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Developing Monitoring and Evaluation Dynamic Systems for Alternative Families with Fostered Children

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June 2021

Background Information on the Current System

The Egyptian government clearly differentiates between two systems of legal guardianship and fostering orphaned children. Since 2018, the Ministry of Social Solidarity has been following a consistent plan of providing unaccompanied children and orphans with alternative families rather than residential care in orphanages and foster homes. MoSS has been developing amendments to both the child law and the overall alternative care system in Egypt that should facilitate and increase the number of families willing to foster. According to the Legal Consultant of the ministry, the MoSS has witnessed a surge in the number of families filing for foster care over the past two years.

Nonetheless, the ministry's capacity to follow up and support these families remains limited and inefficient especially when it comes to

recognizing what is best for the child's interest. What is yet to be developed is a Monitoring and Evaluation system that combines both home visit efforts with other monitoring effective activities. The current system is not efficient since some families move residence without notifying the ministry while some other families find regular visits to be somewhat intrusive and not for the child's best interest.

M&E experts in Alternative Family Systems suggest that a home visit is an approach that cannot be entirely eliminated. This means looking to alternative approaches that complement home visits. The task of this policy paper is to explore these alternatives based on best international practice and views from local stakeholders.

Problem Statement

Despite the ongoing effort made by the Ministry of Social Solidarity to improve the alternative care system in Egypt, a lot remains to be done when it comes to the monitoring and evaluation of both existing and potential alternative families. On the one hand, many families report feeling intruded on and supervised by the ministry. On the other hand, social workers face many challenges during these visits. The incompetence of social workers, lack of motivation and low compensation are among the many issues that confront the MoSS when it comes to the M&E of families. However, the main issue with the current M&E system is that it is more supervisory rather than being supportive of families. The purpose of this policy paper is to analyze the pitfalls of the current system while at the same time recommending alternative solutions based on best practices across the globe as well as feedback from families, social workers, and other stakeholders.

1. Supportive vs. supervisory roles

One of the most recurring issues emphasized by both NGOs and families was the issue of privacy. This issue varies from visiting the families without prior notice, asking the neighbors about the family and the child, and school visits without notifying the parents. Even though it is the ministry's role to ensure that the child is not subjected to any form of abuse, playing a supervisory role is not effective when evaluating the families. Another issue that was highlighted by the families was that of disclosure. While the child has the right to know that he/she is fostered, reports of social workers revealing a child's caring status without notifying the family have often caused trouble and made such families reluctant to reach out for help on how to deal with the issue of disclosure. Therefore, it is important for the ministry's M&E system to support the families in knowing the challenges that they go through when raising the child instead of focusing solely on inspection and intrusion.



2. Lack of skilled workforce

The lack of skilled workforce was another issue that came to the fore. According to a representative from the MoSS, each social worker is in charge of nearly 4000 families. This makes the social workers overburdened beyond their capacity. In addition, the existing social workers do not have adequate training home visit techniques to ensure child safety through observation in case of doubt, while avoiding being intrusive. Another issue that was emphasized by one parent is the lack of knowledge on the part of social workers regarding the legal and institutional framework of alternative families such as the necessary procedures for obtaining a passport for the child in case of travel.

3. Social stigma against fostering

Due to social and religious beliefs, the Egyptian society is still yet to learn and accept the concept of foster care, not just the Kafala system. This issue demotivates many potential families who could be willing to foster but are concerned about how they would be socially perceived. Since social workers are part of the society, sometimes they are the ones who discourage potential families to apply for fostering. Moreover, Egyptian media have been negatively portraying fostered children and orphanages for years.

Policy Options/ Analysis of Alternative Interventions

The policy options provided here were developed from both desk study of best practices and feedback from stakeholders. The latter included qualitative data gathered through interviews and surveys from government representatives, alternative families and potential key actors like active local NGOs is the way to get accurate and reflective data to rely on for recommendations and data collection. An initial interview with an official from the MoSS was conducted for background information about the required policy changes for the M&E system. At a later stage, data was obtained from surveys and interviews to test the feasibility of the proposed alternatives.

Findings from our inquiries suggest that the M&E challenges in alternative family care are multidimensional. Many of them are institutional and family related.

1. Alternative 1: Increasing the number of skilled social workers

Two challenges were identified here: the presence of unskilled staff as field workers as well as low financial compensation.

The lack of skill could be addressed by advocating for the engagement of NGOs and their volunteer members who are interested and able to take part in the assessment process for alternative families. The partnership with NGOs could be designed such that NGO volunteers serve in job shadowing government social workers where the government workers could rely on those volunteers for doing assessments and share in the field visits for a period of time until the volunteer gets fully acquainted with the process.

This could be implemented through 2 streams of actions as the following:

- A. Formulating and applying a selection criterion for qualified social workers and enhancing their skills through capacity building training that reinforces their capabilities to implement the monitoring process and lead volunteers efficiently.

The role of the government social worker will be as below:

- I. The social worker will shadow and lead the volunteers across all engagement activities with alternative families.
 - II. Data management for all inputs and follow-up results registered through meetings and/or engagement with alternative families and their fostered children.
- B. Volunteers will be involved in the process of M&E and trained by local NGOs, where those volunteers are graduates from the Higher Institute of Social Work can serve for one year after graduation in public service.

Benefits to volunteers:

- a. Certification from the MoSS.
- b. Accessibility and exposure to new experience in monitoring and follow-up for alternative families.
- c. Training in major topics like data collection and analysis- conducting assessments

2. Alternative 2: Decreasing the social stigma

The social stigma associated with the foster care of children often serves as a deterrent for a lot of would-be alternative families. Hesitant due to the fear of societal judgments could be addressed through a series of actions:

- A. The MoSS could organize a public event to gather all interested stakeholders and organizations who support alternative families and the foster care of children. Through this event, the MoSS will declare the launching of an awareness campaign that serves the cause.
- B. Having the MoSS as a patron and supporter for this campaign will encourage many organizations to take the lead, which will bring attention to the issue at stake. Moreover, coordination with the media and religious entities should be promoted.

A supportive page like could be of a great advocating role like “Yalla kafala/ Kafal/ Dar el eftaa” which are active and effective in working on the cause.

3. Alternative 3: Effective and diversified evaluation system

The problem of intrusion make families angry, leading to the avoidance of contact with the government, which makes it hard to make the necessary follow-ups and reviews.

This challenge could be addressed by establishing diversified channels of monitoring and evaluation. Four channels are proposed:

1. An online system which will contain the background data of all alternative families as well as the necessary evaluation tools and forms. Fam-

ilies can fill the follow-up forms online and submit them through the online system. One social worker may be assigned to 40 alternative families. This worker will be responsible for reviewing the forms filled by the families every two months.

2. Organizing virtual meetings with families every quarter of the year (3-month intervals).
3. Organizing field visits bi-annually (every 6 months) to the homes of alternative families. Each visit should be registered on the online system, noted in point 1.
4. School visits to be organized every semester after coordinating with the school administration and the family and providing assurance of confidentiality during the visit.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper sought to investigate the existing issues surrounding the monitoring and evaluation of alternative families in Egypt in order to recommend efficient interventions. The paper has revealed the main issues with the current system to be three-fold: the lack and inefficiencies associated with social workers, the lack of support for existing and potential families, and the social stigma associated with foster care in Egypt. Notwithstanding these issues, the study also revealed that several opportunities exist that could help address these issues. Among these opportunities is the current political will that is conducive to enhancing the Alternative Families' system. This comes in line with the government's vision and willingness to deinstitutionalize foster care and close orphanages by 2025. Through the development of a detailed guideline for the MoSS, NGOs are helping to increase the number of families, supporting them and providing a form of monitoring towards the families. Building upon these efforts, this paper has suggested the following recommendations for the MoSS to improve the efficiency of the Monitoring and Evaluation system for alternative families:

1. Training and employing volunteers from NGOs to support social workers: The study recommends employing the services of volunteers to complement the work of the existing social workers. This will help address the issue of the lack of M&E workforce. The training of social workers could also be outsourced to specialized NGOs like Wataneyyah and Face.
2. Raising awareness of the public about the issues of foster care: This can be done through close collaboration with media players, celebrities and religious figures to influence public opinion about the issue of foster care. We recommend reaching out to the popular TV and radio channels as well as religious programs since they all contribute to shaping public opinion.
3. Diversifying the tools of Monitoring and Evaluation: In order to reduce frequent visits in ways that invade the privacy of families, the ministry should consider using alternative methods to facilitate the monitoring process. This could be done through using online mediums to keep track of the families and conduct quarterly online meetings with the parents instead of relying solely on home visits.

«All the academic references used in this brief are mentioned in the policy paper.»

This brief is published by: The Public Policy Hub - GAPP School (AUC)

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