Notes from the 4th Leave No One Behind Dialogue Series:
Children without parental care or at risk of losing it
February 14th, 2017

- Children without parental care are often the most forgotten and neglected groups of children by policy and investment.
- They are children whom, for one reason or another, cannot live with their parents. They are subsequently forced to live on the streets, in institutions, or different forms of alternative care.
- When we talk about leave no one behind, we have those subgroups of people that we know we are leaving behind and those we are not even conscious of leaving behind.
- Loss of parental care is connected to poverty, performance and access to education, poor health, (especially mental health), violence, and migration.
- For children without parental care, there is limited data: An estimated 1 out of 10 children live without parental care.
- A child that loses its parents also loses its first line of protection.
- Austria has been involved in promoting UN guidelines on alternative care for children: until 1980, children were put into institutions. This made it difficult for children to find their place in society.
- In 2014, 6,159 children were growing up in 600 pedagogical houses, with a maximum of 12 children per unit
- Latest efforts (2012) tried to better improve these pedagogical houses and alternative care.
- More and more facilities that use specialised services are addressing individual challenges.
- Attempts are being made to shift more children from these small group homes to foster care.
- Implementation of key challenges:
  - Transitioning from family and community based care to independent living (not covered by legislation in Austria). The aim is to offer support.
  - Increased influx of unaccompanied minors of refugee children
  - 609 under age of 14
  - Trying to provide alternative care
  - Each child and youth without parental care should be given the chance to shape their future and to become a self-reliant participant in society. They must be granted the right to live in a supported and cared environment, both at home and with support of other countries.
  - The UN should invest in children, as they are the future ambassadors of the world
  - Children and care need extra support than children living with their parents. Naturally, the responsibility falls onto the government
- Significance of education:
  - Parents aren’t around to save for higher education
  - Pressure to do well in school to acquire scholarships becomes a stressor
  - There should be opportunities for children that don’t perform well in school, but excel in other aspects
- Intellectual performance doesn’t define you as a person
- Foster children do not learn the essential skills that are typically learned from the parents, such as opening a bank account – thus, life skills programs must be in place to ensure that young people without traditional care are not left behind in this capacity.
- Living in poverty is a generational crisis: a cycle of intergenerational poverty goes on.
- The solution is to stop this systemic cycle of poverty and to give trust and emotional and mental support for the caregivers or young mothers.
- What is the appropriate zone of care? When families cannot cope, what is the next layer out? Extended family? Religious institutions? Communities? And when should we rely on the state?
- How can we address the generational cycles of poverty, abuse, and violence?
• We need to take our own actions – big or small – consistent with our values.
• What is the definition of poverty? In Liberia, most of the population is poor yet half don’t even know they are poor – and they are happy. There is something greater at stake.
• Because of poverty, children are separated from their parents
• While foster care can save children, the solution is not more foster care--it is stronger families.
• How can we support the family and the parents so that they are able to provide the safe, caring and supportive environment every child deserves?
• Best practice: in Spain, age of protection has been raised from 18 to 21
• What are some lessons learned from the care system?
• Counselling and therapy are integral – allows for social and life skills, release of anger, positivity, etc. Foster care further allows access to better education, in addition to basic necessities such as food and clothing
• Children need emotional support. Material support is necessary for opportunities, but that does little without the emotional support
• In Austria, parents are obliged to provide support for the duration of the child’s education. However, this varies for foster children. There has to be some kind of support network rooted in place.
• Practices found in other countries to be dismantled: unaccompanied migrant children. Mexico is a transit country. Many cross through Mexico looking for a better life and for better opportunities.
• Mexico recently approved a national law approving rights of girls, boys and adolescents
• Prohibited detention of migrant children, regardless of their nationality
• Need to look at structural issues that cause poverty: war on drugs, mass incarceration, and the cause of war.
• More often than not, foster children are very broken.
• It is important for foster children to know that they still have a home to come back to—there is a space for them to return to during school holidays and weekends; it is not a transit home.
• Educational institutions are vital
• Support that children need isn’t always available, especially if they rotate from one school to the other—how can educational institutions respond to this situation?
• What are the factors that worked towards successful foster care? What needs more attention?
• What is unique about SOS Children’s Villages is that they provided the foundation to house children and keep them together. When children are taken away from their parents, the only thing they have left is their siblings. Usually young children are the most sought after, and they are adopted first. Older children have a much harder time finding homes.
• There is a stigma within the foster care system. That children who are in foster care look and act a certain way, and have a certain skill-set (or lack thereof).
• Policies are built around this stigma.
• A lot of families are unnecessarily separated, and this can be prevented.
• Others stay in their families for far too long.
• If a social worker doesn’t have a proper salary and psychological support, it can be overwhelming in terms of the support being offered.
• Many children suffer for years, and won’t be addressed or acknowledged unless the situation seriously deteriorates.
• Social protection systems must include social workers, not only employment placements and pensions
• It’s related within the social protection targets of the SDGs (1.4 or goal 10)
• Children without parental care suffer abuse of all forms, and the work to progress needs to start now.