

A WORLD THAT CARES

HOW TO SUPPORT CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE THROUGH THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



SOS CHILDREN'S
VILLAGES
INTERNATIONAL

BRIEFING PAPER



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FOREWORD

Millions of children grow up alone and cannot count on the care and protection of a loving home. Frequently, we as a society, working together with governments, can act to prevent this. But if family separation cannot be avoided, collectively we must respond by providing quality alternative care to children; otherwise each child and our communities at large suffer. Creating 'a world that cares' means creating a society in which all children have a fair chance to grow up in a caring and nurturing environment where they can develop to their full potential.

Our experience of almost 70 years of providing support to children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care proves that these children face heightened challenges and are disproportionately affected by a number of development issues. These include poverty and marginalisation, poor physical and mental health, lack of access to education and basic services, high youth unemployment, and high levels of violence and neglect.

Without determined effort, the most vulnerable children will lag further behind unless concrete measures are put in place. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the 193 member states of the United Nations, calls on the global community to "endeavour to reach the furthest behind first" and sets ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated targets. Policies, programmes and services to achieve these goals rely on collective efforts and concrete actions to deliver on these ambitions. It is imperative that those who can contribute are well organised and apply evidence-based solutions. These must be replicable and scaled up to achieve more, in more locations, more efficiently.

This paper intends to put forward pragmatic and practical recommendations on how policies, programmes and services to achieve the SDGs can truly turn the tide for children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care. The paper also reminds us of the importance of timely, reliable and disaggregated data to monitor and evaluate SDG implementation specifically for these most vulnerable children, in order to ensure they are not left behind in our communities, wherever they are growing up.

Achieving sustainable development by 2030 will require a renewed commitment to stronger partnerships among NGOs, the government and the private sector. This must become a movement of like-minded and very determined partners that find common ground and novel ways to cultivate new forms of cooperation. Cooperation is paramount, as is supporting child and youth participation in this process. At SOS Children's Villages, we believe that *No Child Should Grow Up Alone*, and we embrace the challenge to secure a brighter and more sustainable future for the world's most vulnerable children, too.

Norbert Meder

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the United Nations member states agreed to a principled and ambitious 15-year global development agenda, *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a key part of the agenda, are built on an understanding that to truly achieve sustainable development we must start by focusing on those who have been left the furthest behind. The SDGs recognise that strategic investments in children are key to furthering peace, ending global poverty and ensuring that all human beings can fulfil their potential.¹ The SDGs set forth bold targets across sectors and include an explicit focus on improving child outcomes through poverty reduction and increased access to health, nutrition, education, justice and protection. If we are serious about putting children at the centre of the global development agenda, we cannot ignore the environments and relationships in which they grow. Early experiences exert a lifelong impact.² Decades of research have demonstrated that children's well-being suffers across domains without the nurturing and protective care provided by at least one consistent and committed caregiver.³

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by nearly every nation in the world, recognises the family as “the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children.” It also asserts that “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”⁴ In 2009, the UN General Assembly welcomed the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, reinforcing the fundamental notion that “Every child and young person should live in a supportive, protective and caring environment that protects his/her full potential. Children with inadequate or no parental care are at special risk of being denied such a nurturing environment.”⁵

Despite the vital role that family environments play in children's lives and well-being, “families” are mentioned only once in the SDGs.⁶ Children living without parental care⁷ are not mentioned at all. Yet, there is plenty of evidence to show that we cannot

truly support children without investing in family relationships⁸ and ensuring that quality care is provided to all children. Children without parental care are among the most disadvantaged and difficult to reach. Currently, not enough is done to provide a nurturing and protective environment for all children, and to proactively identify groups of children who have been marginalised. The 2030 Agenda did not include a systematic process to identify the most vulnerable, including children without parental care. The bold vision of the 2030 Agenda will not be achieved if such children continue to be left behind.

The following pages discuss how the SDGs can reach children without parental care. Although there is no precise statistical data on these children, there are estimates that approximately 220 million children are growing up without parental care – ten percent of the world's child population. This figure includes children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care and live in extremely vulnerable circumstances where they lack adequate care and protection.⁹

Children without parental care are disproportionately affected by a number of development issues addressed in the SDGs and associated targets. These include extreme poverty, poor physical and mental health, and lack of access to education and basic services. Moreover, these children are more likely to experience violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect during childhood. Upon entering adulthood, they often face greater challenges adapting to living independently and becoming fully integrated into society, in addition to being more likely to experience discrimination, social exclusion, employment insecurity, poverty and poor health. Coordinating and integrating programmes to effectively address issues related to health, nutrition, education, protection and caregiver support go a long way in ensuring that vulnerable children and families have what they need to succeed.¹⁰ Coordinated, evidence-based action can also help to ensure that children in vulnerable situations, including those without parental care, benefit fully from policies and services and achieve better outcomes in the immediate and long term. The actions taken to implement, monitor and evaluate the SDGs along with the commitment to strive for and invest in better data are key to turning the tide for these children.



Target 1.3

Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable

The target will reach children without parental care if governments:

1. Strengthen child-sensitive social protection and the economic capacity of vulnerable households
2. Enhance parenting support and the quality of alternative care settings
3. Strengthen the social service workforce working with children without parental care

CHILD-SENSITIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION AND ECONOMIC STRENGTHENING OF VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS

Poverty is multidimensional and can harm all aspects of a child's development, often leading to long-term disadvantages that are difficult to overcome.¹¹ Research demonstrates that poverty is often a contributing factor leading to family-child separation.¹² In poor households, the hardship and high levels of stress to which families may be exposed, combined with inadequate access to social protection, can contribute to family instability or breakdown. When vulnerable families do not have the resources to meet basic material and developmental needs, the risk of child-family separation increases. Poverty and limited access to basic services have led to millions of children living without parental care, creating cycles of poverty that can persist for generations.¹³

States can address poverty and its potentially detrimental effects on children's outcomes by expanding child- and family-centred social protection policies and services, which are as critical to ensuring children's well-being as health and education systems, though they remain significantly under-resourced both in terms of financial and human resource capacity.¹⁴ Child-sensitive social protection interventions include child and family grants and conditional cash transfers, pensions, unemployment and disability insurance policies, health insurances and labour market protections. As such, social protection includes instruments targeting children directly, and those which target other groups but which can have positive benefits for children.¹⁵ Evidence demonstrates that child-sensitive social protection programmes, supported by policies to address children's vulnerabilities, have a greater effect on children's outcomes across domains than those that do not focus specifically on the risks children face, as well as their capacity for resilience.¹⁶

Household economic strengthening interventions can help prevent family-child separation and facilitate reunification where separation may have occurred. For example, effective gatekeeping procedures can help ensure that children are not separated from their families as a result of poverty and related issues, and are instead supported with family-strengthening assistance tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable families at risk of separation.¹⁷ Researchers, policymakers and practitioners have increasingly recognised that household economic strengthening for the most vulnerable families can be a key factor in ensuring healthy and holistic child well-being.¹⁸

Interventions target individual families and include measures that focus on increasing access to household savings, credit, income generation and decent employment opportunities. Income support interventions aim to prevent a deeper plunge into poverty and can prevent families from reaching a breaking point, when children may be forced into alternative care or child labour to reduce economic stress. Some research points to the role that conditional and unconditional cash transfers can play in preventing family-child separation.¹⁹

Conditional programmes provide money to families living in poverty with the aim of increasing household economic status and are subject to caregivers engaging in target behaviours, such as enrolling children in school and attending regular health check-ups.²⁰ Existing research focuses primarily on the effects of social assistance for children living within families. Less information is available regarding the reach and impact of such programmes on children without parental care. In many instances, such programmes do not reach children living outside of households, leaving them further marginalised and unprotected.

PARENTING SUPPORT AND QUALITY ALTERNATIVE CARE

Globally, there is growing recognition that family strengthening and parenting support are core components of sustainable responses to ensuring the care and protection of all children.²¹ Investments in family relationships are crucial for progress on all SDG targets relating to children. For instance, in order to achieve SDG target 16.2, which seeks to end all forms of violence against children, parents and caregivers can be supported to understand the importance of positive, non-violent discipline and effective parent-child communication. Positive parenting can prevent the risk of child maltreatment at home as well as the separation of children from families.²²

When children are unable to remain with their birth family, either because they have lost relatives or because it is not in their best interest, appropriate alternative care should be a primary consideration. Governments must facilitate protective temporary or permanent care options in line with the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.²³

Any care option must respect the rights and best interests of the individual child and cater to his/her specific needs, characteristics, situation and, as far as possible, wishes. This means that a full range of quality alternative care options needs to be put in place. Suitable options can include kinship care, foster care, adoption and residential family-

like care.²⁴ Alternative care providers must meet minimum quality care standards to ensure that children receive appropriate care.

STRONG SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE TO SUPPORT CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE

Child care and protection services – a critical component of an effective social service system – work with vulnerable families to prevent child poverty, violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect, and family-child separation. When this is not possible, they respond through services that provide alternative care and support family reunification. To effectively deliver and scale up such responses, the social service workforce must be strengthened.²⁵ This requires providing sufficient funding and enacting specific legislation, policies and standards to regulate the profession.

These would include: establishing professional requirements, improving preparation and training, professionalising recruitment, and ensuring effective monitoring. Those working with vulnerable children require specialised training in child rights, development, protection and participation. Little data is available with regard to social service personnel working with families and young children, including in alternative care environments.

This reflects the limited attention the workforce has received in international development policy and programmes.²⁶ Without an effective and well-supported workforce, it will be impossible to reach children most likely to be left behind.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

**Target 4.2**

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

Target 4.3

By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

Target 4.4

By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

Target 4.5

By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

The targets will reach children without parental care if governments:

1. Expand access to quality early childhood care, development and education
2. Ensure access to relevant training and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education
3. Provide educational opportunities to develop relevant skills for decent jobs and entrepreneurship
4. Ensure access to educational programmes and staff able to address the specific needs and challenges of young people in vulnerable situations

QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE, DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

A child's capacity for learning begins in the early years and is inextricably linked to the quality of caregiving and the home environment.²⁷ The fields of neuroscience, molecular biology, genomics, psychology and sociology have shed light on the significance of early experiences on lifelong development and learning.²⁸ For instance, research conducted over the last two decades has shown the speed at which neural connections are made during a child's early years and how the quality of those connections is affected by the child's caregiving environment.²⁹

Access to quality early childhood care and education facilitates the development of key competencies for learning, particularly for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.³⁰ Children who have spent early childhood without family-based care often experience long-lasting setbacks in learning. Many attend school for fewer years, and some receive no schooling at all.³¹

Success in meeting Goal 4 and its targets is largely dependent upon the quality of care children receive from their families and caregivers. This includes opportunities for playing, learning and interacting with consistent and responsive adults at home, at day care centres, or in formal or informal child-centred spaces and educational settings in the child's community.³² These early experiences are the foundation for developmental potential in physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth, which in turn sets the stage for successes or setbacks in schooling, employment, and family and community life.³³

Significant disparities in early childhood care and education determine unequal development outcomes among children, thus leading to persistent inequalities in both high- and low-income settings. Research indicates that quality early childhood development programmes lead to higher levels of school enrolment and performance and are considered a powerful "equaliser".³⁴ Children without parental care are more likely to miss out on these early care and learning opportunities and, as a result, may lack the necessary skills to learn effectively. In addition,

family-child separation can increase levels of stress, often resulting in poor school performance, or worse, dropping out completely.³

Rates of return on investments made during the prenatal and early childhood years are on average seven to ten percent greater than investments made at older ages.³⁶ Studies show that these rates are even higher for the most marginalised children, for whom such programmes may serve as a pathway out of poverty and exclusion.³⁷ Investments in the early childhood period, with sustained support through adolescence, can mitigate the deleterious impact of poverty, social and gender inequity, disability and discrimination, resulting in long-lasting benefits for children and youth, families, communities and nations.³⁸

Concerted efforts must be made to ensure that children living without parental care do not miss out on quality early childhood care and education opportunities. These should include targeted measures to provide psychosocial support and rehabilitation for children who may have experienced trauma or severe neglect which can affect developmental outcomes over their life course if left unaddressed.

QUALITY TRAINING IN TECHNICAL, VOCATIONAL AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

Access to higher education and vocational training are key indicators of successful youth development and adult self-sufficiency. Young people who have spent time living without parental care, whether in alternative care facilities, on the street or in otherwise precarious situations, often do not have the continuing source of emotional, social and financial support that is available to many young people as they transition to early adulthood.³⁹ Their education may be disrupted and negatively impacted due to instability and frequent changes within their care environments. Schools and other educational institutions often do not have programmes in place to support these young people and facilitate their

integration into educational settings. As a result, young people who have grown up without parental care may face educational deficits due to childhood experiences of poverty, neglect, abandonment or abuse, which in turn affects prospects for obtaining employment, a critical factor in securing housing and economic stability and independence.⁴⁰

Young people who have grown up without parental care have fewer opportunities to access higher education and technical training. Research from the United Kingdom has shown that in comparison with others in the same age cohort, young people in public care are severely disadvantaged in terms of educational opportunities and outcomes due to disrupted schooling and deficiencies in basic education.

School systems generally do not compensate for these gaps and social workers and carers often fail to prioritise filling them.⁴¹ Similarly, in the Czech Republic, a child who has grown up in institutional care is 40 times less likely to attend university than a child who has grown up within a family or community-based care environment. Young people who have lived in institutional care represent less than 0.6 percent of students in higher education and vocational training, and comprise less than one percent of university graduates.⁴²

As young people leave care or otherwise transition to independent living situations as young adults, it is important for them to have support finding and navigating education and vocational training opportunities. Many have no connections to a committed adult in their lives who can provide social support.⁴³ Mentorship programmes are therefore key to helping these young people develop trusting relationships, build social capital,⁴⁴ and facilitate learning and vocational training opportunities.

Young people without parental care require equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education and support throughout their transition to independent living if we are truly committed to reaching the most disadvantaged and achieving sustainable development.

OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP RELEVANT SKILLS FOR DECENT JOBS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

As noted above, low educational attainment and lack of training is an issue for many young people who have grown up without parental care, and often affects their chances of finding employment. Throughout the world, young people are less likely than adults to be employed and are more likely to work in informal jobs, placing them at greater risk of earning lower wages, working in unsafe conditions and increasing the risk of violence, exploitation and abuse.⁴⁵

Difficulties entering the job market impact the ability to establish economic stability and independence, suppressing productivity and increasing reliance on the social welfare sector, which in turn adds to costs borne by the public.

Young people leaving alternative care settings experience more compressed and accelerated transitions to adulthood than the general youth population.⁴⁶ For example, in the United Kingdom, young people in the general population tend live at home and remain in full-time education for longer stretches of time, while those leaving care have to cope with the challenges and changes of independence at a far earlier age. Very few young people remain in alternative care placements beyond 18, and a majority leave at just 16 or 17 years of age.⁴⁷

Young people who have grown up without parental care require assistance accessing appropriate education and training, obtaining practical skills and finding employment. The process leading to care-leaving should be carefully managed, ensuring that holistic supports are in place so that young people are not forced into homelessness and low-paid or high-risk work situations.

All these elements are necessary for the young person to build self-confidence and obtain the necessary skills to prevent future economic and social deprivations.⁴⁸

TAILORED PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFIED STAFF TO ADDRESS THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE

Education should be inclusive, holistic, child-centred and relationship-based, fostering the individual talents and coping mechanisms of each child. However, children without parental care often struggle to access quality education. For example, in the least developed countries, children who have lost one or both parents are 12 percent less likely to attend school than their peers.⁴⁹

In a study of 19 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, children living in households headed by a relative were worse off than those living with a parent, and children living in households headed by non-relatives were even less likely to be enrolled in school.⁵⁰ These children must be prioritised as efforts are made to meet the SDG education targets.

Children and young people without parental care, including those in alternative care, must be guaranteed equal access to free and quality education. Educational systems and programmes must be equipped with properly trained staff who are supported to meet the specific needs of this population.⁵¹

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Target 8.5

By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value

Target 8.6

By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training

The targets will reach children without parental care if governments:

1. Develop labour and childcare policies that avoid leaving children with working parents without supervision and care
2. Develop targeted measures to support young people without parental care in accessing further education, vocational training and employment opportunities without discrimination

LABOUR AND CHILDCARE POLICIES TO GUARANTEE SUPERVISION OF CHILDREN WITH WORKING PARENTS

Labour policies that either facilitate or hinder working adults' ability to balance work and caregiving responsibilities have an impact on both parents and children.⁵² While paid maternity/parental leave is important, it is insufficient: caregiving does not end after infancy. Access to affordable, good-quality child care is limited in many parts of the world, including in some high-income countries.⁵³ As a result, the number of children who are left without adult supervision while their parents work continues to grow. According to UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, more than 17 percent of children under five years of age are left home alone or in the care of another child under the age of ten.⁵⁴ This affects the health, development and safety of these children as well as their parents' ability

to be fully productive at work. In some instances, parents migrate to find employment and provide for their family, leaving their children in their country of origin with extended family or alternative care settings. The absence of a parent can negatively affect the psychological well-being of children left behind.⁵⁵

Ensuring that quality child care services are available to disadvantaged families, including single-parent households, would allow all families to fulfil work and family care responsibilities, preventing unnecessary family breakdown resulting from poverty and social exclusion. Such measures would help to ensure that children from disadvantaged households benefit from early childhood education and care, positioning them for greater educational opportunities and success.

MEASURES TARGETING YOUNG PEOPLE WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE IN ACCESSING FURTHER EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Young people who have grown up without parental care are more likely to lack social networks and face stigma and discrimination, making it difficult to transition from precarious living situations and alternative care environments to independent and productive adulthood. As a result, young people who have grown up without parental care are often ill-prepared to fully engage in social, economic and political life.

The deficit in skills and technical abilities obstructs productivity and increases the likelihood of unemployment in adulthood, which in turn adds to social welfare costs borne by the public. To reduce the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET),⁵⁶ governments must develop policies and interventions to identify and support young people without parental care as a particularly at-risk group. Ongoing support must be provided for young people who live in or have aged-out of alternative care so as to facilitate their transition to independent living. Such support would allow young care leavers to access ongoing mentoring, career guidance and other similar services to improve their education and employment outcomes.⁵⁷

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

**Target 10.2**

By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status

The target will reach children without parental care if governments:

1. Establish legal and social protections against discrimination and exclusion of people who have grown up without parental care, and develop programmes to foster their full participation in all areas of social, economic and political life
2. Identify the child population groups that are being left behind, through improved quantitative and qualitative data

LEGAL AND SOCIAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION AND FOR THE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE GROWN UP WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE

Children without parental care are exposed to greater forms of discrimination and exclusion, which may be linked to a lack of access to education, housing, and social capital, and difficulty finding employment or even a positive self-perception and sense of identity.⁵⁸ For some young people, this can have a profound impact, including an increased likelihood of suicide⁵⁹.

The social pressures and sense of alienation can be mitigated through programmes and community projects that include children without parental care, ensuring that they have equal access to educational and training opportunities and are recognised as able and important contributors to community life.

These programmes and projects should meet key developmental needs of children without parental care in areas such as housing, education, employment and training, social and family relationships, self-care, financial support, and independent living skills.⁶⁰ In addition to addressing the needs of individual children or youth, community education and support is also required to prevent discrimination and encourage communities to take responsibility for their most vulnerable, by including them in social, economic, political, and cultural opportunities at the community and national level.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE CHILD POPULATION GROUPS THAT ARE BEING LEFT BEHIND

The current dearth of quantitative and qualitative data on children living without parental care or in alternative care is an indication that the inextricable links between sustainable development and the quality of care received during childhood is not fully acknowledged.

Despite the clear recognition of the principle of non-discrimination in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children without parental care continue to exist in a blind spot with regard to policies, programmes and data.⁶¹ Given the inextricable links between evidence, advocacy, policy and strategic action, this lack of information has real-life consequences for millions of children.⁶²

It is critical that efforts are made to proactively identify population groups that are at risk of being left behind, including children living without parental care. Once identified, policies and services must be developed and implemented to reach and support them.

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Target 16.2

End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children

The target will reach children without parental care if governments:

1. Collect comprehensive data and expand research on the magnitude, nature and consequences of violence against children living without parental care
2. Implement and enforce national legislation and policies and adequately fund programmes to protect children from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect in all settings, including alternative care

COMPREHENSIVE DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH ON THE MAGNITUDE, NATURE AND CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN LIVING WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE

A first step in combatting violence against children is through a better understanding of the magnitude, nature and consequences of such experiences. The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducts Violence against Children Surveys to measure the national prevalence of physical, emotional and sexual violence against girls and boys.⁶³

As a result of these surveys and a study combining data from nearly 100 countries, the CDC reports that one billion children aged two to 17 years are victims of violence, being subjected to regular physical punishment by their caregivers.⁶⁴

While this data has been tremendously helpful in building awareness and informing effective responses, it does not specifically capture the prevalence of violence experienced by children living without parental care, whether in institutions, on the street or otherwise separated from their families.

Stakeholders must come together to ensure that governments are collecting data on children without parental care, including the nature and prevalence of violence in alternative care settings. Research should ensure that children's voices are included and that young people are afforded an opportunity to share their understandings and proposed solutions.⁶⁵

Children living without protective parental care are likely to be at even greater risk of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. For example, the UN World Report on Violence against Children documents how corporal punishment and abusive 'treatments', including physical restraint and electric shocks, continue to be used on children in institutions.⁶⁶

Trafficking networks often target children living without adequate care, whether in institutions, on the street or separated from their families as a result of conflict or disaster.⁶⁷ Research also demonstrates an increased risk of all forms of child abuse for disabled children and higher risk of sexual violence for children with intellectual disabilities,⁶⁸ many of whom are placed in institutional facilities creating further vulnerability to rights violations.

There is a higher prevalence of children going missing from institutional care and life on the streets⁶⁹ and responses to tackling this problem effectively are limited. There is also a critical correlation between children fleeing conflict, systems for 'processing' migrants and asylum-seekers, child labour and trafficking of children.

Failure to identify and respond to these children and young people can result in greater incidences of instability and conflict at individual, family, community, and even national levels.

NATIONAL EFFORTS TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION, ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN ALL SETTINGS, INCLUDING ALTERNATIVE CARE

Families can serve as a first line of protection for children. Unfortunately, however, the family environment may be where children suffer harm, sometimes resulting in family-child separation. By definition, child maltreatment includes neglect by caregivers.⁷⁰ Neglect can come in many forms, including failure to provide adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, sleep or medical care, or failure to ensure that the child's surroundings and activities are nurturing and safe.

Research has demonstrated that children's health and development can be derailed not only as a result of physical or sexual violence, but also by a lack of sufficient positive stimulation, nurturing and opportunities to learn, particularly in the early years. Although neglect is by far the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, it receives far less public attention than physical or sexual abuse.⁷¹

To achieve target 16.2, greater investment in the child care and protection system is paramount, in order to prevent and respond to child abuse, exploitation and neglect, both within and outside the family or home environment.

This should involve efforts to educate and support parents and caregivers, strengthen community protection mechanisms, facilitate investigations and legal processes, and provide appropriate care for children separated from their families.

To work effectively, child care and protection systems must operate within a clear legislative and policy framework that recognises, funds, and supports child protection workers and their mandates with the most vulnerable populations. Unfortunately, where they exist, such laws are often not fully implemented due to inadequate resources, and limited authority and accountability.

In many countries, child care and protection systems are under-staffed and under-resourced.⁷² Policies must be backed by investments in financial and human resources to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. The capacity of child care and protection workers must be developed and strengthened to effectively prevent and respond to situations of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.

FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW OF THE 2030 AGENDA



Principle (e)

Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind

Principle (g)

Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which is high quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts

The principles will be implemented for children without parental care if governments:

1. Develop data collection frameworks to count children living without parental care and outside of households; and to analyse the impact of care status on children's well-being

DATA TO COUNT CHILDREN LIVING WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE AND OUTSIDE OF HOUSEHOLDS; AND TO ANALYSE THE IMPACT OF CARE STATUS ON CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

No State can bolster children's well-being and development without precise information on its child population, the most vulnerable groups within it, and the situations that lead to risk or resilience. The Sustainable Development Goals recognise

that "quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data will be needed to help with measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind. Such data is key to decision-making."⁷³ The SDG document also acknowledges that baseline data for several of the targets remain unavailable and calls for "increased support for strengthening data collection and capacity-building in Member States, to develop national and global baselines where they do not exist."⁷⁴

Implementation of the SDGs and efforts to track progress made towards their established targets offer an opportunity to ensure that the extraordinarily vulnerable population of children without parental care is not left behind, but rather essentially incorporated into every effort "to end poverty and hunger and ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment."⁷⁵

Greater evidence-based understanding and knowledge of children's care and living arrangements is crucial for States to develop adequate child protection responses and systems. When assessing States' progress in improving the lives of children, living arrangements and caregiving environments are key markers for vulnerability, risk and disadvantage.

Children without parental care often experience abuse, neglect, lack of stimulation, and extreme and toxic stress, all of which have a profoundly negative effect on children's health, education, development and protection. To address this, national statistical offices should include "care status" – in other words, children's care and living arrangements – as a disaggregation category that falls under the scope of "other status", as mentioned in several parts of Agenda 2030.

This would represent a concrete step towards improving data collection, analysis, research, monitoring and evaluation related to children without parental care, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and other relevant international standards.

Currently, there is only limited data about how many children live in such precarious circumstances, except for scattered estimates from some specific countries.⁷⁶ Because they are often living outside of households, children without parental care are generally not represented in household-based surveys, which are the primary tools used by national governments and the international community to measure data relevant to children's well-being.⁷⁷ For example, there is currently no global data on the numbers of children living in institutions. Estimates range from 2 to 8 million, but the actual number of orphanages or residential institutions and the number of children living in them is unknown. Many institutions are unregistered, and underreporting is widespread.

No international monitoring frameworks exist, and many countries do not routinely collect or monitor data on children living without parental care, whether in institutions, on the street, or in alternative care environments.⁷⁸

Improvement of the scope and quality of household surveys and the development of complementary methods to assess the conditions of those living outside of households is an urgent action area.

National data on children's care and living arrangements is available in many countries around the world. In high-income countries, this data is routinely used to inform policies targeting particularly vulnerable families.

The OECD Family Database is a useful example. In many low- and middle-income countries, however, better data on children's care and living arrangements could be obtained by more systematically mining existing household-level data sets, including the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS).

Strategic investments in statistical capacity-building could be used to improve DHS and MICS survey questionnaires, facilitating an enhanced understanding of the links between care arrangements and developmental outcomes across domains.

If the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals is to leave no one behind, it is essential that global monitoring frameworks include methodologies to ensure that children living outside of households and/or without parental care are represented and that data is used to inform targeted, appropriate and accessible interventions.

"I like how the community of wolves works. They seem to be lone creatures, but if you observe them, whenever there is a challenge they gather in order to protect the whole pack. This is what we should be doing too: working together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for everyone."

Migena, SOS Children's Villages' 2030 Youth Coalition member from Albania

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