

FAITH
ACTION
INITIATIVE



MAXIMIZING YOUR IMPACT:

A Guide for Taking a Systems Approach
in the Care and Protection of Children



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WELCOME

Dear fellow advocates for orphaned and vulnerable children,

The Faith to Action Initiative and many others involved in the care and protection of children have been working for decades to raise awareness about the importance of families. While building and supporting orphanages and children's homes is one of the most common ways Christians respond to the biblical command to "defend the orphan," Scripture and decades of research confirm that children belong in families.

Progress to see children cared for in families has been steady, as international commitments to phase out institutional care increase, governments amend their laws and policies, donors redirect funds, and organizations around the world prioritize seeing children cared for in families. As momentum increases, efforts must expand beyond raising awareness and dive deeper into providing and supporting quality and sustainable family-based care.

This guidance has been created for Christian individuals, ministries, and organizations who recognize the importance of supporting orphaned and vulnerable children in families and are searching for the best ways to engage. Readers will learn how to maximize their impact; leveraging resources and efforts to make long-term, sustainable, and positive changes for orphaned and vulnerable children.

In this guide, you will learn:

- The limitations of common approaches to supporting orphaned and vulnerable children;
- A framework to support orphaned and vulnerable children that maximizes impact;
- The benefits of focusing on the broader system of care and protection; and
- Concrete and simple actions to incorporate an approach that focuses on systems.

Our hope is that in the following pages you will find encouragement and direction that lead you to new heights in how you support orphaned and vulnerable children around the world.

Thank you for your commitment to caring for these children and desiring to do your very best.

Sincerely,

The Faith To Action Initiative
faithtoaction.org

SHIFTING THE APPROACH

... learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue
the oppressed, defend
the orphan, plead for
the widow.

—Isaiah 1:17 (NRSV)

How We Make Decisions Matters

The Bible clearly calls believers to serve orphans. Isaiah 1:17 commands God’s people to, “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan.” James 1:27 declares, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Christians have been responding to this call graciously and generously since the early days of the church.

While the call is clear, discerning a specific role and exactly how to make the best impact for **orphaned and vulnerable children** and their communities is challenging. Therefore, examining the decision-making process is critical for considering how to ensure efforts result in the best outcomes for children and their communities.

Commonly, the decision-making process for developing a response to the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children looks like this:

PROMPT
(make aware)



PASSION
(desire to act)



IDENTIFY
(determine focus)



CREATE
(develop program)

Source: Rebecca Nhep, ACCI presentation



DEFINITION : “Orphaned and vulnerable children”

A term used to identify children who have either lost one or both parents, or children who face significant risks to their safety or wellbeing. It is an important term because the word “orphan” is often misused, being applied to children who have living parents, but are for some reason separated from their families.

PROMPT: An individual is *prompted*, or made aware of a specific need, perhaps by reading an article, watching a documentary, going on a mission trip, or having a conversation with a friend. Maybe they are told there are millions of orphans worldwide.

PASSION: That individual then begins to develop a *passion* for this issue and a desire to act.

IDENTIFY: Their first plan of action is to *identify* the focus of their efforts. They may not be able to fix everything, but they can focus on a specific type of child, a location, or unique situation of a child.

CREATE: Finally, they *create* a program or ministry to support that specific focus.

At first glance, this process seems very logical and has no doubt resulted in ministries that benefit children around the world. However, programs created through this process have limitations that most have come to accept as unavoidable:

- **Unable to respond to all the needs of children and families:** No single program can meet the full range of needs of a child or family. Organizations find themselves frustrated and pressured to be the sole provider or entire solution for all the needs of the children in their program—an impossible task! They are unable to provide unique solutions for the variety of needs of children and families.
- **Only reach a specific set of children:** Programs are unable to respond to the needs of children outside of their mission and focus. They cannot reach children who are outside of the program's criteria or geographical reach, such as those outside of a fixed age range or those not residing in the surrounding community.
- **Temporary solution:** A program's services will only be provided during the length of time a program is in existence. Eventually, when the ministry leaves the country or funding dries up, so does the service.

This decision-making process, especially when it is done in relative isolation or without guidance of local community members, can too easily lead to unintended negative consequences, such as duplicating efforts, undermining others' efforts and roles in the community, and programming that is inappropriate or ineffective.

Fortunately, an alternative approach for determining how to support orphaned and vulnerable children can help overcome these limitations, avoid unintended consequences, and ultimately maximize impact. However, this requires taking additional steps before identifying where to engage and create programs.

CASE STUDY: Shifting to a new approach

In 1997, Philip and Jill moved to the Dominican Republic with a desire to see orphaned and vulnerable children experience the love and care they deserve. They began their work by building children's homes on multiple campuses that received many children. However, after working in the children's homes for several years, the couple realized that they were not responding to the children's greatest needs. Philip explained, "We learned that most of the 'orphans' in our homes had living parents who wanted to be in relationship with their children. Our focus was on beds and food, on staffing and activities, but what the children needed was connection with a family." It became clear that the children's homes they had built to serve vulnerable children were actually contributing to the separation of children from their own families. While they knew they were following God's calling to support orphaned and vulnerable children, their initial "solution" had been too simplistic, and they began to wonder if there was another way to approach the problems they were seeing more strategically.

Phillip and Jill began by seeking a clearer picture of the complexity of the orphan care system, asking questions, taking time to learn, and connecting with others. They wondered if it would be possible to reunite the children back to their biological families and provide education and services to keep those families together? Could single moms be provided with daycare options so they could go to work and not leave their children neglected during the day? Philip and Jill also became connected with wonderful Christian families that were part of local churches in the country. For those children who couldn't safely return home to their own biological families, would it be possible for them to live with those wonderful families?



This process of learning, asking questions, engaging with others, and being open to God's leading eventually led Philip and Jill to decide they needed to make a change in how they supported orphaned and vulnerable children and families. Instead of providing residential care, they wanted to support a system of care and protection for children that was responsive to all needs of children.

In 2005, Philip and Jill moved to Costa Rica and God opened a path to partner with local churches, the government, and families to support vulnerable children in new ways. They engaged pastors and local churches to recruit families from their congregations who would open their homes to receive children. They developed a close relationship with the national child welfare office and supported the expansion of a foster care system. They actively worked with the biological families of children in foster care to support reintegration. The organization they founded, Casa Viva, has now cared for over 1,000 children in Christian foster families in Costa Rica. Their programs ensure that children not only have their physical needs met, but also meet the need for children to grow up in a safe and loving family, their greatest need of all.

Considering the Bigger Picture

Improving the impact of programs for orphaned and vulnerable children requires a broad perspective. From the window of an airplane, we see the crossing of roads and highways, tops of buildings and homes, and the expanse of land used for agriculture. It is a vantage point that allows us to see how different parts of a city connect to function.



Similarly, a “30,000-foot view” of the various elements that protect and care for children provides an important perspective of how each element interacts to support children and keep them safe. A specific orphan care ministry is one of many parts within the larger landscape working to provide care and protection for children, but there are other key elements surrounding this ministry that are revealed from this elevated perspective.

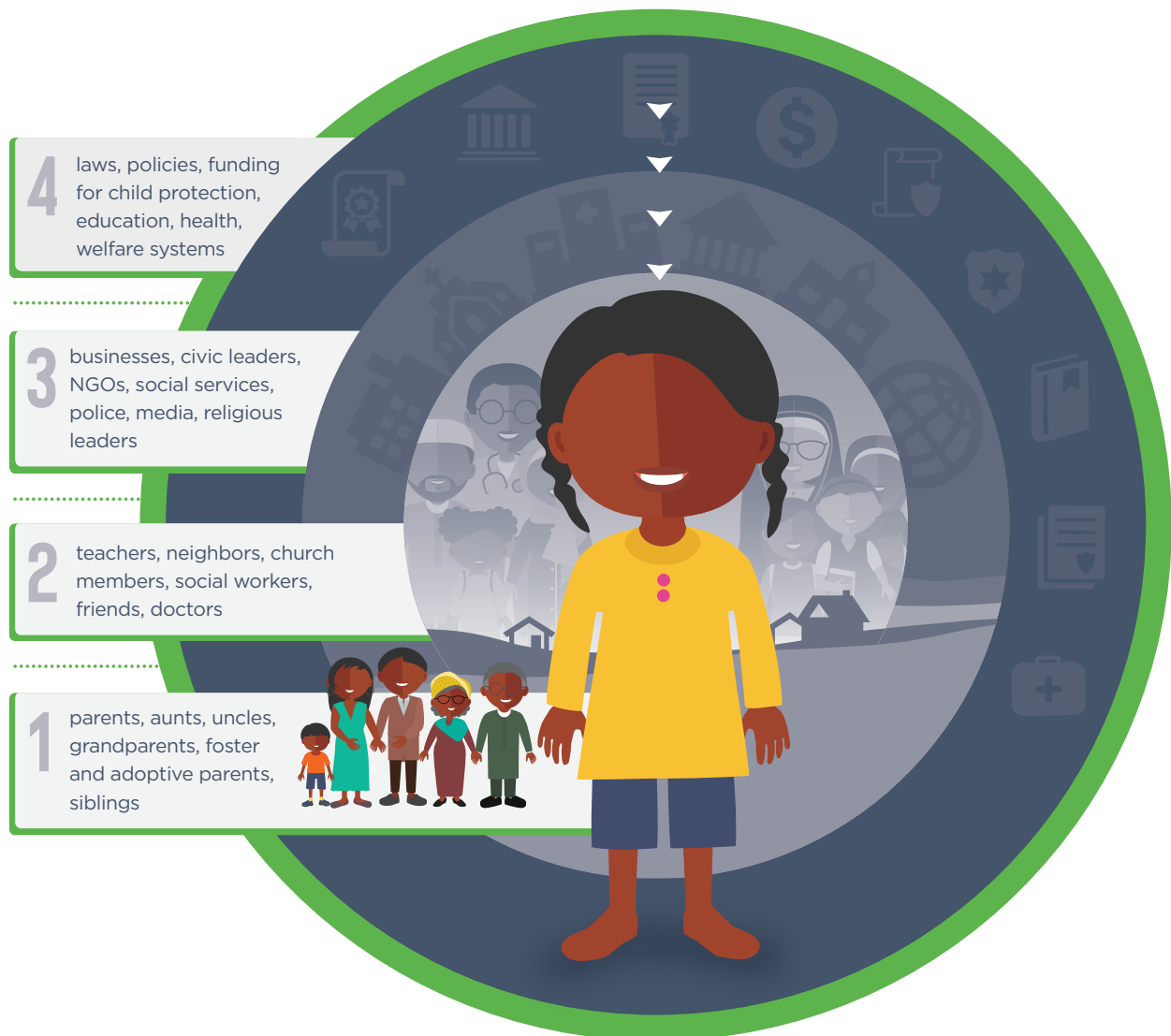
From this view it becomes clear how different elements contribute to the protection and care of vulnerable children. Becoming aware of the broader system is an important part of taking a systems approach.

BECOMING AWARE OF THE SYSTEM

Parts of the System

A system includes interrelated and interdependent parts. Everyone and everything is part of a system and can work to make sure it functions properly.

The image below illustrates the system that surrounds children. It represents layers of formal and informal elements in a community and nation that can contribute to the care and protection, including the less obvious elements of the system.



Adapted from Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model and other similar models of the ecology of the child

The first layer includes the most direct and important relationships for a child: his or her family. It is made up of those who provide the love and bond necessary for healthy development. The second layer includes the people, organizations, or groups in the community who have direct contact with children and their families. The third layer includes elements in the community that do not regularly have contact with a child, but impact safety and care. This layer is significant, but only indirectly affects a child. The fourth and final layer represents the undergirding systems that protect and support children.

The elements in these layers can either positively or negatively impact a child's safety and development. For example, discrimination from community members can lead to poor treatment of children. Conversely, supportive community members can uphold child rights and prioritize the care and protection of children.

Functions of the System

Ideally, the layers surrounding children and their families form a system that ensures their care and protection. Children and families in every community need a range of well-functioning services that effectively interact with and support one another as a safety net, ensuring children do not fall through the cracks.

FUNCTIONS OF A SYSTEM OF CARE AND PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN

- **UNIVERSAL:** Ensuring all children have access to services, such as access to education, supportive services for children with disabilities, community development, and poverty alleviation, to meet their basic needs and fulfill their basic rights.
- **PREVENTION:** Preventing all children from experiencing violence, neglect, and exploitation, including parenting programs, addressing stigma and discrimination, and raising awareness.
- **EARLY INTERVENTION:** Supporting families who are in crisis through services, such as social work and individualized family strengthening.
- **INTERVENTION AND ALTERNATIVE CARE:** Implementing alternative care arrangements for children who are unable to stay with their family, utilizing quality social work practices, and ensuring the placement of children outside of their family is both necessary and the most suitable for the child, including kinship care, foster care, or adoption.
- **RESTORATION:** Providing provision or rehabilitative services for children and families who have experienced separation, crisis, abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

The system must, therefore, work toward ensuring all children have access to universal services, as well as prevent harm to children and intervene appropriately if harm occurs.

Some of the elements in the system provide general support and a holistic response to caring for all children, like their education, health, and basic needs. Other elements are protective and exist to monitor and respond to situations of abuse, neglect, or exploitation of children, like social workers, police, and child protection services.

These functions move toward the goal of a society where all children are cared for and protected. Whether they know it or not, an individual, ministry, or organization joins in this goal when they serve orphaned and vulnerable children within a community.

Being aware of the parts and functions of the system allows individuals, organizations, and churches to be intentional and strategic in the ways they respond to the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children.

TAKING A SYSTEMS APPROACH

In the midst of the decision-making process, when trying to identify the best ways to support orphaned and vulnerable children, there are so many possibilities. For example, should an organization establish a foster care and domestic adoption program? Should they focus on developing economic empowerment or education programs? Should they start an awareness raising campaign or advocate for policy changes? A **systems approach** guides individuals, ministries, and organizations as they determine what to do.

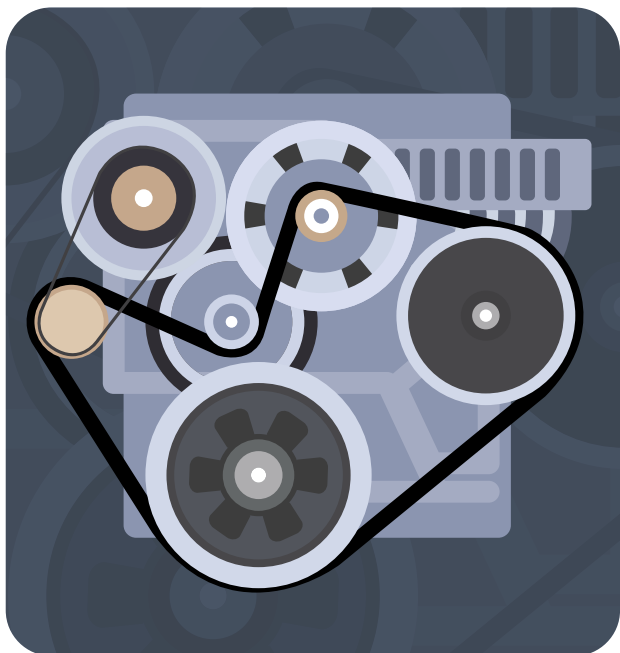
Engaging in the System

A systems approach creates lasting change by supporting existing elements or addressing deficits of the system for the care and protection of children. It allows those wanting to support orphaned and vulnerable children to operate in a more effective way to meet children's needs. This approach allows those within the system to make decisions that strengthen the broader system and ultimately improve the care and protection for all children. For example, teachers can observe children in their classrooms to make sure they are getting the care they need at home, and if a concern arises, school counselors can connect families to services in the community or report signs of abuse or neglect to local authorities. Schools can also provide meals for students who may not receive sufficient food at home. Local churches can identify vulnerable households and provide food or other material support to those families. Police can receive training on how to appropriately intervene when a family is in crisis and refer families to support services to ensure a child's safety and wellbeing is prioritized. Lawyers and judges can receive training to help them make good decisions regarding the placement of children while making sure a child is not unnecessarily separated from his or her family.

Additionally, a part of taking a systems approach is considering one's role as a part of the system; realizing that what an individual, organization, or group does in that system impacts the whole system.

DEFINITION : "Systems approach"

A systems approach requires understanding the system in which one is participating, including the less obvious elements of the system, and then being intentional and strategic in the way one acts as part of that system. It is taking the perspective that all problems should be addressed with consideration of their relationship to the broader system.



Like in a machine, in which individual parts interact with one another to perform a task, those involved in supporting orphaned and vulnerable children are also interacting with and affecting other elements of the system around children. Each specific program impacts children, families, and communities far beyond the visible outcomes. A program has the potential to either help the system work more efficiently or unintentionally cause harm and pull the system off track. **When an orphan care program functions in coordination with the broader system of care and protection of children they are ensuring children are well-served.**



CONSIDERING THE BALANCE OF A SYSTEM

An important consideration in assessing the health of the system of care and protection of children is balance. Too often one element of the system overtakes other elements. For example, in the wake of the AIDS crisis, funding poured into many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to build orphanages. One study found that there was a doubling in the number of registered orphanages in Zimbabwe between 1994 and 2004. The overabundance of orphanages led to neglect of programs that could ensure children stayed with their families or provide alternative families through kinship care, foster care, or domestic adoption.

In countries around the world, the vast majority of children who are in orphanages are not actually orphans and could be cared for in families, especially if those families receive proper support. Today, many countries remain overly reliant on orphanages to meet the needs of children in adversity. Similarly, a country may have developed strong domestic foster care and adoption programs but has yet to prioritize support to strengthen biological families. Without services for biological families, children will continue to be separated from their families for reasons, such as poverty, that could be remedied with support services. Imbalanced systems mean only a few solutions are available while other options are not available or limited, and the system is unable to provide unique solutions for the variety of needs of children and their families. However, a balanced system ensures that children and families have options to access services most appropriate for their specific needs.

Source: Children in Residential Care: The Zimbabwean Experience, page 11.

Benefits of a Systems Approach

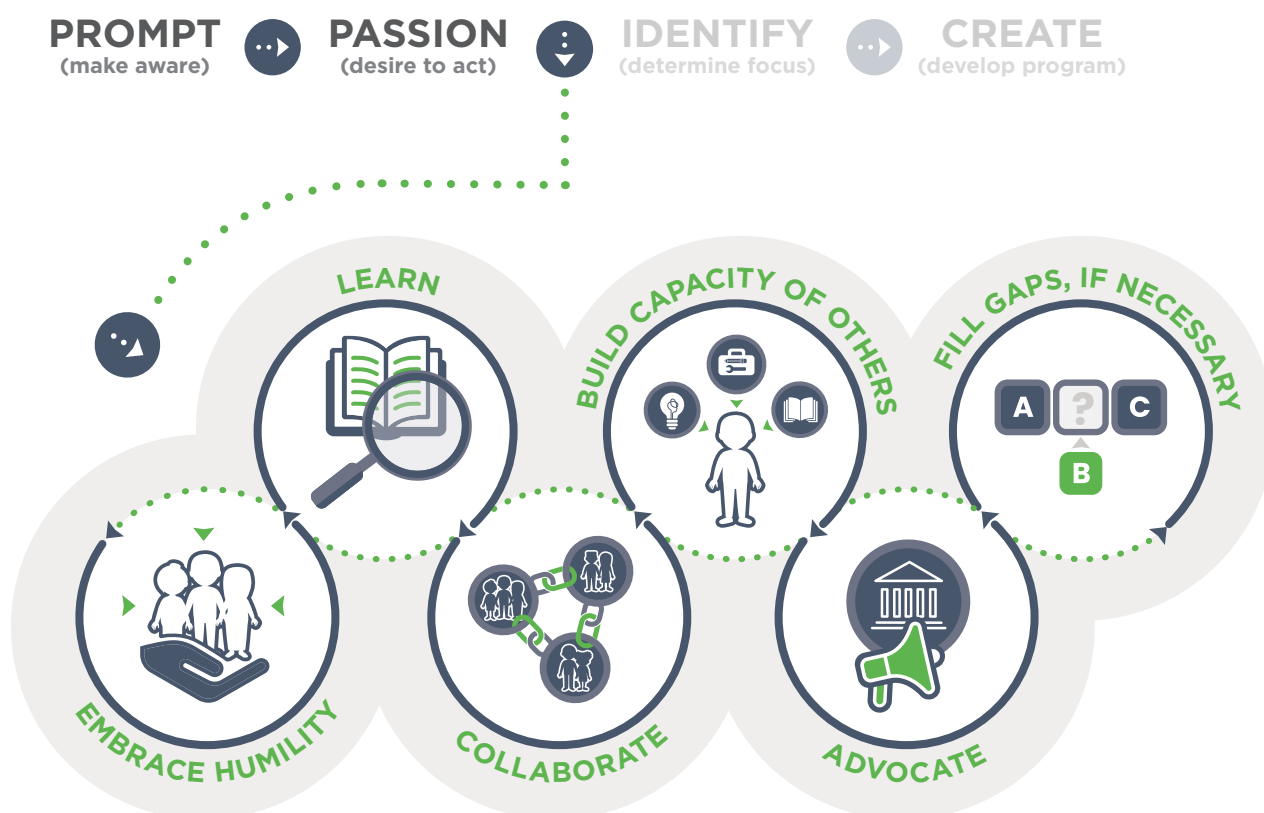
It is vital that those with a desire to support orphaned and vulnerable children take a step back to see the big picture to determine where to focus their efforts. This will help maximize impact in the following ways:

- ▶ **When individuals, organizations, or churches focus on strengthening elements of a broader system,** they reach a larger population with more services. More children and families in crisis have access to services that directly address their specific needs and the unique challenges they face.
- ▶ **When individuals, organizations, or churches work in collaboration with others,** they help to seamlessly integrate children and families into the broader system's array of services and support provided across many organizations and entities.
- ▶ **When individuals, organizations, or churches invest in the existing elements of support in a community,** community members are empowered to care for orphaned and vulnerable children. Honoring existing structures of support leads to long-lasting impact in the community.

These outcomes can become a reality by taking strategic and intentional steps when determining how to respond to the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children.

HOW TO SWITCH TO A SYSTEMS APPROACH

Whether it's a donor sending financial support or an organization directly supporting children, it is vital that those with a desire to care for orphaned and vulnerable children adopt a systems approach to determine where to focus their resources and efforts. After the initial prompt and passion for orphan care is developed, a systems approach then takes a different route.



Unlike a traditional decision-making process, this process is often non-linear and fluid. Those who take this approach can move back and forth between the different actions as they learn, adapt, and progress. *Let's get started!*



Systems thinkers argue that interventions do not always produce neat, sequential, and contained outcomes; instead, an ongoing process of innovation, reflection, and learning is needed to bring about social change.

—Systems Change: A Guide for What It Is and How to Do It



Embrace Humility

Actively reflect on position, power, and privilege and choose to be a humble learner and servant. For those coming from outside a community, it is especially important to recognize the possible influence held in a relationship and how easy it is to unintentionally coerce others. This can contribute to barriers in partnership and mutuality, which are essential when taking a systems approach. Overcoming these barriers requires intentionality to ensure a posture of humility and learning.

Building trust and authentic relationships within a community requires relinquishing specific goals, timelines, and slowing down to listen. Outsiders are typically not best positioned to understand intricate problems within a community. Often, local community members have creative solutions to share and help outsiders better understand the situations orphaned and vulnerable children and families face. A continual posture of humility, servanthood, and prioritizing the perspectives and leadership of others will help combat deeply embedded tendencies toward efficiency over cultivating relationships.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

—*Philippians 2:3-8 (NIV)*



REFLECTION:

**The questions throughout Section 4 are for readers who are working with programs for orphaned and vulnerable children to reflect on how to implement each action in taking a systems approach.*

- ▶ How is my ministry or organization leaving space for others to lead and guide the work to care and protect children?



Learn

Challenge any assumptions and become curious. As individuals, organizations, and churches begin to consider the bigger picture, they will start to see the many elements that make up the full system of care and protection surrounding children.

Actively engaging children, families, and community members is critical to seeing the bigger picture, which leads to smarter solutions and empowering those who are most affected by the system. Learn from a wide variety of perspectives, because every individual experiences and perceives the system differently. For example, practitioners ensure an assessment is grounded and practical, while advocates consider policy changes. Beneficiaries of program services, government officials, and service providers are additional partners to include to support learning.

When it comes to the care and protection of children, the most effective programs recognize the rights of children to participate in the planning of programs and services in ways appropriate to their age and maturity. It is important to listen to children's perspectives, respond to their concerns, and involve them in decisions that affect their lives. Community organizations encourage participation by including youth in leadership roles, providing ways for children to share their observations and opinions, and being responsive to the needs expressed by the children themselves. Child participation must also be done carefully, ensuring the safety of children. Additionally, care leavers are children and adults who have spent time in alternative care, such as orphanages or foster care, and should be consulted as they are an important source of knowledge and experience.



TOOL

Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation



<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/nine-basic-requirements-meaningful-and-ethical-childrens-participation/>



When you are confronted by any complex social system ... with things about it that you're dissatisfied with and anxious to fix, you cannot just step in and set about fixing with much hope of helping. This is one of the sore discouragements of our time ... If you want to fix something you are first obliged to understand the whole system.

—Lewis Thomas, *The Medusa and the Snail*, Viking, 1979

Two important tools for learning from children, families, and community members are system mapping and root cause analysis.

Mapping the system documents available community resources and uncovers formal and informal mechanisms to protect and care for orphaned and vulnerable children. Formal mechanisms are those that are a part of established government or other programs. Informal mechanisms are those within less formalized settings, often built on traditional, cultural, or religious practices, such as local elders or tribal leaders. Consider what uniquely exists in the different layers within the system of care and protection of children in the specific context. When mapping, an important part of the process is studying the linkages between different elements of the system. For example, how are referrals for services made from one organization to other agencies? Finally, consider how each element is contributing to the functions of a system of care and protection of children.



Local: Community Mapping Guidance

www.bettercarenetwork.org/library/the-continuum-of-care/community-based-care-mechanisms/community-mapping

National: Child Protection Systems: Mapping and Assessment Toolkit



www.socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/child-protection-systems-mapping-and-assessment-toolkit-user%E2%80%99s-guide

It is vital to explore the root causes and underlying factors contributing to the challenges facing orphaned and vulnerable children and families. This involves looking below the surface, asking “why” repeatedly, and seeking to identify all possible factors. The goal is to see the unseen and identify what is not obvious at a first glance. A root cause analysis provides a fuller picture of how a specific response could be contributing to, relieving, or having no effect on the long-term wellbeing of children.



Understanding the Problem



www.jsi.com/resource/understanding-the-problem-rca-root-cause-analysis/

It is important to recognize that learning about a system of care and protection is not a one-time event, but intentional activities to understand, such as mapping and root cause analysis, must be revisited often, especially as circumstances change or new information is discovered.



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REFLECTION:

- ▶ Who are the local community members best placed to better inform my ministry or organization's understanding and knowledge of the needs and opportunities for supporting orphaned and vulnerable children? How can we engage local community members to ensure that our understanding is well-informed and reflects the strengths, needs, and wants of their community?
- ▶ What are the root causes of the challenges children and families are facing? Are there others who are addressing the root causes? Who, how, and how well?
- ▶ How have orphaned and vulnerable children, families, and care leavers informed my understanding and actions to respond to their own needs and opportunities?



Collaborate

Support efforts that bring together individuals and groups working to care for and protect children. Collaborating, linking, coordinating, and networking with others allow everyone to be more effective in the shared mission of improving care and protection of all children.

Individuals, organizations, and churches can start by joining networks in the community, even those that seem less directly related to their mission. If a network does not exist, bring individuals together, including orphaned and vulnerable children and families, care leavers, faith and community leaders, and others seeking to improve care for orphaned and vulnerable children. They should all be brought to the table, when possible. Strengthen important linkages between different service providers that ensure children and families cannot fall through the cracks.

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) provides a set of tools and activities that support collaborative work. It gives beneficiaries and other community stakeholders the power to make decisions for their own communities. Orphaned and vulnerable children, families, care leavers, faith leaders, and community groups are included in activities that enable and empower people to share, analyze, and enhance knowledge of their community. PLA is a resource to plan, monitor, evaluate, and reflect on programs and services that support families and communities. By playing a facilitator role or simply supporting a participatory process, a ministry or organization can support action that is determined, led, and implemented by local leaders.



TOOL

Reflection Action: www.reflectionaction.org

Governments have a legal responsibility to protect and care for their citizens, including orphaned and vulnerable children and families. Because of this responsibility, governments must be considered key partners in efforts to collaborate. Often governments rely on support from ministries and organizations to assist with implementation of national policies.



TOOL

Broadscale Collaboration: www.woroadmap.org/_service/38803/download/id/868263/name/WWO-Roadmap-2023-Feb-Broadscale-Collaboration.pdf



REFLECTION:

- ▶ Who are our local partners in this work? How do we stay in communication with them or work together? What partners should be added?
- ▶ What organizations and entities currently exist in the community or country that we don't yet work with who are providing care and protection? Think beyond formal entities to informal and less obvious elements, such as churches, extended family members, or other community members.
- ▶ How well-connected are we with other organizations, government agencies, mandated authorities, and local leaders?
- ▶ Can we better participate in and contribute to networks, working groups, and other collaborative forums?

CASE STUDY:

Joining collaborative efforts to maximize impact

In an effort to see all orphaned and vulnerable children in Zambia cared for in loving families, Alliance for Children Everywhere (ACE) has joined a “collective impact” effort, collaborating with a variety of other non-profits, the Catholic Zambian Association of Sisters, as well as funders. This work has been ongoing since 2014, but ACE joined the effort in 2018 with the hope of joining with others to be part of the solution for bridging the gap between policy and practices when it comes to supporting family care options for children. The group works to support governmental policy changes in Zambia, as well as grassroots efforts to strengthen family-based care in Zambia.

ACE has contributed by sharing with others in the collective about its programming in family strengthening and foster care, including the challenges. They have benefited not only by the learning from partners but also through greater influence in policy decisions at the national level. For example, the collective has successfully supported the roll out of emergency foster care in

Zambia which will allow for vulnerable children in need of alternative care to be placed directly into loving families, bypassing any short-term institutional care. ACE's CEO, Gabriel Walder, reflects on their motivation for collaboration, “We want to follow the biblical example of working with others as we seek to serve the most vulnerable among us. Being a faith-based organization motivates us to demonstrate the love of Jesus to those around us whether through our direct programming or collaborations.”





Build Capacity of Others

Consider how to join with others to build the capacity of individuals, groups, and organizations within the system of care and protection before considering something new to solve the problem.

Building the capacity of others within the community takes on many forms, such as providing guidance for benevolence programs within local churches, training educators on inclusive strategies for children with disabilities, or providing social workers with the tools and skills to effectively support children and families. A ministry or organization must consider that they may not be the right one to provide the direct training or support needed. Building capacity includes making connections or providing funding to access support from someone else who is better equipped to provide the specific guidance, training, or technology needed. Building the capacity of the government includes seeking to understand their objectives and offering to support their needs. For example, inviting government officials to child protection training seminars, joining governmental working groups and committees, or providing the government feedback on policies or plans.

Building the capacity of others requires diligence to prioritize supporting and encouraging them and leads to locally owned, sustainable impacts for orphaned and vulnerable children. Supporting efforts to build the capacity of churches, community groups, local leaders, families, and even children themselves empowers communities.



REFLECTION:

- ▶ How is my ministry or organization helping to make other local organizations and entities stronger to ensure children are cared for and protected?
- ▶ Are we currently providing services that a local organization or entity could or should provide? Could we build their capacity instead?
- ▶ Are there existing parts of the system we can support that we don't already? Where can we partner rather than doing it ourselves?



The secret is to empower, to make that community strong ... If the community is strong they will be able to look after their own orphans.

—Dr. Jephata Chifamba

CASE STUDY: Building capacity of community social workers

The “Community Level Access to Social Services” (CLASS) project implemented by World Vision Armenia and funded by USAID has supported the reform of Armenia’s social and child protection systems since 2017. CLASS works with multiple bodies within the national government, as well as local and regional authorities, community social workers, and other non-profit organizations, to establish and strengthen community-based social services for all vulnerable children. Armenia is reforming its national care system, including ending the use of residential care. As part of this effort, Armenia adopted into the law on Local Self-government that all communities with more than 5000 residents hire community social workers. Community social workers are essential for early identification of vulnerable households, ensuring they receive the support they need and preventing children from being placed in residential care. They are a part of monitoring and supporting the smooth reintegration and reunification of children returning from institutions back to biological families.

Through the CLASS project, World Vision Armenia provided support in developing the required social work accreditation course for

community social workers and invested in an updated university curriculum and certification process for social workers. The project provided training on case management practices, child protection, and alternative care (such as foster care), and ensured proper supervision while state-run institutions were being transitioned to community social welfare centers. In addition, World Vision invested in a package of regulating documents for community social workers, including job descriptions, a guide, methodology, dictionary, and toolkit.

Community social workers trained by the CLASS project are working to ensure that vulnerable families get access to needed social services so they can care well for their children. Community social workers were vital service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic and escalation of conflict in parts of the country. In 2022, there were 150 community social workers working across Armenia compared to only eight community social workers in 2017. Also, more than 42,000 members of 10,500 most vulnerable households had received counseling and support from a community social worker.



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Advocate

Strengthen local and national laws, policies, standards, and procedures to ensure long-term support for all orphaned and vulnerable children.

Ministries and organizations should understand local and national policies as they relate to children and partner with the government to ensure programs support governmental strategies and are aligned with the law. Almost every country is working to reform and improve their system of care and protection of children. Often ministries and organizations help governments with implementing national policies at the local level by identifying areas within the system that need to be strengthened and, in collaboration with others in the community, identifying approaches to strengthen existing structures. By working in partnership with local and national governmental agencies, capacity increases and compliance with policies in a community is strengthened.

A valuable way to start building a relationship with government agencies is by simply asking, “How can we help?” Many ministries and organizations working toward the care and protection of children are not legally registered in the countries where they work which limits their ability to contribute positively to the improvement of systems for children. In addition to not adhering to the law, without oversight and accountability, it poses a child protection risk.

Working to support the efforts of the government can sometimes be complicated. However, those who pursue this work understand that persistence, kindness, and service opens doors over time. Government engagement is best done by committed staff or partners from the country an individual, ministry, or organization wants to support. As administrations change within a government, it is still worth pursuing long-term partnerships as typically lower-level functionaries are unlikely to change. A great way to help is by supporting orphaned and vulnerable children, families, and care leavers to advocate for services and support that best meets their needs. Advocacy and partnering with the government will require patience alongside a deep commitment to systems change, yet will result in abundant rewards!

It is important to recognize that ministries and organizations often feel the tension in solutions like those pursued in advocacy and government engagement, between responding to the immediate needs of children and building a stronger system that will serve more children and families over time. Often, the short-term and long-term solutions can be addressed at the same time and do not need to be in competition with each other. However, sometimes when focusing efforts and resources on meeting the immediate needs, progress is hindered for the long-term change that needs to happen. Consider when the immediate response could have a negative impact on the long-term solution and make decisions which might avoid such consequences.



REFLECTION:

- ▶ Do we comply with all local laws, regulations, and policies? Are we appropriately licensed with the government?
- ▶ Within what legal and policy frameworks (action plans, national strategies, etc.) is it important to operate? How can these frameworks better inform our understanding and response?
- ▶ Are we contributing to the fulfillment of relevant local and national action plans that are focused on strengthening the system of care and protection of children?
- ▶ What more can be done to contribute to improving and implementing the governmental policies and standards and procedures in the care and protection of children?
- ▶ Is there data, research, or learning we can share with the government?



CASE STUDY: Empowering the church to lead in national care reform

Paraguay Protects Families (PPF) is a nationwide movement “For every child in Paraguay to grow up in a safe and loving family, and achieve their God-given purpose, making our Heavenly Father known to the entire nation.” Twelve faith-based organizations collaborate with children and families, churches and pastors, children’s homes and foster care agencies, as well as business leaders, communication experts, and other professionals to drive a national movement to improve the system of care and protection of children in their country. They believe that the church will lead this effort through radical collaboration with all sectors of society and government. One of the things PPF has prioritized is advocacy. By mobilizing such a broad group of actors, they have seen great strides in government reform, including the signing of the “Joint Declaration of Best Practices” in 2019, followed by a national review of the care system the

following year. Since then, PPF has been working to support the government’s ability to implement those best practices, including drafting a practice manual and hosting trainings when needed. PPF mobilizes churches to support this effort to improve care for children. In the past, many churches in Paraguay have been involved privately in orphan care for years, mostly by providing residential care for children, but churches were largely unengaged in broader care reform efforts. However, as part of the PPF movement, the church is playing critical roles, from awareness raising, providing holistic support to vulnerable families, recruiting foster and adoptive families, providing financial support, and more. They know Paraguay’s government needs the church to be engaged to see every child grow up in a safe and loving family.



Fill Gaps, if Necessary

Create a service to fill a gap only if it cannot be filled by existing formal and informal mechanisms. The decision to create a new service must be carefully considered and based on results from mapping, consideration of root causes, and stem from in-depth collaboration with community members. It must also practice approaches that ensure sustainability of the service over time, beyond an organization's direct role. Ministries and organizations need to be particularly cautious of the context where they work and recognize Westerners have a cultural tendency toward acting quickly and placing a high value on efficiency over a longer process of partnership with many actors in the community. Here are some tips to help take a systems approach when filling gaps:

- Take a participatory approach, including others such as children, youth, care leavers, families, community members, faith and local leaders, in the design, planning, and monitoring of a program (see the *Collaborate* and *Learn* sections above).
- Seek local ownership as early as possible in the design and planning phases by continually asking for advice, critical feedback, and perspectives of key stakeholders in the community and following their lead.
- Build off of local assets, not deficiencies.
- Contextualize programming with the specific community.
- Integrate new services into the system through linkages and connections with other elements in the system.
- Partner with, coordinate with, and support others to avoid creating a service that someone else can do.
- Consider the holistic needs of children, ensuring access to services for overall wellbeing and avoiding programming that responds to a specific need that might hinder children's wellbeing in other areas.
- Share learning along the way so that others may learn from the experience.

Ministries and organizations must take time to reflect to ensure current programs are meeting a need and not subverting or competing with the role of the government or other formal or informal mechanisms to provide a service. They should consider if a program is really needed and determine if there are others who can fill the gap right away or with some support.

It is important to recognize that demand for an existing service is not the same as the service being truly needed. A program might appear successful through funds raised or by the number of children served, but that does not mean it is most appropriate.

If an individual, ministry, or organization seeks to maximize their impact, it is important that they look at the bigger picture, not only the success of an individual program. While the impact a program has on individual children is important, assessing a program by its impact on the overall system of care and protection of children is crucial.



REFLECTION:

- ▶ How does my ministry or organization's activities fit into the larger systems surrounding children?
- ▶ Are the children and families we serve connected to the community and systems that exist to support them by participating in our programs?
- ▶ What linkages need to be made to ensure this activity is contributing to the broader effort to care and protect children?
- ▶ Are the activities we support addressing the root causes that lead to problems for children and families or, at minimum, are they avoiding perpetuating those underlying factors?
- ▶ Are there any potential harmful impacts of the activities we provide to children within our program, children outside our program, their families, or others who are trying to help these children?
- ▶ What is the plan for sustainability? Do we have a plan to wind down? Who will carry on the services we have provided when we leave? How are we preparing for that?
- ▶ Are we collecting and sharing our learning with others?

A CALL TO ACTION

The process for deciding how to directly support orphaned and vulnerable children is critical, both for achieving the best outcomes for children and ensuring efforts are empowering and sustainable for local communities.

When considering supporting efforts to serve orphaned and vulnerable children, ministries and organizations must humbly do the work to collaborate with, learn from, and build the capacity of others, advocate, and, if necessary, fill gaps in the system of care and protection of children.

Children and families deserve our best when supporting them in overcoming the challenges they face. Christians can lead the effort to be more intentional, strategic, and effective in our efforts to improve the lives of children around the world.



faithtoaction.org

The Faith to Action Initiative, a project of Tides, is a coalition of organizations seeking to elevate best practices in care for orphaned and vulnerable children, with free educational resources and support for churches, faith-based organizations, and individuals who want to help. To learn more about family-based care and how you can get involved visit www.faithtoaction.org.