

Promoting child welfare and rights: challenges and ways forward—Indonesia and Australia

Address to Save the Children's 'Families First Learning Event'
Jakarta, 27 July 2016
Dr Brian Babington

Selamat pagi! Saya senang sekali untuk kembali lagi ke ibukota Jakarta and for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would like to start by thanking Save the Children, especially Tata Sudrajat and Karen Flanagan, for convening this important conference and for assistance with my research over a number of years.



I wish to applaud the work that you all do to build stronger families and to help children grow up in safe and nurturing environments in Indonesia.

Today, I would like to reflect on three things relevant to the conference theme of building stronger families and reducing the institutionalisation of children.

First, I would like to discuss some of the research and other literature about the importance of raising children in a strong family environment. Second, I will talk about the main challenges faced by decision-makers in prioritising child and family wellbeing across societies. Finally, I would like to leave you with some ideas about what we can do to help enhance family and child wellbeing.

I will argue that we need to keep working to improve our existing programs **and** aspire to transform how our societies and governments improve children's welfare and rights. We can work towards these major transformations in three ways: by investing in greater understanding; supporting innovative practices; and, building multi-sectoral collaborations for collective impact.

The topic is a very broad one and I can only make a few points to highlight my main themes. I will use some examples from Australia, Indonesia and other countries. As I hope you will agree, so many of the challenges we face cut across national boundaries: we all struggle with these questions in a variety of ways.

Let me start by telling you a little about myself. Most of my career has been devoted to community development, either in Australia or overseas in countries such as Myanmar. As a diplomat, I represented Australia at the United Nations on community development and humanitarian issues. For the past 12 years, I have been the CEO of Families Australia, a national not-for-profit organisation that advises the Australian Parliament and Government on ways to improve family wellbeing, especially for the most disadvantaged families. A special area of focus for Families Australia has been to help establish Australia's first-ever government-supported plan of action to reduce child abuse and neglect.

I first became interested in the problem of orphanages when Families Australia helped to support people who were placed in institutions in the 20th century. Australia has now closed all its large-scale children's institutions, but we now face the task of helping tens of thousands of adults who suffered sexual and other types of abuse as children in these places.

Because of that, and my other work on international children's rights, I became interested in Save the Children's work in Indonesia and other countries to end the use of children's institutions except when absolutely no alternative exists. That led me to undertake research through the Australian National University over the past few years (Babington 2015).

I was impressed by the Indonesian Government's decision a decade ago to work toward reducing the numbers of children in *panti asuhan*. It was an important decision at the global level given the estimated numbers of children in *panti asuhan* and the slow progress that is being made towards deinstitutionalisation in other countries.

So, I set about trying to understand how and why this decision was made. I thought that, perhaps, there could be lessons for other countries that were thinking about deinstitutionalisation to help them on their journey. I will talk about my findings a little later.

Maximising children's welfare

Maximising children's welfare

Why is it important to raise children in a strong family environment?

- Research from Goldfarb (1940s) to Bucharest (1990s)
- Significant deficits across all child developmental domains

"It is very rare to find children who have received so little one-on-one attention from adults as children reared in the extremely deprived environment of orphanages..."

I would like to start with the first question: Why is it important to raise children in a strong family environment? Perhaps this question begs an obvious answer, but I thought it might be useful to touch, briefly, on key messages from research about the impacts of separation of children from their family environment in terms of childhood and later adult development.

More than 70 years ago, Goldfarb found that children who had been in US institutions for their first three years experienced significant intellectual delays compared with other children (Goldfarb 1945, pp. 247-255).

In more recent times, one of the best known studies is the Bucharest Early Intervention Project (BEIP). From the early 1990s, BEIP examined the effects of institutions on Romanian children (Carlson & Earls 1997, pp. 419-24; Zeanah et al. 2005, Smyke et al. 2007). When compared with other children, researchers found significant deficits were experienced by children in institutions across intellectual, academic, behavioural, physical, cognitive domains (MacLean 2003, pp. 857).

To quote from MacLean's extensive synopsis of literature about the impacts of institutions on children (2003, pp. 877, 879):

It is very rare to find children who have received so little one-on-one attention from adults as children reared in the extremely deprived environment of orphanages...the results across studies are consistent in showing that institutionalization has a powerful impact on all aspects of children's development. When compared to either other adopted children or children home reared since birth, orphanage children have lower IQs, are shorter and weigh less, and have more behavior problems and attention difficulties. They are also more indiscriminately friendly and have more insecure attachments.

Of course, contemporary messages about the importance of rearing children in a family environment come from a range of other sources.

UNCRC (1989)

- A child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will (Article 9)
- Both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child...The best interests of the child will be their basic concern (Article 18)
- A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, is entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State (Article 20)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states:

- A child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will (Article 9).
- Both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child...The best interests of the child will be their basic concern (Article 18).
- A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, is entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State (Article 20).

UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015)

- Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG Goal 1)
- Ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition (SDG Goal 2)
- Ensuring healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages (SDG Goal 3)
- Achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG Goal 5)
- Reducing inequality within and amongst countries (SDG Goal 10)

Last year, the UN agreed to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to reach by 2030. Many of these speak directly to the supports needed by families. These include:

- Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG Goal 1).
- Ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition (SDG Goal 2).
- Ensuring healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages (SDG Goal 3).
- Achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG Goal 5).
- Reducing inequality within and amongst countries (SDG Goal 10).

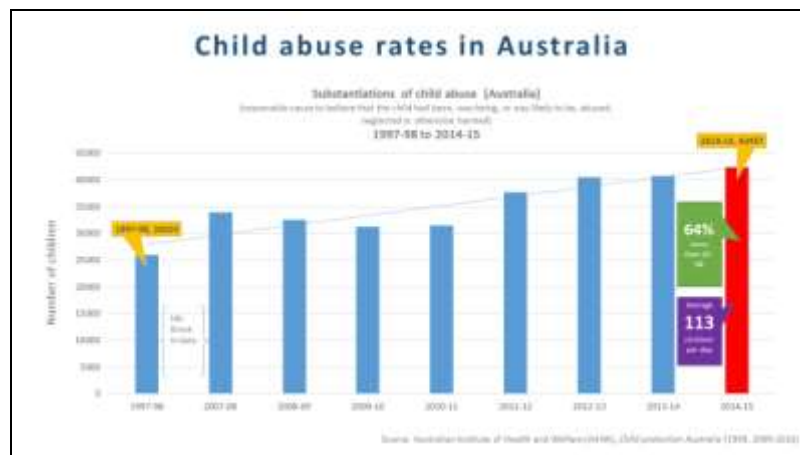
In sum, it is clear from research and international norms that our task is to ensure that children are reared in the best possible family environment and, in turn, to do our utmost to help families and communities to achieve maximum wellbeing.

Challenges

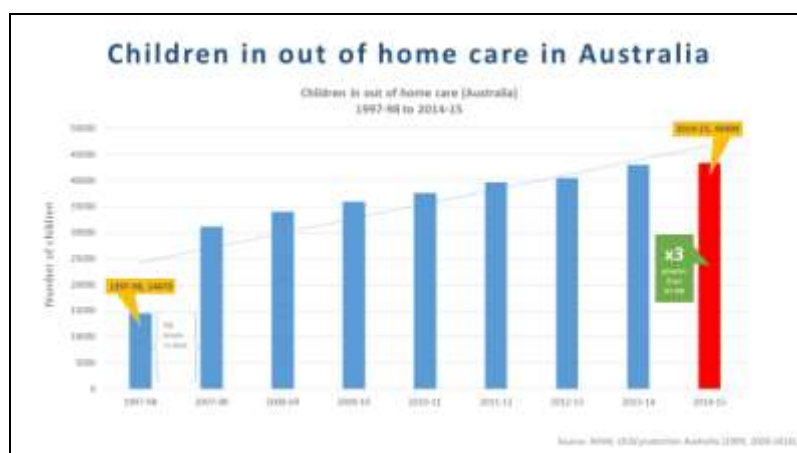
I would like now to turn to the second question: What are some of the key challenges faced by decision-makers when it comes to prioritising child and family wellbeing? Here, I will talk about the situation in Australia and my research in Indonesia to illustrate why change can be difficult, and how we can work to overcome barriers.



While Australia is a highly prosperous country when seen in light of OECD wellbeing indicators, we face significant problems in relation to child safety and wellbeing. The *Australian Child Rights Progress Report* (2016) claimed that one in six children in Australia live below the poverty line. The gap between secondary school completion rates for young people from lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds is around 20 per cent. And, we see that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 26 times more likely to be in juvenile detention compared with the non-Indigenous cohort.



Turning to child safety, I use data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare over the past 17 years. I'd like to draw your attention to a few things: first, the number of substantiated child abuse cases rose from around 26,000 children in 1998 to over 42,000 in 2015. Using 2015 data, on average, an abuse substantiation was recorded for 113 children every single day of the year; second, these figures show a 64 per cent increase in numbers of child abuse substantiations in 17 years; and third, and very obviously, the trend-line is ever-steadily upwards (AIHW 2016).



When a child cannot live at home they are very often taken into foster care or the care of relatives. We see around 15,000 children in this category in 1998 which rises to over 43,000 in 2015. That means there has been a trebling in the number of children in out-of-home care across Australia in less than two decades (AIHW 2016).

We know from research that the main causes of these problems lay directly in a combination of adult alcohol and substance misuse, domestic and family violence, and mental ill-health. Yet, focusing greater attention on these problems is made more difficult when children's views and needs are not well recognised at community levels and when all Australian governments struggle to adequately fund early intervention and preventive measures.

I should add that Australia is making strides to improve child protection. In 2009, all Australian Government leaders adopted the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 as the first-ever plan of action to reduce child abuse and improve child wellbeing. Some important work has been undertaken to date, such as the appointment of Australia's first National Children's Commissioner.

Research on *panti asuhan* policymaking

- Policy change from complex interplay of forces
- Some wanted to reduce cost of government subsidies
- Others saw policy change as important to demonstrate compliance with key international human rights standards
- Other players opposed change: *panti asuhan* had social and religious support

Understanding the barriers to long-lasting improvements to children's welfare was also a key subject for my research into why Indonesia decided to change its policy a decade ago to reduce the number of children in *panti asuhan*.

From many interviews, I concluded that the reasons for the policy change were far more complex than portrayed in the public literature. Policy change resulted from a complex interplay between forces that wanted a change of policy direction and those who supported the continuation of *pantis*.

For some, it was important to reduce the cost of government subsidises for *panti asuhan*, while for others policy change was important in terms of demonstrating Indonesia's compliance with key international human rights standards during the early *Reformasi* era.

Other players, however, opposed change. They argued that *panti asuhan* enjoyed broad social and religious support, and that it was a well-accepted part of Indonesian society—some movie stars even attract media attention by celebrating their birthdays at *panti asuhan*!

I concluded that, ultimately, the new policy represented a compromise solution. I also wondered whether this compromise has provided the basis for major, lasting change.

Common elements?

- Both countries have made adjustments on children's policy
- But, deeply entrenched problems relating to children's welfare persist
- Too complex to tackle by taking a 'business-as-usual' approach?

I do not think it is a great stretch to argue that the cases of Australia and Indonesia have at least one important thing in common: both countries have made some important adjustments on children's policy, but are yet to tackle some deeply entrenched problems relating to children's welfare.

Here, I wish to say how appalled I was with the revelations this week of the mistreatment of young people in detention in Australia's Northern Territory.

At the broadest level, a central issue seems to be that the task of improving children's welfare in all our countries may simply be too complex and large to tackle by taking 'business-as-usual' approaches. To unpack this idea, I draw on the work on leadership by Heifetz and Linsky (2002) at Harvard University. They argue that there are a whole host of problems that we try to tackle by so-called 'technical' fixes, that is, by tinkering with *established* systems and ways of doing things. They say that the big transformations needed to solve really complex problems are risky because they require people to move from their comfort zone, to risk hostility and loss of previous positions even if those positions were untenable in the long term.

Ways forward

Ways forward

- What we can do to strengthen family and children's wellbeing?
1. Invest in understanding
 2. Support innovation
 3. Build collaboration across traditional boundaries

With those points in mind, I would like to move to address the third question: What we can do to strengthen family and children's wellbeing?

I fall into the category of people who think that lasting change generally occurs by *both* technical improvement *and* paradigm-shifting approaches. In other words, while we might want our decision-makers and societies to suddenly put children at the centre, we need to keep improving our existing program practices by challenging ourselves about the value and impact of what we do on the ground every day. But, we should also simultaneously undertake deeper transformation and paradigm-shifting work.

I have three suggestions drawn from the work at Harvard, our experiences in Australia, and my research into what makes policy change occur.

Invest in understanding

- Indonesia research suggested several conditions for policy change previously unexamined
- Devoting resources to understanding most likely moments to achieve policy change improves chances of influencing policy

First, **invest in understanding**. My research in Indonesia suggested that the chances of policy change on *panti asuhan* became more likely in the 2000s because several factors coincided. These were: having willing champions for change within government; having excellent research about the problem (which Save the Children sponsored, also supported by UNICEF and the Ministry of Social Affairs); and advocates of change who took advantage of moments when policy change seemed most likely to occur.

If we devote resources to understanding the most likely moments to achieve policy change, the chances influencing policy change should be improved. Such deeper understandings are also likely to show up the obstacles to change. That provides an opportunity to strategise about, navigate around, and maybe overcome obstacles.

Too often, I hear NGOs blaming governments without trying to understand why governments sometimes act the way they do. Equally, governments need to invest in understanding and respecting the roles played by civil society actors.

My research showed that, by carefully analysing what people said and analysing these discourse using secondary data, it was possible to better comprehend the roadblocks to progress.

Going forward, this suggests that we are well advised to invest in building up our capacities to understand the overt and hidden complexity of the policymaking environment.

Support innovation

- If we don't take risks & attempt new things, all we can hope is to do better at old ways
- Save the Children innovation through its Children and Family Support Centres
- Child Aware Local Initiative in Australia

Second, **support innovation**. If we do not take risks and attempt new things, all we can hope for is that we do better at old ways of working to solve old problems. In this respect, I applaud the innovation that Save the Children has taken through its Children and Family Support Centres (PDAKs). In my work back in Australia, we have been trialing an innovative program called the Child Aware Local Initiative in seven locations. That program is about working with communities to develop local plans of action to improve child safety and wellbeing. We know that these activities carry risk of failing; but we also know that unless we take risks we cannot learn what works and what doesn't.

Build collaboration across boundaries

- Creating 'holding' environment to help players cope with change/loss
- Building partnerships for change
- Multi-sectoral
- Five conditions for collective impact: common agenda; shared measurement; continuous communication; strong logistical backbone; enabling environment

Third, **build collaboration across traditional boundaries**. Harking back to work by Heifetz and Linsky, it is important to create a 'holding' environment in which all players are supported as they undergo the difficult process of change. That means listening to those with the most to lose in a post-children's institution environment and analysing what they say and what they mean. It is about strategising how to overcome the roadblocks to deinstitutionalisation and creating a 'learning environment' which supports players during the transformation process.

It is also about **creating and sustaining partnerships for change**. Looking at the international arena in the past few years, I see many more references than a decade ago to building multi-sectoral, integrated approaches for collective action. The Stanford Social Innovation Review has argued that multi-stakeholder approaches are essential to solving large-scale social problems. They suggest five necessary conditions for effective collective impact: namely, agreement around a common change agenda; shared measurements systems; continuous communication amongst key leaders and workers; a strong logistical support system; and, working in an external environment that 'enables' or supports change.

In Australia, we are attempting to do this through an innovative partnership between the NGO and research sectors and our Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. We have established the National Forum for Protecting Australia's Children which involves all these players and which meets several times a year to discuss our progress on child protection. This type of collaboration across traditional sectoral boundaries is working well as it builds trust between parties and a sense of common purpose.

I want to leave you, then, with these messages. Thank you for all your work in support of stronger families and safe and thriving children. Keeping your practices sharpened by constant review and evaluation is important. Also, we need to keep our eyes on the bigger transformations that need to occur for the full realisation of children's rights and wellbeing.

I have suggested a few ways ahead – by investing in deeper understandings about the challenges and the concerns of all the players who are faced with the difficult adaptive task of change, by supporting innovation and testing new ways of doing business, and finally, by going beyond our traditional professional boundaries to build multi-sector collaborations. In the words of one of my Harvard teachers, at times we must 'listen to those we don't like to dance with'. *Terima kasih!*

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