to a number of reasons:

- ***Recent establishment of child protection systems:***

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 relatively recent developmental focus (Wessells, 2014) and is also ‘*necessarily a lengthy and complex process*’ (Krueger et al., 2014: 54) and therefore 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).

- ***Low capacity within child protection systems:***

The general lack of capacity within the child protection sector at national levels often means that there are extremely low levels of data collection that take place. Where that data is collected, it frequently remains unanalysed or processed. It therefore does not lead to increases in knowledge or understanding of the sector (UNICEF 2015a: 15; UNICEF 2015c: 16), with the net result of a weak evidence base (Combaz 2013: 3). On this basis, it is difficult for existing systems to design or plan prevention and response services adequately, or to develop monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks that can inform discussions over evidence of impact (Stuckenbruck 2018: 21; De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012).

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), Prickett et al. (2013)

and Davis et al. (2012). Such issues have also been noted in the UNICEF and Global Affairs Canada case studies from 2015, which explored national experience in four countries across West Africa:

- Senegal: *'The monitoring and evaluation system required by the National Child Protection Strategy is considered extremely weak. There is no national baseline offering recent and viable data on various child protection issues. Thus, it is difficult to accurately measure progress...'* (UNICEF 2015c: 16).
- Ghana: *'A further challenge is the lack of evidence on the impacts of system change. Though there is consensus about the approach, evidence supporting its validity is not yet available. Ghana has worked to establish a foundation of research and assessment for use in measuring the results of system change. However, the country is not able to evaluate the success of the reform steps it is making nor measure the impact in terms of results for children.'* (UNICEF 2015a: 15).
- Kenya: *'While anecdotal evidence (client feedback obtained on an ad hoc basis) suggests that children and their families benefit from these services, a proper evaluation is yet to be carried out' and 'Complicating the matter is a shortage of child protection centres and... the lack of a monitoring and evaluation framework.'* (UNICEF 2015b: 17, 22).
- Tanzania: *'Fundamental to the systems approach is the need for robust evidence and mechanisms for routine data collection. These are important not only in developing a comprehensive child protection system, but also in providing ongoing learning on how to maintain it. Similarly, maximizing the use of data and ensuring policy and programming are based on strong evidence requires institutionalization of data collection systems.'* (UNICEF 2015d: 22).

Although efforts are being made to create evaluation frameworks - see, for example, the recent UNICEF report *Measuring Child Protection Outcomes in Senegal* (UNICEF 2017), and the activities of the Child Protection Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (<http://www.cpcnetwork.org/resource/introduction-to-the-child-protection-monitoring-and-evaluation-reference-group-cp-merg/>), it would appear that these are still in the early stages of development.

- ***Limited documentation from state-led child protection systems***

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 unlikely to be available. The availability of up-to-date, accurate and relevant information is a crucial element of coordinating, planning and strategic thinking. However, in a review of national child protection systems in five countries across West & Central Africa, it was found that little of such data is available to policy-makers due to the weakness of their information management systems. There was no formal system in any of the five countries for collecting comprehensive statistics and data on the overall situation of children vulnerable to abuse, neglect, violence or exploitation (Child Frontiers 2011: 19).

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 (2008), Terre des Hommes, UNICEF (2013), World Vision International (2011) and others. In the first instance, this has implications for this review, since the scope specified a focus on evidence from *national* and *state-led* child protection systems rather than *programme-based* and *international agency-led* child protection systems. However, the fact that international agencies are the main sources of available evidence also holds implications for the quality and relevance of that evidence.

As indicated, in many cases, questions over the quality of available evidence stem from the programme-led design approaches that have dominated the development of child protection systems in low-resource settings during the last decade (Stuckenbruck 2018: 12). Key issues include the following:

- ***Variable definitions of systemic approaches to child protection***

At an international level, there exists a broad, and at times poorly-defined, range of perspectives on what constitutes a child protection system (Krueger et al. 2014). The reviewed evidence suggests there is general agreement that the main aims of a systems approach to child protection are to strengthen a) the protective environment around children, and b) the capacity of children themselves to fulfil their rights to protection from abuse, neglect and other forms of violence and ensure their well-being. Davis et al. (2012: 15-16) conclude that the various child protection system frameworks emerging from the work of a range of international agencies (e.g. UNHCR 2010; Save the Children 2008; World Vision International 2011) utilise similar structural components and processes in approaching the above, with a particular emphasis on the importance of mechanisms for linking across agents and connecting with communities and beneficiaries at the grass-roots level. However, at the same time, Wulczyn et al (2010: 2) found enormous variation in what provider 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. For example, evidence across five countries in West & Central Africa points towards a significant disconnect between the child protection expectations of the formal and state-led systems and the beneficiary communities and other stakeholders (Child Frontiers 2011: iii).

On this basis, there is, as yet, no internationally-agreed definition of what a systems approach to child protection actually consists of. According to Wessells (2014), there is no consensus on *what* should be measured to evaluate effectiveness, or *how* it should be measured. In this context, on a case-by-case basis, presented programme evidence is often designed to meet a programme-specific set of assessment needs, usually defined by the international provider institution themselves. Programmes for the development of child protection systems often gather and present a body of evidence designed to demonstrate alignment with particular strategies or design approaches, rather than evidence that demonstrates systemic effectiveness in terms of outcomes (Krueger 2014: 10, 11).

This appears to be particularly the case with systems-development programmes led by international agencies, as they may be seeking to validate institutional priorities in particular (Krueger 2014: 12). There is also a noted 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 (Krueger 2014: 12).

- ***Inadequate consideration of contextual factors***

Delaney et al. (2014: 16) highlight that the application of any child protection systems framework should reflect the national and local context. 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). This 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). In fact, findings suggest that the effectiveness of child protection systems is reliant on the contextualising of action to local situations and practices (Combaz 2013: 2).

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 as a major shortcoming the inadequate levels of research on social and cultural practices and expectations. This has led to many systems being developed and implemented with an incomplete understanding of contextual conceptions and existing informal practices for child protection, with implications in terms of the validity of outcomes. In many post-colonial settings, child protection systems have been developed based on European models, and which do not necessarily reflect commonly-shared beliefs and values about child protection at a social level (Child Frontiers 2011: 4), and this holds implications for delivery. For example, in reviewing evidence presented by Save the Children in relation to their activities in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Papua New Guinea, Krueger (2014: 13) concludes that, as a result of such shortcomings within programme design and delivery, the systems approaches developed and the resulting evidence of outcomes and impact presented are not fully fit for implementation at country level (Krueger 2014: 27). As result of these and other factors, the principles and approaches underpinning these programmes are subject to a particular critique on the basis that they have undermined their own overall effectiveness in supporting the development of functioning child protection system (Krueger 2014: 12).

### **3. A summary overview of available evidence on child protection systems in low-resource settings**

Based on the documents covered in this review, available evidence on the reported effectiveness of child protection systems is divided into two main sets of outcomes: those outcomes associated with the establishment of necessary child protection mechanisms and systemic components, and those outcomes associated with improved child protection results.

In general, the bulk of available evidence of the effectiveness of child protection systems is focussed on the first set of outcomes. There has historically been a focus on process and output indicators for programmes and other interventions rather than on the actual impact on the lives of children (Wessells, 2014). Where evaluations are made, effectiveness is often assessed based



on inputs or processes, with little outcome or impact-oriented assessment undertaken (Combaz 2013: 4). Programme evaluation documents discussing child protection in a range of international settings is commonly based around an assessment of whether the system adheres with a theoretical model, is suited to national and sub-national context, and, to some extent, has the technical and resource capacity to function according to the framework design. 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. Other case studies given in reports such as Davis et al. (2012), relate only to specific aspects of child protection systems, such as creating and/or enlarging political space for child protection system strengthening, strategy and policy development and community protection mechanisms. Not only is the focus here on the processes involved in creating a system rather than the impact of such processes, but the limited scope makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the system as a whole.

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 and community leaders, or localised systems development. 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. In cases where there have been stronger success indicators, these remain at a project level and so only apply to a small geographic area and are not nationally representative. For example, although one case study in Nepal found that the project had led to a village being declared 'Child Marriage Free' (EthiCore 2017), the findings cannot be generalised across a national system, and no judgements on the functioning of the Nepali child protection system as a whole can be made.

As a result of this general focus on meeting systemic framework structures, there is less emphasis within assessments on how well systems are functioning in terms of the delivery of child protection (Kreuger 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*. Similar examples are also seen in Delaney et al. (2014), reporting on Terre des Hommes' programming in Albania, Burkina Faso and elsewhere. While systemic targets are seen to have been achieved, there is no reported evidence of the subsequent impact on service delivery.

Combaz (2013: 1-2) states that, in general, available evidence on effectiveness of child protection systems in developing countries is very descriptive and does not provide substantial information on the links between given systemic development practices on the one hand and

improved outcomes and impact for children on the other. Effectiveness in terms of outcomes are not directly equated with meeting project milestones or with the implementation of recommended mechanisms, and when defined in this manner, there is little evidence about effectiveness in the literature about child protection (Combaz 2013: 4; De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012). Where that evidence is available, it shows that the effectiveness of child protection programmes is very variable and seems to be only average. For example, UNICEF's 2012 review of its own projects for protecting children from violence found that 13% were deemed not effective, 67% partly effective, and 19% effective (De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012).

Given the lack of consistency in systematic approaches, comparisons and quality in the evidence base, it may be difficult to generalise on what is effective and what is not in child protection programmes (Davis et al., 2012: 9; De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012). However, despite the lack of robust evidence and limited consistent findings, there are some helpful targeted insights into what works and what does not work in improving and ensuring child protection in developing countries (Combaz 2013: 2). These points are drawn mostly from a small number of high quality reviews synthesising findings from across a range of programmes.

## **4. Examples of effective child protection systems in low-resource settings**

In practical terms, and bearing in mind the limitations of evidence discussed above, 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 (Stuckenbruck 2018; Krueger 2014).

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.

Based on research on child protection systems in developmental contexts in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, there remain a number of challenges in implementation, particularly at the community level. These are often linked to ineffective service delivery or, in many cases, the lack of any child protection services beyond limited law enforcement and basic medical care (Crispin 2018).

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), Prickett et al. (2013) and Child Frontiers (2011). For example, findings suggest that the primary obstacle to the effective functioning of child and family welfare systems in the West African countries studied is the fundamental lack of congruence between the formal system priorities and strategies, actual state capability and resources, and community conceptions of child wellbeing and child protection (Krueger et al. 2014).

In this context, it is difficult to definitively point to a specific national system that could be defined as effective, although one can also highlight to the many challenges currently faced by child protection systems in developed country contexts. Within this in mind, it may be more useful to focus on specific strategies that have been found to be effective in limited resource contexts (Crispin 2018).

In support of this, a 2012 UNICEF meta-synthesis points to a range of programme-specific factors that contribute to or shape effectiveness in child protection systems in low-resource settings. The report concluded that sources of overall effectiveness at a systems design level include:

- Taking a multi-sectoral approach to child protection that addresses capacity building and system strengthening needs while also target harmful social norms;
- Integrating child protection into existing inter-sectoral programmes that combine longer term social change with short term tangible 'entry points';
- Addressing both prevention and response in the range of child protection services provided;
- Understanding and considering underlying socio-economic, cultural and political determinants as a critical part of programme design.

Sources of ineffectiveness at a programme level include:

- isolated and vertical programmatic responses, which are ineffective and inefficient when compared to more holistic interventions;
- weaknesses in applying results-based planning and management;
- lack of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks;

The report also identified a range of interventions which evidence suggests can improve effectiveness among existing child protection systems. These include:

- strengthening systematic capacity and coordination mechanisms in order to improve the effectiveness of partnership and community mobilisation 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.

(De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012).

In general terms, these findings are upheld by the discussions on case studies from a broad range of national contexts from within East Asia and Pacific (Thompstone et al. 2014), West and Central Africa (Krueger et al. 2014; Child Frontiers 2011), and elsewhere across sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d).

However, in addressing the overarching issue relating to the lack of evidence from child protection systems in low-resource settings from around the world, there remain a number of challenges. The lack of information management systems at national level is not a technical challenge that can easily be addressed through the creation of indicators and data collection methods. Instead, the development of such systems need to be rooted in practical considerations of what types of information will be useful at each level and how to collect, aggregate and disseminate that information in an effective and timely way (Child Frontiers 2011: 19). There is evidence of emerging practices in addressing these issues at national level (see, for example, UNICEF 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d), but many initiatives remain at an early stage of development.

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## About this report

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