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## Child Abuse & Neglect



# Dilemmas for international mobilization around child abuse and neglect

David Finkelhor<sup>a,\*</sup>, Patricia Lannen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA*

<sup>b</sup> *UBS Optimus Foundation, Switzerland*

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this commentary is to articulate some issues and dilemmas raised by various efforts to mobilize international action around child abuse and neglect (CAN). We will start by proposing a typology of international mobilization strategies, noting that initiatives to promote CAN programming in new settings have tended to emphasize one of three vectors: governments, professionals, or international NGOs. There are pros and cons to each emphasis, which we discuss. We also review the debates around some of the following dilemmas: Should low-income countries be a top priority for CAN mobilization? Are there cultural and institutional capacities that need to be present in a country in order for CAN programs to work or be ethical? Are some CAN programs more likely to be internationally transferable than others and why so? Has the field adequately considered whether non-CAN programming (e.g., family planning) might actually be more effective at preventing maltreatment than CAN programming? Does the field give adequate acknowledgment that policies and practices emanating from high-resourced and Western countries may not always be the best to disseminate? Are we relying too much on a model of program transplantation over a model of local cultivation? Should we aim for modest rather than ambitious accomplishments in international mobilization? How much emphasis should be placed on the priority dissemination of evidence-based programming? We conclude with some suggestions in the service of clarifying these dilemmas and making some of these decisions more evidence based.

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### Introduction

Increasing numbers of organizations are working at the international level on the topics of child maltreatment and violence against children. The World Health Organization has made child maltreatment an important component of its global violence prevention initiative (Butchart, Harvey, Mian, & Färniss, 2006). UNICEF has launched an End Violence against Children campaign that includes a “kNOw Violence Global Learning Initiative” (UN News Centre, 2013). The U.N. General Secretary has a Special Representative on Violence Against Children who has been promoting worldwide action on this topic (SRSG On Violence Against Children, 2013). Large international foundations such as the Oak Foundation, UBS Optimus Foundation, and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation have programs targeted at child maltreatment. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Save the Children, Terre Des Hommes, International Rescue Committee and World Vision have

\* Corresponding author address: Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 126 Horton Social Science Center, 20 Academic Way, Durham, NH 03824, USA.

become active on this issue (IRC Children and Youth Protection and Development Unit, 2012; Save the Children, 2013; Terre des hommes – Child Relief, 2010; World Vision International, 2014). The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), the publisher of this journal, has a long history of trying to disseminate knowledge and practice internationally. All these mobilizations appear intended to prevent child maltreatment by providing expert knowledge, changing attitudes and practices, and addressing its causes.

The goal of this commentary is to articulate some issues and dilemmas raised by these various international mobilization efforts. We will pose some critical questions about assumptions sometimes made, try to delineate the logic model behind initiatives, and urge everyone look for evidence that tests the approaches being tried.

In this commentary we will be using the term *child abuse and neglect (CAN) programming*. This term is used to refer to practices, policies, and even cultural attitudes that have been embraced by advocates in the field of CAN and also violence against children (VAC), mostly in countries with longer histories on this issue but also increasingly elsewhere. This programming includes things as diverse as trained child protection workers who investigate maltreated children, mandatory reporting laws, parent education around non-violent discipline, trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy for victims of abuse, sexual abuse prevention education, children's advocacy centers, school programs for preventing bullying or dating violence, and legal systems that allow the placement of abused children in foster care. Programming in this sense is broader than specific organized and named programs and also includes, for example, the dissemination of non-violent parenting styles. All of these are practices that are increasingly widespread in high-resourced countries in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, but some have been grown or transferred to other places around the globe.

We will start by proposing a typology of international mobilization strategies and then raise some additional questions that some of these strategies face.

### **Dilemma 1: What is the Best Strategy for Mobilization?**

Initiatives to promote CAN programming in new settings have tended to emphasize one of three vectors: governments, professionals, or international NGOs. There are pros and cons to each emphasis.

#### *The Government Vector*

The targeting of governments is an obvious policy strategy and reflects particularly the strategies of UNICEF and the Together for Girls initiative and the work of the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child (Pinheiro, 2006) and the World Health Organization. The logic to such efforts is that if a government makes CAN a policy priority, it will likely commit resources to set up programs, change laws, train professionals, and affect conditions for young people across a wide expanse of the population. Governments in many countries have public health bureaucracies that have broad jurisdictions, are part of international collaborations, and could be potentially mobilized to take on child maltreatment in addition to other health problems. One component in this strategic approach is to make arguments that might be particularly persuasive to governments, such as studies showing high population prevalence, potential cost savings, and broader economic and social benefits. Another component to this strategy is to oblige governments to take action through involvement in international conventions, such as the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The strategy has great appeal in terms of the scope and magnitude of change that can occur quickly. A good example of the success of such a strategy was when American physician Henry Kempe and his allies were able to persuade U.S. politicians to enact the Child Abuse Protection and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974. This legislation set up many elements of the universal child protection system in the United States and has provided ongoing funding for its activities to this day (Myers, 2006).

Despite such apparent successes, the strategy has pitfalls. Governments can be difficult to influence and slow to move. Some do not want sensitive issues exposed. Their commitments can be fickle, so that support for a policy at one point can disappear quickly. Political regimes may change, and new politicians may resent and suspect the programs of their predecessor. Governmental policies often carry a lot of political baggage, for example, interest groups that need to be placated or bureaucrats who are arbitrarily favored or alienated. When governments mobilize, they often prioritize political considerations over the evidence base.

#### *The Professional Vector*

The targeting of professionals as the agents of mobilization has been the long-term strategy of organizations like ISPCAN and other international professional groups such as the International Pediatrics Association. Those targets include professionals in fields like pediatrics, social work, psychology, and law enforcement. One goal of this strategy has been to recruit and train professionals who will go back to their countries to disseminate information about CAN, implement programs, and recruit and train more colleagues. There appear to have been some notable successes to this strategy in generating child maltreatment programs in countries such as Malaysia, Estonia, and Saudi Arabia (Ahmed, 2009; Kasim, Shafie Mohd, & Cheah, 1994; Tartu Child Development Center, n.d.). The international network of pediatricians has been particularly influential in this strategy. Law enforcement networks have also been active internationally in disseminating cyber-crime investigation techniques (Interpol, 2014).

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