Report # 100   **Child Welfare Reform In Developing Nations**   **December 2007**

Tracking Child Reforms In Post-Soviet Era

Agencies seek understanding of child welfare in developing nations

As developing nations move toward reforming their child welfare systems, humanitarian organizations and assistance agencies concerned with improving those systems have found themselves without a reliable tool for assessing the changes being made and monitoring the progress of reform.

Last year, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development began to explore a comprehensive strategy that would provide USAID with a deeper understanding of critical social transitions underway in 21 nations in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, and enable the U.S. international assistance agency to better target interventions and evaluate their effectiveness.

Understanding the state of reform is critical to agencies like USAID, the principal U.S. agency for providing humanitarian and other assistance to improve lives within developing countries. OCD's work is part of a larger USAID contract awarded to Washington, DC-based Creative Associates International, Inc. that focuses on issues related to the region's social transition.

The project involves 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.

Shedding Soviet-Era Systems

One practice many of former Soviet Union states and former Soviet Bloc nations are abandoning is the heavy reliance on institutions to house children who are no longer permanently 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 included parents with a disabled child, low-income and unemployed parents and parents with substance abuse problems.

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.

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.

Reform, however, is uneven across the developing nations with considerable differences seen in their rates of developing alternatives to institutionalization, rewriting national child welfare policy, financing reform and other critical issues.

Available Measures

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. One of the most ambitious, the European Union Index of Child Well-Being, 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.

But USAID's interest is in finding a tool for 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 And Reform

Such a tool would mean gathering and examining data on a number of key

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

They faced a number of challenges. Individual situations vary from nation to nation. Gaps between stated policy and implementation are common among former Soviet regimes. 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. And missing information is a problem.

Child welfare issues are also politically and emotionally charged. The changes made within countries and the attention they receive are often influenced as much by ideology and values as they are by data.

Monitoring 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 and a sustainable process of gauging the progress of child welfare reform in the region over time.

OCD researchers determined that it was crucial to embrace the guiding principle for those who act on 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." In other words, 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 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 increase in 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.

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

The strategy begins with a "marker of child welfare" that is a single index based on an international database. The marker, while imprecise, offers a simple estimated percentage of children under the age of 17 who are not in the permanent care of their parents, including those in orphanages or other residential care settings, children with disabilities in similar care arrangements and children in foster-care.

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 and children with disabilities. The percentage of children in each alternative care arrangement and trends in those numbers are helpful in understanding the nature and progress of a country's efforts toward dealing with children without parental care.

To complete the analysis, a third level was designed to take a more specific, expert and subjective look at what each country is doing in four general areas critical to improving the child welfare systems in the region: policy and legal framework related to child welfare, structure and types of programs and services, professional personnel capacity, and outcomes and performance indicators. This intensive analysis, researchers say, provides a deeper, nation-specific understanding of child welfare issues and the progress of reform, and information directly related to steps a country could take to improve care arrangements and prevent the separation of children from their parents.

Together, the three-level analysis stands as the most comprehensive method of assessing changes in child welfare systems and tracking the progress of reform in nations undergoing major social transition.

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