

ChildPact Manifesto for Investing in Child Protection Networks

In the New Eastern Europe / the Wider Black Sea Area, the number of vulnerable children is increasing while their number in the general population has decreased sharply in the past 20 years: fewer children are born and those who are born can expect harsher lives.

AN EMBARRASSINGLY ELUSIVE GOAL

In the last 20 years, governments strived to reform their child welfare and protection systems, but reforms remain incomplete. The transition to democratic governance did not create systemic reforms to end violence against children. This is a shameful failure.

'Ending violence' against children remains an embarrassingly elusive goal that flies in the face of the thousands of child-focused NGOs, specially mandated inter-governmental institutions and global commitments like the (nearly) universally signed UNCRC.

ChildPact believes that ending

violence against children is not impossible, but it requires a radical shift in our approaches, along with levels of partnership and collaboration that have not yet been attempted. The challenges will entail coordinated efforts and the courage to take advocacy risks, safely share information about what works and what stopped working, and genuinely learn from the other stake-holders.

To meet these challenges, in every country child-focused NGOs have come together in child protection / child rights networks to advocate for better lives for children. Civil society networks are crucial for the global effort to end violence against children as they influence policy developments which lead to more effective programs.

EXPOSING AN UNREASONABLE MISCONCEPTION

But civil society networks / coalitions lack adequate funding and technologies, as victims of a misconception about what

matters when making institutional funding and private donation decisions. Networks are seen as 1) bureaucratic structures with un-productive administrative costs that 2) do not offer direct services to children. This reasoning is hugely flawed.

Let's expose these two misconceptions. First, children need more than direct services: they also need good policies of the kind that child-focused networks fight for. If policy-making is wrong, services that NGOs can offer are mere drops in an ocean for a few lucky children that can be reached. Even worse, such services can create a dangerous perception that children are sought after and protected, allowing governments to look elsewhere while children continue to suffer.

Second, the administrative or 'overhead' costs are a poor measure of a network's performance. Impact results (along with transparency, governance and leadership) should be the main factor for guiding funding decisions. ChildPact acknowledges that in the absence of results, the overhead ratio can offer insights for fighting fraud and poor financial management. But many charities, and in particular the networks of charities, are weak because they do not spend enough on overhead. Overhead costs include important investments in training, planning, evaluation, cause visibility, and efforts to raise money so they can build and implement advocacy strategies to influence

government action. These expenses allow a network to sustain itself (the way a company will pay for its utilities) or to improve itself (the way a company invests in R&D).

Lacking capacity investment opportunities, NGO networks rely heavily on erratic annual project grants. With funding cycles tied to planned outcomes, networks do not have time to urgently seize political influencing opportunities because grant timelines and implementation plans need to come first. This, along with the overhead funding misconception minimizes the potential strength coalitions could have.

AN APPALLING KNOWLEDGE-PRACTICE GAP

But this point of view is a luxury that the development community cannot afford if it is genuine about its intent to end violence against children. Ending violence demands attention to an appalling knowledge-practice gap in the child protection field. For instance, the famous Bucharest Early Intervention Project proved, scientifically and beyond doubt, that children in institutional care suffer profound deficits and delays in IQ and social and emotional development when compared to children assigned to foster care before the age of two. Yet the practice of institutionalization continues although there is an entire list of documented and internationally acknowledged services and

community-based approaches to avoid institutionalization. Deinstitutionalization processes are surely difficult, but this persistence in a practice that gravely damages already vulnerable children (children deprived of parental care) reflects the tendency for child protection information about what works and what doesn't to remain unused and even (intentionally) ignored.¹ Coalitions are essential interlocutors with government to close this gap.

CHILDPACT'S CALL FOR A TRUST FUND FOR CHILD PROTECTION NETWORKS

Inspired by recent innovative funding practices,² ChildPact **calls for a trust fund for child protection networks to be established.** Usually a trust pools funding from public (ex. donor agencies) and private (ex. foundations) actors who choose to join forces to address a specific problem in a particular geographical area by grant-making within a certain timeframe (ex. 10 years).

A trust fund for child protection networks would be the first of its kind and could be established with an aim to achieve the following capacity

¹ Mirela Oprea, Why Networks Encourage Innovation and Why Donors Should Invest in Them. Lessons from the Field of Child Protection, ChildPact, 2014.

² Like the Robert Carr Fund for Civil Society Networks in the global HIV response, participated by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DFID, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and PEPFAR.

building and impact objectives:

- 1.** End the structural weakness of child protection networks in the New Eastern Europe / Black Sea Region;
- 2.** End their dependence on unpredictable funding and resource flows;
- 3.** End the knowledge-practice gap in child protection. ChildPact strongly believes and warns that without these three 'ends' the bigger 'end' - that of ending violence against children - will never be possible. **Only very strong, easily visible, compellingly vocal and outstandingly skilled child protection networks will be able to create the necessary vibe and hype needed for truly ending violence against children.**

A trust fund offers the following crucial elements:

- 1. COST-EFFECTIVENESS.** Pooling funds creates economies of scale. Donors wishing to support child protection networks do not need to set up their own offices or programs;
- 2. TESTING GROUND.** Successful implementation in one region of the world would generate a number of lessons allowing the program to be taken at a global level;
- 3. FLEXIBILITY.** Generally trust funds can adjust their funding to real-life events, while child protection networks operate in a highly dynamic landscape. Activists need swift assistance to be able to react to government failure or pledges,

to 'frozen' conflicts suddenly flaring (and creating further difficulties for children), to unexpected actual or proposed changes in legislation.

4. CROSS-REGIONAL APPROACH.

ChildPact spans several regions of the world (Caucasus, Western Balkans & South East Europe). Many foundations and government donors operate in one country or sub-regionally only. Some donors operate in all those regions, but compartmentalize their programming in sub-regions. But child protection issues affecting children in all these sub-regions are the same, as countries still struggle with the legacies (of the same communist) past. By creating a trust fund donors can contribute to addressing these issues holistically without needing to establish separate programs.

ChildPact, the Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area, brings together 600 child-focused NGOs from 10 different countries, who work with more than 500.000 vulnerable children.

ChildPact is a strong advocate for regional cooperation at inter-governmental and civil society level, in an effort to identify innovations that can tackle the common threats to children's well-being. ChildPact strongly believes that child-focused NGO networks play an essential role in promoting innovation, advancing policy and supporting good practice.

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