

‘Never only one zebra’

A Review of Measurement Frameworks in Children’s Care



Executive Summary

Background

Between March and August 2020 International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI), commissioned by UBS Optimus Foundation and GHR Foundation, conducted a review of measurement frameworks in Children’s Care¹. The review consisted of a literature review and interviews with 22 professionals from the Children’s Care sector and 11 professionals from the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECD/ECEC) sector (the ECD/ECEC sector was chosen as a comparison sector). This publication summarises the main findings of the study. The overall goal was to analyse the potential for a common measurement framework that could support Children’s Care reform and system change, and improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

Summary of main findings

Measurement challenges and opportunities of the Children’s Care system

Many different measurement frameworks are being used by international donors, INGOs, government agencies and local service providing organizations.

¹ For this review Children’s Care was defined as: “the range of systems and services that support children who are without adequate care by their biological parents, or who are at risk of becoming so. This includes preventive interventions such as family strengthening support where children are at risk of becoming separated from their parents, as well as more curative, alternative care interventions such as family type based care, kinship care, foster care or residential care, family reintegration efforts, as well as de-institutionalization processes.”

An issue that came up regularly in the interviews is the fact that donors often require organizations delivering services to vulnerable children and families to use certain, not locally developed M & E frameworks. This puts a burden on staff of these organizations and leads to these M & E frameworks not being really used towards improving practice (and they are discarded as soon as the -usually international-funding ends).

Few tools are specifically geared towards measuring system change or care reform. More common are those aiming to measure impact of certain projects or services. According to many of the interviewees most of the tools tend to be unusable, as they aim to measure too much and there is a lack of capacity of staff at different levels in the system to apply them in an effective manner.

There is also limited involvement of end users in measurement framework development. The lack of involvement of children, youth and families in having a say about what is important to measure and how, was identified as an especially important omission. Most of the interviewees were strongly of the view that full stakeholder involvement was necessary from the initial stages onwards, if measurement frameworks are to be relevant in their contexts and to have any chance of being effective.

From the review two main forms of measurement frameworks were identified:

- Measurement frameworks for Children’s Care system monitoring and reform. These are frameworks that look mostly at outcomes at Children’s Care system level in a country, such as changes in policies or progress towards certain goals, number of children in institutional care, family care, etc.
- Child well-being focused measurement frameworks. These are M & E frameworks mostly focused on the impact of certain interventions, projects or programmes at beneficiary level, e.g. children successfully reintegrated into biological families, (psychosocial) well-being of children, etc.

Overall conclusion: Based on this review, for the two forms of measurement frameworks identified it is difficult to say if they have so far really contributed much to intended improvements of systems, interventions and/or programmes.

Comparison with the ECD/ECEC sector

There are many similarities between the ECD/ECEC and Children’s Care sectors regarding key issues of concern or stumbling blocks. These are: confusion and misunderstandings about terminology and priorities; measuring and evaluation not relevant/unnecessary burden for those working directly with children and for NGOs/service providers, who would rather use their often meagre resources on something considered more urgent; and a lack of a unified approach to measuring and monitoring the respective systems. A striking difference between the sectors is the emphasis the ECD/ECEC interviewees put on quality of provision and agreeing on what constitutes quality in any discussion about measurement. The notion of quality hardly featured in interviews with Children’s Care informants.

Necessity and feasibility of (developing) a common measurement framework for Children's Care

The considered view, taking into account both what the literature is telling us about system change as well as what most of the interviewees' experiences and opinions are, **is that investing in and searching for a common global measurement framework for Children's Care is not advisable**. This is primarily due to the absolute necessity for contextualization on the one hand and the complexity of Children's Care on the other hand.

The findings from the study do point strongly to the **feasibility and desirability of country specific measurement frameworks**, which can have added value in improving Children's Care systems at country level. However, it is argued that, before investing (much) time and resources into developing such a country specific measurement framework, focus should first be on making improvements to other aspects of the Children's Care system i.e. creating the right conditions in which a measurement framework can be effective. This involves:

- Identification of key persons and organizations, who are willing and able to implement and sustain system change efforts.
- Government leadership and coordination of the process that the common measurement framework will be used for.
- A common vision and agenda on Children's Care (reform), with realistic goals and objectives, as discussed and agreed upon by all major stakeholders (including, very importantly, children, youth and families), focused on the best interests of children.
- Professional workforce development through continuous training, qualification and learning platforms, which also involves agreeing on a professional competence profile and training profile.
- Cultivate a culture of critical reflection, openness and a willingness to learn at every level of the system: amongst groups of Children's Care practitioners, amongst professionals from different sectors (primary health care, ECD/ECEC, education, family and parenting support, housing and social welfare) and amongst policy makers, both at local and at national level, in order to be able to measure and evaluate in a meaningful way.
- Adequate resourcing by government and/or donors, who are willing to cooperate and commit to be in it for the long haul.

Key messages

Key message 1: It is important to distinguish between a measurement framework that would apply to one Children's Care system in a certain country and one that would be more global, to be used across countries and regions, as both are being developed/sought after by different actors. They entail very different processes, have different goals and serve different interests.

Key message 2: On the basis of the interviews conducted for this review, it can be concluded that there is considerable support for a common, global set of principles and values for Children’s Care, but much less support for an (elaborate, complicated) common, global measurement framework that is monitoring its actual implementation.

Key message 3: Investing in the development and implementation of a country specific measurement framework has little or no added value, nor real chance of succeeding, without the necessary (pre-)conditions in place.

Key message 4: Donors should invest in the most pressing needs for Children’s Care reform in a country first, before investing in (development of) country specific common measurement frameworks (and try not to burden grantees with too much M & E).

An indicative roadmap towards a country specific common measurement framework is presented below:

