

# STRENGTHENING CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A CALL TO ACTION

Joint inter-agency statement



African Child Policy Forum; African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect; Environnement et Développement du Tiers-monde; International Social Service; Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs; Plan International; Regional Inter-agency Task Team on Children and AIDS; Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative; Save the Children; SOS Children's Villages International; Terre des hommes; UNICEF; and World Vision International

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### BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

This Statement draws on a growing body of practice and evidence on child protection systems strengthening in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>1</sup> and is inspired by the dialogue and findings of a multi-agency conference on the topic that took place in Dakar, Senegal in May 2012. Ten organisations convened on April 10–11, 2013 in Dakar to determine the technical content of this Statement.<sup>2</sup> Readers may wish to refer to the substantial body of literature and resources on child protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa that was assembled and organised after the Dakar conference, including the Working Paper on Child Protection Systems Strengthening in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup>

The objective of this Statement is to (i) present our common understanding of child protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa and why they are important and worthy of investment; and (ii) issue a call to action to governments, the African Union, regional economic communities, multilateral agencies, donors, the private sector, academia, civil society organisations, communities and organised children's and youth groups.

### CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Child protection seeks to guarantee the right of all children to a life free from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect in both emergency and non-emergency settings. The many actors engaged in child protection include children and youth, families, communities, government, civil society and private organisations. Effective child protection depends on the following elements: (i) appropriate policies, legislation and regulations; (ii) well-defined structures and functions and adequate capacities; (iii) supportive social norms; (iv) effective promotion, prevention and response actions; (v) high quality evidence and data for decision-making; and (vi) efficient fiscal management and sufficient resource allocation. When these elements and actors work together, they create a system that is better able to protect all children.

The systems approach is guided in sub-Saharan Africa by the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child ("ACRWC"), the African Youth Charter, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the "African Women's Protocol"). Its development was

also influenced by the recommendations of the U.N. Violence Against Children Study (2006) and the subsequent General Comment 13 from the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child. The approach is in full alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (“CRC”) and other international conventions, instruments and standards. These conventions and instruments establish that States have responsibility for the protection of all children, regardless of local context. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child specifically addresses children’s protection rights related to child labour, child abuse and torture, juvenile justice, parental care and protection, harmful social and cultural practices, separation from parents and adoption, sexual exploitation, and the sale, trafficking and abduction of children.

### WORKING SYSTEMICALLY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The systems approach to child protection acknowledges that children face complex problems that require a multi-disciplinary response. In sub-Saharan Africa, poverty increases the vulnerability of children, and the issues they face are of significant scale (see box below). An individual child can be confronted by multiple needs, violations, and vulnerabilities, of differing durations and severity in both stable and emergency settings. For example,

a single child might suffer from severe neglect, exploitation, family separation, and sexual violence. Exposure to multiple risks can greatly increase the likelihood of harm to the individual child. Because of this, systemic approaches aim to move away from fragmented, single issue responses, and instead aspire to more holistic, comprehensive and sustainable interventions that take account of the multiple risks that children confront in different contexts and at different stages of their lives.

The systems approach further aims to address a number of factors that compromise effective child protection in sub-Saharan Africa: the lack of a coherent multi-sectoral policy and programming agenda for child protection, weak national and sub-national coordination, and significant under-resourcing and unclear accountabilities for child protection. These risks are compounded in transnational or cross-border settings. Additional challenges arise from the often inadequate capacity of child protection actors, social norms and practices that are not protective or are actually harmful, and, overall, inadequate monitoring and evaluation to assess the suitability, impact and cost-effectiveness of interventions.

The systems approach aims to **promote** the right to child protection, through raising of knowledge and awareness and increasing access to protection measures, to contribute to the **prevention** of

## CHILD PROTECTION: A MAJOR ISSUE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Over 400 million children live in sub-Saharan Africa, almost half of the total population.<sup>4</sup> Data on child protection issues are limited, but the risks are clearly significant. A growing number of country studies are showing very high prevalence rates of physical and sexual violence and associations between this violence and a range of physical, reproductive and mental health problems.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that almost 40 percent of girls are married by age 18, and approximately 60 percent of children are not registered at birth.<sup>6</sup> Female genital mutilation/cutting is practiced in some 25 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, with prevalence rates of 80 percent or more in some of those countries.<sup>7</sup> Many children also face justice systems that are poorly equipped to support children, whether they

are in conflict with the law, victims, witnesses, or in need of care and protection.

The distribution of protection risks is not uniform. Girls are not only at higher risk of sexual violence and exploitation, but also face an array of other risks such as HIV, FGM/C, domestic work, and early marriage. Boys face higher risks of recruitment into armed forces and the related exposure to violence, sexual exploitation, and imprisonment. They are also more likely to undertake risky migration. All children in conflict and in emergency situations are extremely vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Children with disabilities face violence, abuse and stigma across sub-Saharan Africa. Ethnic, linguistic, religious and other divides can also increase the risks to children.



violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, through early identification and intervention when problems arise and by building the resilience (including economic) of children, families and communities; and to **respond** when violations or issues occur, through the provision of appropriate services and through community mechanisms such as mediation. While all of these elements are important, it is generally more cost-effective to focus efforts on promotion and prevention.

The strengthening of child protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa ideally centres on the child and the family, broadening out to include community and kinship mechanisms and traditional authority and mediation structures. Non-governmental organisations of various types may also be involved together with government authorities and agencies. Local culture, tradition, knowledge, attitudes and practices shape how these different elements work together at the community level to prevent and respond to protection risks. Patterns of socialisation, approaches to child-rearing, and the relationships between children and adults also influence their interaction.

The way in which child protection systems operate varies considerably among the more than fifty countries of sub-Saharan Africa. A wide spectrum of non-governmental, community and faith-based organisations and actors, including organised groups of children and youth, generally play a key role in these child protection systems. They are often the primary providers of child protection services, frequently complementing and drawing from community structures and practices. They may also participate in nationally or locally organised communication and education campaigns on specific child protection issues.

Increasingly, more structured local child protection structures (such as child protection or welfare committees) bring together elders, chiefs, local government officials, community organisations, children and youth, and other stakeholders. These structures often serve as the primary means of identifying issues such as violence against children or children living without adequate family care. Government child protection policies in sub-Saharan Africa are beginning to recognize customary practices and the role played by traditional authorities and faith leaders in mediation aimed at maintaining community harmony, and the potential for linking these mechanisms to national child protection endeavours.

At government level, the principal child protection mandates include ratification of key regional and

international legal instruments, development of policy, legislation and regulations and accountability systems related to child protection, and provision of security and justice. The securing and deployment of resources to support the child protection system, its monitoring, evaluation and overall coordination, and the promotion of cooperation of resource sharing across sectors also fall within the government's remit. Governments are largely responsible for the provision of certain protective, preventive and responsive services, the setting of standards for them and the training, deployment, assessment and development of cadres working in them. They also have a major role in the promotion of behavioural and social change and in the preparation of child protection responses in emergencies.

Responsibility for child protection is usually spread across a number of social and human development ministries (for example, social protection/affairs/welfare, health, education and justice). It is often difficult to identify a single ministry which has the 'lead' mandate for child protection, and hence the principal accountability for it. Many of the ministries and agencies with child protection mandates have minimal budgets and limited convening power relative to other human development sectors, and lack both the capacity and the mandate to work across sectors.

Although the various components of the child protection system generally fulfil their intended protective role, some of them can in fact have harmful consequences: for example, although community mediation mechanisms that address incidents of gender-based violence may protect child victims from lengthy formal justice processes, they may also exempt the perpetrator from legal sanctions. Violence can and does occur in nominally 'protective' institutions such as schools and police stations. Child protection systems strengthening efforts in sub-Saharan Africa need to be well-informed about the potential protective and harmful nature of the more and less formal elements within the system. Stakeholders should seek to design and regulate the system to achieve an optimal balance and interplay between them.

### WHY INVEST IN CHILD PROTECTION?

When children thrive – nations thrive. There is increasing evidence that fulfilment of the right to protection also contributes to the achievement of national development and poverty reduction agendas in sub-Saharan Africa. Violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect can be life-threatening; research findings

also show that experiencing one or more protection risks has negative consequences over the entire life cycle, just as the better known risks of lack of access to health, nutrition, education and social protection services do. For example, chronic violence, institutionalisation at an early age, or neglect can have a profound effect on a child's neural development, particularly during the first two to three years of life. The resulting cognitive, social and emotional delays are likely to affect adversely educational achievement, health status, lifetime earnings, and also increase the likelihood of later social problems, incarceration, and the inter-generational transmission of violence.<sup>8</sup> Within sub-Saharan Africa there is limited but increasing evidence of these negative effects; for example, recent research illustrates the positive correlations between violence to children and the risk of HIV.<sup>9</sup>

Investing in child protection accordingly contributes to the development of human capital. Children who are protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect are more likely to attend and remain in school, to perform better in the classroom, and are less likely to experience health issues including HIV. When combined with adequate nutrition and stimulation in the early years, children protected from violence are more likely to experience better physical growth, higher IQ scores, reduced mortality, and improved earning potential.<sup>10</sup>

Certain child protection interventions are generally more cost-effective than others. For example, a systematic literature review of interventions for AIDS orphans and vulnerable children concluded that in the area of housing, evidence suggests that foster care appears to be more cost-effective than residential care (orphanages).<sup>11</sup> Given the scarce resources available to develop child protection systems, cost factors such as this need to be fully taken into account.

Many studies show positive, and often high, economic and social returns from effective protective investments, but these have mostly been conducted in middle and higher income contexts. Accordingly, there is increasing discussion on the need for cost-benefit analyses of overall development programming in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the areas of early childhood development, education and health (including free access to services). Similar analysis is needed of the role of the child protection sector and the potential positive contributions that can be made through investments in strengthened child protection systems.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Whether at the sub-national, national, or international level, the systems approach frames the mandate of child protection as a major contributor to positive outcomes for children. While this mandate is

### CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS: MOMENTUM IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

There has been increasing momentum in sub-Saharan Africa on the child protection systems agenda. Nearly half the countries have completed or launched exercises to map and assess their child protection systems, allowing them to describe those systems and specify priority areas of engagement and investment.<sup>12</sup> Some countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Tanzania have begun the process of redefining the child protection system through development of new policy frameworks, tapping into existing practices and resources and forging links between the informal and formal parts of the system, making the system in its entirety more sustainable, effective, and 'fit' for the country context.

Sub-national coordination mechanisms built around child protection committees or the equivalent are rolling out in countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Human resource gap analyses have been conducted in some countries to inform the strengthening of the social service workforce. Evidence, data and information are being collected on a number of thematic areas, such as the violence against children studies that have been completed or are underway in Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Child protection issues are serving as 'entry points' for broader system strengthening, such as alternative care in Ethiopia, Ghana and Rwanda.

distinct from those of other sectors, such as health or education, it is often complementary to them. Whatever the context, the systems approach, as an integrated approach to protect children, will seek to (i) understand, define and apply the principle of the **best interests of the child** in designing policies and approaches, guided by both rights conventions and local culture and values; (ii) promote the adoption of a **child-centred approach** recognising that protection must be addressed in a holistic way, sensitive to context and environment, and taking full account of the child's role in the system; and (iii) **coordinate, engage, and build the capacity of a wide range of actors**, from children, youth and families, to traditional and faith leaders, to government, civil society and the private sector.

Strategies to strengthen systems in both emergency and non-emergency contexts are outlined in the *Policy and Programming Resource Guide for Child Protection Systems Strengthening in Sub-Saharan Africa* ([http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/overview\\_6588.html](http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/overview_6588.html)), and include, *inter alia*:

- articulation and understanding of the existing elements of the child protection system through mapping and assessment, leading to the creation of a national vision and a programme of action identifying priority gaps and sequenced interventions for addressing them;
- harmonisation of policies, legislation and regulation with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the African Youth Charter, the African Women's Protocol, and the CRC, while ensuring those policies take into account local social norms and practices;
- establishment of clearly defined mandates and accountabilities for child protection system actors, and effective multi-sectoral coordination arrangements;
- development of and dialogue on the investment case for child protection and the allocation in national planning of appropriate levels of resources for investment in the child protection system;
- identification of child protection issues such as violence against children or the situation of children outside of family care, where focusing action might be the first step in the process of systems strengthening;
- strengthening of the spectrum of care and protection from promotion and prevention to response, based on priorities established in accordance with available resources, and including measures to strengthen household resilience (e.g., through child-sensitive social protection programmes);
- increasing the capacity (numbers, deployment and qualifications) of the social service workforce, including those working directly with children (professional, para-professional or volunteer), government cadres, non-governmental workers, and academic and licensing organisations;
- engagement with the processes that address harmful practices in culturally and contextually appropriate ways, and that strengthen supportive social norms and practices;
- recognizing and strengthening the work of community-based organisations, both youth and adult, and assisting in their coordinated efforts; and
- improving the evidence and information base to support the case for child protection systems strengthening through high-quality research and data gathering, linking researchers and practitioners and engaging national capacity in research and knowledge generation.

# A CALL TO ACTION TO STRENGTHEN CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

We call for action to develop and strengthen child protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa. We address this call to the governments of sub-Saharan Africa, the African Union and the regional economic communities, multilateral agencies, donors, the private sector, academia, civil society organisations, communities and organised children's and youth groups.

- improve the skills and strengths of the social service workforce;
- monitor and evaluate the impact of child protection interventions, and disseminate findings in an accessible format to promote learning and improve system design; and
- undertake joint efforts to strengthen child protection systems to prepare for or adapt to emergency or conflict situations, and develop appropriate interventions for these contexts.

## TO ALL OF THESE ACTORS

We call for coordinated efforts to:

- recognise that children, youth and families are at the heart of the system, and that collaborative efforts should focus on strengthening their ability to become agents of their own protection;
- understand the quality and scope of existing child protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa, through measures such as research, mapping and assessment;
- support actions to develop and strengthen these systems in a way that is consistent with their respective political, socio-economic, cultural and economic contexts, and that recognizes that all child protection actors, whether more or less formal, are working within one and the same system;
- design and implement child protection interventions covering the areas of promotion, prevention and response, and engaging children, youth and families as protective agents in their own right;

## TO THE GOVERNMENTS OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

We call for:

- the prioritisation of child protection systems strengthening at the national, local and community levels in national planning processes, and the allocation of substantial budgetary resources to strengthen the promotion, prevention and response capacities of the system;
- the development of an enabling legal and policy framework and an accountability structure for the child protection system with clear roles, responsibilities and standards for all of the actors involved;
- the creation of mechanisms to collect child protection surveillance data and to monitor and evaluate the system and thus expand the evidence base;
- the coordination of national efforts in child protection across and within sectors to strengthen the system, and the promotion of resource sharing among them;



- the mainstreaming of child protection responsibilities into the policies and practices of all related sectors (justice, security, education, health, communication); and
- the development of formal partnerships with non-governmental and civil society agencies to extend the reach of governmental services and to align the child protection efforts of all actors, whether more or less formal.

## TO THE AFRICAN UNION AND REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES (EAC, ECOWAS, SADC)

We call for:

- increased emphasis on the issue of child protection systems strengthening in policy and planning, frameworks and structures;
- the provision of encouragement and support to individual governments undertaking child protection systems strengthening;
- the monitoring of government efforts on child protection systems strengthening and the promotion of experience sharing among them, e.g., through their State party periodic reports; and
- renewed efforts to harmonize legal frameworks and protection mechanisms across the region to ensure transnational protection for children on the move.

## TO MULTILATERAL AGENCIES (U.N., WORLD BANK, AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK) AND DONORS

We call for:

- support for research and analysis on child protection and child protection systems in national poverty reduction and social development efforts in sub-Saharan Africa, and documentation of good practices;
- inclusion of child protection systems strengthening on the agendas of dialogues with government and other stakeholders on national development plans and partnership strategies; and
- identification and appraisal of opportunities to support and/or invest in child protection systems strengthening.

## TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR

We call for:

- increased awareness of the right of all children to protection, and promotion of child protection in its cooperation with and support to national and local governments and other stakeholders.

## TO ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

We call for:

- increased emphasis on generating knowledge and evidence relevant to the child protection systems strengthening agenda to provide decision-makers and practitioners with information that is prioritised, realistic, reliable and useful;
- increased collaboration between practitioners and researchers to strengthen the applicability of research to policy and practice; and
- renewed emphasis on the engagement of national capacity in research and knowledge generation.

## TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS, COMMUNITIES, AND ORGANISED CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH GROUPS

We call for:

- continued and expanded collaboration on child protection systems strengthening among all civil society actors (organisations, communities and their leaders, families, young people and children) to ensure that their efforts reinforce each other and are enriched by the sharing of resources and experience;
- more systematic and sustained efforts to monitor and evaluate civil society involvement in child protection systems strengthening, providing feedback on successful approaches to all partners in the system;
- further development of the role of civil society as the essential link in child protection systems strengthening between formal and less formal elements, providing the formal actors with knowledge and understanding of the community level while building capacity of the civil society actors; and
- strengthening and reinforcement by traditional and faith leaders and local representatives of community values, norms and practices that protect children, and advocacy for the transformation of those practices that put children at risk.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Sub-Saharan Africa' includes the entire African continent with the exception of Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and Western Sahara.

<sup>2</sup> The organisations participating in the April 2013 convening were: African Child Policy Forum; Environnement et Développement du Tiers-monde; Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs; Plan International; Regional Inter-agency Task Team on Children and AIDS; Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative; Save the Children; Terre des hommes; UNICEF; and World Vision.

<sup>3</sup> Inter-Agency Group (2012), Strengthening Child Protection Systems in sub-Saharan Africa: A Working Paper. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/strengthening\\_child\\_protection\\_systems\\_in\\_sub-saharan\\_africa\\_-\\_August\\_2012\\_.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/strengthening_child_protection_systems_in_sub-saharan_africa_-_August_2012_.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See [www.childinfo.org](http://www.childinfo.org)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, UNICEF, U.S. CDC, and Muhimbili University of Health and Applied Sciences. *Violence Against Children in Tanzania: Findings from a National Survey 2009*. (United Republic of Tanzania, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2013*, [www.childinfo.org](http://www.childinfo.org)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Selected articles include Brown, D. et al. (2009). Exposure to physical and sexual violence and adverse health behaviours in African children. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, (87:6), 447–455; Boothby, N. et al. (2012). Coordinated and evidence-based policy and practice for protecting children outside of family care. *Child Abuse and Neglect*; Engle et al. (2012), Strategies to avoid the loss of developmental potential in more than 200 million children in the developing world, *Lancet* 329 (415), 229–242.

<sup>9</sup> New research in Tanzania has shown, for the first time in a low-income country, a demonstrated relationship between lifetime traumatic history and sexually-acquired HIV infection (Pence, B. et al., (2012), Prevalence of

psychological trauma and association with current health and functioning in a sample of HIV-infected and HIV-uninfected Tanzanian adults. *PLoS One*, 7(5)). A study in Kwazulu-Natal found that prevalence rates for physical and emotional abuse are 43 per cent for orphans and vulnerable children, and that these children were at higher risk for depression and behavioural problems (Thurman, T. & Kidman, R. (2011), *Child maltreatment at home: prevalence among orphans and vulnerable children in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa*. Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine). Similarly, another study found that South African children orphaned due to AIDS had higher rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder than other orphans and non-orphans (Cluver, L., Orkin, M., Boyes, M., Gardner, F. & Meinck, F. (2011). Transactional sex amongst AIDS-orphaned and AIDS-affected adolescents predicted by abuse and extreme poverty. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes*, 58 (3)). A cross-sectional study, also from South Africa, demonstrated adverse mental health outcomes from abuse of young women (Ruxana, J. et al., (2012). Adverse mental health outcomes associated with emotional abuse in young rural South African women: a cross-sectional study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(5)).

<sup>10</sup> Engle, P.L., et al. (2007). Strategies to avoid the loss of developmental potential in more than 200 million children in the developing world. *Lancet*, 369(9557). pp. 229–242; also see World Health Organisation, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs332/en/>

<sup>11</sup> Santa-Ana-Tellez, Y., DeMaria, L., & Galárraga, O. (2011). Cost interventions for AIDS orphans and vulnerable children. *Tropical Medicine and International Health*, 16, 1417–1426

<sup>12</sup> For example, in Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Tanzania, Uganda, Swaziland and Zambia.



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