THE CARE OF CHILDREN IN DATA

EVIDENCE, GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE IN THE SDGS
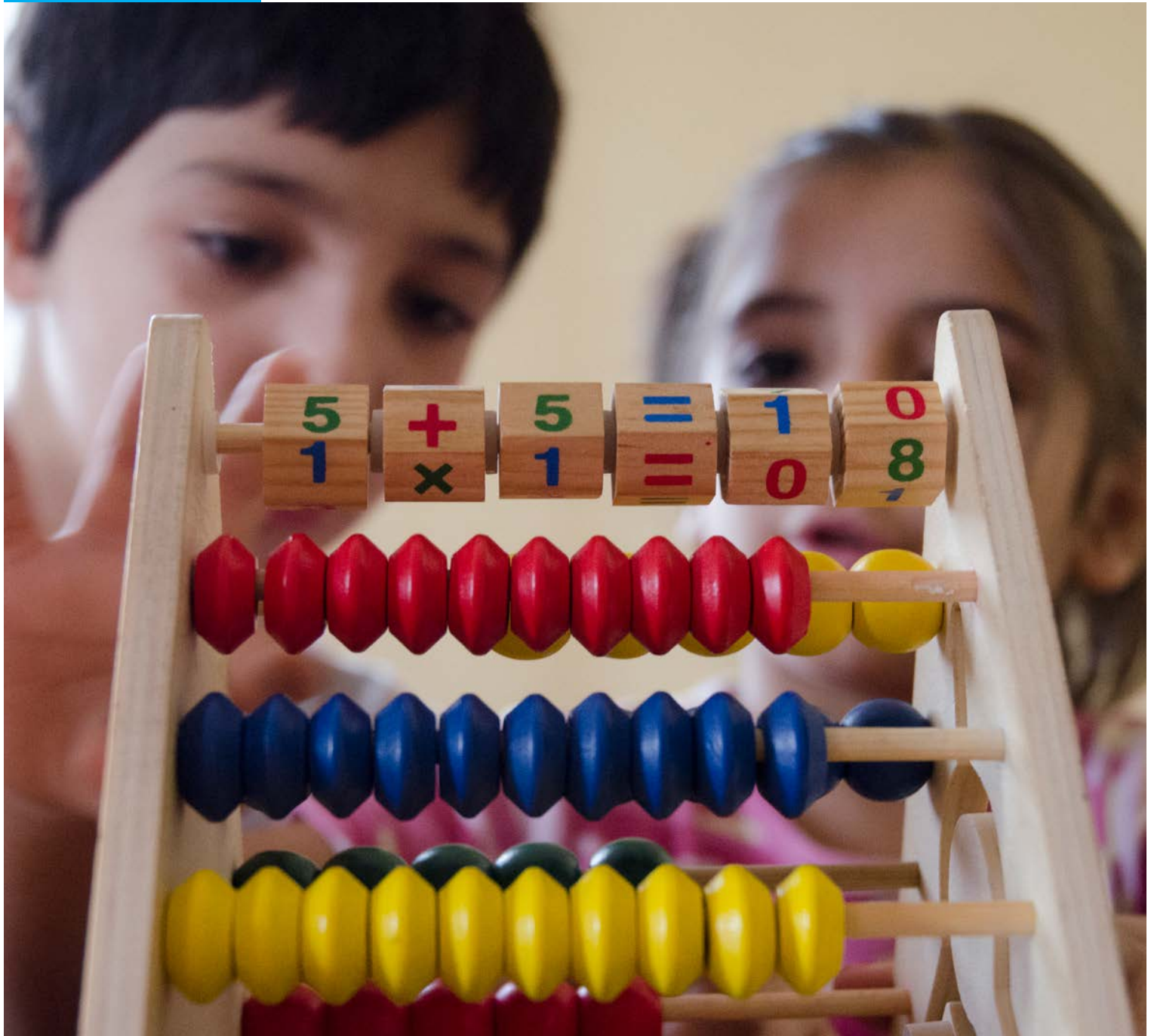
SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL

development initiatives

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IMPRINT

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits all 193 Member States of the Nations (UN) to put in place policies, investments and monitoring systems that ensure all children and young people can realise their rights and full potential through equal access to a range of supportive services and opportunities for personal development.

As many as 14 out of the total 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and up to 143 targets of the 2030 Agenda directly or indirectly relate to children's needs and rights, ranging from ending multi-dimensional poverty and violence in all its forms, to ensuring universal access to quality education, health, social protection, employability support, birth registration and other vital services. These come with an accountability of States to develop quality, accessible, timely and reliable data to help with the measurement of progress in the implementation of this Agenda and ensure that 'no one is left behind'[1].

A lesson learnt from the expired Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is that implementation efforts are likely to bring no gains for marginalised groups if the specific challenges that they face are not recognized and addressed - the poorest 5% made no progress at all between 1999 and 2008[2]. Therefore, the identification of children in vulnerable situations and understanding of the determinants of their vulnerability through disaggregated data is critical to know who is missing on progress and prevent short fallings towards the SDGs. However, data and statistics available in national and international statistical systems are still limited or poor for over half of the child-related SDG global monitoring indicators, leaving governments without the necessary information to tackle the obstacles of vulnerable and marginalised children[3].

Specifically, children and young people made vulnerable by the loss of parental care or by families at risk of abuse and neglect remain virtually invisible in official statistics. While the child's caregiving environment is the core of a child's development,

it is still largely overlooked as a factor creating vulnerability and marginalisation. When data is available, it is not fully used to inform child protection policy and services[4]. A concerning data gap on children living outside of parental care currently restricts the ability of decision-makers and duty-bearers to know the needs of these children and take the right steps to ensure they are nurtured and empowered to participate in society.

More comprehensive data systems that count all children are crucial to ensure that they achieve positive outcomes regardless of their background and no one is left behind. The call for timely investment in the statistical capacity of countries to produce and use reliable disaggregated data under SDG 17 has been echoed by several experts and institutions, including the Independent Expert and Advisory Group on Data Revolution for Sustainable Development[5], the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[6], the UN Statistical Commission[7] and the UN Secretary General[8].

The present paper explores how such call can be turned into concrete action to ensure that data for sustainable development include in the picture some of the most neglected children in the world, those who have lost or risk losing parental care.

WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S CARE

The quality of children's upbringing is a crucial determinant of their well-being and development outcomes, both in childhood and in their transition to adulthood. The environments and relationships in which children grow have a lifelong impact on their development. For example, a study by UNICEF[9] found that children living with people other than their parents fare worse in almost every outcome areas compared to children living with their parents.

Currently, many children around the world do not live with their family, either because they have lost them or because they were removed from them by a competent authority that has determined this is in the child's best interest. This child population group is usually captured under the catchphrase of 'children without parental care'[10], and it is entitled to special protection by the State under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)[11] and to quality alternative care services in line with the standards set out by the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children[12].

While there is no global number of children who temporarily or permanently live without parental care, some estimates have been developed over the past years, in order to at least tentatively sketch the scale of the problem and try to convey a sense of urgency among policy-makers to devise suitable social welfare and development policy responses. Overall, estimates from different international agencies suggest that millions of children who live without parental care and protection are uncounted, and are therefore excluded from the chance to build a sustainable future. About 151 million children have lost one or both parents[13]. Estimates from national household survey data from 77 countries point to 1 in 10 children living with neither biological parents. Most recent extrapolations from existing limited data put the number of children living in orphanages at more than two[14] million, while calculations of the 1980s claimed that the number could be up to eight million[15], showing the difficulty in finding solid data sources. Some reports that many children living in

orphanages have actually one or both parents alive[16], and could be reintegrated with their families with properly designed and funded support services[17]. Tens of millions of children were estimated to be living in the street[18], and eleven million have lost parental care due to HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2014[19]. Many take on responsibility for their siblings prematurely. For example, in Zimbabwe there were 50,000 child-headed households in 2008[20]. But children do not grow up alone only in developing countries. For example, in 2016, as many as 64,252[21] unaccompanied children applied for asylum in Europe. In the United States, 127,821 children are being raised outside of parental care by other members of the extended family[22]. The number of vulnerable children who continue to live under the radar grows even further, if dysfunctional families at risk of abuse and neglect and the estimated 290 million unregistered births are taken into account.

Although estimates is the best one can do to give an idea of the magnitude of the issue and mobilize to action in the absence of comprehensive and reliable data sources, they do not provide an in-depth understanding of the issue and its root causes. Accurate and disaggregated data on the children who cannot live with their family and require State protection are necessary to avoid ill-conceived policies and implement responses that are tailored to the specific circumstances, in the best interest of the child and socially sustainable.

According to recent research[23] to systematically identify sources of data on children who have lost parental care and were placed to live in alternative care arrangements, data on children in alternative care could not be identified in 55 of the 197 countries analysed. Data on residential and foster care was only available in 86 countries, while the remaining countries had data for either one or the other alternative care arrangement. Data on foster care was available only for 88 countries, representing only 25% of the world's children, so it was impossible to calculate a global estimate. The lack of precise disaggregated data for children living outside of their family environment in most state reports has also been, for many years, a frequent concern of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its concluding observations[24].

Strengthening the national systems for counting, monitoring and reporting on these vulnerable children is a tall order. This should be done through better use of existing data sources as well as the improvement of methodologies to address the data gap on children who live outside of a family environment. It is essential to know who these children are, in what circumstances they live and what type of support is most suitable for them, in order to ensure they can realise their right to quality care and protection. Whenever this is denied, the child's personal security and development are at stake, as well as the sustainable development of their community. For example, children without adequate parental care are at heightened risk of abuse, trafficking or child marriage; and of becoming parents themselves at an early age, when they are unable to provide the right care to their own children, nurturing a cycle of rights violations that continues in a downward spiral[25].

Decades of research has shown that children's well-being suffers across domains if the child is raised outside of a family environment without at least one consistent and committed caregiver[26]. In the context of the SDGs, this can undermine the potential of the younger generations to become strong and healthy adults by ruining their childhood and adolescence. Therefore, it is crucial that when collecting data and measuring indicators of progress for children, the resulting information details children's caregiving arrangements. This 'care status' should be more closely monitored and included in the disaggregation categories under the scope of 'other status' in the indicators and monitoring framework of the SDGs[27] and factored in official reports as a determinant of vulnerability for the full and harmonious development of a child.

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WHY QUALITY DATA WOULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

If governments had accurate and reliable data on children whose family networks are frail or have broken down, they could plan targeted prevention and intervention systems that effectively address the individual needs of these children and allow for greater scrutiny and quality control. By doing so, they would also keep their commitments under the international child rights and development frameworks. Indeed, social welfare and development policies have been increasingly attentive towards this issue. For example, the European Commission's 2013 Recommendation on Investing in Children[28] and the United States' Government's Action Plan on Children in Adversity[29] focus on child and family-centred policies and services to support families and avert unnecessary placement of children in alternative care arrangements. For these and similar policies and services to work, detailed quantitative and qualitative data on children made vulnerable by the lack of parental care, their care arrangements and outcomes is essential to inform adequate and evidence-based planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of responses.

Comprehensive statistical data on children who have lost or risk losing parental care and their caregiving arrangements is necessary to enumerate children who are in need of special protection and support within the child population, as well as to provide tools for monitoring and evaluation of alternative care and family strengthening responses. Currently, most States face challenges to count these children properly and struggle to centralise information on aspects of care in a national databank, in both high and lower income countries. When data is available, it does not consistently provide detail about the child's characteristics, including the most basic data such as age and gender. The weaknesses in data collection and statistics relate both to the child population in general and to the disaggregation of the different populations of children and their vulnerabilities and need of care. While in higher income countries some large-scale population-level data on children's care arrangements exist, in lower income countries critical child protection issues remain a concern, such as the

capacity of public authorities to build well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems, as well as to register, accredit and licence service providers. For example, evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa supports the claim that large numbers of children are living in unregistered residential care facilities, representing up to half of the operating institutions at country level[30]. This lack of oversight leaves governments unprepared to protect children outside of their family care.

Moreover, States striving to strengthen their child care and protection systems need accurate qualitative as well as quantitative data to increase their understanding of the determinants of child-family separation, and of the relation between child well-being and the different forms of family support and alternative care options, in order to ascertain which responses are most effective in any given context and the consequent direction of reforms. Disaggregated data should be used to discern the reasons behind the loss of family care, so that the root causes of children entering alternative care can be addressed through the provision of relevant financial, psychological and social services. Research has established that many children who live in residential care facilities are there because the parents could not cope with economic or social crises, emergency situations, discrimination and social exclusion, which should never be reasons for child-family separation and can be solved with adequate state support. In lower income countries, such knowledge gap has allowed for the proliferation of large-scale residential care settings and the long-term institutionalisation of children, with negative consequences on children's development that could have been avoided with a closer look at the different range of care arrangements[31]. For instance, children's placement in alternative care, including in harmful institutions, is sometimes caused by lack of access to quality education, which leads parents to separate from the children in the hope of giving them a chance to be schooled[32].

It is also important to collect and analyse data that helps paint a holistic picture of the range of available alternative care provisions, including information on the characteristics of children placed in care and the quality of care practices under different care arrangements. Without this, it is hard to develop

a solid understanding of the critical role that each caregiving arrangement plays and 'what actually works', and to advocate in favour or against of different approaches to child care system reform[32]. For example, while the majority of data available refers to formal care options, such as foster and residential care, little is known about informal care arrangements, such as kinship care. Yet, children living in extended family care are actually the majority of children not living with their parents, and the role of extended family care is particularly significant in some regions of the world, such as Africa. By the same token, there is a need to increase the amount of data on formal care options at country level, as well as at the regional and global levels, to provide critical learnings for state and non-state actors involved in the process of deinstitutionalization of child care systems. Without accurate and reliable data on both residential and family-based care arrangements, a push towards one or the other option lacks a sound evidence base and risks to be prejudicial, instead of being driven by a serious assessment of what is in the best interest of the child under different individual circumstances. Thus, a better understanding of how this and other types of caregiving arrangements work would help better support practices that work on a context-basis.

Finally, but no less important, data is essential to enable governments, civil society, the private sector and international development agencies to measure the extent to which policies, practices and funding truly reach children without parental care or at risk of losing it, and produce the desired impact in the medium and long term. Having more accurate data on children's care aspects would make the difference to allow for stakeholders to see trends and changes over time in both family patterns and caregiving arrangements outside of family care, thus enabling a process of considerate reflection on policy and service provisions and the areas for improvement.

To illustrate the point, we can take the example of support and impact in the area of education. Children without or at risk of losing parental care are particularly vulnerable to not accessing quality education because many do not go to school, but also because far too many lack the prerequisite of a safe home and a safe childhood necessary to learn in

school. Lack of education is detrimental not only to the psychosocial development of a child and young person, but also to their future ability to access formal employment and live out of poverty, making them more vulnerable to being left behind. Early experiences and the environments in which children develop during their first years can have a lasting impact on their lives: the brain is 90% developed by their fifth birthday, and without a nurturing early childhood care, millions of children are put at a disadvantage even before they enter school[36]. The more risks they are subjected to, the greater the negative impact is on their development[37]. In 2009, Harvard University estimated that there would be a return of US$ 4-9 for every dollar invested in quality early childhood programmes[38]. This would give returns in terms of increase in earnings for the persons involved and public returns in terms of reduced special education, welfare and crime costs, and increased tax revenues from programme participants later in life[39].

Moreover, when children in alternative care grow older and reach the age of majority, usually when they are 18, they must leave the care system and pursue further education, training or employment opportunities. Inadequate schooling that they may have experienced in their care background means that these young people resort to low-skilled and unstable jobs, impeding them from obtaining decent work and breaking the cycle of poverty. Recent evidence has shown a lack of data on the outcomes of care leavers, even in higher-income countries[40], which again points to an underlying issue of the inability to assess the impact and return on the investments made by governments in the alternative care of these children and young people.

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THE CURRENT DATA LANDSCAPE

At the global level, UNICEF's Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys (MICS) and USAID's Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) seem to be the most widely-used sources for estimating the number of children that may live outside of parental care. However, these are not the only global sources. Some UN agencies have arrived at estimates of orphanhood by other means as well. Notably, UNICEF[41] and UNDP[42] published estimates of orphans in recent reports drawing on the UNAIDS Spectrum model. The data sources are not fully transparent but the model seems to estimate child population based on fertility rate estimates and compare that to estimates in adult mortality. Therefore, areas with higher fertility rates and higher adult mortality rates would have more orphans. These methods may be the source of the estimates provided earlier in the article. Such estimates may be useful to get a general sense of the scope of the issue, but the methods allow only for rough estimates which are not sufficient for effective targeting of resources, which requires more disaggregation. Additionally, these numbers only estimate the orphan population, but a majority of those outside parental care are not orphans[43].

DHS and MICS ask a few questions that would provide good insight on children without parental care who are still living in households (the surveys only survey households). The surveys ask if each parent is living for every child and if the children currently live with their parents. The surveys also ask about the relationship between each household member and the household head. One of the options is 'adopted/foster/stepchild'. Countries have also added customized questions to explore other family relationships. Official summaries of the survey results tend to report the percentage of children who are foster children, double orphans, single orphans, and foster and/or orphan children. These numbers do not add neatly. A child may be a foster child without being a double or single orphan and a single orphan may not be adopted or a foster child.

Other household surveys and censuses also collect information on children outside of parental care. Household income and expenditure surveys such as the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement

Surveys frequently ask questions about household structure that closely match DHS and MICS. They will frequently have the same challenges measuring children outside parental care as DHS and MICS and do not cover children outside of households surveyed.

Beyond these household surveys, there are many administrative units within a country that should have data on children outside parental care. Ministries of justice should track the legal custody of each child in a country. Education ministries should be tracking their attendance and school performance. Health ministries may have data on immunizations and other indicators. Other ministries within certain countries may share responsibilities for children generally and children outside of care specifically. These ministries should be sharing data and comparing data to ensure that children outside of care are monitored to give them adequate access to public resources and to ensure that their rights are respected. However, in many countries administrative systems may be limited and so unable to collect and share this data across government and beyond. As a result, data might not be available to create a more comprehensive picture of children outside of parental care.

THE CURRENT DATA AVAILABILITY

Children outside of parental care may be likely to be excluded from data sources by design or through error. For instance, many surveys focus on households for their analysis, excluding institutional care settings by design. However, this approach may not necessarily be applied universally. Informal care arrangements may be more likely to be treated like a household in a survey than a formal institutional care setting because they may more closely resemble a household. For instance, according to calculations by Development Initiatives, 1.2% of the children in Namibia's latest DHS live in a household with 10 or more children outside of parental care. It is likely that some of these children live in informal care.
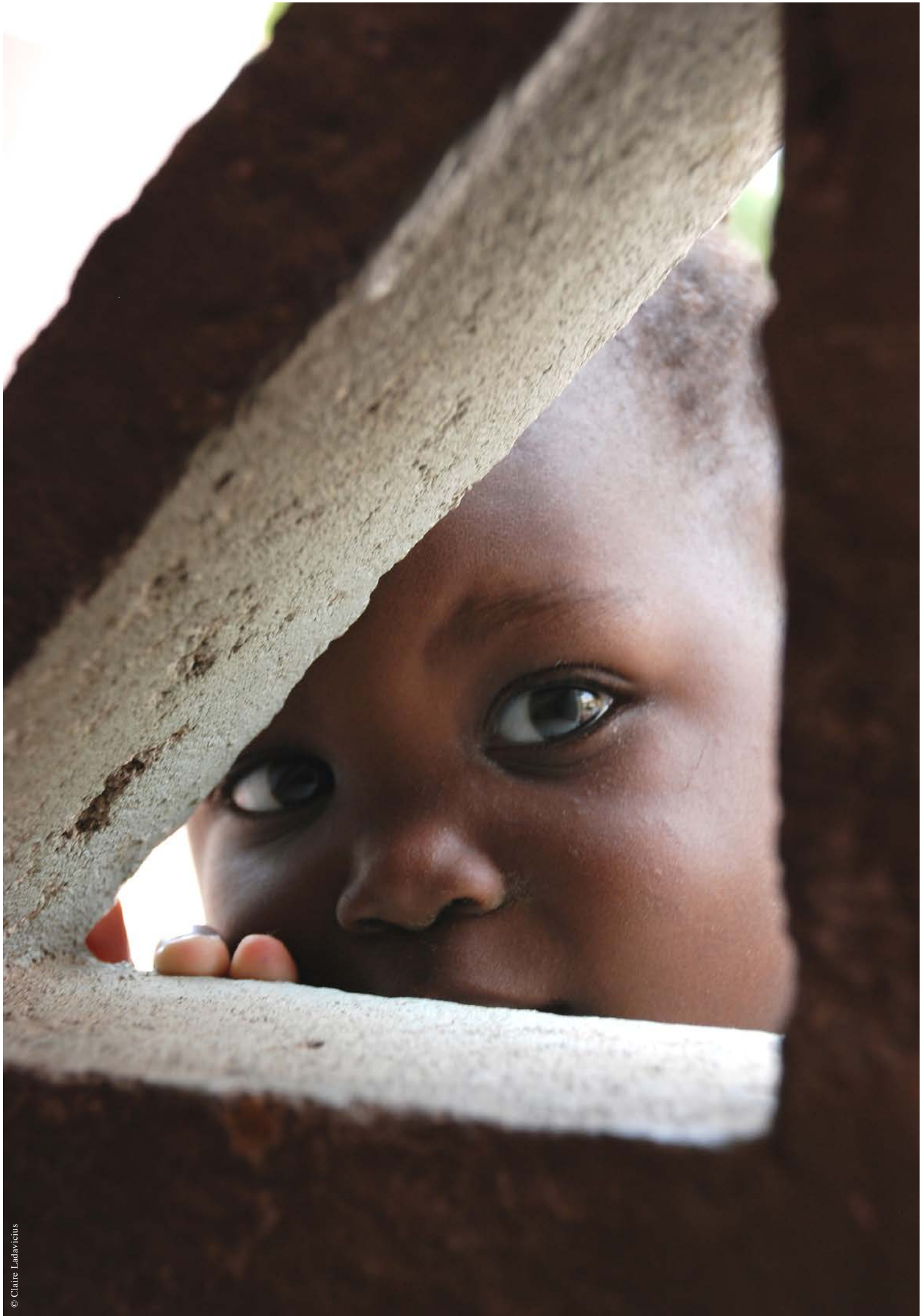
In other cases, surveys may underestimate the population of informal neighbourhoods and exclude children this way. Furthermore, many surveys will exclude non-nationals as a matter of practice. This could exclude many refugees. Surveys frequently exclude internally displaced persons camps. The most widely used household surveys, MICS and DHS, typically face these problems. Carr-Hill[44] highlights that these problems and other errors could mean that 250 million of the world's poorest people may be excluded from official statistics. These estimates would likely include many children outside of their family care.

According to estimates from Development Initiatives using the most recent DHS surveys in 52 countries, children in the poorest 20% of the global population – the P20 – are slightly less likely to be living outside of parental care than the rest of the population[45]. However, these results may reflect challenges in measuring wealth rather than the reality experienced by those outside of parental care. Many children may live in wealthier households, but their individual wealth may be a lot lower than that of the household where they might provide domestic services. Surveys such as the DHS and MICS define wealth at the household level, rather than at the individual level. This can be a particularly problematic method of measuring welfare in cases where a wealthy household neglects or abuses one of its members. This seems more likely particularly in instances where children receive shelter within the household provided they serve as domestic servants to wealthy nonrelatives[46].

Connecting data from household surveys and administrative data sources could provide a much richer picture of the complex circumstances faced by children outside parental care. For instance, education data could show if a child is being kept from school even though they are in a wealthy household.

The US Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity has promoted research on children outside of family care. Recently, they worked with the academia, the national statistical office, and administrative units to improve the count of children living outside of family care in Cambodia[47]. They proposed a new method to improve estimates

generated through administrative data on the number of children living in institutions[48]. This involved random surveys of locally identified institutional care facilities and comparing their numbers to administrative numbers. They also suggest new methods to significantly improve estimates of children living on the streets[49]. To collect an adequate estimate of this population, multiple passes are required with an effort to see what percentage of those contacted are being contacted for the first time. This allows for an estimate of the fraction of children missed on each individual pass.

There is some research indicating that family-based care and institutional care settings vary widely in their ability to produce positive outcomes. In certain cases, some orphans in family-based care have had negative experiences which could have been avoided if greater effort was put into systematically collecting and reviewing data on foster children[50]. This topic seems an area that could significantly benefit from better data across sources.

Civil registration and vital statistics and identification systems can also play a major role in ensuring that information is maintained for children outside of their family care. These systems should track the birth and death of every person, but many children are left uncounted. These systems may be linked to national identification systems[51]. In some countries, vaccination campaigns may be far more successful at reaching the entire child population than civil registration or identification systems. There is potential to add registration and identification efforts to immunization campaigns. However, efforts to combine these campaigns have not been widely carried out so it is not known how widely these efforts can be implemented.

Many non-governmental organizations have data on this population as well. For instance, child sponsorship organizations frequently collect data on children outside of their family care. While the data collected by these organizations may serve a different purpose from household survey data and this data may not be representative of the national population of children outside of their family care, there is significant potential to join up the data with data from other sources. It is not difficult to imagine a situation where an NGO is able

to provide a much deeper understanding of children outside of care in a certain community than a household survey or population census could. Furthermore, big data, private commercial data, and citizen-generated data could provide information about children outside of their family care with the due privacy-sensitive precautions. Currently, however, data sharing seems very limited and the anonymity and security concerns of NGOs prevent this data from being open. Opening up data from NGOs and other civil society organisations in a safe and secure way could supplement official data to add more richness to the information available on children outside of parental care. Data generated by citizens also has the potential to give much more granular information on localities which could support validation of official data.

There have been several attempts to understand the wellbeing of children outside of parental care, but the data that exists is not systematically joined up or collected in a way that could create a complete picture of their wellbeing. A more complete mapping of the data available within several case study countries could provide a better understanding of the potential to improve data on children outside of their family care and the gaps that exist.

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WHAT COULD CHANGE?

The ideal for children outside of care is that data on children is improved so that those who can be invisible in the system, as they fall outside of households or are not clearly identified within households, are counted; and all stakeholders have data on the welfare of children lacking adequate care. In theory, this could best be achieved by the government by ensuring that, upon registration, each child is given a unique identity number that is linked between different ministries and government agencies. As appropriate, these stakeholders would explore opportunities to share information with nongovernmental agencies, with the proper privacy protections in place.

As appropriate, surveys and censuses could be modified to include populations that are currently excluded. Many countries have made efforts to reach uncounted populations through specialised surveys of IDPs, refugees, nomadic groups, those living on the street, and other populations. In many cases, nongovernmental organizations can provide valuable information to government officials on these populations.

Furthermore, various stakeholders could modify their data collection and data sharing practices to collect better data on the circumstances experienced by children outside of their family care. PEPFAR has published a series of tools with MEASURE Evaluation for organizations to improve their data collection on orphans and vulnerable children[53].

To better understand the data on children outside of care, a detailed mapping of data would be useful, followed by better engagement between the various data producers. With the wide variety of child care arrangements and data systems, a nuanced understanding of the local context would best facilitate this exercise. To achieve a real data revolution to transform the care of children outside of parental care, national statistical offices, line ministries, judicial systems, and informal and formal institutions should seek opportunities to improve their information and share it to provide a complete image of the welfare of children in the communities. Furthermore, the data mapping exercise would provide a better understanding of where children outside of parental care may be missed in national statistics. The exercise may further generate ideas for ways to modify survey sampling techniques or survey questions to better address the major knowledge gaps that exist within a country.

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