

Measuring what is needed makes that you know what to do.

Presentation for the Regional Foster Care Conference
Sint Maarten (Netherlands Antilles)

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Ladies and Gentleman,

I bring you greetings of all Dutch organisations united in the Better Care Network Netherlands. This network, launched in November 2007 is set up for the exchange of information and knowledge among organisations and individuals involved in the care of children without parental care. All these children that are faced with difficult circumstances and need appropriate care and protection while their parents are unable or unwilling to care for them. Children on the streets, left behind in hospitals, orphans, abused and neglected children and children in the care of their extended family members, child headed households, in residential homes and children in foster care.

The aim of the network is to promote the best interest of these children and to promote better care solutions for them when their parents are in difficulty or absent. We promote family focused support structures to help families cope and family based alternative care when children are no longer cared for by their parents. This care should be organised in accordance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Stockholm Declaration that states that long term institutional care has a damaging effect on the children and we should all strive for families for the children to grow up in and develop to healthy adults.

The Network has grown enormously and is now a strong advocate for better care in The Netherlands representing most of the large and smaller organisations that from The Netherlands support partner organisations all over the world. We unite people, bring them together in meetings, send out newsletters with information and lobby the Dutch government. And where we are here in a part of the Netherlands it is a privilege to represent this organisation here and bring you greetings and wish you success with the developments in this region.

The Dutch branch of the Better Care Network is part of the worldwide Network that has a fantastic resources website with a special knowledge base for foster care developments. The documents available on this website address will guide you to much information, research reports and good practice models that can assist you all in your work. I invite you all to subscribe to the list serve email newsletters and those of you that speak Dutch are welcome to register online to the E-Newsletters from the Dutch branch.

The International Network is hosted by UNICEF in New York and together these two organisations have decided to produce support materials. I present the Manual developed here today and we are busy developing an online toolkit and portal for alternative care that will soon be available on the website.

Today we will look at the manual. Downloadable from the website and we also have hard copies available at this conference.

Let me first introduce myself a bit more:

Coordinator of the BCNN and consultant but first and for all wife. Mother and for 25 years also foster mother for short term placements. Many children, also with a Caribbean background shared my life and my home. I think that that job, as it was often hard work for the whole family including the foster children, was the best of my life. To see a child enter under great stress, with sadness about the loss of his parents and his home, start to feel safe, start to enjoy and start to grow to a happy child. The glimpse in the eyes of a child is the best reward ever and exceeds far the applause of an audience after a presentation or the salary on your bank account at the end of a working month.

It is good to have this experience now I have the privilege to talk about rather than to do the work at my age.

“*Meten is weten*” is the Dutch equivalent of measuring makes that you know what to do.

There is incomplete information and data on children living in formal care worldwide. The information that is available is not always comprehensive and varies in quality. Lack of systematic and comparable data affects policy in many ways. At national level, lack of data makes it difficult for individual childcare and national government agencies to address childcare and protection issues; monitor whether the aims of prevention and alternative care services are being met over time; identify the needs of children in formal care; and support advocacy to improve systems and services for children at risk or in alternative care. At international level, lack of data makes it impossible to assess regional and global trends, compare countries, and identify common barriers.

I hope that you know precisely how many children in your country are in need of care and protection, how many children live in difficult circumstances in their families, how many children are placed in the care of others. And that all this care is nicely monitored and supported.

Many children grow up informally with others than their parents. I think that in this region in particular it is not strange when you live with your aunty or grandparents. These are informal arrangements and most of times do not need government intervention.

It is different when children are not safe at home, when parents do not know how to cope, when children are left behind by migrant parents as is the case here in Sint Maarten, when parents suffer and die as a result of HIV and AIDS and when parents abuse or neglect the children. Let alone those parents that are imprisoned, are abroad, are in The Netherlands or sent their children from there because they do not know what to do with them in our country. Go to aunty, she will fix what I could not do.

When social services are involved, when organizations start to place children or support their informally arranged carers we speak about formal care.

To overcome the challenges of lack of data, UNICEF, in partnership with the Better Care Network, produced the *Manual for the Measurement of Indicators for Children in Formal Care*. The purpose of the manual is to assist countries in designing a national information system to monitor child protection and well-being in formal care.

How does this manual look like?

The manual introduces a set of 15 global indicators; practical guidance on data collection; and a common measurement approach to better monitor childcare practices, inform policy and program development, and facilitate comparison within and between countries.

The manual is recently introduced and the intention is that the manual will be increasingly used by UNICEF offices, non-governmental agencies, social welfare universities, and governments.

With UNICEF and the Better Care Network's support, trainings will be conducted to train non-governmental agencies and their governmental counterparts in the manual's effective use and implementation. The presentation at this conference is meant as an introduction of the manual and to engage discussion on how the manual could assist in the development of foster care in the Caribbean region.

I already asked you what you know. And I think that it is important, given the scope of this conference to look in particular to what we know about the children in foster care in our countries and the children in residential care.

When I look at The Netherlands it is interesting to see that different systems are being used for the measuring of children in formal care.

The Dutch system is such that we have Centres for Youth Care where families and children can go to when they have difficulties. Social workers do an intake interview and assess the situation. In a multidisciplinary team the results of the assessment are discussed and an indication is given indicating the support needed and, in case of placement out of the family what care setting is best for this particular child. A care plan is developed and a placing agency involved.

The first option in our country is always to try to keep the child at home creating a support system in the community. When that is not possible a place is sought in the extended family or network of the child and only when this is not a good solution or not available the child is matched with a family from the database of trained and prepared foster families recruited through campaigns.

The intention is to find a family that is as close to the cultural background of the biological family but you may understand that that is not always possible. Foster care has many forms and for some children so called gezinshuizen or larger professional family type settings are needed. That is regarded residential care and falls outside the scope of registration by Foster care.

From all foster care placements data are registered regionally and annually Stichting Pleegzorg provides a national pleegzorg/ foster care factsheet with data from the previous year. Types of placements, duration of placements, type of foster families. Everything is analysed and recorded. Residential care does the same, with a different methodology and together this gives direction to the policy of our Ministry of Youth and Family.

Is this perfect? Not completely as it measures data, it does not measure the effect of the care provided, it does not register quality of care provided and it does not guarantee that the care matches the individual need of the child. But it is a start and quality measurement and the whether the care provided is effective becomes more and more important.

Not for the data, but to answer to the need of children and ensure that what we do is helping, not contra productive.

Does the registration system match the system of Belgium or Germany, our neighboring countries? Not yet. Europe has started to ask for data to set out better social protection policies for Europe. Recently the Council of Europe introduced also a system of indicators to measure data as a start to compare countries and set European policy.

The Manual I would like to introduce to you today is meant to do the same. To have an idea what is happening in countries and what is needed. To monitor individual cases based on monitoring the system of care as a whole. And when this is done you can identify good and bad practices. And when you have this insight per country or region you can start to share. This will contribute to the exchange of good practices so that there is a solution fit for each and every individual need.

But we are faced with a very difficult situation in many countries. In The Netherlands in the 1980th when I started my task as a foster parent foster care was provided by many different organizations. Churches were the ones that had historically as their task caring for the disadvantaged groups in society. That resulted in many different larger and smaller organizations all with their own policy of recruiting foster families, with providing group care, with supporting children and families. Private systems more or less monitored by the legal structure and national policy but very often the quality of care depended on the individual worker or organization. The organisations raised money from the government, from individual donors and from the church. When incidents happened the inspectorates were involved but that was often too late.

This is the situation still in many countries. Governments can make policies; donors often have their own agenda's. I have seen children homes set up with foreign donor money in countries where the government policy is to de-institutionalise and I have seen private foster families go a totally different route than is in accordance with the law.

I even saw people in The Netherlands, emotionally touched by begging children when they were on holiday, raise money with friends, buy a piece of land in the holiday country and set up a children home like we had them in early 1900 in our country. 24 children, boys and girls separated in bunk beds in dormitories. Is that in the best interest of the individual child?

I also saw people take in children in their own home without any formal structure behind it. That went well until it went wrong. And it ends often in another separation of the child from the place he just started to call home and a family in distress.

That is why it is so important to let compassion be guided by good policies. To know what you are doing not based on emotions or private initiatives of well doers but to base it on what is needed.

The indicators developed in cooperation with advisors from all over the world, BCN has an advisory committee with over 50 people from even so many countries, are meant to assist in this. Not only to develop policy and make nice fact sheets but also to monitor outcomes of care provided. What happens with the children; what is their care history; what happens when they are over 18?

Do we know this when we start with 24 small children in a home? Do we from the start begin to plan for their future? Do they have an individual care plan? Do we evaluate and update this plan regularly? How are foster parents supported? How is the quality of care provided monitored and evaluated?

Decentralisation, planning and control systems, supervision and systematic quality measurement give a structure and a guarantee that children can get the care they need.

Is the system in The Netherlands where we are measuring perfect? I do not think so and many social workers complain about the bureaucracy of reporting systems, and that is something to be aware off, but the overall care has improved and monitoring gives parents the insurance that their child is safe and they can expect good care.

If you think that the measurement of care provided is a good idea and your country, or your region also needs this system you can download the manual and start to look at your own facility or organization. Ut you may understand that this work is only successful when you start to do this with more organizations. When this is done together with the government and when you start to cooperate.

Networking is important. When in The Netherlands BCN partners came together we made small working groups per region. People discovered that they were working in the same country, sometimes in the same city. One organization started to make an inventory of organizations working in one of the large slums in Nairobi and soon had 45 different organizations focusing on the same group of people. Some provided food packages, some ran an orphanage, some sought foster families, some did the same as others and some families received food packages from three organizations, others received nothing.

It will be a major effort to get all support for children streamlined but cooperation is the only solution to get national policy in line with the UNCRC. It is your government that has signed and ratified this convention. It is their responsibility to promote and ensure the right to care and protection for individual children. But only with the help of the civil society they can do it.

Shake hands with your colleagues and join forces. Children are worth it and the glimpse in the eyes of the child that has become a successful and healthy adult raising its own children is better than anything.

I wish you success and am happy to assist you in working with the manual.