Strengthening Social Service Systems for Vulnerable Children and Adolescents: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

There is emerging global consensus on the importance of strengthening social service systems for vulnerable children and adolescents in Africa, but no agreement on the conceptual definition and the scope of strengthening social service systems, whether strengthening social service systems is achievable or not, how to move towards it, common indicators for measuring its progress, and its long-term sustainability. This has resulted in various interpretations of the concept, emanating from different disciplinary perspectives. This paper discusses the various dimensions of strengthening social service systems emerging from these interpretations and argues for the need to pay attention to the complex interactions across the various components of social service systems in the pursuit for better social service delivery to vulnerable children and adolescents in Africa. The paper highlights major components of strengthening social service systems and proposes that these are utilized for measuring social service system strengthening.

Keywords*: social services, systems strengthening, child protection system, conceptual framework, Africa.*

Introduction

Strengthening social service systems has received increased attention in many African countries in order to improve social service delivery to better lives of vulnerable population, especially vulnerable children and adolescents. Davis, R et al. (2012) points out that "there is a growing interest in applying the system approach to strengthening child protection efforts". According to Davis, R et al.(2012) "the systems approach shifts attention to a larger systemic framework that includes legal and policy contexts, institutional capacity, community context, planning, budgeting and monitoring and evaluation of subsystems". Increasingly, governments and international organizations are utilizing a systems approach in the establishment and strengthening of child protection systems (Davis, R, 2009). However, investments in strengthening social service system have sometime taken place in many African countries in the absence of defining the actual systems at country level (Asare, N et al, 2011). As a result, understanding of what is meant by strengthening social service systems remains elusive. The lack of a conceptual framework on how to implement and measure strengthening of social service systems has undermined the efforts meant to improve the social service delivery mechanisms. There are various interpretations of the concept of strengthening social service systems, emanating from different disciplinary perspectives. This confusion in clarity and lack of a common agreed conceptual framework of strengthening social service systems at global and national levels dilutes the approach of strengthening social service systems.

Unfortunately, there is little or no research and scant literature on strengthening of social service systems compared to the health system strengthening, thereby, making it difficult for practitioners and policy makers to have a guide when supporting strengthening of social service systems. The lack of a conceptual framework makes it even more difficult for program planners to evaluate their efforts in strengthening social service systems, especially in Africa, where social service is fragile and fragmented across ministries. This dilemma justifies for urgent need to develop a conceptual framework that brings various dimensions of strengthening social service systems together, and pay attention to the complex interactions across the various components of strengthening social service systems in the pursuit for better social service delivery in Africa. As a contribution to emerging practice and debate in this area, this paper explores existing

conceptual frameworks for strengthening social service systems and its eminent potential to guide as a framework for policy makers and program managers supporting strengthening social service systems for vulnerable children and adolescents in Africa. Therefore, this paper has two main objectives:

1. To examine existing conceptual frameworks for strengthening social service systems for vulnerable children and adolescents.
2. To assess and discuss the major components of strengthening social service systems and how these enhance child protection system for vulnerable children and adolescent.

Method

The paper used secondary data of existing literature on social service systems based on NGOs' reports and international development agencies. During the literature search the paper explored three interlocking questions 1) what are the existing conceptual frameworks on strengthening social service systems? What is the link between strengthening social service systems and child protection systems? What is the role of strengthening social service systems for vulnerable children and adolescents?

The paper used archival studies and utilized literature published by United States of America for International Development (USAID) and United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) on strengthening social service systems and unpublished reports on social service systems by NGOs and international development agencies. The paper also drew on the World Health Organisation (WHO) health system strengthening framework and electronically accessible journals that comment on child protection and social service system strengthening.

This paper notes that there is non-existence of peer reviewed published Journals on this topic. There is also limited research undertaken by academic institutions on the subject area other than official publication of USAID, Measure Evaluation and PERFAR together with official reports of some NGO's and international development agencies including numerous unpublished materials that comments on child protection systems. Therefore, the papers reviewed were obtained through an online search using a systematic review process. Overall, more of the literature reviewed has been conducted by policy- and practice-oriented organisations.

It should be noted that while the review aims to summarize the relevant literature on the topics outlined above, it does not provide an exhaustive representation of the literature on each topic. Rather, prominent, widely cited and insightful literature was selected to inform the wider research. The justification for the selection of NGO reports and literature for inclusion in this paper was based on those which intersected the issues on strengthening social service systems for vulnerable children and adolescents. Papers related to concepts and definitions were limited to those with multiple citations and regularly noted as prominent pieces within this field.

Defining social service system strengthening and its rationale

Globally, strengthening a social service system is recognized as a logical and effective step to improve the efficiency, quality, and sustainability of the services the system delivers (Measure Evaluation, 2017). A social service system is understood as one that addresses both the social welfare and the protection of vulnerable populations, and includes elements that are preventative, responsive, and promotive (PEPFAR, 2012). However, PEPFAR argues that "there is no universal definition of a social service system. This is, in part, because of the diverse range of social services that are provided across and within countries" (Measure Evaluation, 2017). According to PEPFAR, social service systems can be defined as the combination of interventions, programs, and benefits provided by government, civil society, and community actors to address social welfare and protect vulnerable populations (PEPFAR, 2012).

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance point out that such a system's goal is to create a protective environment for healthy development and well-being, by alleviating poverty, reducing discrimination, facilitating access to needed services, promoting social justice, and preventing and responding to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect, and family separation (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, n.d.). PEPFAR (2012) argue that a well-functioning social service system should include strong linkages with

sectors such as health, justice, and education. This paper consider that a social service system strengthening should ensure that all components and key actors involved in child protection have the technical and operational capacity to carry out their functions in an integrated, holistic, coordinated manner that is geared towards long-term sustainability and accessibility (Davis, R et al., 2012).

Arguably, system strengthening approach is an evidence-driven process that identifies deficits, such as an underperforming workforce, insufficient financing, and inadequate child protection laws or policies (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2015). Davis, R et al. (2012) asset that this approach builds on the existing capacity of individuals, organizations, and systems to strengthen those gaps. Measure Evaluation (2017) point out that a social service system strengthening is a sustainable way to help fortify the very networks on which vulnerable households rely to build good governance and help organizations define their core messages and develop well-functioning monitoring and evaluation systems; and link up with other systems. Wulczyn, F. et al. (2010) argue that the system strengthening approach ensures an evolving continuum of care and helps establish the necessary monitoring and resource strategies for delivering effective social services. This paper emphasis that, the system strengthening should be placed on the fact that the path that the system strengthening takes is country specific, country led and depends on a range of social, culture, economic and political factors.

The paper notes that system approach is more a theoretical framework that would inform the strategies to promote child protection systems. There are different perspectives on system strengthening that need clarifying such as;
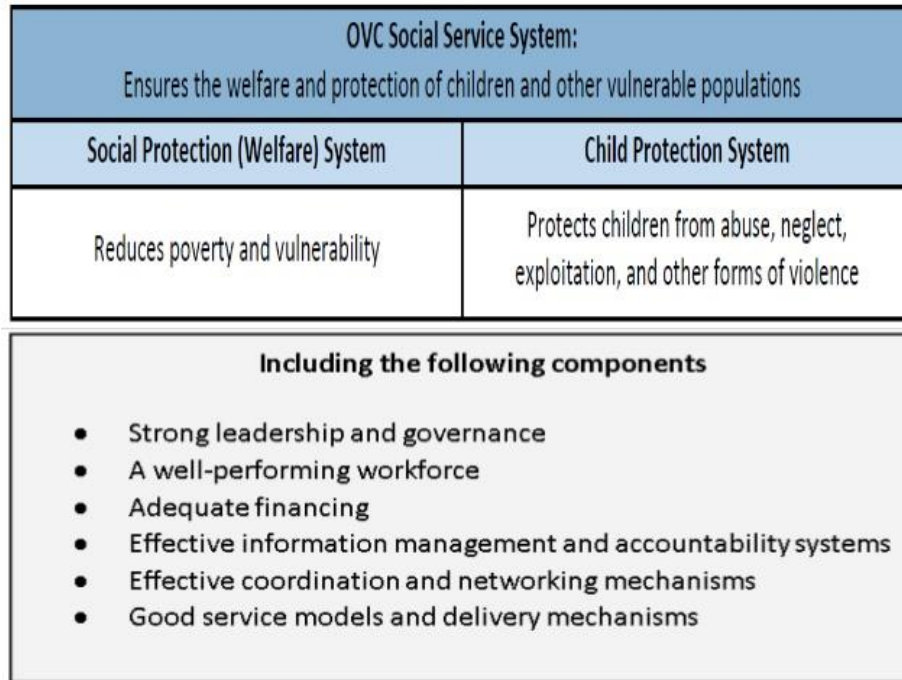
1. **System building:** (where national systems are virtually non-existent, and/or the State is very fragile); where this situation exists, it offers the opportunity to design something that builds upon and integrates positive endogenous community practices and their principles and values. It begins with designing and building a system which creates a virtuous link between the state and citizens (recognized and understood by everyone).
2. **System reform:** (in contexts where the existing national system appears to be not fully relevant, appropriate, or where there is incongruence between the formal system and endogenous community practices).
3. **System strengthening** is basically a work of improving what is there, as long as there is some sort of national system, a foundation that is relevant and more or less realistic for the context, as well as some recognition of both formal and informal elements of the system. [1]

Wulczyn, F. et al. (2010) assert that strengthening national child protection systems as a whole helps to avoid the duplication that often occurs with purely vertical programmes developed in isolation for specific categories of children. PEPFAR (2012) point that responsive child protection systems should build on the strengths of issue-specific programming by ensuring that specific forms of vulnerability are addressed, including those related to gender, disability, HIV, and indigenous populations, and be able to measure outcomes for different groups.

Recognizing the meagre evidence base on system strengthening in Africa for vulnerable children and adolescents, and the nascent nature of strengthening social service system in general, this paper proposes major components of strengthening social service systems. PEPFAR (2012) defines six "system components" to guide interventions aimed at strengthening social service system as outlined in figure 1 below. These core components stress that an interrelated system of social service system strengthening is critical for the meaningful child protection system for vulnerable children and adolescents – a system that combines protection, prevention, promotion and transformation. It is crucially important to understand that each of these components of the social service system strengthening is equally important and must be supported as integral part of the social service system strengthening without which the social service system strengthening is incomplete.

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[1] Davis, R et al (2012) Strengthening Child Protection Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Working Paper

Figure 1. Social service systems strengthening for vulnerable children and adolescents: A conceptual framework

Sources: PEPFAR 2012

Social protection (Welfare) system and reduction of poverty and vulnerability

Reduction of poverty and vulnerability among vulnerable children and adolescent is essentially part of the aim of strengthening social service system (Casey Outcomes and Decision-Making Project, 1998). UNICEF point that it is widely recognized that the reduction of child poverty is crucial for sustainable economic and social development (UNICEF, 2014). Child poverty in this paper refers principally to economic deprivation and includes its multidimensional aspects such as lack of access to services, insecurity, powerlessness and lack of voice (Klasen, S, 2000). Children living in poverty experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full and equal members of society (UNICEF, 2011). Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) argue that living in hardship has long-term, adverse and irreversible consequences, turning poor children into poor adults and "can have serious ramifications throughout the rest of a person's life, including the chances of holding onto a job, the uncertainties associated with growing older and the transmission of vulnerability to the next generation" (UNDP 2014, 59). Investing in children has positive rates of return in terms of long-term developmental outcomes (Yaqub, 2002).
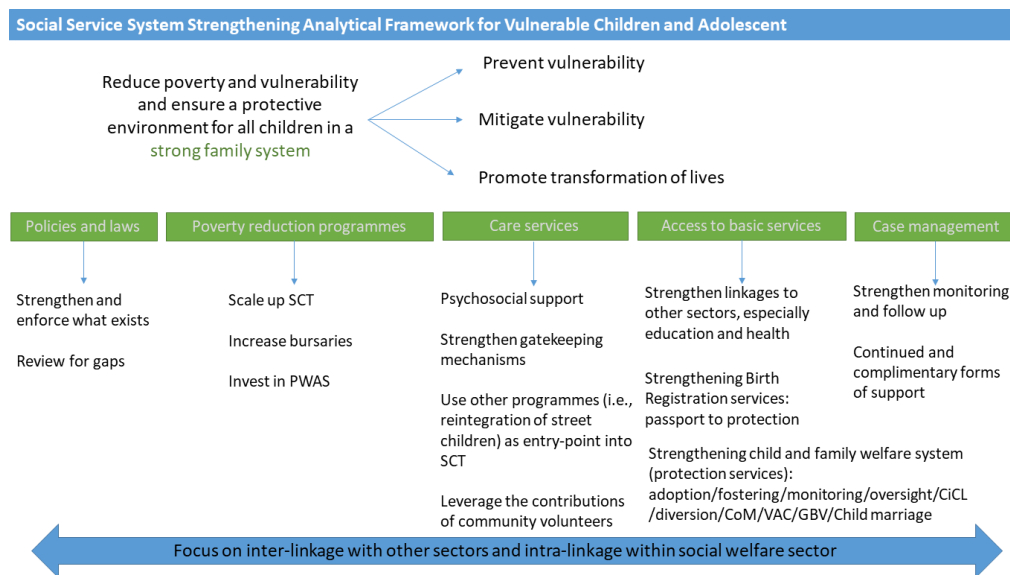
Arguably, a protective environment for children boosts development progress, and improves the health, education and well-being of children and their evolving capacities to be parents, citizens and productive members of society (Yaqub, 2002).. Harmful and abusive practices against children, on the other hand, exacerbate poverty, social exclusion and HIV, and increase the likelihood that successive generations will face similar risks (UNICEF. 2014). Measure Evaluation (2017) point out that the HIV epidemic's effects often place children in a position of vulnerability. For example, HIV can strain families economically, exacerbating the effects of poverty on a household's ability to provide for its basic food, nutrition, education and health needs (PERPAF, 2012).

Strengthening social service systems, therefore, reduces children's exposure to harm by accelerating actions that strengthen the protective environment for children in all settings (African Child Policy Forum., 2011). Preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse is essential to ensuring children's

rights to survival, development and well-being (Ager, A et al, 2010). Rebecca, D. and Jim, M. (2012) argue that strengthening social service systems create a protective environment, where girls and boys are able to access services and are free from violence, exploitation, and unnecessary separation from family; and where laws, services, behaviors and practices minimize children's vulnerability, address known risk factors, and strengthen children's own resilience.

Figure 2. Below illustrates that strengthening social service system should contribute to poverty reduction and vulnerability and ensure a protective environment for all children in a strong family system. This framework assumes that this will lead towards preventing child vulnerability, mitigate vulnerability and overall promote transformation of children's lives achieved through policies and laws reforms i.e (strengthening and enforcing existing laws or review of both the laws and policies where gaps exist).

The framework argues that poverty reduction programmes should encourage scaling up social cash transfer programs either implemented as a single model (cash without care) or as a twin model (cash plus care), and also increase access to bursaries to enable vulnerable children access education and promote investments in public welfare assistance schemes. Further, the framework emphasize to ensure increase access to care services, access to basic services and integrated case management as critical part of the strengthening social service.

Figure 2. Social service systems strengthening analytical framework for vulnerable children and adolescents

Source: Adopted from UNICEF Zambia, presentation by Sylvi Hills during the Strategic Planning and Coordination Meeting - On Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice System in Lusaka, Zambia.

Components of the social service systems strengthening

This section gives an overview of the conceptual framework that underpins the components of strengthening social service systems. The conceptual framework is part of the definition provided by PEPFAR with its five core areas of strengthening social service system such as: (1) leadership and governance structures; (2) the social service workforce; (3) financing; (4) information management and accountability systems; and (5) coordination and networking mechanisms and additionally, 6) good service model delivery mechanism. This paper emphasis that interventions aimed at strengthening the system components should be understood as inputs that aim to improve the performance of the system itself. The paper argues that focusing attention on strengthening these system components should lead to improved coverage, access to, and quality of welfare and protection services, which are understood to be the desired outputs of a strong social service system. Furthermore, strengthening welfare and protection service models

and delivery mechanisms can improve the welfare and protection of children and families—the desired impact of a strong social service system.

1. Leadership and governance

Leadership and governance are crucially important components of the social service system strengthening. Measure Evaluation (2017) define leadership and governance as having and implementing laws, policies, and strategies, as well as developing a ministry's organizational and leadership capacity. Accordingly to Bess, A et al. (2011) social service system strengthening need to focus on building strong senior leadership within the ministries that can communicate clear vision, goals and able to convene processes for agreeing on laws, policies, national plans of action, strategic plans, and regulations. Thus, a functional social services is one that have existence of legal and policy framework with operationalization of national laws, bills, guidelines, and strategies that guide a government's social protection and child protection assistance (Measure Evaluation, 2017).

2. Social service workforce

UNICEF argue that making sure that people working in the social service sector—especially those working with vulnerable children— have the proper skills, values, and motivation is critically important (UNICEF, 2012). Manly, a question arises on who the social service workforce is? Global Social Service Workforce Alliance argues that the social service workforce is an inclusive term that includes all categories of people who work on behalf of vulnerable children and families (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, n.d). They point out that this includes a range of providers and actors, paid and unpaid, both informal and traditional such as family and kinship networks, community volunteers as well as formal, employed professional and paraprofessional workers (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, n.d). . Examples of workforce strengthening include a wide range of approaches such as training and education of the formal and informal frontline workforce and capacity building of educational institutions such as curriculum development and teacher training (Wessells, M., 2009). Early studies show that having a larger and better distributed workforce lowers caseloads and enables workers to address child protection concerns more efficiently and effectively (National Association for Social Workers Foundation, 2010).

Global Social Service Workforce Alliance argues that social service ministries need skilled professionals to deliver policies and services with the best outcomes for children (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2015). Bess, A et al. (2011) point out that strengthening social services system should pay attention to ensure that there is well-trained and effectively deployed governmental and nongovernmental staff who work individually or collectively to address the needs of vulnerable populations—especially children and families. It should be noted that for this to happen there is need to streamline social workers' caseload and role. Bess, A. et al. (2011) further, argue that social workers should engage with all members of beneficiary families, not just parents, so that they can identify children's needs and make appropriate referrals. To do this, they need additional training and a reduction in caseloads to a manageable level, with sufficient time allocated to each family for regular follow-up and with a [well-articulated integrated case management in place] (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2015). According to the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, social workers need to clearly understand that their role includes monitoring the physical and emotional well-being of children and young people in beneficiary households and referring them to the appropriate services if necessary (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, n.d). Studies show that professional associations are important partners with the government in establishing and monitoring service quality licensure and standards, and serve as valuable resources for continuing education, thereby strengthening the capacity of social welfare workforce to provide evidence-based practice services to more vulnerable children and adolescents.

Financing

Financing include mobilizing, accumulating, and allocating money in sustainable ways to cover the child welfare and protection needs of vulnerable populations. Davis, R et al. (2012) points out that a systems approach has direct implications on the way resources (both human and financial) are considered within the new paradigm. Measure Evaluation (2017) argue that social service ministries must know the financial cost and the benefits of services and make a strong case to the ministry of finance and other donors to secure necessary funding. According to PEPFAR (2012) ministries should have comprehensive, well-performing financial management systems, financial control procedures, and processes for budgeting and spending resources, as well as accounting for and reporting on expenses if the social service system strengthening is to be effective.

3. Information management and accountability systems

This is a process for collecting, analyzing, disseminating, and using data on child welfare and protection policies and programs. Evidence-building, knowledge management and improving data collection, analysis and use for decision making underscores all areas of the social services system strengthening. Measure Evaluation (2017) argue that social service system strengthening work should therefore work to strengthen the evidence base on child protection and contribute to other areas of knowledge, and ensure that evidence is used effectively to improve policies, laws and their implementation. Experience shows that development of integrated multisectoral joint work plans with clear indicators supported with data dashboard that can be used to make decisions form an important part of these efforts. It is crucially important that there is a robust monitoring and evaluation that drive research and analysis of data including dissemination of information on child protection, both nationally and locally. Studies indicates that data generated from data dashboard can help track relevant trends; monitor and inform the development of laws, policies and interventions; and demonstrate the impact that social service programs are having on children. The overall perception of field leaders and practitioners is that M&E stands out as an area where great improvements are needed, and where increased sharing of information and larger investments are critical, especially, ensuring data quality and conducting routine assessments, surveys, ad hoc initiatives and tracking systems.

4. Coordination and networking mechanisms

Coordination is mechanisms for all actors working in child welfare and protection to develop and implement policy, share information, and coordinate services. Manly in Africa coordination across agencies remains limited and there is no strong referral mechanism to ensure that the needs of vulnerable children are identified and addressed more effectively (PEPFAR, 2012). Responsibilities are often spread across government agencies, with services delivered by local authorities, non-state providers, and community groups, making coordination between sectors and levels, including routine referral systems, a necessary component of effective child protection systems (Measure Evaluation, 2017).

Therefore, coordination acts as mechanisms for managing relationships and referrals between actors responsible for child welfare and protection services and ensuring that children receive comprehensive services. A cohesive, well-coordinated and participatory systems mapping and assessment that promotes joint planning, learning and consensus building from the beginning can lay the ground work for a functioning social service system strengthening. Effective coordination occur when children access social and health services delivered by partners through an effective coordinated system, referral system and that resource allocation and programs are implemented according to national policies.

Service model

Wulczyn, F et al. (2010) argue that for effective strengthening of social service systems to happen there is a need to develop a broader and better-tailored package of comprehensive child-sensitive social protection services. The World Bank (2017) point out that where a package of services already exists, additional complementary services should be considered to maximize its impact on the intersecting social

and economic vulnerabilities that face children. Witter, S et al. (2004) argue that a service package should include the following; psychosocial counseling, community- and school-based interventions to create a more supportive environment for children and their families, awareness-raising about gender-based violence and related support services, child protection services, support for children with disabilities and those living with HIV and ensure access to treatment, low-cost recreational activities for girls and boys in the poorest households who are unable to access those that already exist, awareness-raising about longer-term effects/risks of child marriage, vocational counseling, awareness-raising about the risks of child labour and children's right to education, housing renovation support and strengthen the protective role of communities and parent skills including strengthening the family systems and access to cash plus care.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper recognizes that poverty exacerbates the risk of children and adolescents to abuse, neglect and other forms of violence. It has highlighted the role of strengthening social service system in poverty reduction and child protection. It has attempted to make a clear link between strengthening social service system and child protection system. The paper has drawn from existing literature on strengthening social service systems to conceptualize the conceptual framework for strengthening social service system in Africa. It has proposed major components of the conceptual framework for strengthening social service system includes (1) leadership and governance structures; (2) the social service workforce; (3) financing; (4) information management and accountability systems; and (5) coordination and networking mechanisms and (6) Good service model delivery mechanism. Most importantly, the paper has highlighted that social service system strengthening requires paying attention to policy reform, institutional capacity development, planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation and information systems.

The paper emphasized that there is need to support social welfare ministries in assuming an upstream role in the overall national child protection system. This includes support to strengthening capacity in strategic planning and costing of needed services. It also requires advocacy for appropriate budget allocation. There is need to create a culture of evidence-informed decision-making. The paper has argued that there is urgent need to strengthen coordination between sectors and increasing support through social protection and rule of law. The paper acknowledges that **w**ith the shift towards system strengthening, new evidence is required to support system-related policy formulation and programme design. It points out that this requires documenting and analyzing the effectiveness and efficiency of specific system components – linkages and relationships between protection interventions, actors and levels of government – and interactions between core and allied sectors.

This paper recommends that there is need to support systematic improvements in the quality and use of social work, including its professionalization and promote the development of appropriate regulations and guidelines to improve quality of service provision by non-state actors, as well as government service providers. The paper articulates that for strengthening social service systems to be effective, there is required to strengthen data analysis and information for decision making, budget and costing exercises. The paper further recommends that protecting children from harm and ensuring that they have access to social services is a multi-sectoral enterprise, requiring action by health services, social workers, the criminal justice system and community-level structures, among other actors. It argues that policy frameworks should reflect a country's real capacities and budgets, instead of promoting unrealistic, ambitious outcomes. Strategies, policy and legal development and reform are sensitive issues that should carefully be considered together with the actual "real" potential capacities of a country to implement required changes.

The paper concludes that strengthening social service system for child protection system is not an end. But should lead to strengthened family support services, referral mechanisms, alternative care, justice responses and victim support improve at local level, the proportion of children in residential care or detention should decrease, hazardous child labour should decrease or at minimum be addressed more quickly, and violence against children should decline, while access to services for children increase through an integrated case management and coordinated care.

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