

Strategies to reform child protection systems

International Child Welfare:

Analyzing and Reforming Child Protection Systems

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Most child protection system strengthening supported by bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors and development agencies in low and middle income countries, in my experience, is **top down**. An outside organization works with a national or local government to identify needed changes—of course getting input from a wide range of stakeholders, including people at the grassroots level, but the initiatives are framed and driven by the top. There are, however, different strategies for reform that are often not seriously considered and should consider.

One framework for describing different approaches to reform child welfare systems has been developed by Michael Wessells (2015).¹ He describes three categories of reform strategies: top down, bottom up and middle-out. As Wessells writes:

“**Top-down** approaches help to ensure that governments have the laws, policies, and capacities that are essential in protecting vulnerable children. [These reforms are initiated and implemented by the leadership of executive branch agencies or by external donors or advisors to government agency leaders.]

Bottom-up approaches work from grassroots level upward, feature community action, build on existing community strengths, and stimulate community-government collaboration.

Middle-out approaches, which emanate from actors such as city councils that are situated between the national and grass-roots levels, embed the child protection agenda in regional centers of power.”

¹ Wessells, M. G. (2015). Bottom-up approaches to strengthening child protection systems: Placing children, families, and communities at the center. *Child abuse & neglect*, 43, 8-21.

As Wessells writes:

An important point is that bottom-up and top-down approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary. The wider task of strengthening national child protection system strengthening requires a mixture of different kinds of work. Top-down approaches are necessary, for example, in establishing a framework of national laws and policies that prioritize, legitimate, and support the protection of children. Bottom-up approaches are necessary for enabling sustainable supports for children's protection at grassroots level and building an environment of prevention. Middle- out efforts, such as work at municipal or district level to support child protection, is needed in order to foster connections between the grassroots and national elements of the child protection system and to promote congruence between these different elements. From this standpoint, it would be misguided to focus, as the child protection sector has, on a top-down approach. The spirit of this guide is that much more attention to bottom-up approaches is needed in order to strengthen child protection systems and achieve the wider humanitarian goal of sustainability.

Top down approaches have limitations. In terms of strengthening child protection systems, top-down approaches often lead to decontextualization in which outside models such as those from the Anglo-Saxon world are imposed in ways that do not fit the local context. At the community level, significant limits include the relatively low levels of community ownership, self-silencing by community members, backlash, high levels of dependency, and low levels of sustainability.²

The end of this document presents some of the pros and cons of top down and bottom up approaches.

Often the strongest approach is to use both a **bottom up and a top down strategy simultaneously**. Little research has been conducted in the child welfare field that compares the pros and cons of these different approaches. In the health field, however, one of the few studies to compare top down and bottom up approaches, studied **ways to improve patient safety** in which some sites used a top down approach, some used a bottom up approach and some used a combination of top down and bottom up.³ In this study in the health field, it was found that:

² Wessells, M. G. (2018). *A guide for supporting community-led child protection processes*. New York: Child Resilience Alliance. p.3.

³Greg L. Stewart, Kristin A. Manges, Marcia M. Ward. Empowering Sustained Patient Safety: The Benefits of Combining Top-down and Bottom-up Approaches J. of Nurs. Care Quality, Vol. 30. No. 3, pps. 240-246 (2015).

The top-down approach failed to develop enough commitment to spread implementation.

The bottom-up approach was unable to marshal the resources necessary to spread implementation.

The combination of both led to the best implementation and spread of the safety initiative.

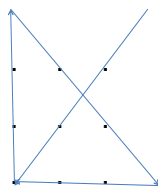
My conclusions, based on 40 years of using each of these the strategies and a review of the literature, is that **a combination of top down and bottom up produces the most effective** and long-lasting system strengthening.

Try to be aware of what is likely to be your implicit assumption—which may be to carry out a top down strategy. Consider alternative strategies rather than automatically slipping into one strategy that seems easy, available or most familiar.

In summary, thinking outside your traditional framework or assumptions is important. As one small example, perhaps you are familiar with the exercise: How to connect 9 dots using only 4 straight lines.



The only solution is to go outside the framework of the dots.



Gloria Steinem had another way to frame this issue of expanding your thinking, of thinking outside of your traditional assumptions. She encouraged people to dream beyond usual possibilities. She said:

Without leaps of imagination, or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. **Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning.**

Pros and cons of top down and bottom up approaches according to Wessells⁴

Top down

Pros

Necessary in establishing a framework of national laws and policies that prioritize, legitimate, and support the protection of children.

Enables a rapid response, for example in an emergency situation in areas racked by chronic poverty, weak governance, and a paucity of supports for vulnerable children.

Provides resources for broad scale implementation.

Top down

Cons

External group, NGO or government, holds the power and makes the decisions. Paternalistic and regards community people as passive victims or beneficiaries.

Often leads to decontextualization in which outside models such as those from the Anglo-Saxon world are imposed in ways that do not fit the local context. As a result, they are limited in their effectiveness.

⁴ Wessells, M. G. (2018). *A guide for supporting community-led child protection processes*. New York: Child Resilience Alliance.

At the community level, significant limits include the relatively low levels of community ownership, high levels of self-silencing by community members, high levels of dependency, and low levels of sustainability. When the external funding for community work ends, the work tends to flounder or collapse entirely.

Top-down approaches to child protection may also produce backlash--negative reactions towards the government, an NGO and/or the promoted activities that can undermine the program effectiveness and sour relations with the NGO or the government.

Bottom up

Pros:

Participatory

More sustainable, enabling sustainable supports for children's protection at grassroots level and building an environment of prevention.

Community-led approaches are grounded in the idea of people power, that is, the ability of ordinary people, even under difficult circumstances, to organize themselves, define their main problems or challenges, and collectively address those problems.

Bottom up

Cons

Slower to implement change

Communities may support harmful practices such as beating a child as punishment.

Community-led approaches may be inappropriate or very challenging to implement in settings where there is little sense of community or deep divisions and tensions

among groups in the same setting.

Community-led approaches may cause unintended harm in particular contexts. In a war zone, for example, where spies and fears pervade all social levels, some people or authorities might see the group discussions and meetings that are usually the backbone of community-led processes as a form of political organizing or recruitment. Such perceptions could lead to violence against the perceived organizers.