

Effective Child Welfare Institutions in Uganda: Prerequisite Organisational and Systems Attributes

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Abstract

This article presents a review of the organisational and systems attributes that contribute to effective child welfare institutions in Uganda. The review was motivated by a baseline study of 29 child welfare institutions in Uganda which established that the institutions were generally not effective owing to the compromised quality of the services and care they give to children. The aim of this study is to broadly examine the characteristics of an effective organisation and systems of child welfare, specifically from an institutional perspective, in order to inform practice and contribute to promoting professional care of children in Uganda. The review was premised on organisational and systems theories. The review revealed that there are many organisational and systems characteristics that a child welfare institution should exhibit if it is to provide effective services to children. These characteristics are embedded within internal and external institutional processes. It was also found that these processes have a direct effect on the organisational outputs and the welfare of the children. The findings are deemed applicable to all social work contexts in this globalising world, where the principles of social work practice are the same. Though the problem that motivated the review is Uganda-based, the citations are predominantly United States-based because, despite their own flaws, the US institutions provide a model for child welfare services globally.

Keywords: child welfare; organisations; inter-agency; social work

Introduction

Child welfare is a specialised field of social work practice that is largely concerned with a particular set of significant social roles and responsibilities and their effective implementation. Child welfare includes providing social services to young people and children whose parents or caregivers are unable to fulfil their child-rearing responsibilities or whose parents or caregivers are unable to provide the resources and protection that children and their families need.¹ Child welfare is intended to help children to achieve permanency, to protect them from harm, to ensure their well-being, and to strengthen their families (Brown, Klein, and McCrae 2014; Child Welfare Information Gateway 2019; NASW 2013). Child welfare systems include a range of services encompassing prevention, intervention and treatment. Child welfare services should focus on the family, the challenges around the child, professionalism and respect for a family's culture and beliefs (Child Welfare League of America 2005). It is widely acknowledged that child welfare as a distinct field of practice is affected by, and at the same time contributes to, innovations aimed at improving the outcomes of interventions (Huebner et al. 2014; NASW 2005, 2013).

What is perhaps contentious is that child welfare services, organisations and systems are more advanced in Western countries than in the South. This may account for the majority of citations in this work originating from the West, especially the United States (US). The US models are ideal and every state should aspire to emulate them, though they are criticised by some for limits of determinacy, characterised by failure to explicitly identify families truly in need of intervention, dangers inherent in contemporary foster care placement, and the inability to move children through the system expeditiously (Huntington 2014).

Ensuring child welfare is a global concern today, explicitly expressed through government and non-governmental policies and programmes. It has deep roots in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, which is the legally binding international instrument that explicitly seeks to protect children from deprivation, exploitation and other forms of maltreatment. It is for this reason that UNICEF has made the promotion of the rights of every child, everywhere, in everything the organisation does, their cardinal mission. Following this global concern about the

1 Technically, the concept of “child welfare” is used to describe a cocktail of government services designed to protect children and enhance family stability. These services are categorised as follows: child protective services, prevention services and family preservation services (*New World Encyclopedia*, s.v. “child welfare,” accessed 22 April 2017, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Child_welfare). However, in the context of developing countries, because the welfare systems are weak, the term is broadly used to include services provided by non-governmental entities.

welfare of children, the NASW in the US is leading the sector in benchmarking and promoting best practices for social work practitioners. The 1981 NASW standards for social work practice in child protection serve as an initial effort to this effect. Consequently, in the field of child welfare today, the standards are generally regarded as a basic tool for social work practice (NASW 2005, 2013) not only in the US, but often also in other countries. Social workers are helping to further advance the course of child welfare through, among other contributions, advocacy and evidence-based practice (Baker 2003).

The aim of this study is to examine the characteristics of an effective organisation and systems of child welfare, specifically from an institutional perspective, in order to inform practice and contribute to promoting the professional care of children in Uganda and, perhaps, in other contexts as well. In this review, a childcare institution is defined as any establishment that is funded and operated by governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide childcare in the form of children's homes, orphanages or children's villages (Walakira, Dumba-Nyanzi, and Bukenya 2015).

The systems literature defines a system – such as the child welfare system – as a collection of parts or components that are organised around a common purpose or goal (Save the Children 2009; UNICEF EAPRO 2009). The system's purpose helps link the system to specific functions, structures and capacities and equally legitimises the system within specific policies, commitments and laws (UNICEF EAPRO 2009). Systems function at different levels, and each level is composed of elements that are unique to the level in which it operates. It should also be noted that, in this review, the concept of “organisation” is synonymous with the concept of “institution”, and the two are applied interchangeably.

The Thesis of the Review

This work has been motivated by the findings of the baseline survey by Walakira, Dumba-Nyanzi, and Bukenya (2015) that covered 29 childcare institutions in Uganda, both governmental and non-governmental, with a total of 1 282 children. That survey found that there was marginal professionalism in caring for children in these institutions with respect to their welfare, including feeding, education, health and psychological support. It was also established that, to a large extent, quality care was compromised in most of these childcare institutions owing to a lack of supervision, limited financial resources, and minimal awareness about child development issues.

These and many other shortcomings point to serious organisational and systemic constraints. For example, it was found that none of the childcare institutions surveyed had a comprehensive and robust system for following up children who formally or informally exited the institution, suggesting that they did not have an exit strategy in

place. Furthermore, gaps were identified in the supervision of childcare organisations by the public authorities and it also became evident that there was minimal evidence of knowledge of and adherence to minimum care standards as espoused by the NASW. The latter are perhaps indicative of a serious systemic failure.

Although the survey established that some community members, management and staff perceived institutional care positively, it is possible that there were serious negative impacts on the children, given the aforementioned organisational and systemic failures. Although the survey also covered only three districts in central Uganda, this author believes that the findings are representative and generalisable not only to Uganda, but also to most developing countries where similar constraints could pose major challenges to effective institutional childcare and welfare today.

This article, therefore, is a response to the concerns emerging from the study by Walakira, Dumba-Nyanzi, and Bukenya (2015). Through a systematic review of literature, the article aims to identify the components of an effective organisation and systems of child welfare, with the hope that this will show child welfare organisations the way forward in terms of being more effective and providing a more robust and ethical service to children, families and communities.

Theories on Effective Child Welfare Organisations and Systems

Contemporary child welfare institutions face challenges that prevent them from dealing with child maltreatment that frequently occurs from prevention to permanency. Many of these child welfare institutions do not have the requisite capacities to confront these challenges (WPIC² 2016). To this end, social workers should explore a more comprehensive approach that deals with both systemic and organisational issues related to the implementation of practice innovations.

The Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center (WPIC) (2016) in the US contends that to build an effective child welfare institution, organisational structures and people should change in order to create room for policies and practices to improve as well. The WPIC (2016) adds that this requires a positive change in attitude by the implementers to the challenges around the child together with a change in behaviour as far as planning, assessing and implementing practices and innovations are concerned. This goes with change in relationships, improving communication, and

2 The WPIC, established in 2008–2013, is one of five regionally based implementation centres in the US tasked with providing in-depth and long-term technical services to selected communities in Administration for Children and Families regions IX (San Francisco) and X (Seattle). <http://www.air.org/project/western-and-pacific-child-welfare-implementation-center-wpic>. Accessed 7 December 2019.

building trust and strong partnerships as part of the system change process (WPIC 2016). The WPIC (2016) states that five key elements within the organisational and systems domains that are a prerequisite for achieving meaningful and lasting innovations that should be introduced in a child welfare institution are: vision and values; leadership and commitment; stakeholder commitment; environment; and capacity and infrastructure.

In addition, according to the organisational and systems theories, three steps are needed to have an effective institution. Firstly, creating a climate of change by increasing urgency and building guiding teams. Secondly, engaging and enabling the entire organisation through getting the vision right, communicating for buy-in and enabling action. And thirdly, implementing and sustaining the change, which can be achieved through creating short-term wins, refusing to let up and making it stick (WPIC 2016).

Organisational literature abounds with organisational effectiveness theories today. The theories are applied in organisational literature to refer to realising the outcomes which the organisation intends to achieve. In applying organisational effectiveness theories, managers are expected to directly observe the following key areas: human capital; leadership development; talent management; organisational design and structure; the design of measurements and scorecards; deploying smart processes and smart technologies to manage their firms; the implementation of change and transformation; and the formulation of broader human resources agenda (cf. Herman and Renz 2008; Mitchell 2013).

Accordingly, the analysis of this effective child welfare institution is framed within the organisational effectiveness and systems theories. It is important to note from the outset that the field of organisational effectiveness and systems theories is so complex and broad that it is impossible to exhaust its contents and application in this type of review. It is also worth noting that the boundaries between organisational issues and systems are not mutually exclusive because systems are part of organisations and organisations do not operate in isolation but as systems. For example, an institutional childcare organisation cannot operate effectively without linkages to the health sector, the education sector, other NGOs and other community subsystems.

Characteristics of an Effective Child Welfare Institution

UNICEF predominantly applies the systems approach to its child welfare programmes (UNICEF 2008). It looks generally at the social protection of children as embedded within the economic, social, political and cultural context, including the family, community, externalities and emergencies (Wulczyn et al. 2010). This broader context determines not only the normative environment but also the relationship of the child protection system to the other systems. On the basis of this systems approach,

UNICEF opines that children are protected when both the system and the normative context in which it is embedded ensure that children are free from deprivation, exploitation and other forms of maltreatment (Wulczyn et al. 2010).

The theoretical underpinnings of an effective child welfare institution are not far removed from those empirically tested by Cornerstone for Kids (2006) and others, but the 14 key characteristics are discussed below and are as follows:

- reverberation and reciprocity;
- cooperation, coordination and collaboration (3Cs);
- accountability;
- process of care;
- governance of complex systems;
- context and adaptation;
- functions, structures and capacities;
- cultural competence;
- evidence-based practice;
- professionalism of staff;
- record-keeping and confidentiality;
- contingency approaches;
- competing values framework; and
- outcomes of effective institutions and systems.

Reverberation and Reciprocity

In the context of systems analysis, these concepts are used to refer to the interaction of multiple common-purpose systems, with the resultant effects of the interactions reverberating throughout the entire system. These relationships among and between agents are complex and extensively intertwined (Begun, Zimmerman, and Dooley 2003). In systems analysis, the work of each system is usually mutually reinforcing (Wulczyn et al. 2010). Accordingly, an effective childcare institution should interact with other institutions in its environment, and should be ready to be influenced as it also influences others.

Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration (3Cs)

As is well known, all systems consist of multi-levelled actors, from the individual child to the level of transnational organisations. Literature abounds with the findings that the 3Cs are pivotal to the effective functioning of the systems (Cohen 2008; Ivory

2007; Leischow et al. 2008). In the case of a child welfare institution, the key actors can be the institution and the supranational agency such as UNICEF, the state, the community, other NGOs, the family and the individual child. These systems can be both formal and informal. For a child welfare institution to be effective, these actors must cooperate, instead of taking individual action (Wulczyn et al. 2010). Meyer and Rowan (1978) contend that the lack of coordination or poor coordination between such actors may result in resistance to change and a reverberating weakness in all the systems around such an institution, and this directly affects its effectiveness. Effective childcare institutions should also collaborate with other systems at the agency level through coalition and service integration and also foster sustainable relationships and build networks with service providers and the community (Horwath and Morrison 2007).

It has been acknowledged that collaboration across service systems helps build community capacity in many aspects and this may help achieve better outcomes compared to operating independently (Lasker, Weiss, and Miller 2001a, 2001b; Provan et al. 2013). As the systems collaborate and cooperate, the childcare institution should, however, be clear about the boundaries and mission of each system, to avoid conflict and the potential of overlaps in functions. Cooperation, collaboration and coordination are also important while confronting challenges – externalities and emergencies – corporately. They ideally help child welfare institutions build a critical mass of professionals with the requisite skills and knowledge that can help the children under their care receive the care and support they dearly need (Brown, Klein, and McCrae 2014).

Accountability

An effective child welfare institution should be accountable. With regard to an organisation, accountability is of two types, according to Brinkerhoff (2004): firstly, financial accountability, and secondly, performance accountability. Being accountable probably also inspires trust among actors in the institution, thus further enhancing its effectiveness.

Process of Care

Organisationally, an effective institution should have an effective and integrated process of care that delivers better overall service to the children under its care (Green and Ellis 2008). The specific elements of this process are variously indicated in the literature (UNICEF EAPRO 2009; Wulczyn et al. 2010). It should be noticed that the process of care is important in fostering effectiveness because it helps not only to protect the children, but also the staff working with the children and the organisations overseeing those activities.

Governance of Complex Systems

An effective child welfare institution should be able to effectively govern the complex systems around the institution. It should adopt an integrated governance style since it deals with a multitude of actors operating within a fluid environment (Folke et al. 2005; Lemos and Agrawal 2006). The importance of integrated governance by a child welfare institution cannot be underestimated because it is important for focusing on connections between the different childcare institutions and other systems at multiple levels. Successful management of this integrated governance also tests the quality and capacity of the leaders of the institution.

Context and Adaptation

Literature on organisational and systems effectiveness succinctly indicates that context and adaptation are key ingredients of the effectiveness of an organisation. This is because organisations and systems do not exist in isolation; rather, they operate within a broader and fluid environment (Rothery 2007). Nunno (2006) and Gaad, Arif, and Scott (2006) also posit that organisations are inextricably linked to the broader context in which they are situated. Because of this, some authors have pointed out that when carrying out an organisational or institutional evaluation and reforms effort, the local context must be the centre of focus (Lemke and Sabelli 2008; Mizikaci 2006). Stevens and Cox (2008), Leischow et al. (2008) and Begun, Zimmerman, and Dooley (2003) posit that the organisational environment is in a constant and discontinuous state of change. Accordingly, organisations that aspire to be effective must purpose to adapt to such an unstable environment. Mulroy (2004) argues that robust structures, functions and capacities within the institution must be available to allow the institution to positively adapt to changing conditions. These robust structures, functions and capacities are important to enable an institution to adapt to its multi-levelled context in ways that are favourable to their continued operation, success and sustainability. In the case of a child welfare care institution, one such capacity could be leadership, and the contextual influences to adapt to are the children, family, community and the larger socio-economic and political influences.

Functions, Structures and Capacities

All organisations accomplish their work through existing functions, structures and capacities. Functions are organised activities that enhance the achievement of organisational goals. In a human service organisation such as a childcare institution, such functions include, but are not limited to, the establishment of a standard of professional behaviour or care (Glisson 2007; Save the Children 2009). There is no doubt that how effectively these functions operate or are executed, to a large extent, determines the level of organisational effectiveness. For example, the allocation of required resources in the right quantity, combination and at the right time is important. In organisational literature, structures are widely defined. Sometimes they refer to a

framework or context within which the institutional functions operate (Green and Ellis 2008; Hmelo-Silver and Pfeffer 2004).

The concept of “structure” at other times is used largely to refer to more specific features of an institution or system, such as a physical space. In this case, the structure of an orphanage can refer to the physical space in which the orphans live. The structure of a system or organisation has also been widely defined as including the policies, regulations, standards and other mechanisms to facilitate the coordination of actors (Save the Children 2009). Furthermore, the structure of a child welfare institution can be described in terms of the different units and agencies and their capacities (UNICEF EAPRO 2009). It can be observed that, whichever way the concept of “structure” is defined, an effective structure is a prerequisite for an effective child welfare institution or system. Capacity, on the other hand, is defined in organisational and systems literature as referring to the skilled personnel, material resources, facilities, decision-making, and funding needed to operate the institution or system (Wulczyn et al. 2010). Decision-making is a very important capacity as it determines how other capacities are allocated to meet the organisational goal. The institutional human capacity plays the role an engine does in a car – it determines the effectiveness of all other capacities.

Cultural Competence

This is one of the virtues of an effective organisation, and refers to the ability of a child welfare institution to respond effectively and respectfully to children of all cultures, classes, races, disabilities and religions in a manner that recognises the values and affirms the worth of a child (NASW 2013). Cultural competence also enhances institutional relevance and, thus, effectiveness. Sometimes children are abused in institutions where there is cultural incompetence – which is characterised by discrimination, biases and favouritism. Such are the institutions that could be ripe for deinstitutionalisation.

Evidence-based Practice

This refers to the routine application of the best available scientific knowledge that is informed by scientifically conducted studies and meta-analyses of existing studies, as a basis for informing and guiding day-to-day professional interventions and therapies (Baker 2003). Accordingly, social work practitioners in effective child welfare institutions should demonstrate unwavering commitment to social work ethics and values and use the NASW code of ethics as a guide to decision-making on unique aspects of child welfare practice.

Professionalisation of Staff

Welfare administrators should use several methods to professionalise staff and increase retention by employing different strategies, such as organisational restructuring, pay increases, ethics training, reduced caseloads, and specialisation of

services. Professionalising employees is considered vital to increase their effectiveness, efficiency and the quality of the services they provide (Zlotnik, Strand, and Anderson 2009).

Record-keeping and Confidentiality

Keeping records and ensuring confidentiality of the information about children in an institutional setting are indicators of an institution's effectiveness (NASW 2013). Such information is vital for planning, referral and termination. The use of modern storage and retrieval technologies is very important in this regard.

Contingency Approaches

Daft (2010) posits that an effective organisation should focus on these three approaches. Firstly, the resource-based approach. This approach calls upon organisations to obtain scarce and valued resources for high performance. Daft (2010) names such resources as low-cost inputs and high-quality raw materials. In terms of child welfare institutions, such low-cost inputs could be in the form of volunteers or reliance on local resources. Secondly, the internal process approach. Here, Daft (2010) argues that the key ingredient that can make an organisation effective is a strong corporate culture which, to him, is very instrumental in maintaining internal organisational health and efficacy. This is different from merely being culturally competent. Lastly, Daft states that an effective organisation should apply the goal approach – the ability to achieve its goals by providing the desired levels of output. In child welfare care, this means optimising the welfare of the children under care by giving them quality access to basic services, including respect for their human rights. It can be noticed that Daft's propositions are not entirely new, but he does emphasise the need for an institution that prioritises resources, goals and internal processes to realise effectiveness.

Competing Values Framework

This framework by Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983) is complex but emphasises some salient features that effective organisations must focus on if they are to meet their goals. The framework emphasises that an organisation must be rational, and that this rationality can be achieved through control, productivity and efficiency, among other ingredients.

Outcomes of Effective Institutions and Systems

An effective organisational arrangement and systems in child welfare institutions are expected to lead to two forms of outcome. Firstly, within the institution these can have the following outputs: increased job retention (Glisson and James 2002; Nunno 2006; Shim 2010); increased organisational commitment (Glisson and Green 2011); less difficulty in implementing evidence-based practices (Aarons et al. 2012); and increased odds of referral for necessary treatment (Glisson and Green 2011). Other

outputs are: higher quality casework services (Aarons and Sawitzky 2006); higher levels of job satisfaction (Shim 2010); and more continuous and comprehensive services to children (Glisson and Green 2011). Secondly, effective childcare ultimately prevents the maltreatment of children. The prevention of maltreatment directly leads to the elimination or mitigation of the risks of a variety of sequelae, including health problems, depression, substance abuse and the use of violence among children (Glisson and Green 2011; Hussey, Cheng, and Kotch 2006).

Conclusion

It can be concluded without hesitation that child welfare is a global concern in contemporary society, and this is because of the multiple challenges facing children today, ranging from state to family failures. Childcare has become one contentious area of social work practice today. The emergence of the field of childcare is attributed to the current advances in scientific knowledge as well as political and economic changes supported by changes in ideology. Because this discipline is facing challenges globally, a global institution such as the UN, and also through its agencies such as UNICEF, is at the forefront of advancing the cause of children's welfare. Similarly, the NASW is one of the professional social work agencies that are extending the frontiers of the welfare of children by formulating common standards of practice. These standards enhance the planning and implementation of child welfare services.

In this literature review, it can be concluded that an effective child welfare institution in Uganda should operate within the systems and organisational theories. The systems theories are a prerequisite for organisational effectiveness because they look at child welfare as the work of different systems, though each may be having a different goal. The systems theories dismiss the myth that an institution can operate in isolation. Though these systems may operate at different levels, it is important that they work together in sync – collaborate, coordinate and cooperate within that specific welfare system. On the basis of systems theories, a child welfare institution hoping to deliver good outputs to children should learn to focus not only on its internal processes, but also on the external environment, and should constantly adapt to the changing environment for it to remain relevant to the context.

It has also been pointed out that an effective child welfare institution should succinctly apply the tenets of organisational theories. The theories recognise that, much as child welfare institutions operate with different systems, their internal structures, functions and capacities must remain effective. Besides, the organisational theories emphasise that effective organisations should focus on such organisational practices as having clear visions, goals, good leadership, supervision, accountability, planning, research, monitoring and evaluation, among other good organisational practices. It is an undisputable fact that the general and specific characteristics identified above for an effective child welfare institution are also a prerequisite for its sustainability.

Recommendations

Child welfare institutions in Uganda that hope to provide effective child welfare services to their clients – the children – should endeavour to pursue reforms internally and externally. Below are some of the recommendations that are worth following by all child welfare institutions, regardless of size, location and level, if they are to remain effective:

- Child welfare institutions should make sure that they are clear about their boundaries with those of other formal and informal institutions within the same systems. Doing this helps them to stay on course with regard to functions, capacities, the process of care and accountability.
- Whatever challenges exist in the child welfare systems, the systems in their entirety should learn to confront the challenges – externalities and emergencies – corporately. This perhaps calls for timely information-sharing and accountability among the systems. The systems should work together with the ultimate goal of dealing with the identified gaps in their goals and processes.
- While pursuing their organisational goals, child welfare institutions should endeavour to focus on both internal and external processes. External processes help to deal with environmental contingencies, while internal processes help to concentrate on issues such as assessment, planning, referral, treatment, follow-up, employment incentives, and technological issues.
- Those child welfare institutions that are willing to increase their level of effectiveness should make a deliberate effort to ensure that their resources, especially the funding, infrastructure and capacities, are commensurate with their goals. These can be boosted by support from the government and other like-minded actors.
- Effective child welfare institutions should acknowledge that children come from diverse backgrounds and because of this, they should be able to deliver services while cognisant of this diversity. This calls for a high level of cultural sensitivity and competence in all interventions and activities.
- Where there is abuse of children in the form of limited access to quality services and human right abuses within an institution, actors, especially the government, should encourage such an institution to deinstitutionalise. This can be successfully achieved by carefully following a process of terminating services and resettling the children in families.
- Effective institutions should also invest heavily in monitoring, evaluation and research. Doing these on a regular basis ensures relevance, comprehension and continuous improvement.
- An effective child welfare institution should professionalise the practice of social work through continuous training, capacity-building of staff and professionalisation of the staff.

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