

A PERSPECTIVE

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS INTO THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY OF ETHIOPIA VIS-À-VIS THE SITUATION OF VULNERABLE CHILDREN

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Abstract

The problems of children living in difficult circumstances, including street children, can be better addressed when treated under a policy framework with carefully stipulated strategies. Although a separate policy of street children is lacking, Ethiopia has tried to mainstream the issues of vulnerable children under the two relevant policies of National Children's Policy and National Social Protection Policy. Whereas the issue of vulnerable children has been slightly discussed under the umbrella of people in need of social protection, detailed discussion along with clearly stipulated implementation strategies for children in difficult circumstances has been issued in the National Children's Policy of Ethiopia. A critical analysis of the policy has been made in this paper with special focus on policy issues of children in difficult circumstances and implementation strategies designed to improve their situation. The analysis was undertaken using normative policy analysis approach by focusing on the substantive contents of the policy with value neutrality. The paper involves a brief overview of the contents of the policy, and critical examination of the policy from the vantage points of its underlying assumptions, cost-effectiveness, equity, feasibility, acceptability from the public, stakeholders' participation, and consideration of the situation of children living in diverse contexts. In addition, it includes criticism of the policy and its implementation strategies. Ultimately, the paper ends with suggesting substantive recommendations that would assist the policy to better achieve its objectives and become compatible with changing scenarios at local, national, and global levels.

Keywords: Public Policy, Vulnerable Children, Children's Policy, Critical Analysis, Ethiopia

Background

Children are considered to be vulnerable members of a society due to their physical and

mental immaturity. This is recognized through the first major international consensus on the fundamental principles of children's rights, the

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Declarations of the Rights of the Child (1) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2). It is a widely accepted value that children should be provided with special protection and care in a stable, secure, and loving family so that they can grow and thrive (3). However, for a variety of reasons, we are not always able to translate this "intention" into a reality, and as a result, considerable proportion of children remain vulnerable, particularly in Africa.

While the literal meaning of the term "vulnerability" is the state or condition of being weak or poorly defended, the concept of "vulnerable children" implies the ones who are more exposed to risks than their peers (4). Children might be subject to deprivation (food, education, and parental care), exploitation, abuse, neglect, violence, and infection with HIV. The World Bank defines vulnerable children as a group of children that experience negative outcomes, such as the loss of access to education, morbidity, and malnutrition, at higher rates than their peers (5). The World Bank (5) further categorized vulnerable children as: (i) street children; (ii) children in the worst forms of child labor; (iii) children affected by armed conflict; (iv) children affected by HIV/AIDS; (v) children living with disabilities; and (vi) local orphans and vulnerable children groups.

An overwhelming body of research suggests that children in poor and vulnerable families have restricted access to fundamental social services such as health and education (6, 7).

According to a study conducted by UNICEF (8) undertaken in 11 countries, the majority of which were in Africa, revealed that household wealth, a child's living arrangements, and household adult education were the most powerful and consistent determinants associated with key health and social consequences of child vulnerability. Findings from Australia also indicated that inadequate housing can impact a child's sleeping patterns, overall safety, opportunity to play and have positive developmental outcomes, increase the risk of abuse and/or neglect, and more (9, 10). Orphanhood status and the presence of a chronically ill adult in the household are also significant for some outcomes (8). Moreover, the cultural context and personal relationships are also important influencing factors in determining the level of vulnerability of a child within a family (11); this can include factors such as single parenthood (12), divorce and remarriage, the presence of many children in the household, early or unplanned parenthood, low education levels of parents, lack of parenting skills, lack of support from the extended family, being stigmatized, discriminated against or excluded for any number of reasons, such as being part of a minority group.

Psychological and social factors, including issues such as substance abuse, violence, physical and mental abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation, and neglect, are also important determinants of vulnerability. In the case of sexual abuse, for example, a research in Ethiopia (13) revealed that of the total reported crime

cases committed against children (between July 2005 and December 2006), 23% of them were child sexual victimization. On average, 21 children were reported to have been sexually abused each month, with the majority of the incidents being committed against female children in their own homes by someone they closely knew. Furthermore, children are also more likely to be at risk of losing parental care when they live in regions, countries, or communities where there are contextual factors such as health epidemics, armed conflict, violence, and internal displacement; high levels of unemployment; economic crises and/or stagnating or unequal economic growth; political instability; natural disasters; harmful cultural beliefs and practices; gender discrimination; and when families lack a strong social support network (11). In general, child vulnerability is a downward spiral in which each shock causes a new level of vulnerability, and each new level exposes the child to a slew of new risks. In other words, the probability of a child experiencing a negative outcome rises with each shock (5, 7).

Children living in difficult circumstance, including street children are an alarm signaling the dire need for social development and poverty reduction policies to improve the situation in the community at large, and to prevent more young people from becoming marginalized (14). While context-specific policies and interventions are needed to reduce the growing number of children from joining the street life, those currently encountering the hardships

should be given the opportunity for human development interventions. In relation to this, Ethiopia has promulgated the concerns of vulnerable children, including street children, through formulating two related national policies and strategies: National Children's Policy (2017) and National Social Protection Policy (2012). Although a separate national policy of street children has not yet been initiated, the issues of children in difficult circumstances have been widely dealt within the national children's policy and very slightly discussed under the national social security policy.

The purpose of this paper is to make a critical analysis into the National Children's Policy of Ethiopia in which the issue of children living in difficult circumstances in general and street children in particular has been dealt in more detail than that of National Social Protection Policy. The commentary involves normative policy analysis approach (15) where the analyst emphasizes on describing what substantive issues are included the policy and evaluates them against selected criteria on the basis of the principle of value neutrality. Accordingly, it is not politically motivated and hence, doesn't involve examining the policy to support or refute a certain [political] ideological position.

Brief overview of the Policy

Promulgated in 2017, the National Children's Policy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia contains six sections: general situation of Ethiopian children and significance of the policy, vision, objective, and principles

of the policy, major policy issues, implementation strategies of the policy, roles and responsibilities, and monitoring and evaluation strategy. The policy has 3 pillars: 1) Children's development and growth, 2) Prevention and protection of children from social, economic and political hardships, and 3) Providing rehabilitation, care and support for children in difficult circumstances. It sets a direction to integrate the efforts of all stakeholders, namely, family, community, government, NGOs, regional and international organizations.

After noting the achievements thus far obtained in most service sectors, the policy admits that much remains to be done in making basic health and education services available and accessible for children. In addition, it stipulates that special attention needs to be given to children living in rural, pastoralist and semi-pastoralist areas that it considers to be vulnerable. Despite children's participation in policy formulation, implementation and evaluation is believed to be necessary, it is admitted that meaningful participation of children has not been realized due to the lack of appropriate attention from implementing organs, negative attitudes, lack of awareness among the community and families, and absence of strong children's structures.

The policy assumes families as the best place for children's overall development. It is stated that families and communities have an irreplaceable role in children's overall development. However, the variation in family and community awareness, understanding and

knowledge regarding child rights and protection have made their engagement in ensuring children's rights and welfare less effective. Therefore, to ensure the effectiveness of the efforts to promote and protect children's rights, it is important to increase families' and communities' awareness to play a pivotal role in children's rights and their overall development.

It is also indicated that stressful circumstances on the family such as poverty are causing many children to migrate to distant area where they end up being street children and victims of child labor exploitation. In addition, the policy reiterates the importance of supporting orphan and vulnerable children only through domestic alternative care options instead of pursuing the option of inter-country adoption.

It criticizes housing and infrastructure constructions for not considering the needs of children. The policy noted the expansion of businesses selling drugs, shisha, khat, commercial sex, pornography and soliciting children for sex in residential areas and areas providing services for children having a negative effect on children's proper upbringing.

The policy emphasizes that children living in difficult circumstances undoubtedly require special support and care. Among others, children living with disabilities, juvenile offenders, children of imprisoned parents, children left vulnerable by natural and manmade disaster, and children who live in extreme poverty, and children from pastoralist and semi-pastoralist areas have been identified as

children living in difficult conditions. The vulnerability of street children, especially girls of the street, and children who have lost their parents has been highlighted in the policy. Exposure to difficult situations due to local and transnational child trafficking, including worst forms of child labor, sexual violence, exploitation, theft of internal organs, underdevelopment of infrastructures, and living in hostile environments were discussed as conditions that put such children in vulnerable contexts. Above all, the policy assumes that government's effort of improving the lives of these children has not been successful.

The policy stipulates that the promotion and protection of child rights and welfare demands coordinated effort and collaboration by all stakeholders and this requires the establishment of a system. Women and children organizations have been given the responsibility to follow-up and monitor the mainstreaming of children's issues by all government organs in laws, policies, programs, projects and plans. But, the policy reiterates that the desired result has not been achieved due to the lack of coordination among various actors in promoting and protecting children's rights and because of the absence of accountability. The policy is fundamentally established on the principles of placing responsibility on all entities to respect children's right to life, that the actions of all stakeholders should put the best interest of children in place, that all children should not be discriminated, and the need to ensure the meaningful participation of children on

matters that affect their lives.

The policy is inclusive and has been devised with relativistic approach in the sense that the situations of children under varied living situations have been considered. What is more interesting is the fact that the major policy issues on children living in difficult circumstances have been widely discussed in the policy. Beyond stressing the need for creating conducive environment for such group of children, the policy accentuates actions aimed at rehabilitation, reintegration and reunification. Supporting orphan and vulnerable children by expanding domestic alternative care options only by scaling up indigenous practices and values and strengthening them through necessary frameworks has also been emphasized. Furthermore, creating an enabling environment for prevention and controlling of involvement of children in activities harmful to their physical and psychological development, such as armed conflict, drug production, trafficking and other similar illegal activities is the other focus area of the policy. Above all, the policy proposes providing support to orphans and children who cannot live with their parents through community-based care, domestic adoption and foster care programs.

Strategies such as mainstreaming child issues, enhancing the participation of children and other stakeholders, collaboration and coordination with partnering organizations, empowering families and strengthening community structures, encouraging stakeholders to base their actions and decisions on research,

capacity building, resource mobilization, and legal reforms have been stipulated to guide the implementation of the policy. The policy also assigns roles and responsibilities to different bodies that are believed to have stakes in the affairs of children. Accordingly, government bodies, private sector, community structures, family, religious institutions, indigenous charities and societies, regional and international development partners, and the children themselves have been provided different duties and responsibilities in safeguarding the interests and improving the lives of the children. Finally, in order to follow-up its implementation and measure the outcomes, the policy set up monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Criteria-based Evaluation of the Policy

In the proceeding sections, the substantive aspects of the policy is critically evaluated on the basis of predetermined criteria set based on review of the works of Robert and Zeckhauser (16) and Holquist (17). Although there are more elements considered as criteria of evaluating a given [public] policy included in the works of these and other authors, this paper is delimited only to the following elements:

1. The Underlying Assumptions

The fundamental assumptions on the basis of which the policy was formulated are more or less constructed based on evidences. Rationales of formulating the policy have been clearly stated along with what it envisions to achieve after the successful implementation of the strategies. Facts and figures regarding the health and education service utilization among chil-

dren in Ethiopia are clearly indicated along with the gaps observed in the provision and use of these services. The policy admits the presence of variations in access to and patterns of use of social services between children of different group characteristics such as those living in rural and urban areas, children living in pastoralist and semi-pastoralist areas, and those having varied economic backgrounds.

It is also important to pinpoint that the policy considers family networks and community ties as the best place where children's interest and wellbeing can be better served. In addition, it is reflected in the policy document about the need to strengthen family and community structures, especially the empowerment of families. Children's meaningful participation in all stages of policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation endeavors has been given a priority in the policy. Moreover, the necessity of maintaining the best interest of children during the implementation of the policy has also been emphasized.

Street children have been recognized as one category of children living in difficult circumstances in Ethiopia. Stressful conditions, including poverty, faced by families are assumed to be the main cause of streetism and hence, empowerment of the family institution through enhancement of income has been proposed as major policy direction. The policy strategy on addressing the problem of streetism in Ethiopia also includes rehabilitation, reunification, and reintegration activities. Furthermore, collaboration and coordination of

efforts from stakeholders at regional, national and international levels have also been assumed as a suitable policy strategies.

2. Cost Effectiveness

Critical examination into the implementation strategies of the policy signifies that the policy is designed in the way it can be implemented in a cost-effective manner. First, the policy plans to coordinate the efforts of collaborating bodies such as the family, the community, government structures at local, national, and international hierarchies, religious and civil society agencies. In addition, other strategies such as child mainstreaming, awareness and mobilization activities, strengthening structures that have the role of improving the lives of children, and information management tasks can be considered as less costly and if properly implemented, they can help to achieve the intended goal with reduced running cost. Moreover, the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms proposed by the policy can also help to make implementations more cost effective provided that the necessary systems are established to improve operations through monitoring, evaluation, and learning mechanisms.

3. Stakeholders Participation

Both primary (direct beneficiaries) and secondary (those that can directly or indirectly contribute to or influence the policy) stakeholders have been identified in the policy. Starting from the children themselves, government structures at regional and federal levels, international partners, family, community

structures, the private sector, religious institutions, and civil societies have been identified as stakeholders with an assignment of expected duties and responsibilities. Moreover, the policy not only encourages the active participation of these stakeholders but also devised strategies of building their capacities and strengthening structures through which they can meaningfully participate in the process. Interestingly, the concept of “meaningful participation” has been repeatedly mentioned in the policy which signals the space given to the importance of stakeholders’ active participation in the policy in all processes that start from planning to implementation and impact assessment.

4. Feasibility

In the context of this paper, feasibility is measured in terms of whether the implementation strategies can fit to financial constraints, and can be implemented under the existing social, cultural and political contexts of the country. As discussed above, the policy suggested implementation strategies that can be effectively implemented under the financial constraints of a third world country such as Ethiopia. It is a well-known fact that public policies are promulgated by a ruling party which has established its own system of government. Accordingly, the policy under consideration was not only devised by the EPRDF government but also that it has been implemented (if any) by same government. Furthermore, the current government established by

the prosperity party has repeatedly expressed that it intends to follow a political ideology that is different from its predecessor- the EPRDF. Lived experiences have also witnessed that it has shown no motive and practical activities of changing its political ideology, including its social security policy. Hence, it is less likely that the policy encounters political contestation. Above all, none of the implementation strategies has been found to be incompatible with cultural milieus and social contexts of Ethiopian society.

5. Acceptability from the Public

In addition to the low possibility of facing negative political reaction from the side of the government, its plan of allowing meaningful participation of people at the grass root level and implementing agencies at various hierarchies enables the policy to get acceptability from the side of the public. The policy also envisages to allow not only the voices of the children (primary stakeholders or beneficiaries) to be heard but also encourages them to actively participate in the processes that range from policy formulation to implementation and evaluation. Such good will in getting various stakeholders, especially the community at grass root level, makes everyone to develop sense of belongingness which in turn contributes for the policy to achieve its objectives. Furthermore, the more or less relativistic approach reflected in the policy by taking in to account the existence of diversity in living conditions among children of varied socio-

economic characteristics enables almost everyone to find itself within the policy which also creates sense of belongingness. Above all, the policy's likelihood of acceptability by the public can be evaluated on the basis of the cultural sensitivity of the strategies and whether they fit to the context of the society where the policy is going to be implemented. In this regard, none of the contents of the policy has been found to stand against the socio-cultural contexts of the host society.

6. Consideration of Children in Diverse Contexts

The policy seems to have applied a comparative or relativistic approach in understanding the situations of Ethiopian children. In other words, it is not only cognizant of the existence of children living in different circumstances but also that its implementation strategies have been designed in the way the situations and needs of children in varied contexts are addressed. Just to mention the few, the policy addresses the situations of vulnerable children such as those living in pastoralist and semi-pastoralist areas, those susceptible to social problems as a result of living both in urban and rural areas, children living with disabilities, street children, especially female children of the street, and children of incarcerated parents have been discussed. Beyond that, the implementation strategies can be considered as appropriate to the contexts of children under varied living situations. Nevertheless, the policy has not exhaustively mentioned all the

categories of children in difficult circumstances. For instance, children suffering from non-communicable diseases, those living with HIV/AIDS, single-parent children, teenage mothers, child domestic workers, internally displaced children, children of ethnic minorities in the current Ethiopian politics, children of migrant families, children of parents with disabilities, children victimized by and surviving violence of all sorts, and those living in war zones can be mentioned as additional categories of children in difficult circumstances.

7. Ensuring Equity/equality

From the very outset, the policy recognizes the fact that Ethiopian children have varied standards of living depending on variables such as income and educational levels of their parents, the nature of the social groups they are ascribed to such as living in rural, urban or pastoralist areas. Cognizant of this, the policy envisages a society in which the living situations of children living in difficult circumstances, including impoverished children is improved. With all its limitations (discussed below), the policy tries to address the concerns of children living in various circumstances and proposes strategies that can separately fit to the context of differing groups of children in Ethiopia. In addition, it not only leaves a room for the voices of children to be heard but also encourages the active participation of children in the implementation of the policy through strengthening the structures in which children can be represented. Furthermore, the fact that the policy

encourages the meaningful participation of all stakeholders that extends from the children, family, local community to the international partners, in the implementation of the strategies can be taken as another measure to ensure equity. Above all, creating access to education and basic healthcare services for all children, especially for those living in difficult situations has got priority in the policy. Such strategic interventions coupled with empowering the family and lower-level community structures are essential to address inter-generational [structural] cycle of poverty and ensure that inequality between children from various socio-economic backgrounds is substantially reduced.

Major Gaps of the Policy

No policy is without limitations. In fact, a policy's relevance may fade over time due to changing circumstances that may differ from the context of which it was formulated. This justifies the reason why public policies should be revised and updated. Accordingly, the following limitations are identified as criticisms of Ethiopian Children's Policy:

a) [Expected] Policy Outcomes not Stated

One of the good qualities of a public policy is that expected policy outcomes after the implementation of the strategy are clearly stated in measurable terms. This is mainly because of the fact that doing so helps not only to track achievement progresses as we implement the policy but also to evaluate the success and failures of the policy. Moreover, stating policy

outcomes in measurable (both quantitatively and qualitatively) terms with defined time frame helps to assess the impact of the policy as far as changing the lives of its target group is concerned. In this regard, looking into the policy document under consideration, one can understand that the policy has not clearly stated its intended outcomes in measurable terms which makes the task of evaluating the impact of the policy difficult.

b) Failure to Address Major Structural Issues

Major structural causes of the problem of children in difficult circumstance have not been sufficiently addressed in the policy. It is clear that the factors that put children in difficult circumstances are not limited only to family's poverty. Other structural variables such as culture, macro-economic issues, and political situations contribute to the problem not less than family stress. Consequently, the strategies to alleviate the problem should go beyond the structure of the family. Although the policy's emphasis on empowering the family should be appreciated, such measures alone cannot be adequate to help resolve the problem of children in difficult circumstances in Ethiopia. Hence, strategies of addressing the cultural, economic, and political causes of the problems should be clearly indicated in the policy.

c) Excessive Reliance on Government Reports

The other gap of the policy is excessive reliance on official or government reports than other published sources produced from empirical data. It is interesting that 'encouraging implementing organizations to base their deci-

sions and activities on research' has been suggested as one of the implementation strategies of the policy. Nevertheless, reliance on credible sources of information could have helped the policy makers to be better informed about the situations of children in Ethiopia, including the causes that put children in difficult circumstances. It is understandable that public policies are more or less politically motivated and the overall processes are influenced by the ruling ideology of the day. Yet, leaving enough space for empirical evidences increases the credibility of the policies and hence, help to get sufficient support from the public and other implementing agencies. Moreover, the policy could have benefited had it base its assumptions, baselines, and goal or vision on evidences provided by relevant regional, continental and global development organizations, including the agencies of the UN.

d) Issues of finance and accountability are missing

Moreover, the source of finance for the implementation of the strategies has not been clearly indicated in the policy. For the policy to be effectively implemented and attain its goal, it requires sustainable source of financial resources. Therefore, the financial sources of the policy and how to secure them should have constituted one of the key elements of the implementation strategy. On the other hand, other than assigning roles and responsibilities to different stakeholders, the policy doesn't place accountability regarding who is to be directly blamed for the failure of the policy.

e) The Proposed Monitoring and Evaluation strategy lacks rigor

Though it is understood that a policy may not necessarily contain every details, the monitoring and evaluation strategy of the policy is not exhaustive at least to the level of clarity for implementers and other stakeholders. For one thing, it doesn't indicate the structures, from bottom to the top level, that are in charge of undertaking the monitoring and evaluation tasks. Except the Ministry of Women and Children and regional bureaus, no other state structures have been mentioned as responsible bodies to carry-out the MERL activities. On the other hand, it doesn't include learning and procedures of taking corrective measures to improve implementation based on lessons learned and to scale up good practices.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to make a critical analysis into the National Children's Policy of Ethiopia, with particular emphasis on examining the relevance of the policy to address the issues of vulnerable children in general and street children in particular. It started with an overview of the major issues and implementation strategies of the policy and then examined the contents of the policy from the vantage points of underlying assumptions, stakeholders' participation, acceptability, ensuring equity, cost effectiveness, consideration of the situation of children in diverse contexts, and feasibility. Accordingly, it is indicated that the policy issues have been detailed in the manner the

situations of children living in different contexts is addressed and so does the implementation strategy. In addition, the policy's strength has been identified in terms of allowing space for the voice of children to be heard, encouraging different stakeholders' participation, trying to ensure equity, and its cost effectiveness, among other things. On the other hand, the policy has major gaps from the point of view of its failure to point out the financial source of implementing its strategies, ignoring major structural issues causing the problems of children in difficult circumstances, and weak monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanisms. Given the fact that policies and their strategies formulated at a specific social and periodic context become less relevant in another, it is necessary that they are revised to fit for changing circumstances and the same statement applies to the National Children's Policy of Ethiopia under consideration.

Recommendation

One interesting feature of the policy is the adequate attention given to children living in difficult circumstances. Although the policy should be credited for slightly identifying the types of children under this category, nevertheless, it is found to be not exhaustive, as discussed in the criteria based evaluation section. Though personal and family level factors may contribute a share, the main factors that contribute for the vulnerability of these children are structural and hence, policy responses or strategies should primarily focus on structural

issues. The social structures that are responsible for the situation of such children may differ from one group to another. But, they have a lot to share in common. In this regard, the policy under consideration has failed in terms of trying to figure out these structural factors on the basis of empirical evidences. Instead, it attributed the situation to a single cause-family stress which seems blaming the victim. Therefore, such assumptions regarding the causes of children in difficult circumstances should be based on careful scrutiny of the structural variables and the design of the strategies should be geared towards addressing such causes.

Formulation of a new public policy for all groups of children in difficult circumstances, including that of street children, is a costly undertaking both politically and economically. Hence, with all its gaps identified above, we would suggest that the policy undergoes major revisions in the way it fits to the changing socio-economic and political circumstances in Ethiopia. Among other aspects, the policy should make its basic assumptions and policy issues on the basis of empirical evidences gathered by non-state actors, agencies, and individuals in addition to its reliance on government reports. Basing decisions and plans on primary and secondary sources mostly collected by agencies that have no political motives and interests would assist policy makers to make their assumptions on real facts about the situation of Ethiopian children, the structural factors that put children at risk, and the strategies that can better address the concerns in the policy.

The National Children's Policy of Ethiopia, though good in terms of putting its vision, goal and objectives, should also state its expected outcomes in measurable terms. Doing so would help the policy to easily track its progress and evaluate its impact. In addition, the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms briefly stated at the end of the policy document should be revised in the way it identifies the structures from top to bottom that are responsible for undertaking the task. It is also important that the monitoring and evaluation activities should be participatory of all stakeholders, including the children. Moreover, the financial sources needed to implement the policy should be clearly stated in the policy.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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