

Why Networks Encourage Innovation and Why Donors Should Invest in Them

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD OF CHILD PROTECTION

I APPALLING KNOWLEDGE VS. PRACTICE GAP



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The famous Bucharest Early Intervention Project¹ compared the cognitive and social development of children living in institutions to children living in high-quality foster care environments. Over the last 14 years, the investigation has verified that children in institutional care suffer profound deficits and delays in IQ and social and emotional development when compared to children assigned to foster care before the age of two. The Project left no doubt that the earlier an institutionalized child is placed in foster care, the better the chances of developmental recovery. Better yet, it left no doubt that prevention of institutionalization should

¹ Charles A. Nelson, Nathan A. Fox, Charles H. Zeanah, Romania's Abandoned Children: Deprivation, Brain Development, and the Struggle for Recovery, Harvard University Press, 2014, found at: <http://www.bucharestearlyinterventionproject.org/>

be a first and fundamental goal of every government and every expert around the globe. Knowledge should propel us all into action.

Yet the practice of institutionalization continues, and efforts to prevent further institutionalization remain modest. Worldwide and here at home in the wider Black Sea Region, public and private practitioners continue to place vulnerable children into institutions rather than create alternative care structures such as foster care, kinship care, and respite care, to name a few options. In fact, there is an entire list of documented and internationally acknowledged services and community-based approaches to avoid institutionalization as “the solution” when children are caught in situations of domestic violence, poverty, juvenile delinquency, exploitation, and labor, or socially marginalized by disability or discrimination. It is horrifying that children already caught in extremely difficult situations receive another layer of harm: institutionalization.

What is clear is that there is a major gap between the pool of available knowledge at the international level and mainstream practice at national and local levels. We can talk about political will and whether governments should address other social priorities first, but what country on earth wants to be responsible for the known effects of institutionalization on their own children?

The results of the Bucharest Early Intervention Project are freely available and well-known, yet not one of Romania’s own neighbors (or Romania itself) has taken the necessary steps to entirely ban the institutionalization of children (Romania’s ban on the institutionalization of children less than two years of age is an encouraging first step). With recognition that deinstitutionalization processes are difficult, time-consuming and demand systemic responses, it also must be acknowledged that the gap reflects the tendency for child protection information about what works and what doesn’t to remain unused and even (intentionally) ignored.

Given that child protection failures can lead to true tragedies in the lives of our most vulnerable citizens – the children – it is imperative for knowledge to be developed not only for ‘pilot’ projects, but for all children in specific, vulnerable situations. This suggests a systems change. Sometimes the needed knowledge is not within the borders of a nation, but in a globalized world where access to information is borderless, this cannot be an excuse for inaction.

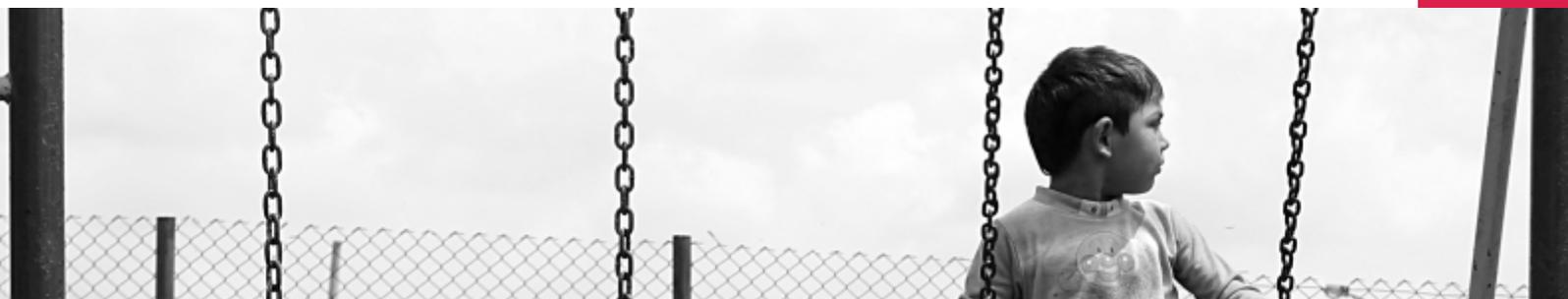


We do not adopt innovations based on objective scientific evidence, but on subjective evaluations of peers who already adopted them.

II INNOVATION AS GAP CLOSER

Introduced by sociologist Dr. Evertt M. Rogers, innovation theory² describes the process by which new innovations and ideas become diffused and adopted within social networks. Diffusion of innovation theory has been studied and applied in a vast array of fields, maybe less so in the field of child protection. Nonetheless, this theory can be a helpful tool for child protection professionals and decision-makers to understand how new ideas can be translated into practice. It also provides a potential reason as to why there remains a wide gap between knowledge and practice.

Communication channels play an important role in the diffusion process. According to the theory, '**most individuals evaluate an innovation not on the basis of scientific research by experts, but through the subjective evaluation of near-peers who have already adopted the innovation**'.³ This is why interpersonal influencers are crucial to innovation as such influence can either accelerate or block a diffusion process.



² Evertt M. Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations Theory, Free Press, New York, 2003.

³ Id, p 36.

III NETWORKS AS INNOVATION ACCELERATORS

Networks need to be supported by those who want to see innovative practices scaled.

The most significant application of this postulate for the field of child protection lies in the implication that near-peer networks need to be encouraged by those who want to see innovative practices scaled from confined 'pilot' projects to systemic reforms. Such networks should be encouraged at sub-national, national and international / regional levels so as to maximize the circulation of innovations from the local to the international levels and vice versa.

Networks that allow for personal contacts should be privileged over virtual networks. As shown by Rogers' seminal work, although mass-media channels allow for more widespread dissemination of information, interpersonal channels are more influential for decision making. In other words, awareness is important, but it is not enough. Reading about child protection innovations (ex. reports, websites, and professional journals), attending conferences and being briefed (in the case of high-level decision-makers) is not sufficient for an innovation to be diffused.

Child protection decision makers are influenced by their social context. A potential adopter's decisions about whether to adopt an innovation are influenced by the opinions of others within their social networks.⁴ Mass-media channels can propose a new idea but to make decisions, people rely on advice from other people that they know and trust. Every change requires an effort and the decision to make that effort. This is taken at the social level. Once an innovation is adopted by some individuals within the social context, it becomes increasingly likely that other members of that social network will also adopt the innovation. Opinion leaders have a special role in this sense as 'opinion leader approval is crucial for introducing new ideas into communication networks and lending those ideas credibility'.⁵

⁴ The 'social context' refers to the social network surrounding a potential adopter.

⁵ J. W. Dearing, Improving the state of health programming by using diffusion theory, *Journal of Health Communication*, 9, 21-36, 2004.

As an example, Romania is the only country in its region to have banned the institutionalisation of children below two years of age; no other country followed this path. Donors willing to see other countries banning institutionalisation of very young children may want to strengthen Romania's 'opinion leader' role in a regional network of stake-holders that are active in reforming child protection systems. Similarly, many countries in Eastern Europe introduced family-based care (kinship and foster care) as an alternative to institutionalisation. In Serbia 66% of the children separated from their families are placed in family-based alternative care; 63% in Romania; 56% in Georgia; 53% in Moldova; 52 % in Bulgaria, 25 % in Azerbaijan, and barely 0.4% in Armenia.⁶ Armenia's participation in networks that include its neighbors should therefore be encouraged and supported.



Where child protection networks are weak and professionals fail to build trusting relations, promising practices are not spread and systems of care fail to improve.

IV HOW CAN NETWORKS BE STRENGTHENED?

In social contexts in which child protection networks are weak and where professionals fail to build trusting relations, the diffusion of innovation is much slower. Promising practices are not spread and systems of care fail to improve.

Child protection systems could greatly benefit from increased resources dedicated to strengthening civil society and multi-sector networks. Such resources should come from all those who want to ensure the right care and protection of vulnerable children.

⁶ Data collated by the author (as of 2011) from the UNICEF Transmonee Database, available at: www.transmonee.org.

The following recommendations of support are worthy of study:

1 CHILD-FOCUSED ORGANIZATIONS

Most large, child-focused CSOs conduct awareness raising campaigns and lobby decision-making bodies for changes in child protection practices. As shown above, lobby and awareness campaigns alone are not sufficient for the actual implementation of new ideas. Investing in child protection networks as part of awareness and lobby campaigns will further distill the campaign's own objectives into peer networks. Peer cooperation is an essential tactic for the successful scale of ideas.

2 INDIVIDUAL OR CORPORATE DONORS

Large numbers of individuals and corporations donate for children, usually for very visible or specific causes. In 1987 a girl fell into a well in Midland, Texas and her broadcasted rescue efforts lasting 58 hours produced no less than 800.000 USD that people donated for her recovery, along with countless teddy bears, home-made gifts and cards.

Such contributions are crucial for improving the life of one child or the lives of a group of children, but for those donors who want to contribute to a systemic change that can help ALL children affected by a specific issue, donating to a child protection network at local, national or international / regional level might be the funding decision they may want to make.

3 INTERNATIONAL DONORS

International donors, specialized UN agencies, private foundations and other donors and resource holders who want to have systemic outreach: contribute to building multi-stakeholder partnerships.

International donors may consider partnering with these networks through tangible commitments that extend time, effort and financial resources.

Equally important, this group of donors should consider renewable resources for the network's long-term sustainability (ex. a trust fund for the diffusion of innovation in child protection to be available for local, national and regional networks).

4 GOVERNMENTS AND/OR STATE-RUN CHILD PROTECTION AGENCIES

To introduce new reforms and innovations, networking and a multi-stakeholder approach is essential. Working at the grass-roots level and inspired by their constant interaction with the most vulnerable children, civil society organisations acquire an undeniable expertise and therefore they are able to recommend evidence-based policy solutions like no other group. This is why governments should not only support the work of these exceptional individual NGOs, but they should encourage their networks and networking.

NGOs are not only 'service providers' for the reform implementation process, but first of all they are 'thought partners' and knowledge generators that cannot be left alone when it comes to closing the appalling knowledge - practice gap. Governments and child protection agencies cannot afford to do this if they are genuine about their efforts to fix broken systems of child protection.

V NETWORKS AS SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR INNOVATORS



Establishing a trust fund for child protection networks to allow them to scale their work is a must.

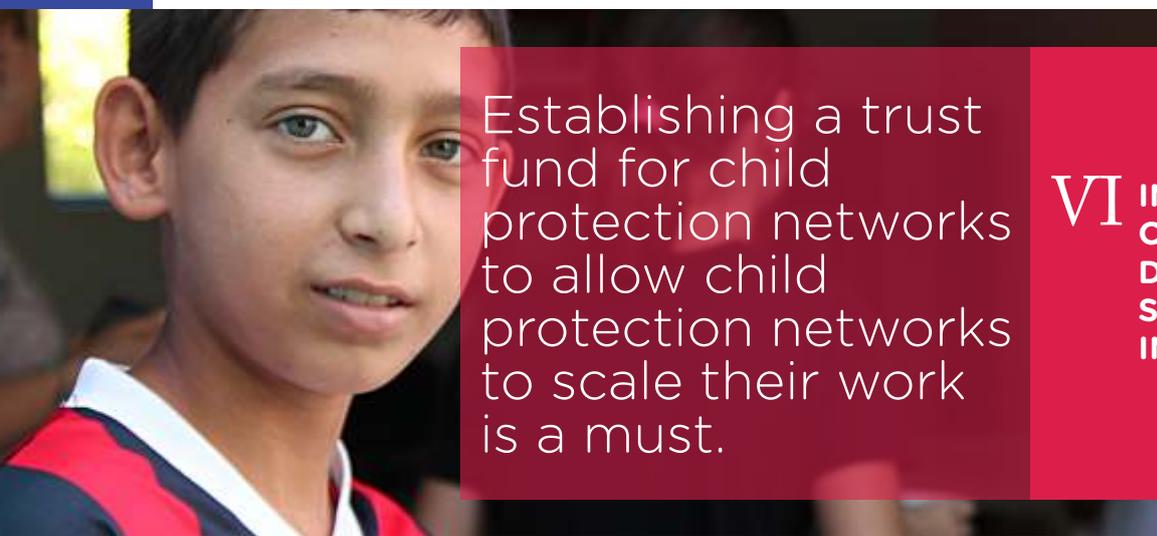
Networks can provide the right social environment to foster the scale of innovation. Networks can also provide the right environment to encourage innovation in the first place; innovators and innovation promoters often underestimate the extensive decision-making process involved in making an innovation decision.⁷ Innovation adopters encounter countless difficulties: anxiety related to uncertainty, resistance to change by other members of the child protection system who might be hostile to the innovation or simply unaware or unconvinced, paralyzing

⁷ Diamond, M.A., Innovation and diffusion of technology: A human process. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 48, 221-229, 1996.

concern over the bureaucratic, or administrative and logistical hassles that may arise.

For example, kinship care and foster care services are essential alternatives to institutionalization. While most countries in the region introduced family-based care (kinship and foster care) as key child protection alternatives, some countries did not introduce these alternatives due to stiff opposition from staff working in institutions and the vested interests or even frightening levels of corruption that surround the so-called 'orphanage' system (where only a tiny number of children are actual 'orphans' without parents).

Networks can provide a buffer or shelter to innovators. With investments in capacity and working in cooperation with one another, relationships fueled by multi-stakeholder networks can provide protection and brainstorming necessary to overcome challenges that marginalize innovative ideas. Connecting to outside perspectives and potential solutions found elsewhere, networks can also provide crucial communication and best practice links from external sources to fuel innovation in locally untested areas.



Establishing a trust fund for child protection networks to allow child protection networks to scale their work is a must.

VI **INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS: DARE TO SUPPORT THE INNOVATORS!**

Both potential adopters and innovation promoters share the responsibility for bridging the knowledge - practice gap that exists in the child protection field today. However, innovators and innovation promoters bear additional responsibilities.

First, innovators must communicate the impact and successes of their efforts. Innovators must detail their lessons, challenges, successes and impact in such a way as to encourage adoption and to help pilot and

operationalize these ideas in other contexts. We must go beyond conferences that explain basic levels of reform and instead document step by step solutions that highlight as many lessons as successes.

Second, innovation promoters must be willing and daring to innovate as well; the method and means of promotion must be advanced to overcome barriers and applaud successes. In the 'New Eastern Europe', we have witnessed twenty years of child protection reforms, and still there are thousands and thousands of children living in institutions. Continuing with the same project-based incentives towards reform will obviously produce more of the same. New social change technologies are required: social media needs to be harnessed to inspire new generations of child rights activists; innovators need to have spaces where failure is acceptable and where they are entrusted with seed funding; networks need to be encouraged so that innovations are not confined within the borders of a self-referential professional community. In both cases donors have a crucial role, as their funding strategies can encourage or hinder any of the above.

Initiatives like ChildPact, the Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area,⁸ are seeking support to push for innovation. ChildPact brings together 600 child-focused NGOs from 10 different countries, who work with more than 500.000 vulnerable children. ChildPact is a strong advocate for regional cooperation at inter-governmental and civil society level, in an effort to identify innovations that can tackle the common threats to children's well-being. Inspired by its members' dedication and encouraged by recent innovative funding practices like the Robert Carr Fund for Civil Society Networks in the global HIV response⁹ (with participation from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DFID, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and PEPFAR) ChildPact calls for a trust fund for child protection networks to be established by those donors who want to see systemic changes in the child protection systems in this region. ChildPact can testify within its day-to-day activity what the Robert Carr Fund has recently witnessed, namely that the civil society networks 'play a vital role in promoting

⁸ More about ChildPact: www.childpact.org.

⁹ The Robert Carr civil society Networks Fund (RCNF) supports international networks that address the needs and human rights of inadequately served populations (ISP). These are key and other populations that face a higher HIV risk, mortality and/or morbidity when compared to the general population. At the same time they have less access to information and services. RCNF focusses on civil society networks because they are best capable of reaching the people who are most affected by the HIV epidemic, found at: <http://www.robertcarrfund.org>.

innovation, developing leadership, disseminating information, linking stakeholders, advancing policy and supporting good practice'. ChildPact can see its members accomplish so much with such little funding. Establishing a trust fund for child protection networks to allow child protection networks to scale their work is an urgent need and this effort should be supported and elevated by other stakeholders who wish to overcome the barriers to innovation.

Beyond the conclusions relating to the field of child protection, the journey to minimize the gap between knowledge and practice is relevant to the post-MDG debates. A successful post 2015 development agenda and its implementation will require levels of partnership and collaboration that have not yet been witnessed in mainstream policy and development circles. The challenges are likely to require coordinated efforts, the courage and the willingness to take risks, honesty about what works and doesn't work in development practice, and to learn from the experiences of others. Donors need to re-orient their funding strategies so as to meet these challenges. The national and international NGO or multi-stakeholder networks that can channel and press for innovations need to be strengthened. Minimizing or ignoring new levels of multi-stakeholder cooperation is the first step to kill collective impact.



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