



# A SOLID INVESTMENT: INTEGRATING CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE INTO THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

TERMS AND PHRASES SUCH AS *UNIVERSALITY* AND *LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND* HAVE COME TO CHARACTERIZE THE GLOBAL DISCOURSE ON THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK. BUT WHO IS ACTUALLY BEING LEFT BEHIND AND WHY? WHAT TARGETED POLICY MEASURES SHOULD NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTORS CONSIDER IN ORDER TO CORRECT SOCIAL DISPARITIES AND ACCELERATE PROGRESS TOWARDS AMBITIOUS 2030 DEVELOPMENT GOALS? IN THIS PAPER, SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES DEMONSTRATES HOW CHILDREN WHO LACK OR ARE AT RISK OF LOSING PARENTAL CARE ARE HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO VARIOUS FORMS OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY. THE PAPER PROPOSES OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR ACTION AS WELL AS TARGETS AND INDICATORS DESIGNED TO MONITOR PROGRESS AMONG THESE CHILDREN. THE ARGUMENT BUILDS ON EVIDENCE PROVIDED BY SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES' PROGRAMMES IN OVER 100 COUNTRIES, INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE, AND CONSULTATIONS WITH THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD.

## INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have helped to raise the profile of pressing issues concerning child welfare, providing a blueprint for government action that has translated into significant improvements in the lives of millions of children worldwide. To date, however, these gains have largely been limited to individuals who are relatively easy to reach, thus widening the gap between those who already enjoy better opportunities and standards of living and those who remain marginalized or excluded.<sup>1</sup>

Recent research and discussions on the future Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the need for United Nations (UN) Member States and development partners to increase the focus on tackling inequalities and providing an enabling environment for vulnerable groups and individuals, so as to lift them out of poverty and ensure they do not slip back into it.<sup>2</sup>

Children without parental care or at risk of being separated from their parents are among the most vulnerable and 'left-behind' members of society, as revealed by evidence presented in international literature and drawn from SOS Children's Villages' long-standing experience working with governments at the policy level and with children in our programming. Children and young people who are temporarily or permanently deprived of a family environment—which could otherwise serve to provide care and protection from violence, abuse, and neglect—are exposed to multiple risk factors that can hinder their physical, psychological, and social development.

The kind of care environment in which children are raised represents a key marker for disadvantage, much like wealth, sex, and location. In the least developed countries, for instance, the proportion of children who attend school is 12% lower among orphans than among their non-orphans peers.<sup>3</sup> Without targeted support, children who lack or are at risk of losing parental care typically lag behind the general population in terms of education, health, employment, and social integration.

Not only do the social disparities linked to the loss of parental care hinder progress towards established development goals, but they also carry significant costs to individuals and the state. To eradicate poverty and reach sustainable development, the world must therefore ratchet up its efforts to address the concerns affiliated with the actual and potential loss of parental care.



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“Most people everywhere are vulnerable to shocks to some degree - natural disasters, financial crises, armed conflicts - as well as to long-term social, economic and environmental changes. [...] Yet some people are much more vulnerable than others. And in many cases discriminatory social norms and institutional shortcomings exacerbate this vulnerability, leaving certain groups without the household, community and state support needed to boost their coping capacities.”

– UNDP, Human Development Report 2014

Photo: A child after Typhoon Haiyan tore through the Philippines. More than 6,000 people were killed and 4 million displaced.

<sup>1</sup> UN (2014).

<sup>2</sup> OWG (2014). See also UN (2013), UNDP (2014), and World We Want (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF (2013, p. 115).

## DEPRIVATION OF A CARING FAMILY ENVIRONMENT: A DISRUPTION OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Today, millions of children in the world are robbed of the opportunity to grow up and thrive in a nurturing family environment, and many more are at risk of losing their family. Only some of them, approximately 24 million, have access to alternative care services, including residential, community, and family-based care. Worldwide, such services are severely undersupplied and often of poor quality or even harmful to children. Indeed, although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child urges States Parties to take action to protect children from all forms of violence in alternative care, dozens of countries still do not prohibit corporal punishment in such care settings, rendering children more vulnerable to physical violence from staff and non-parental caregivers.<sup>4</sup>

Children who lack or are at risk of losing parental care represent a large and growing group in society. While the issue is especially critical in less developed regions, up to one million children live in alternative care throughout Europe.<sup>5</sup> In terms of development policy, UN Member States should act not only because these figures are high and growing, but also to minimize the devastating effects of poor and inadequate upbringing on the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children.

Children, and particularly infants, need to develop a long-term and secure relationship with at least one primary caregiver to promote the successful development of their self-esteem, emotional stability, and capacity to form social relationships.<sup>6</sup> The deprivation of a caring family environment makes children highly vulnerable to attachment disorders, cognitive impairment, and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. What is more, children without parental care often experience multiple traumas, ranging from abuse and armed conflict to natural disasters.<sup>7</sup>

Poor alternative care increases the stress on children as well as their vulnerability. Specifically, children who are forced to move from one care setting to another inevitably experience the disruption of relationships with caregivers and peers, sometimes repeatedly. Moreover, in overcrowded residential care facilities, where the

psycho-social needs of individual children are generally neglected, the risk of developmental and psychological damage is extremely high. In fact, the placement of children under three in an institution can hinder the physical development of their brain.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, one in three children in alternative care still lives in an institution. Actual numbers might be even higher, as many of these institutions and about 230 million children worldwide are estimated to be unregistered.<sup>9</sup>

Research has also linked inadequate childcare to deviant and anti-social behaviour in adulthood, suggesting that inaction in this domain is a threat to individuals and society at large. Unless children who lack or are at risk of losing parental care receive specific policy attention and dedicated resources in post-2015 efforts, sustainable development will remain out of reach.

## LOSS OF PARENTAL CARE: A BRAKE ON PROGRESS TOWARDS THE MDGS

To meet the MDG targets on child mortality and hunger, efforts to support children who lack or are at risk of losing parental care need to be stepped up, especially as these young people tend to be particularly

### Universal primary education: an unattainable goal?

The international community is in danger of failing to meet the MDG of universal primary education by 2015. Millions of children are still out of school, mainly due to high dropout rates. In developing countries, many children who are deprived of a family environment drop out of school, either to care for younger siblings in child-headed households, or because the new caregivers are unprepared to cover the costs of their education. In more developed countries, discrimination remains a serious problem:

“There is a stigma for no reason other than being in alternative care. Schools should be inclusive.”

– Nadine, 22, formerly in care at SOS Children’s Villages Austria

Photo: In Syria children attend school in shifts, as numerous schools have either been destroyed by the conflict or are used as homes for an estimated 4.2 million internally displaced persons. Due to limited space, many attend school at night.

<sup>4</sup> SOS Children’s Villages (n.d.a; n.d.c).

<sup>5</sup> Eurochild (2010).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, attachment theory literature.

<sup>7</sup> Whetten et al. (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Pinheiro (2006) and UNICEF (2010).

<sup>9</sup> UN (2014, p. 7).

difficult to reach. Children who lose one or both parents are more likely to die young, with variable causes of death recorded across low- and high-income countries.<sup>10</sup> The loss of parental care is also associated with higher vulnerability to malnutrition than the average population. In Sierra Leone, for example, SOS Children's Villages found that children who have lost both parents are 32% less likely to eat three meals a day than peers who are growing up with their parents. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this difference is sometimes associated with discrimination in the allocation of resources within poor households, which hits children who are not direct biological descendants of the household head, but who had to migrate to that household after the loss of parental care. Such children may be given less food or clothing than the other children in the household, and they may be beaten and overworked.<sup>11</sup>

### A KEY STEP IN ATTAINING THE SDGS: THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE

To ensure that the post-2015 development framework leaves no one behind, and that development is not achieved at the cost of growing inequalities, tracking progress on SDG targets among the most vulnerable groups is essential.

The Open Working Group (OWG) on SDGs has taken an important step in this direction by proposing a number of targets that draw attention to vulnerable groups and by listing key markers for disadvantage—such as age, sex, economic, or other status. As children without parental care constitute one of these vulnerable groups, their care environment and 'care status' should be considered among the key markers for disadvantage. In particular, progress should be tracked in the following areas:

- **Health and well-being** targets of both the MDG and the future SDG framework are not likely to be met unless children without parental care are taken into consideration in policy-making. In fact, the quality of the care environment is an important predictor of quality of life and health outcomes. Disruptive care, harsh parenting, and household poverty tend to be associated with a higher incidence of substance abuse and chronic diseases,<sup>12</sup> in addition to mental and behavioural problems. Such negative effects can be prevented; however, a failure to do so places a financial burden on individuals as well as the public health care system, thus hindering human development.
- **Education** is a core 'unfinished business' of the MDGs. In urging states to 'ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable' by 2030, the OWG specifically mentions 'children in vulnerable situations'.<sup>13</sup> This target was established in view of marked disparities that persist around the world. In the Czech Republic, for instance, a child living in institutional care is 40 times less likely to attend college than a child who resides with his or her family. Similarly, young people who reside or resided in institutional care represent fewer than 0.6% of students in higher education and vocational training, and they comprise fewer than 1% of university graduates.<sup>14</sup> Given such statistics, any policy designed in response to the OWG's call for greater investment in early childhood development and care<sup>15</sup> should be inclusive of children who are deprived of a nurturing and stimulating family environment. Concerted action in this area would help to equalize children's learning opportunities and accomplishments, regardless of their individual socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>10</sup> Li et al. (2014).

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, UNAIDS, and PEPFAR (2006).

<sup>12</sup> UNDP (2014, p. 59).

<sup>13</sup> See Target 4.5 in OWG (2014).

<sup>14</sup> SOS Children's Villages (2013, p. 9).

<sup>15</sup> See Target 4.2 in OWG (2014).

<sup>16</sup> UNDP (2014, pp. 90–92).

- **After-care support** to young people can be provided through improved social protection, education, and employment measures. Yet, around the world, young care leavers who are in need of such support largely cannot access it. In 2012, SOS Children’s Villages engaged 400 young people from various alternative care settings in peer research on the conditions of leaving care in different countries.<sup>17</sup> The survey found that the process of leaving alternative care can significantly limit learning and employment opportunities, exposing care leavers to a high risk of gradual marginalization. When young people leave care—before the age of 18 in some countries—they often lack the necessary institutional and financial support, such as practical skills training, career guidance, and scholarships. As a result, many care leavers have no choice but to pursue manual labour jobs and precarious employment conditions. Enhanced state commitment to after-care support is urgently needed, even in higher-income countries. In Finland, for example, half of care leavers surveyed by SOS Children’s Villages were neither working nor studying.



“Sometimes I think about myself, that I am no one for the others and my views don’t matter. It is really difficult to think about changing and developing in these circumstances.

I would like to talk with the heads of State about child issues. I would like to tell them about children like me, without parents, family, future. It is some kind of luck to have the chance to grow up with members of your family, with love, good conditions...

Some people don’t have this luck – it is not a reason to surrender. We all have the obligation to help them and take responsibility.”

– Helena, 17, SOS Children’s Villages Poland

Photo: Portrait of two girls at SOS Children’s Village Valmiera.

## QUALITY CARE AND PROTECTION FOR EVERY CHILD: BREAKING A CYCLE OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Investing in social protection for families that are at risk of breakdown and ensuring quality alternative care for children who cannot live with their parents are two of the most efficient and effective ways to break the cycle of poverty and inequality, protect children’s rights, prevent violence, and enable families and children to be resilient and healthy contributors to society. The following research findings underscore the need for concerted action:

- **Poverty is the main reason why children are placed in alternative care.** Parents who find themselves unable to provide for their children, or who must migrate for work, may be forced to place their children in alternative care in the hope that they will have adequate shelter and better access to food, education, and health care. Only a small proportion of children enter alternative care because they have no surviving parents. Research conducted by SOS Children’s Villages shows that 88% of children in alternative care have at least one living parent and that 70% could actually be reintegrated if adequate family support services were provided.<sup>18</sup>
- **Poverty is linked to domestic violence, which is a leading cause of the loss of parental care.** In both developing and developed countries, physically violent parents are more likely to be poor, with a reduced capacity to cope with stress and a higher incidence of mental health problems and substance abuse.<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, these parents may be unable to care for their children. In Uruguay, for example, children and young people involved in national consultations identified ‘violence at home, at school, and in the society’ as the country’s most urgent problem.<sup>20</sup> Between 2011 and 2012, 55% of the children under state protection in Uruguay had indeed been placed there as a result of domestic violence.
- **Poor-quality alternative care leads to a vicious cycle of poverty and inequality.** Family-based forms of alternative care represent a good temporary or long-term solution when parents cannot care for their children. In stark contrast, placing children

<sup>17</sup> SOS Children’s Villages (2012).

<sup>18</sup> SOS Children’s Villages (n.d.a).

<sup>19</sup> Pinheiro (2006, p. 68).

<sup>20</sup> For details on the consultations, see Aldeas Infantiles SOS Uruguay (n.d.).



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“Based on current understanding of the risk factors for violence and the evidence of prevention strategies that are effective, it is clear that families can be a powerful source of protection and support for children. Good parenting, strong attachment between parents and children, and positive non-violent relationships with children are clear protective factors. This highlights the importance of providing support to families to encourage these factors to flourish, especially families situated in communities with low levels of social cohesion.”

– Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro,  
UN World Report on Violence against the Children 2006

Photo: Mother and child at SOS Children’s Village Salvador da Bahia.

in overcrowded care facilities exposes them to poor health and substandard living conditions as well as to severe emotional and psychological deprivation. Nevertheless, the placement of children in institutions is still prevalent in many countries. In Kenya, for example, just over 600 residential care facilities care for more than 40,000 children—which translates into an average of 63 children per facility. Insufficiently trained staff are an additional problem. In Malawi, for example, 71% of care providers reportedly lack training in childcare.<sup>21</sup> As the standards of care are not always set consistently or controlled by national or local authorities, they are often left to the individual capacity of untrained care providers.

- **Poor-quality alternative care increases vulnerability and marginalization.** Children and young people who cannot count on an attentive caregiver to protect and guide them are more likely to miss out on vital information about good nutrition, health, and social and life skills. As a consequence, they are more exposed to risky behaviour that can greatly decrease their standard of health, particularly if they engage in unsafe sex and thus expose themselves to HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. Guidance is also crucial for young people who are aging out of alternative care, as they generally need help to secure housing, educational opportunities, and employment. In the absence of such assistance, these young people are likely to experience social and economic exclusion.

- **Poor-quality alternative care increases the risk of abuse, neglect, and violence against children.** Children who lack the fundamental protection of their parents and cannot rely on quality alternative care become easy targets for abuse, neglect, violence, and exploitation. Informal support systems such as extended families, which are very common worldwide, are often under- or unregulated, so that children may not be known to the authorities and may thus be at greater risk. These children may also be more exposed to discrimination and stigmatization by relatives and other members of their community than children who can count on the protection of their parents. Furthermore, institutional care facilities are rife with abuse, neglect, and violence against children. For example, research highlights that many girls and boys under 18 in institutional care have experienced sexual violence, including child-to-child violence.<sup>22</sup>
- **Violence in care fuels the cycle of violence.** In adult life we reveal how we fared in childhood. Many violent parents have experienced violence as children. Children who grow up in institutions where violence is rampant are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour, become involved in crime or prostitution, inflict self-harm, or commit suicide.<sup>23</sup> In this context, investment in quality alternative care and family-strengthening programmes can only serve as a pre-emptive solution in the fight against abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against children.

<sup>21</sup> Chiwaula, Dobson, and Elsley (2014, pp. 72–73).

<sup>22</sup> SOS Children’s Villages (n.d.a) and Pinheiro (2006, p. 183).

<sup>23</sup> Pinheiro (2006, p. 190).

## A STRATEGY FOR ACTION: BOLSTERING FAMILIES AND CARE

Currently, children and young people comprise one-third of the world's population. Millions of them have lost or are at risk of losing parental care. The evidence presented in this paper shows that denying these children and young people a chance to grow up in an enabling care environment exposes them to a heightened risk of poverty, inequality, and violence. In the absence of adequate guidance, they fare far worse than the general population when it comes to education, health, employment, and social skills. The failure to recognize and assist this vulnerable group thus has predictable consequences: a growing burden of human and social costs as well as a diminished capacity to achieve internationally agreed upon development targets.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year—underscores the importance of the family environment to a child's development. It also requires States Parties to provide children with special assistance when family protection breaks down. Nevertheless, state neglect of children and young people who lack or risk losing parental care remains widespread. Support services for these children and their families are severely undersupplied: more than 90% of such services are currently delivered by non-governmental organizations,<sup>24</sup> and unstable funding limits opportunities for expansion of services.

As noted above, 88% of children in alternative care have at least one living parent, and the majority of these children could be reintegrated into their biological family with adequate support. More effective social protection and care systems and equal access to basic social services—including family-strengthening services, quality alternative care, and after-care services—are crucial to efforts to reduce disparities in basic life chances for children who lack or risk losing parental care. These investments are also an efficient means of ensuring that all children meet educational, health, employment, and many other development goals.

In view of the evidence and our growing understanding of the needs of children without parental care, and with the aim of achieving the future SDGs, **SOS Children's Villages recommends that all governments and development partners join forces to:**



**Reduce vulnerabilities and build resilience of children and young people who lack or are at risk of losing parental care.**

The first step is to recognize this group as among the most vulnerable, so that it may also be targeted with policy interventions designed to reduce global poverty and inequality. Such measures may be designed to enhance social protection, educational and employment opportunities, and health care, as well as protection against abuse, neglect, exploitation, and all forms of violence in and outside the family environment.



**Develop indicators that identify gaps and track progress in services provided to children who lack or are at risk of losing parental care.**

Indicators should be developed to identify the inadequacies of existing social protection and care systems, and to ensure that national provisions are in line with the principles set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. Such indicators should measure the degree of access to and the standard of family-strengthening programmes and alternative care services. Examples of such indicators include the ratio of children placed in family-based care vs. those in institutional facilities, and the number of cases per social worker.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it will be crucial to monitor progress towards universal birth registration, which ensures greater awareness among authorities with respect to national and local child populations and children's needs, thus allowing for improved service planning and development. Universal registration of care facilities is also essential, as it empowers state authorities to govern alternative care facilities and to monitor alternative care providers, thereby reducing the risk of harm to children who cannot stay with their parents.

<sup>24</sup> SOS Children's Villages (n.d.a).

<sup>25</sup> See also SOS Children's Villages (n.d.b) for a proposed post-2015 framework designed to ensure that no one is left behind.



### Develop data disaggregated by care status.

The kind of care environment in which children are raised is a key marker for vulnerability and disadvantage, much like wealth, sex, and location. Substandard or unsafe care exposes children to multiple risks and development challenges. National and international partners should cooperate in providing and using data to help identify children without parental care and families at risk of breakdown and to track progress on development targets by care status. Efforts to fill the current data gap would help to enhance the design and monitoring of dedicated policy measures while promoting inclusive development—such that no child without parental care is left behind.



### Ensure the participation of children and young people who lack or are at risk of losing parental care.

On the whole, these children and young people are rarely consulted or listened to, in part due to the lack of consultative processes designed to garner their input and in part due to their generally low self-esteem. It is undeniable, however, that their participation will ensure more thorough analysis of the challenges and vulnerabilities they face as well as development of more supportive and sustainable policies and strategies tailored to their needs and national and local realities.

#### IMPRINT

Publisher:  
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Responsible for content: Stewart Wilms  
Editor: Claudia Arisi  
Proofreading: Tania Inowlocki  
Layout: Lisa Volderauer

Back Cover Photo: Boy at SOS Children's Village  
Bakoteh, The Gambia © Christian Lesske

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# A LOVING HOME FOR EVERY CHILD



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES

## ABOUT SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

SOS Children's Villages is a non-governmental and non-denominational child-focused organization that provides direct services in the areas of care, education and health for children at risk of losing, or who have already lost, parental care.

The organisation builds the capacity of the children's caregivers, their families, and communities to provide quality care. Finally, SOS Children's Villages advocates for the rights of children without parental care.

Founded in 1949, SOS Children's Villages operates in the spirit of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children in over 130 countries.

*I can't wait to see a world  
where all children have  
the same opportunities  
to grow with dignity,  
security and respect.*

**#EQUALITY4CHILDREN**

