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As a reminder, this Review is directed, uppermost, at professionals in the field of adoption and child protection worldwide. It is not aimed at being directly shared with prospective or current adoptive parents, as its content and editorial line often raise sensitive issues, which may require adequate support for their understanding.

EDITORIAL

Moving Forward – Implementing children’s rights in the framework of alternative care

Black letter laws and international standards are the first step towards better protections for children; yet, unless they are effectively applied, they remain legal prose with no practical value.

The ISS/IRC is pleased to announce the launch of the handbook for the implementation of the UN-approved alternative care Guidelines – the first global resource of its kind – on 7 March at the Human Rights Council in Geneva and online in English, French, Spanish and Russian at www.alternativecareguidelines.org. This website will include details on how to access the handbook as well as contact details for further information. Launches in New York, Asia, Africa and Latin America are in course of preparation.

The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (hereafter, the Guidelines), unanimously welcomed at the UNGA in 2009, brought in a watershed of ‘orientations for policy and practice’ to address the special vulnerabilities of children deprived of their family. The text’s acceptance marked a fundamental policy shift indicating to States that, as a first priority, they should invest in strengthening the capacity of families as well as in mechanisms to prevent separation.

Since the approval of the Guidelines, the continuing challenge has been their implementation. As remarked by Jean Zermatten, Chairperson of the CRC Committee ‘as with all

internationally agreed standards and principles, however, the real test lies in determining how they can be made a reality throughout the world for those that they target – in this case, children who are without, or are at risk of losing, parental care’.

Continuing realities to be addressed

The ongoing actualities in the field are that over two million children around the world live in care institutions. At least 80% of these have one or both parents alive. Many more children are in need of alternative care and are in danger of becoming unnecessarily separated from their families. These children are subject to higher risks of exploitation, abuse and other violations.

Whilst the Guidelines address these situations, challenges in the field include how to develop comprehensive strategies with limited resources and importantly, how to ensure that the child and his family participate in the decision-making process. Other issues include the development of programmes with appropriate standards, which can be complemented by other initiatives such as the standards (see p. 6) as well as how to tackle obstacles that those leaving care face to become

fully independent, as is also addressed by SOS Children's Villages International in its new tool on the subject (see p. 4). Other hurdles for those in the field include how to provide appropriate care for children with disabilities, as examined in the ISS/IRC's Special Series (see p. 7).

Further direction on how to address realities

Supplementary direction has been an ongoing request from national and international stakeholders. Funded by an international consortium, a handbook titled *Moving Forward: Implementing the 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* was developed to specifically provide such guidance. The core text was drafted by an international team led by CELCIS with overall supervision by an expert steering group. Hundreds of professionals from within Governments, NGOs, UN agencies and academia fed into the drafting process, which includes promising practices from over 40 countries. The handbook was field-tested in Argentina and Malawi, facilitated by RELAF, Family for Every Child and the Better Care Network Malawi.

Moving along the road to better implementation

The handbook makes a difference by providing practical guidance on how to move forward on the road to embedding children's rights in alternative care provision. It highlights implications for policy-

making where national governments should provide leadership, and provides links to what is already being effectively done on the ground. Matilde Luna, Project Leader from RELAF (Latin America) confirms that 'the handbook provides child protection specialists and decision makers with inspiration for the design of national policies to better implement the Guidelines in Latin America. It builds on the trail-blazing progress that the region has continued to make with respect to alternative care in our region'.

Follow-up to the Guidelines

The ISS/IRC looks forward to seeing a better protection of children's rights as this new tool provides insight and encouragement to all professionals on what can feasibly be done in resource-constrained contexts. Other follow-up activities with the help of UNICEF and NGOs, such as evaluations and reforms of alternative care systems in light of the Guidelines, will also be needed to complement the handbook.

The ISS/IRC team
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* Please note that this editorial is based on the press release for the handbook, which includes specific notes and other important information.