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A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO CHARACTERIZING THE STATUS AND PROGRESS OF CHILD WELFARE REFORM IN CEE/CIS COUNTRIES

Including a Case Study on Child Welfare Reform in Ukraine

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to create a strategy for assessing the status and progress of child welfare reform in CEE/CIS countries using the best available quantitative and qualitative information. The assessment focuses on children without permanent parents who are in state care, which includes true orphans and social orphans. Traditionally in the region, such children were cared for by the state in several types of residential institutions. A major component of child welfare reform, however, includes providing family-care alternatives, which may incorporate non-relative foster care, guardianship/kinship care, small group home care, reunification with biological parents, and adoption.

The project was conducted in two sequential phases, *Phase I* and *Phase II*. The project emphasized three levels of analysis, which cut across both Phases. The Phases and levels of analyses with results are described below.

Phase I

Purpose

The initial purpose of Phase I of this project (previously completed, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, and Creative Associates International, 2007) was to create a single numerical index that would characterize the status and progress of each selected country in reforming its child welfare system. The first step in creating such an index was to examine numerical indicators, available from international databases (e.g., UNICEF TransMONEE database), of the child welfare system and indicators of risk factors linked to children being relinquished to state care.

Strategic Conclusion

While a single quantitative marker of child welfare that reflects the number of children without permanent parents in state care is possible, it would be of limited use in understanding child welfare status and progress toward reform across the region or in individual countries and is, therefore, ill-suited to be the primary guide for USAID and others in supporting welfare reform and developing new interventions and child welfare systems.

Three Levels of Analysis

Instead, the Study Team proposed three "levels" of analysis:

Level 1 consists of a single quantitative Marker of Child Welfare that estimates the number and percentage of children in a country who are living without permanent parents in state-supported care (i.e., residential institutions and foster/guardianship arrangements). While this numerical Marker can reflect the extent and change in the number of children in state care, it is too limited and ambiguous to be the primary guide to assess policies of child welfare reform within countries.

Level 2 consists of examinations over years of two types of indicators: 1) the number and percentage of children in different care arrangements, and 2) risk factors that directly and indirectly reflect potential causes that contribute to children without parental care.

Level 3 consists of in-depth qualitative interpretation and substantiation of the major trends and patterns in the two previous levels based on the informed judgment of experts and professionals. This approach is based on the Team's judgment that indicators alone are often ambiguous or even misleading, more information is required to accurately interpret them, and that qualitative information obtained in-country is necessary to understand and guide reform in child welfare.

Specific Country Results

The Level 1 analysis consisted of ranking countries in the region on the Marker of Child Welfare and providing year-to-year plots of the Marker between 1989 and 2005. These results showed that Russia, Belarus, and Moldova had the highest rates of children without permanent parental care in state services, followed by Romania and Kazakhstan. However, one result of the Phase I analysis was the conclusion that these plots are not readily interpretable without the Level 3 analysis which was conducted in Phase II of this project (see description below).

Work on Level 2 analyses began in Phase I, which consisted of identifying several direct and indirect risk factors for why parents relinquished children to state care. These indicators, available in the TransMONEE database, fell into five hypothesized categories of plausible causes associated with the separation of children from their parents: 1) Financial inability of the family to care for the child; 2) single mothers ill-equipped behaviorally and financially to care for a child; 3) revocation of parental rights due to parental mental health, substance-abuse, or child abuse and neglect; 4) children with disabilities; and 5) problematic behavior of adolescents which may produce an unmanageable and undesirable child who is moved out of or relinquished by the family. These categories and indicators are not totally distinct and independent and may be correlated, a possibility explored in Phase II.

Phase II

Purpose

Phase II of this research, which is the primary topic of the current report, had two general purposes.

- *Analysis of risk-factor indicators.* The risk factors identified in the Level 2 analysis of Phase I (see immediately above) were analyzed to determine if year-to-year changes in these risk factors coincided with year-to-year changes in the Marker of Child Welfare, which would suggest the hypothesis that such risk factors might contribute to the number of children without permanent parents.

- *Level 3 analysis.* The Level 3 analysis was refined in Phase II using in-country sources to interpret Level 1 and Level 2 data trends with the aid of qualitative information framed by the four pillars of policy, services, personnel preparation, and

monitoring and evaluation (Davis, 2006). The Level 3 process was piloted in a single country (designated as Ukraine by USAID) to operationalize and refine the proposed process and to provide concrete examples of the kinds of information that it would produce to better understand and interpret the numerical indicators.

Analysis of Risk-Factor Indicators

The risk-factor indicators and Marker of Child Welfare identified in Phase I (Levels 1 and 2) were analyzed in Phase II using several different procedures to determine if year-to-year changes in risk-factor indicators corresponded to year-to-year changes in the Marker of Child Welfare. If so, this would suggest that such indicators may reflect conditions that contribute to children being without permanent parents.

The results of these analyses are presented in the Addendum to this report, which also contains dossiers of year-to-year plots of indicators for each country. Collectively, these analyses produced several conclusions:

- *Inconsistency across countries.* There was substantial variability between countries in the nature of year-to-year changes between an indicator and the Marker. Countries were not very similar to one another in terms of which indicators of risk related to the Marker, lending further support for the necessity of an in-country Level 3 analysis.

- *Discontinuity in correspondence between year-to-year changes in the indicators and the Marker.* Frequently, the relation between an indicator and the Marker was different before approximately 1995-2000 than it was afterwards, and often there were more consistently similar trends after 1995-2000. The more recent period (after 1995-2000) corresponds to years following the fall of the Soviet Union, which led to numerous social, economic, and political changes in most of these countries which eventually stabilized in the 2000s.

- *Promising indicators.* After the 1995-2000 period, there were a few indicators that followed the same year-to-year relative changes as the Marker of Child Welfare in many countries.

    - *The percentage of non-marital births.*

    - *The percentage of children affected by parental divorce.*

    - *The percentage of low-birth weight births.*

- *Country rankings.* There was a tendency for the countries that ranked highly (i.e., poorly) relative to other countries on the Marker of Child Welfare to also rank highly (i.e., poorly) with respect to non-marital births and divorce rates affecting children, deprivation of parental rights, crimes against children and youth, and teenage problem behavior. This provides some suggestive evidence that these kinds of risk factors

may contribute to higher values on the Marker of Child Welfare, but causality cannot be inferred from these results alone.

Level 3 In-Country Analysis of Indicators and the Four Pillars

A model process was developed that represented a strategy for conducting in-country Level 3 analyses designed to obtain additional quantitative and mainly qualitative information that would help to interpret the year-to-year pattern of indicators and provide information on the status and progress of welfare reform in an individual country. The Level 3 analyses rely heavily on interviews with experts on child welfare from within the target country's government, NGOs, donors, and other sources. The model Level 3 process included several components:

- Background information on the cultural, political, and economic history of the country was studied.

- Year-to-year plots were obtained of the status of children without permanent parents and risk factors to be used as one basis for discussion, and that discussion in turn would validate, contradict, qualify, explain, and interpret these year-to-year plots.

- Background information was obtained on child welfare issues in the country—policies, services, personnel preparation, monitoring/evaluation—through documents and consultants, including those operating in the country. This information was used to identify issues specific to the country.

- A single comprehensive interview was developed to be used with major stakeholders within the country (i.e., Ministers and government officials, NGO directors, demonstration project directors, etc.). A general interview is given in Appendix C that can serve as a starting point to be expanded and made specific to any target country. For example, the interview as expanded specifically to fit Ukraine is presented in Appendix B. The difference between the general and country-specific interviews reflects the contribution of background information on the particular country.

- Potential interviewees were identified and a schedule for the in-country visitation was created. Interviewees represented key informants in the domains of policy, services, personnel preparation, and monitoring, including those responsible for current services as well as model demonstration services. In-country professionals identified and scheduled interviewees.

- The single interview was segmented into parts appropriate for the expertise and responsibilities of each interviewee. Each major topic in the interview was to be addressed by someone, and major questions of opinion were asked of two or more interviewees.

- The interviews were conducted with a combination of an interdisciplinary external team knowledgeable about various aspects of child welfare plus local professionals.

- In the report, key accomplishments and areas needing improvement were identified across all sectors of the system, including an emphasis on long-term planning issues often overlooked by governments.

Field Test of Model Level 3 Process

This general model process described above was followed utilizing Ukraine as the target country. This field test included a visit to Ukraine by three external reviewers (authors of this report) plus local consultants including the USAID/Ukraine representative. The process worked well and has several advantages:

- The Level 3 process produces a comprehensive, integrated, "big picture" look at a country.
- Independent visitors in collaboration with local professionals provided a balanced, objective, and informed view of the country's child welfare system that neither a totally internal nor totally external review would likely have produced.
- An interdisciplinary team enriches the information obtained.
- The use of a common interview protocol permitted some degree of cross-validation of some points that were asked of several interviewees.
- Background research and information helped to target the interview questions and stimulate relevant probes to produce more insightful information.

The approach has a few potential limitations:

- Interviews produce information that people claim is accurate, although asking similar questions and involving in-country professionals can minimize obtaining biased information.
- It is difficult to determine the prevalence of certain conditions.

Results of the Case Study of the Level 3 Procedure

Validation of the Need for Level 3

The first result of implementing the model Level 3 process in Ukraine was a substantial demonstration of the fact that simply plotting indicators across years and comparing levels and trends can give a misleading impression of the status and progress of the country's child welfare system. The report presents examples from Ukraine of several limitations to simply using indicator data to characterize a country's child welfare system:

- The number of children in residential vs. foster/guardianship care may give an inaccurate impression of the status of children.
- Breaking down an indicator into its components (i.e., "disaggregating") often revealed a different impression.
- Internationally available data may be out of date.
- Trends over years may reflect unintended consequences to policies.
- Trends over years may reflect changes in definition, not simply changes in policy.
- The indicators reflecting children without permanent parents may not include so-called "street children," which may be more numerous than the number of children actually in state care.
- There may be a problem of double counting in national statistics.
- The total statistical picture of a country may be very complicated and difficult to portray.
- It is very difficult to determine how well policies are actually implemented from looking at statistical indicators alone.

Accomplishments, Limitations, and Agenda for Ukraine

In addition to validating the need for Level 3 and testing the feasibility of the Level 3 procedure, the field test of the model process produced a variety of specific observations concerning the accomplishments, limitations, and future agenda for child welfare reform in Ukraine. These major observations are reported in detail in Chapter 4 for each of the four pillars of policy, services, personnel preparation, and monitoring and evaluation.

Ukraine has made great strides in child welfare reform, especially with respect to policy changes and particularly during the last three years since the Orange Revolution. It is difficult to imagine a more rapid and substantial set of changes that reverse long-standing attitudes and practices, enacted in such a short period of time and with greater enthusiasm, conviction, and optimism than what has happened in Ukraine in the last three years.

At the same time, Ukraine is an example of policies leading public attitudes, not the reverse, and inevitably such rapid and substantial change will be met by some public resistance, be enacted unevenly across several necessary components of government, face implementation problems, and encounter all of the challenges that confront even highly experienced developed countries operating a national child welfare system.