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**Recommendations for the Adaptation of International Best Practices in Community-Based  
Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs) to the Local Context in Rural Northwest China.**

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## **Acknowledgements**

Involvement in child protection occurred somewhat accidentally for me, after I stumbled upon staff of a Chinese non-profit organization that conducted child abuse prevention and response programming, and we began chatting about our experiences in community work. The years since that unplanned encounter have brought me into the company of several people without whom my learning process – and consequently the writing of this paper – would not have been possible.

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## **Executive Summary**

In 2012, Plan China launched its five-year strategic program cycle, in which it identified one of its main areas of program intervention as child protection, with a particular focus on community-based child protection mechanisms. Despite several years of pilot projects that were intended to provide a foundation for the roll-out of future work, it was discovered that there was a shortage of academic analysis concerning which international practices in child protection might be best suited for the Chinese context, specifically in regards to practices at the lowest level of rural society. With these needs in mind, this research study set out to undertake three tasks.

The first task was to review international experiences in community-based child protection mechanisms, selecting three themes for best practice that relate directly to the implementation of community-based child protection mechanisms in Plan project areas. The second task was to explore the possibilities and challenges that might be faced when implementing these practices in China. The third and final task was to offer recommendations for the effective adaptation of international best practices within the local context, seeking to provide a general compass of appropriate technical approaches for consideration by community development workers.

Prior to commencement of the study, a thorough international literature review was undertaken, covering a total of 29 internationally published research articles, studies, and program reviews. Analysis of the existing materials led to the identification of three core themes for assessment, chosen also for their close relationship with existing work under the supervision of Plan China's child protection team. The three core themes for successful establishment of community-based child protection mechanisms were: 1) establishment on the basis of existing community structures, 2) meaningful child participation, and 3) inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable populations. The literature review included an analysis of each theme, with specific recommendations from international literature that were identified as being vital for the success

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of community-based child protection activities as they related to each subject. These same three themes then became the subject of analysis for the research material, with specific attention given to those dimensions which international literature indicated were important considerations for success of a project activity.

Due to protocol governing research in China, only secondhand data was used for the purpose of this study, including locally published sources, internal Plan China mapping documents<sup>1</sup>, and field reports. Prior to analysis, the internal mapping documents and field reports were stripped of identifiers by a Plan China assistant, and returned to the researcher in anonymous form.

The findings of the study were preceded by a background analysis pertaining to the general situation of children in rural communities near Plan China's project areas. In this section, there is significant exploration of the impact of migration and the breakdown of family and community networks, a topic which recurs throughout discussion of the three operational themes.

Explorations pertaining to the structure of community-based child protection mechanisms focused on the role of schools and the village committees, both institutions with legal and social mandates to respond to child protection incidents. Attention was also given to community structures and volunteer networks stemming out from the village committee, and the role of these individuals in society.

Discussions pertaining to child participation focused on the shifting role of children in Chinese society, children's increased ability to engage in public education and awareness concerning child rights, and the remaining cultural limitations surrounding peer support and child participation in early intervention work. Though it was not possible to identify the most ideal structure for facilitating child participation, the role of schools was indicated as being vital to facilitating innovative practices. Further discussion outlined the challenges of mobilizing child

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<sup>1</sup> "Mapping data" refers to field notes and summary reports obtained as a result of qualitative community mapping, a process which uses focus group discussion, key informant interviews, literature review, and observation to draw conclusions pertaining to the situation of a community as it relates to specific questions along a given topic.

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participation in community platforms, and the need to encourage participatory platforms to reach children outside the school system.

Finally, discussion of marginalized and vulnerable children and their families concluded that avenues for their support lie primarily in the establishment of new relationship channels.

Whether by mobilizing the village committee and its network of volunteers or by adapting the existing child protection groups in schools, it is imperative to build relationships between members of society in a way that strengthens organic safety nets and increases avenues for protection.

On the basis of the initial findings, a total of eleven preliminary recommendations were offered, which are presented in summary in the box on the following page.

### **Summary of Preliminary Recommendations**

- Encourage the development of child protection practices that are indigenous to local communities, while offering support at key junctures to ensure that activities will refrain from causing unintended harm.
- Establish a community level network involving the school child protection working group and child protection focal points from the surrounding village committees.
- Particularly encourage and seek to develop the work of the village committee women's cadre in child protection.
- Encourage women's cadres to mobilize community volunteer forces for child protection; where necessary, seek to solve the human resource dilemma by recruiting a part-time assistant for the village women's cadre.
- Provide very simple orientations and awareness raising for community volunteer forces who assist the women's cadre.
- Use new media and technology, particularly village centre films, to convey child protection knowledge to rural areas with a large number of illiterate caregivers.
- Work closely with schools as the leverage point to mobilize child participation in child protection public education work.
- Establish independent, inclusive, and non-politically affiliated child participation groups.
- In child participation work for middle school students, make sure that students understand basics of support and assisted reporting for their friends, but do not establish formal channels for peer reporting. Do not engage elementary school students with peer reporting or peer support activities.
- Seek creative, sustainable approaches to community-based child participation activities.
- Develop project components that are designed to facilitate positive, trusting, and mutually caring interpersonal relationships between children, within families, and across communities. Where possible, promote local employment for adults who have children.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that these recommendations offer only a technical compass against the backdrop of project management and implementation; they should be kept in mind within Plan China's long term development goals, while acknowledging that their implementation will require a process of perseverance and clear prioritization.

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## **Section 1. Introduction and Background**

### *1.1. Purpose of the Research*

The purpose of this study is to discover culturally appropriate adaptations of international best practice standards and effective operational principles for the development of community-based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs) functioning at the most foundational level of Chinese society

The work is done on behalf of Plan China, the national office of an international non-governmental organization that operates in over 50 countries around the world (Plan International, 2013). Though the explicit purpose of this study is to support the improved implementation of Plan China's child protection program at the community level, it is hoped that the work may also contribute to the practice of other development organizations operating within the region, to the work of Plan International in other program countries, and to the benefit of international child protection practitioners across the globe.

Above and beyond the purpose of contributing to the work of child protection practitioners and improved program operations in project communities, it is hoped that through the completion of this work, young community members – and their families – will be able to live in safe, supportive environments that contribute to the wellbeing and protection of children.

### *1.2 Plan's History in Child Protection*

As an organization with extensive history in child-centered community development (Plan Asia, 2005), Plan International was among the earliest members of the global development community to recognize the importance of child protection as an area of program focus. The Plan Asia 2005-2015 regional strategic plan identifies community-based initiatives for child protection as a prioritized field among Plan's work throughout the entire region (Plan Asia, 2005). As evidence of this increased focus, a comparative study of community-based child

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protection mechanisms in 13 Asian countries was published by Plan in the fall of 2012, offering a comprehensive overview of practices from the region, with specific recommendations for the further development of community-based child protection work (O’Kane and Moore, 2012). With countries in the study ranging from such diverse regions as Pakistan, India, Vietnam and the Philippines, and with Plan China supplying only limited information for the research, there remained significant room to analyze how these regional recommendations might relate specifically to the Chinese context. What the study made evident, among some noteworthy observations, was the fledgling stage of development for community-based child protection work in Plan Asia project regions, and the need to make further observations by drawing on experiences from other organizations and countries across the globe.

### *1.3 Plan China’s History in Child Protection*

Plan China's interest in child protection programming followed shortly on the heels of organized initiatives by the Asia Regional Office, taking on a season of new focus in 2010. At that time, a 14-month pilot project was implemented for the development of a community-level child protection mechanism in Chunhua County of Shaanxi Province, which, though relatively welcomed by the community in terms of child participation and protection activities, was developed without much of a scientific evidence base to support the activities that were done.

Following the completion of this project, a larger pilot project was drafted for the development of community-based child protection mechanisms in Yang, Hanying and Chunhua counties in Shaanxi Province, China (2011-2013). In seeking to develop project activities on a greater evidence base than the original Chunhua pilot project, the initial proposal was designed with an assumption that children's advisory boards – a common child protection practice promoted by NGOs working in sub-Saharan Africa – would be applicable to the Chinese context (Plan China, 2011). It became apparent quite early on, however, through the process of

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community mapping at the village level, that there would be challenges to implementing this work, with the whole concept and mental framework of child participation and child-led activities being foreign to community members, particularly adults (Plan China, 2013b). Unfortunately, due to both weaknesses in the mapping process and impending project deadlines, adaptations to the advisory board model were made on the basis of only very basic evidence, and the boards (renamed “children's participation groups” due to objections from the community, who claimed that children could never be “advisors” to adults) continued to face challenging questions concerning their role and level of efficiency (Plan China, 2013b). The issue of children’s groups, explored more thoroughly in Section 8.6, became a clear indication that international best practices needed to be fully explored and wisely adapted before future project measures would prove successful.

As the project continued, in accordance with the original implementation plan, international consultant Stephanie Delaney was hired to advise the process of developing a system for child protection reporting and support measures. As preparation for this work, a baseline study, community focus groups, and interviews were done in order to better understand local practices ----- but none of these activities were done to the satisfaction of the project management team (Stephanie Delaney, 2010). At the time, the management team was able to identify some gaps in knowledge, and sought input from project partners familiar with the context in the field. As their input was slowly integrated into project plans and the implementation document for the child protection mechanism was finalized, the unexpected opportunity for further community feedback suddenly revealed that the partners, working from provincial level, had not been fully clear in their representation of village-level practice. Some last minute adjustments were made, but – again – project deadlines led to the decision that only implementation of the mechanism would reveal whether or not it was effective in protecting children in the villages. In essence, time would have to tell.

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Meanwhile, Plan China developed and confirmed its 2013-2017 Country Strategic Plan, which designed for the creation of community-level platforms that could contribute to the improved protection of children, to be developed in all Plan project communities in Shaanxi Province (Plan China, 2012). Originally, the three-county pilot project was intended to provide foundational information concerning best-practices for community level child protection mechanisms in China; however, in the second half of the pilot project, mounting political sensitivities with impending national leadership transitions led to an extended delay in project implementation and opportunities to gather information throughout the course of operation. In regards to work in Shaanxi Province, there was neither time nor capacity for Plan China's individual program units to replicate an improved community mapping process and re-design the child protection mechanism on their own. Instead, it became necessary for the Plan China country office to provide an evidence-based approach to supplement the lessons that the implementation of the pilot project was intending to reveal. It was in this context that the study outlined below was conducted.

#### *1.4 Rationale for the Study*

The need for the study is not only limited to Plan China and its child protection programs. Faced with a child population of over 222 million (National Statistics Bureau, 2011) and high rates of violence against children, it is with great urgency that government bodies and non-profit organizations working in China are seeking to address the lack of a comprehensive national child protection system.

In a country where social contexts vary and the population is extremely large, the recommended approach by Plan China, UNICEF, and other non-profit organizations – both in terms of practicality and as a form of advocacy with the central government – is to find community based solutions for addressing child protection issues in society at large. This

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approach serves not only to offer a foundation for construction of an improved national child protection system, but also serves to provide local-level support to children and families at risk, ensuring that help is accessible to the large population of left-behind children in rural China.

While there is a growing body of international literature on community-based child protection mechanisms and their best practice implementation standards, fairly little work has been done to adapt these practices to the Chinese context. As demonstrated by Plan's own organizational experience with pilot projects, the tendency when beginning a new work has been either to replicate blindly what has proven effective in other countries, or to start from scratch by building entirely on the basis of local needs. There has been particularly little academic study concerning the good practices for adaptation of community based child protection mechanisms, especially at the least formal, most foundational level of rural Chinese society. Until such an evidence base is available, project partners will be at great risk of investing time, energy, and resources into practices that may have already proven ineffective in other cultural contexts.

## **Section 2: Specific Research Objectives**

As stated above, the explicit goal of this study is to identify best practices in the implementation of community-based child protection mechanisms used in the international community, and to offer recommendations for their successful adaptation to the Chinese context.

In light of this goal, the specific research objectives are:

- To review international practices in community-based child protection mechanisms, selecting three themes for best practice that relate directly to the implementation of community-based child protection mechanisms in Plan project areas.
- To explore the possibilities and challenges that might be faced when implementing these practices through community-based child protection mechanisms in China.

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- To offer recommendations for future effective adaptation of international best practices within the local community context

### **Section 3: International Literature Review**

Prior to compilation and analysis of in-country data, an extensive review of international literature relating to community-based child protection mechanisms was undertaken. The purpose of this literature review was to identify key themes, selecting operational principles and best practices in implementation based on the experiences of programs in other countries.

#### *3.1 Sources of International Literature*

The first step in conducting the study was to embark on a thorough review of international literature pertaining to best practices in community-based child protection mechanisms outside of China. It was determined that no documents would be accepted for review that had been written prior to 2008, as this was the year of a significant conference in Bucharest, Hungary, which launched a dialogue about systems theory as it relates to child protection in development, and which had a noteworthy impact on the strategy of international organizations in their approach to child protection work (UNICEF, 2008). As part of the literature review, a total of 29 English-language documents were covered, with sources from UNICEF, Save the Children, War Child, and Plan International pre-dominating. Formats included project reports, summaries, evaluations, and comprehensive research analysis, including extensive reviews completed by Mike Wessels of the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity, as well as Claire O’Kane and Kunera Moore, on behalf of Plan International’s Asia Regional Office (ARO). The literature review was purposefully limited to documents regarding the structure and function of community-based mechanisms, networks, and systems for child protection in the international development context, without becoming engaged in related

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documents concerning child welfare, development, or survival. These documents were then assessed for identification of recurring themes that related specifically to Plan China’s work, with discussion and final approval from the client partner.<sup>2</sup>

### *3.2 Theory of Best Practices*

The analysis of international literature relating to community-based child protection mechanisms proved more challenging than anticipated, primarily because the child protection field has few agreed-upon standards and even fewer agreed-upon theoretical definitions. In an initial review, it was identified that child protection systems theory, the cornerstone for thought surrounding community-based child protection mechanisms, was formally initiated as late as 2008 at the inter-agency meeting held in Bucharest, Hungary (UNICEF, 2008). It was on the basis of this meeting that UNICEF called for a paper on child protection systems theory, published in 2010 (UNICEF, 2010). The fact that the foundational theory affecting community-based child protection mechanisms has not been well-developed for more than five years has lent itself to extensive discussion, debate, and inconsistency within the field.

### *3.3 Child Protection Systems Theory*

So what is child protection systems theory? The Bucharest Paper, drafted in 2008, identified child protection systems as “a set of laws, policies, regulations and services, capacities, monitoring and oversight needed across all social sectors – especially social welfare, education, health, security, and justice – to prevent and respond to protection related risks.” (UNICEF, 2008, pg. 1). The core principle behind child protection systems is the knowledge that child protection cannot happen in a vacuum, or be solely under the responsibility of a single entity –

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<sup>2</sup> Further explanation of this process can be found in Section 6.

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without the participation of other bodies. Rather, child protection issues are exceptionally complicated, often involving multi-faceted layers of risk, and child protection prevention and response services must be equally multi-faceted. A child protection system emphasizes functions and linkages rather than specific services, mobilizing different sectors of society – including children and families themselves – to take a holistic approach to protecting the welfare of the child. It is important to note with UNICEF that “every family, community, and nation has a child protection system in place” (UNICEF, 2010) and that child protection systems can be understood to occur at the formal and informal levels of society.<sup>3</sup>

### *3.4 Defining Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms*

In exploring best practices for community-based child protection mechanisms, one of the challenges that arose was the lack of concise and unified definition for exactly what constitutes a “community-based child protection mechanism.” Most noteworthy for the purposes of this project was what appeared to be a slight difference in interpretation between Save the Children and Mike Wessels with Plan China and its associates concerning what constituted a “mechanism.” Save the Children defines a community-based child protection as “a network or group of individuals at community level who work in a coordinated manner towards child protection goals. Such mechanisms can be indigenous or externally initiated and supported. They may also be informal or formal in their structure and functioning” (Save the Children, 2010). In practice, however, as confirmed by Mike Wessels and as will be explored further in the body of this paper, much of the international practice community, particularly those at Save the Children, have come to understand a “community-based child protection mechanism” as a “group” at

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<sup>3</sup> In the field of child protection, the concept of a “formal” structure refers to those things which are imposed or regulated by outside institutions, such as government bodies. In contrast, “informal” structures refer to those practices which arise from local practices and ways of working. Because the Law Governing Village Committees provides significant leeway for these bodies to mobilize local society based on indigenous need and practices, it can be understood that much of this paper discusses child protection work taking place at the juncture between the informal and the formal mechanism.

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community level that works for purposes of child protection (Wessels, 2010).

Upon closer look at Plan's internal literature, most notably through the recent Lessons for Protection regional comparative analysis, it was clear that different country offices within Plan operate with a variety of understandings concerning what constitutes a CBCPM (O’Kane & Moore, 2012). The Lessons for Protection report did not offer a concise definition, but cited a breadth of models and structures that engage in roles ranging from prevention work (readily mobilized at the village level, and more akin to work described by Save the Children) to program coordination, legal enforcement, and monitoring – activities that traditionally reach beyond the scope of the most basic community structures. It was indicated in the report that though most CBCPMs take the form of child protection committees or groups, in some Plan project areas, a “community based child protection mechanism” is understood to be a network or community level system with strong links to the national system. In some countries, the term “Community-based child protection system” (CBCPS) was preferred to the term “community-based child protection mechanism, and more accurately reflected their operational style (O’Kane & Moore, 2012).

In grappling with the definition of community-based child protection mechanisms, it is important to note that the term “community-based” indicates that a practice has arisen from the community, or at the very least is adapted to the unique characteristics of that community. For this reason, it is difficult to offer a definition that wholly encompasses all project areas. However, for the purposes of academic study through monitoring and evaluation, which involves counting, assessing, and discussing these entities, a working definition must be identified.

Exploration into the definitions of Save the Children, Global Child Protection Services (GCPS)<sup>4</sup> and a review of the Lessons for Protection report led Plan China, with the support of

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<sup>4</sup>The GCPS definition of community-based child protection mechanisms, in keeping with theory on child protection systems, focuses on processes rather than structures, referring to them as, “processes (either endogenous or

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external consultant Stephanie Delaney, to develop a working definition of CBCPMs for internal use. This definition reads as follows: “Community-based child protection mechanisms refer to an existing community structure or practice which takes on child protection functions, where this entity receives formal support from and linkage to the government.” (Plan China, 2012).

It is important to note for the purposes of this paper that “community” refers to the most basic level of Chinese society, generally identified in rural China as the “village.” The “village” is the level of social infrastructure below the township level, where most government services have their lowest unit of office, in the town seat. Though the number of villages in a township and the distance of villages from the town will vary significantly, comparatively weak infrastructure, poverty, and a large population mean that these services in the town are not always accessible for children and families in village areas. More background information about the “village” and its governance will be explored as part of the China-based literature review.

## **Section 4: Best Practice Themes: Principles and Practices**

### *4.1 Selection and Exploration of Best Practice Themes:*

Having identified the object of analysis, the author sought to identify three recurrent themes which international literature proved to be necessary for the best practice implementation of community-based child protection mechanisms. The identification of these three best practice themes was reliant on two basic criteria, chosen for their relevance to the process of adapting best practice international recommendations to work in the Chinese context that is implemented by Plan China. Firstly, the three themes must be recurring, agreed-upon principles found throughout international CBPM/CBCPS literature. Secondly, the three themes must relate to one

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externally established) used within a community or neighborhood in order to achieve the goal of protecting children of that community or neighborhood, either generally or from a particular manifestation of violence, abuse, exploitation or neglect.” (pg. 3) This definition is very helpful for developing a better understanding of informal mechanisms, but remains somewhat difficult to manage in regards to project monitoring, research, and evaluation. How does one “count” processes? For this reason, Plan China will choose to continue with the internal definition cited above, for the purposes of operational use.

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of Plan China's eight core values and/or areas of current work, with specific consideration given to the fact that in the Plan China country office, members of the child protection team are responsible for implementation of the core values of gender equality, inclusion and participation. On this basis of these criteria, the themes identified were: 1) Building on Existing Structures; 2) Meaningful Child Participation, 3) Inclusion of Marginalized and Vulnerable Populations. These three themes were analyzed for core principles and operational practices that were proven to be effective through international literature.

In 2010, Mike Wessels wrote a formative paper for the child protection community in which he concluded that, “the state of the evidence regarding... [community-based child protection practice]... is largely anecdotal, impressionistic, unsystematic, and underdeveloped.” (Wessels, 2010). What Wessels brought to light was the vast number of programs that were developing field practice on the basis of gut instinct and pure community need rather than a sound evidence base. There was high need to take a blended approach to research – bridging theory with practice –that could provide a new generation of community-development practitioners with sound guidance for the development of their programs. For this reason, our exploration of each theme below will present important theoretical concepts relating to the subject, followed by an overview of the successful practices identified by other project countries, and end with a summary of concrete, operational principles for best-practice gleaned through this experience.

#### *4.2 Theme One: Building on Existing Structures*

One overarching theme for the development of community-based child protection mechanisms has been that they are most successful when they are built on existing community structures and practices, rather than being developed independently. Surprisingly, this has not always been a recognized need, for as Wessels notes, a didactic approach has scuttled many

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community-based child protection mechanism projects (Wessels, 2009). In community-based child protection mechanisms, however, community ownership and building on existing methods is absolutely necessary if they are to succeed.

#### *4.3 Structures That Have Been Used – Highlighting the Creative Ones*

Evidence shows that the most common structure for a community-based child protection mechanism is a child protection committee, typically a group of 7-10 (or in some cases up to 20) volunteers who work towards child protection goals in the community (Wessels, 2009; O’Kane and Moore, 2013). As Wessels identified in his 2009 presentation, however, child protection committees have been a “reflex response” to humanitarian crises, and the state of evidence concerning their use has made it difficult to draw conclusions. It has been an exceptionally common practice for NGOs to develop independent child protection committees which do not build on existing community structures; in fact, child protection committees are the most common format for community-based child protection mechanisms used across Plan (O’Kane and Moore, 2013). However, lessons learned based on program experiences in Sierra Leone strongly advise against an un-calculated adoption of this approach (The Columbia Group for Children in Adversity, 2012).

There are several countries which have taken an individualized approach to the structure of community-based child protection mechanisms, and which have proven helpful in their own contexts.

> In India, it was discovered that smaller groups may be more effective than the traditional large number of members; this approach could lead to greater efficiency and more clearly defined roles (O’Kane and Moore, 2012).

> In Thailand and the Philippines, rather than developing independent Child Protection Committees, Plan projects have worked to add child protection capacity to existing village

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committees and Barangay councils. In both countries, the committee has 11-15 members (O’Kane and Moore, 2012)..

> In Vietnam, a commune level child protection committee was developed by Plan which essentially functioned as a network, and which included the head of the commune people's committee, head of the school, judicial officer, police officials, members of mass organizations, members of the network of village collaborators and children's groups (O’Kane and Moore, 2012). However, only one person was selected as a commune child protection officer. Contrary to recent recommendations by O’Kane and Moore (2012), these boards report directly to the inter-agency working group rather than to the national system.

> In Cambodia, Plan and Save the Children operate using similar models. In Plan project areas, Family Protection Networks are developed that link with and are supported by the Commune Council on Women and Children (O’Kane and Moore, 2012). In Save the Children project areas, a Village Safety Net Program was developed which essentially functioned as a networking meeting for representatives of different parties, who each proceeded to fulfill child protection obligations under their existing organizational mandate (Save the Children Norway, 2012).

> In Malawi, the Child Protection Committees take a step further on the basis of the existing social structure, as Rwot Kweri (Household Monitors) within the local government system gather information about abducted and returned children, births, and deaths. Birth attendants make referrals of complicated cases to the Child Protection Committee – which continue to fulfill a role of monitoring and support (Plan Malawi, n.d).

Despite the noteworthy examples listed above, it is important to highlight that most projects from the documented reports persist in using Child Protection Committees, often ones which are independent from the existing structure. Though evidence points to the relative ineffectiveness of this approach, there have been few alternatives identified.

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#### *4.4 Operational Principles for Building on Existing Structures*

The evidence from literature concerning existing practices is linked to a few operational principles that might affect the development of structure for community-based child protection mechanisms.

First, as repeatedly stressed, despite the common practice of establishing independent child protection committees, recommendations continually call for the establishment of community-based child protection mechanisms that are based on existing structures and practices. This has been successfully accomplished by Thailand and the Philippines, and continues to be the preferred model for operations in those countries (O’Kane and Moore, 2012). In these countries, the principles of child protection committees have been maintained, though the members of the group are pre-determined by the existing government structure.

Secondly, as evidenced by Vietnam and Cambodia – which share similar political structures to China – the development of networks is a viable alternative to the development of committees. As in the case of Vietnam, the selection of a single focal point<sup>5</sup>, or child protection officer, can help lend cohesion to community-level work. As demonstrated in India, a small group of people can serve a similar purpose to the larger Child Protection Committees, and at times may be more effective(O’Kane and Moore, 2012). In the case of Malawi, it was proven that an existing governance network (the Rwot Kweri) at the very frontline of society could be mobilized successfully to contribute to the purposes of child protection monitoring (Plan Malawi, n.d.).

Finally, new research suggests that mechanisms need to exist at the “bridge” between the

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<sup>5</sup> In the Plan International community, the term “focal point” is used to refer to designated persons who is called upon to fulfill a role relating to a certain responsibility. For example, a child protection “focal point” is an individual who serves as a prevention officer, monitor, or advocate who fulfills responsibilities relating to child protection, usually in addition to his or her full time role.

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community and the formal system. Evidence shows that integration into existing government structure leads to more sustainability and supervision, ensuring that community-based child protection mechanisms have the back-up that they need to operate in a technically sound manner (Global Child Protection Services, 2012). It has been recommended that CBCPMs have a one to two year “maturation period” before a program should be rolled out to support replicated branches, and representatives with a strong link to the formal system can lend a program this type of sustainability more readily than can a host of short-term community volunteers (Save the Children, 2008).

The primary challenge when identifying a structure that fits this criteria is that there is a trade-off in regards to community ownership (Wessels, 2010). Multiple other project findings have reflected that community-based child protection mechanisms need to be voluntary and inclusive in order to ensure their use and maintain accountability; naturally this becomes more difficult if the primary members are strongly linked to the formal system. It is with this challenge in mind that we proceed to explore Theme Two and Theme Three.

#### *4.5 Theme Two: Meaningful Child Participation*

The theme of Meaningful Child Participation was chosen not only because of frequent reference in documents found during the literature review, but also because it is among one of Plan China's core cross-cutting strategies. In addition, as will be discussed further in the body of the paper, Chinese society is historically patriarchal and authoritarian, making meaningful child participation a noteworthy challenge when seeking to “build on existing structures”, as referenced under Theme One. The challenge presented by this theme provides an opportunity to explore the best practices and key operational principles gleaned from other countries, with the hope that their experience can contribute to the field work of Plan China.

Unfortunately, it was discovered that there continues to be ongoing discussion and lack of

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consensus concerning exactly how children should be involved, and in a manner that was appropriate for them. Meaningful child participation proved to be a key challenge for other project countries as well. As one Uganda project report cited (Mangen, n.d, slide 6), “It is almost impossible to get children to participate in Child Protection Committees due to socio-cultural inhibitions.” The statement came with no further recommendations. The Plan Asia regional review on CBCPMs expressed similar challenges across the region, if worded a bit more delicately (O’Kane and Moore, 2012).

#### *4.6 Structural Models that Facilitate Meaningful Child Participation*

Across the development community, some countries have adopted a fairly informal, ad-hoc approach to foster child participation. In Cambodia, for example, Save the Children has been facilitating child participation by bringing children together with adults to conduct vulnerability assessments and participate in network meetings (Save the Children Norway, 2012). In this program, children are not involved in the routine operations of prevention and response for child protection issues. This approach has been useful in a community-based child protection system or network where child protection committees are not a main feature. However, it risks a form of tokenism, which, as will be discussed below, is a central issue for concern.

For the most part, however, literature reviewed revealed that most CBCPM projects, particularly those where child protection committees are used, attempt to take a formalized approach to child participation. According to Save the Children's report on community-based child protection groups, *A Common Responsibility*, there are four different models to facilitate child participation through the use of child protection groups or committees (Save the Children, 2008). In the first model, children will talk to members of an adult group, but do not form a group themselves. In the second model, both a children's group and an adult group exist, with representatives from the children's group attending adult group meetings. In the third model, a

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representative (or representatives) from adult groups visit or attend the children's group. In the fourth model, children and adults form one group together. In Plan project areas across the Asia region, child participation in CBCPMs generally takes place in keeping with the second and third models (O'Kane and Moore, 2012). Plan regional documents specifically recommend that, where child representatives attend the adult groups, at least 4-5 children should be included, thereby seeking to avoid tokenism (O'Kane and Moore, 2012).

In addition to the question of models to facilitate child participation with adults, there is also the question of child participation through interaction with their peers. In South Africa, Save the Children established peer groups where older children worked with younger children on child protection issues (Save the Children, 2008). However, this structural model leads us to another question: What are activities that can facilitate meaningful child participation appropriately?

#### *4.7 Activities for Meaningful Child Participation*

According to Save the Children reports, young people can be involved in child protection work at three different levels: Peer to Peer, Peer to Family, and Peer to Community. In the peer-to-peer model, children reach out to other children with information about child protection, in methods that project documents noted were able to reach ethnic minorities and excluded children for the first time. In Peer to Family activities, children are taught to reach out to members of their own household, and in Peer to Community activities, children may be involved directly in door-to-door awareness raising, engaging their neighbors and community members (Save the Children, 2011).

The question arises as to what types of activities are appropriate for children to engage in at each of these levels. Project reports from different countries cite a range of experiences. At War Child's project sites in Uganda and Eastern DRC, staff encouraged advocacy, awareness raising, monitoring, reporting, and referral of child rights violations through their child rights

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clubs (War Child, 2010). Staff assessed that involvement of young people in awareness raising increased their own personal safety, allowing these young people to become role models for their peers in societies where children were found putting themselves in precarious situations. Across the Plan Asia community, children were similarly involved in raising awareness, mapping risks, identifying or reporting on child protection concerns, and advocating with leaders concerning these risks (O’Kane and Moore, 2012) These activities, though requiring close management to reduce risks to children throughout their involvement, are generally demonstrated to be appropriate and successful means for encouraging children's participation and ownership.

The discussion concerning meaningful child participation, however, becomes more intense as the intervention levels increase. According to project reports, members of peer groups in South Africa, in addition to conducting advocacy and monitoring, provided practical care and protection for other children, including listening to and talking with peers after they had experienced abuse (Save the Children, 2008). The War Child project likewise encouraged peer counseling and mediation, with the final report observing that peer support improved protection, as other children would recognize a potential risk and report on behalf of their classmates and friends. (War Child UK, 2010). According to the Lessons for Protection Plan Asia analysis, children have been involved in organizing action to prevent or respond to child protection concerns, including early intervention home visits. In Plan Sri Lanka project cites, some child leaders have been trained in basic counseling skills to support children at risk of abuse or who have experienced abuse (O’Kane and Moore, 2012).

However, not everyone agrees that these approaches are appropriate. Mike Wessels, in his formative 2010 review of community-based child protection project documents, offered a strong critique of many of the programs he reviewed, identifying that children were taking on tasks that may not be appropriate for their age, maturity, or training (Wessels, 2010). As highlighted in the paper, different cultures use age or coming-of-age signs to interpret childhood and adulthood

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differently; therefore, it is important for children to have responsibilities that are appropriate for their maturity given the cultural context. While Wessels acknowledges risk mapping and peer awareness as appropriate ways for children to be involved, he urges organizations and communities not to involve children in very difficult issues requiring a high degree of maturity, such as gender-based violence. Wessels also explores mixed evidence as to whether or not it is appropriate for children to conduct education targeting adults in the community, particularly specific adults or parents of at-risk peers.

#### *4.8 Operational Principles for Meaningful Child Participation*

A common consensus among child protection community development practitioners is that there is a need to avoid structural models that lead to tokenism in child participation, particularly through unbalanced child participation in adult child protection committees. O’Kane and Moore (2012) recommend that while 4-5 child representatives attending an adult meeting may curb this issue, balance-of-power issues may continue to exist, particularly in cultures with a strong patriarchal or authoritarian heritage. Other models that facilitate the interaction between separate child and adult groups have proven viable in countries outside the Asia region, and should be given consideration.

Children should be given roles that are appropriate for their age, maturity, and training, particularly in light of their cultural background. Culture-specific assessment should be done to explore how children should be engaged in public awareness activities, particularly when considering what audiences children can engage in light of their cultural age. Careful assessment needs to be done to consider if it might ever be appropriate for children to play a role in early-intervention and peer support, and if so, at what age, and in what capacity. It is not recommended that children take part in response (Wessels, 2010).

Parents and teachers need to be supportive of child involvement. Several articles

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highlighted that meaningful child participation was only possible if children were “sanctioned” by parents and school teachers. It is important to identify leverage points for mobilizing their support.

#### *4.9 Theme Three: Balancing Power and Facilitating Inclusion*

Like theme two, theme three was chosen in part because it met the two basic criteria for selection, and in part because it was a subject that presented with some difficulty when considering the implications of building on existing structures. The literature reviewed revealed that the existing social structures in most societies perpetuate patriarchy and inequality; for that reason, it is important for development organizations to be highly proactive about identifying practices for balancing power and facilitating community inclusion (O’Kane and Moore, 2012).

Like the issue of meaningful child participation, it was discovered through the literature review that most agencies have identified the need for this practice, but lack significant successful lessons to share. The majority of papers simply called for more research on this subject. With this in mind, our exploration below will explore candidly not only the best practices but also the key challenges that projects in other countries have faced.

In order to facilitate a balance of power and inclusive practices, it is important to give thought to issues along two continuums. As with other themes, structure is one entry point for change, while operational principles are another. Along another continuum, it is important to consider the inclusion of community adults and marginalized families in the community, as well as issues of inclusion for children. The issues along these two continuums will be explored below.

#### *4.10 Balance of Power and Inclusion Among Mechanism Members: Structural Practices and Operational Principles*

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> In Malawi, Plan established volunteer child protection committees that were separate from the formal system (Plan Malawi, n.d.). Due to the voluntary nature of the work<sup>6</sup>, anyone who wanted to join could take part in activities, and a cross-sector of society, including women and children, became involved. One major challenge was identified to this approach, however, and that was that people in extreme poverty were less willing to participate, as the meetings took away from valuable income-earning time.

> In some Plan project countries, informal protection groups were developed in order to facilitate parental involvement in a way that balanced gender issues. In Nepal, these took the form of special Women's Groups; in the Philippines, an initiative to get men involved led to the creation of Father's Groups (O'Kane and Moore, 2012).

> One recent report recommends that child protection committees should encourage rotation of members (O'Kane and Moore, 2012), placing no limits on time spent in "office". As involvement in committee activities would require less commitment, they might be more inclusive. What is important to consider along with this recommendation is the issue of capacity building for mechanism members, which becomes more difficult with increased turn-over. Evidenced across the literature and explored more in Section 11.2 is the threat that lack of capacity causes for community-based child protection mechanisms and the children that they reach.

> In the Plan community, India, Nepal, Philippines and Sri Lanka reported experience involving marginalized families, but discovered that taking time away from income-earning activities was a significant barrier to involvement (O'Kane and Moore, 2012).

> Plan Pakistan noted that literacy requirements were a barrier to involvement in community-based child protection activities, and practitioners across the region have been

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<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion of the issue of volunteering and financial support to community-based child protection mechanisms, please see Section 13.

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notified of the need to explore literacy as an issue in their own programs (O’Kane and Moore, 2012).

On the basis of other country practices, a few operational principles were identified that might be helpful in preparation for adaptation and analysis:

First, it is important to note that one of the characteristics of a “community-based” institution – whether that be a child protection mechanism, club, or service – is that it *must* involve active participation of local stakeholders, and not just an elite few. Literature has revealed that the most successful community-based child protection groups include representatives of poor or marginalized populations, where there is a practice of power-sharing in discussions, decision-making and work (Wessels, 2010). Regardless of how the community-based child protection mechanism itself is structured, it is important to identify associated structures for volunteerism and interaction that reach a cross-sector of society.

Under some social and political structures, other projects have observed that government representatives tend to be male and volunteers tend to be female. When integrating volunteerism into the structure of proposed community-based child protection mechanisms, it is necessary to ensure a gender balance of members. This is particularly important for community engagement surrounding sensitive issues such as sexual abuse. As discovered by Plan Philippines, the role of men and boys can be invaluable in work to increase the dignity of women and girls and reduce gender-based violence (O’Kane and Moore, 2012).

Parental involvement is imperative, and community-based child protection mechanisms need to find a way to facilitate it. Communities must have the capacity to protect their own children; placing capacity for protection in the hands of an elite few – such as teachers or community social workers – will make it exceptionally difficult to reach at-risk and marginalized children for protection (Save the Children, 2011). Though involving fathers has proven particularly difficult for some countries, the work of Plan Philippines offers a healthy new model

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that is worth considering (O’Kane and Moore, 2012).

Avoid stigmatization of specific categories of adults (or children) with excessive monitoring and/or targeted education. While there is a place for early-intervention, it needs to be done very carefully, and in a way that does not cause loss of dignity. More is explored on this issue below (Wessels, 2011).

#### *4.11 Looking Closer: Issues of Inclusion and Access for Children*

Structures for encouraging meaningful child participation were explored under Theme Two; as inclusion involves making mainstream society accessible for marginalized individuals, it is understood that practices to facilitate inclusion will be built on these foundations.

> In order to facilitate inclusive practices and balances of power among children, literature widely agrees that the most successful children's groups are voluntary, and open to all children.

> As partners such as Plan Pakistan have identified, activities must be accessible to differently-abled children. Their success in designing programs that are open to the community but accessible for all is noteworthy in the region. (O’Kane and Moore, 2012)

> Literature reveals that, in the past, attempts to be inclusive of at-risk children has led many programs to single out specific groups of children with awareness activities, routine monitoring, or community support. Many Plan countries offer specific initiatives focusing on girls (BIAGG) or children with disabilities, with the belief that proactive engagement of these specific populations is the best way to contribute towards an inclusive program. While literature showed that some Plan project countries feel successful about their inclusion strategies, a 2009 Save the Children report has criticized what it calls “inadvertent targeting” and stigmatization of vulnerable groups of children. The report cites that “excessive targeting of vulnerable children, such as orphans”, and even well-meaning practices such as individual assistance packages to

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certain types of children, may be counter-productive, “ostracizing” the target population. (Save the Children Sweden, 2009, pg. 33) The use of stigmatizing labels was found to be harmful to children and counter-productive to the original attempt to be inclusive.

Additionally harmful has been the tendency of external agencies – such as development organizations – to identify who was a vulnerable group. One Save the Children document recommends that, before beginning intervention, it is best to have the community itself identify which children are members of a vulnerable population, and to have the community intervene on their own terms, as the work of the child protection mechanism becomes more mature (Save the Children, 2008).

It is important to recall here that the systems approach to child protection, explored in Section 3.3, was originally developed because issues-based approaches were proving ineffective – and even counter-productive. The systems approach seeks to build off individual child and family strengths (UNICEF, 2010), taking each unit into account rather than linking populations together based off a single characteristic.

This history creates a paradox of facts inherently at tension with the need for proactive inclusion. If a single operational principle can be deduced from the existing literature, it is that there must be a delicately maintained balance in terms of project design. Proactive methods of inclusion must be identified that are tactful and non-stigmatizing, and which operate on the terms of the community itself rather than the terms of the supporting development organization.

With few best-practice operational tips relating to inclusion discovered through the literature review, we choose to assess the strengths in rural northwest China, and particularly in Plan China project communities. Perhaps by seeking existing practices at the community level, we will be able to learn methods for improved implementation within a new context.

## **Section 5: Entry Points for Analysis**

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As previously mentioned, there is inherent tension between building on the existing structure – which in China is traditionally hierarchical in nature – and managing issues of inclusion and participation.

In determining an entry-point for analysis, the primary question for consideration was: What are existing community structures and practices that could be capitalized upon and integrated with international best practice standards, for the protection of all children in the community?

Specifically, the following questions were used to help analyze the large body of material that was available:

- 1) What are existing community-level structures to support the development of community-based child protection mechanisms? Specifically, what are appropriate, existing platforms that offer a “link” between the formal and informal sectors, and which contribute to a systems approach?
- 2) What is a preferred model for facilitating child participation in the Chinese context?
- 3) What are views about the “cultural age” of Chinese children, and how does this affect their potential roles and responsibilities in regard to child participation in child protection work?
- 4) Who is identified by communities as being populations vulnerable to child protection issues?
- 5) What are existing practices for facilitating the involvement of these people in community life, and for reaching them with services or assistance? How inclusive are these existing structures, and how could they be made more inclusive?

## **Section 6: Methodology**

Once the literature review led to the determination of entry points for analysis, careful discussions were held with the client representative to determine what methodology should be

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used to gather necessary information, with particular regard for the sensitive nature of data-collection in China. It was agreed that, in addition to exploring published child protection literature from other organizations working in country, the main source of data relating to the Chinese context would be Plan's extensive collection of existing field notes and mapping data, the use of which was approved in writing by the Plan China Acting Program Support Manager.

Specifically, the chosen documents included published literature and reports by UNICEF China, Plan China, and the Beijing Children's Legal Aid and Research Center, but had a primary focus on the 41 internal files that could show more thorough information about community practices relating to child protection in Plan's project areas. The selected materials were written in both English and Mandarin Chinese.

Though most of the secondary internal data was anonymous, some documents were found to include the names of field staff who submitted the report, or identifying information about project locations. Thus, ethical use of the data required an anonymization process. As a solution to this problem, a file of all second-hand documents was created and sent to Plan's full-time intern, who stripped the mapping documents and field notes of identifiers, including names, dates, and project sites. The data was then returned to the researcher in anonymized form. Data was kept on a secure computer and accessed according to Plan China's intellectual property and IT confidentiality policy, being deleted from the researcher's personal hard drive at the completion of work on behalf of Plan. Because mapping material was stripped of identifiers, different types of raw secondhand data – specifically mapping and field notes – are cited as aggregated sources.

### *6.1 Analysis of Data*

The existing data was reviewed according to the three themes identified through the

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international literature review. Because of the lack of resourceful recommendations in international literature pertaining to the themes of inclusion and participation, it was determined not to limit the review to the discussion of questions outlined in the “Entry Point for Analysis” section, but – while focusing on these questions - to concurrently analyze the themes for any relevant data that might help shape recommendations. Data was reviewed for themes and sorted using Microsoft Excel, which assisted with the identification of recurring trends and further specification of sub-themes. Once these were identified, they were revisited in light of the international literature review. For each trend, the existing data was assessed to highlight key findings, which formed a basis for the recommendations provided.

## *6.2 Management of Risk*

Throughout the course of the research process, close communication was maintained with the client partner relating to the subject of risk, particularly given the politically sensitive nature of community development work in China. While collection of primary data was deemed impossible from a risk-management perspective, it was determined that the use of existing secondary data for the purposes of this study would not increase the likelihood of risk for either Plan employees, project communities, or the organization. Furthermore, it was determined that the study had significant capacity to have a positive impact on the development of programs that could help reduce child protection risks in project communities. With the use of existing published literature and anonymous secondary field data, a waiver for full ethical review was granted by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board.

## *6.3 Limitations*

The most significant limitation to this study arose from the fact that it is was not possible

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to gather primary field data, thereby limiting the study to the use of second-hand and published materials. Despite the large amount of material available from internal Plan mapping documents and field reports, the use of this existing data did have a strong impact on the quality of the information gathered and its direct relevance to the three core themes. Most importantly, the use of secondary data meant that there was limited first-hand information from children, particularly marginalized children, and extremely limited information from members of vulnerable populations. Since members of these populations are directly involved in the subject of this analysis, their absence as primary sources is acknowledged as a unique limitation of this paper that must be kept in mind when reviewing the final recommendations. In addition, the use of only second-hand data prevented the illustrative use of case examples when discussing the situation of vulnerable populations, which the client had specifically requested.

In addition to facing limitations in regards to Plan China's internal data, the prerequisite for appropriate risk management pertaining to political sensitivity of research meant that it was impossible to gather similar internal material from the handful of other organizations who conduct child protection work near Plan China's northwest project areas. This meant that only publicly available literature from other non-profit organizations could be utilized ---- and with these primarily referring to work outside of the province.

Another limitation for the project was one of scope. International literature surrounding best-practices in community-based child protection mechanisms highlight far more than the three themes chosen for discussion in this paper. However, due to practical limitations and a desire to provide Plan China with a meaningful analysis most relevant to the "hard-to-reach" places in its current work, it was not possible to explore other subjects to the depth that might originally have been desired. Significant areas for further analysis that were not included in this study will be discussed on Section 13, in *Recommendations for Future Research*.

Finally, it must be noted that China is a vast country in which each geographic region and

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each sector of society will have unique characteristics that may be separate from those found in other parts of the nation. Even among Plan China's internal mapping material, gathered from no more than eight project sites spanning Shaanxi Province and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, there was an extreme range of findings, particularly in regards to the challenges faced by children and families and the resources that were at their disposal to address these issues. For this reason, it was determined that this study should focus on the experiences of children and their families living in the communities in which Plan is focusing its 2012-2017 Child Protection Program, namely, rural and semi-rural communities in Shaanxi Province and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. While material from other non-profit organizations in the sector did reference work in other parts of the country, the ability of overall findings to be extrapolated to other regions of China cannot be confirmed. Meanwhile, it is important to note that Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the geographic area in which one of Plan's northwest project sites is located, has a significant Muslim community whose practices are somewhat different from those of the ethnic Han population found in other areas. However, the process of stripping identifiers from second-hand data meant that it was not possible to tell which information came from this community, and reference to the Muslim ethnic minority throughout the final mapping text were too few to analyze in an academic, conclusive manner. .

## **Section 7: Review of China-Based Literature**

### *7.1 Need of Children at the Local Level: An Analysis Based on Mapping and Research*

The first step in adapting international best-practices in CBCPMs to the Chinese context is to understand the needs of children in the target communities, particularly as they relate to child protection.

According to a 2010 research report published by the National Working Committee for Women and Children, the incidence rates of abuse are high among the general population, with

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boys experiencing more physical abuse (boys 64%, girls 45%) and emotional abuse (boys 66%, girls 55%) than girls. As many as 29% of girls are survivors of some form of contact or non-contact sexual abuse, while 22% of boys claim to have had similar experiences. Neglect, which is generally under-acknowledged in China as a form of abuse, was not included in the study. In Plan China project areas, statistics varied widely from region to region, with 42.9% percent of children claiming some form of physical or emotional abuse (Plan China, 2012)

While statistics surrounding the child protection situation in China tell an alarming tale, it is much more difficult to measure changing attitudes and anecdotal reports of how children experience abuse in their daily lives.

Of all forms of abuse, sexual abuse is by far the form that is least accepted by society, with laws tightly regulating justice for men who commit sexual violence against girls. Neighbors state that if they knew a child in their community had been raped, they would certainly report the case. However, mapping also showed that community members tend to view sexual harassment or abuse as a risk that came from strangers, while reports from other parts of China show that – at least in those regions – nearly 66% percent of young rape victims had been harmed by someone they knew, including family members. It may be for this reason that cases of sexual abuse are often viewed with a sense of shame by the affected family and handled very quietly whenever possible. For many children who experience sexual abuse and their families, no report is made to the police or justice departments, and police feel that it is difficult to intervene (Plan China, 2013a). When a family experiences the rape of a daughter and does choose to voluntarily make a report, there is often an extreme focus on justice and compensation – with little consideration for the child’s psychological or emotional health (Jiao, 2013). In China, legal definitions limit rape to acts of violence against a woman or girl child, and when boys experience sexual abuse, there is little legal support for their assistance (People’s Republic of China, 2011).

Field mapping revealed that social attitudes toward physical abuse are much more

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complex than attitudes toward sexual abuse. According to the mapping data, physical abuse severe enough to be interpreted locally as “domestic violence” is not accepted by society, and it was reported that grandparents or neighbors would generally stop parents from hitting children if there were “injuries,” the child started to have “mental health issues,” or if the child was bleeding. These sources indicated a fairly high threshold for physical discipline of children (Plan China, 2013a). However, a number of sources indicated that attitudes towards milder forms of corporal punishment and physical discipline for children may also be slowly changing (Plan China, 2013a). The Education Bureau has adopted policies outlawing the use of corporal punishment, and though mothers, fathers and teachers are reportedly those who continue to use the practice with the highest frequency, mapping material indicated that most of these individuals (personal behavior aside) were aware of the harm that these practices can cause for children. Several community sources – including middle school students - indicated that most parents stop using corporal punishment after children complete elementary school. According to parents, physical discipline of young children at home is generally mild and related with an isolated behavioral incident (Plan China, 2013a)

Some of the reform may only be taking place on the surface, however. Younger children, particularly young students - continue to feel fear from corporal punishment and physical discipline at the hands of parents and teachers. For elementary-aged children in some communities this corporal punishment reportedly remained quite severe, with children stating that they are hit frequently, and with disciplinarians using sticks, leaving prints, or hitting so hard that it was difficult to sit down the next day (Plan China, 2013a) Though teachers in many project areas said that they would no longer dare to hit a child due to increased government regulation, children in one project site reported that the most common discipline tactics used by teachers included, 1) being given additional homework, 2) being made to stand in class, 3) being forced to run, 4) doing pushups, and 5) hitting them on the hand or face – sometimes even with

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sticks. (Plan China, 2013a)

Emotional abuse and neglect are the two forms of violence against children that remain under-recognized by the community. “Cold violence” (ignoring) might be mentioned with a chuckle by parents who reflect ruefully on their own poor discipline tactics, but even the Mandarin expression for the most common form of violence against children is a combination word: “hitting-cursing” ( 打骂 ) (Plan China, 2013a) . This failure to acknowledge emotional abuse as a pattern of interaction that is harmful by itself indicates that many children who experience this form of violence may not receive the support that they need. Meanwhile, there is little awareness of neglect as a form of intentional abuse, though separate sources identified that children with disabilities, or special needs, might be at risk of this phenomenon (Plan China, 2013a). With the exception of deliberate child abandonment, in which children are understood to become orphans, there is no criminal framework for viewing neglect as an act of violence against children, and neighbors are rarely willing to report such caregivers who neglect their children (Plan China, 2013a). Adding to this phenomenon, as will be explored further below, is the complex understanding of neglect at a level of society where children are severely impacted by poverty and adult migration. .

## *7.2 Left Behind.*

The reason for the complexity surrounding neglect in China is the fact that there are 58 million children living in this country for whom one or both parents have left them at home in rural areas while the adults migrate to the cities to work (Plan China, 2012). Children are frequently left in the care of their grandparents, though other relatives, neighbors or boarding schools may also take on this responsibility. Children report that parents working outside the home may place a phone call once per week, though in some families, the communication is as

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little as once per month – or longer (Plan China, 2013a). Throughout the mapping, heart-wrenching stories of children who had little to no emotional attachment for their parents were cited by teachers and those few parents who remained in the community. In *Listening to Children's Voices*, a 2010 published mapping resource conducted by UNICEF China, there is a telling poem written by a child:

“ Fall upon fall passes by

And the leaves...[continue to change]

Only

The large hand no longer leads the hand that is small

And there is dullness to the sounds of joy and the voices of laughter that once filled our hearts.” [UNICEF China,2010, pg. 5]

Faced with a large number of children left in the care of elders and living in very rural areas, the government has launched a program for removal of schools, including some elementary schools but particularly middle and high schools, from many villages, bringing children from nearby rural areas together in boarding institutions at the township level. In some areas, all that remains in the village is an “Education Point” (教学点) , a small class taught by a literate villager in the equivalent of a one-room schoolhouse. The result is that the majority of middle-school students and a significant number of elementary school students in rural and semi-rural China live in boarding schools, with some schools offering boarding for children starting in kindergarten (Plan China, 2013a). Many of these children live at school for Monday thru Friday, returning home for a brief period on the weekends. There, in the case of left-behind children, they are faced with grandparents or other caregivers who only serve in that capacity part-time, a reality which has significant impact on family life.

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### *7.3 Parent-Child Relationships and Home Discipline Practices*

As to be expected with such a distance in the interpersonal relationship, many parents report difficulties communicating with their children and a general sense of helplessness when it comes to managing their children's behavior (Plan China, 2013a). Parents respond to the breakdown in relationships in different ways. China's family planning policy<sup>7</sup> has led some parents to feel very aware of the attention that they are not giving to their only daughter or son, with a haunting fear that their offspring will pay them back for their poor child-rearing when they reach old age (Plan China, 2013a). Some parents who have left their children behind respond to communication breakdown, guilt or fear by spoiling the children with financial gifts to buy their favor. Meanwhile, grandparents – who may feel sorry for the children – may refrain from discipline of their young wards, with many sources saying that grandparents would focus their attention on a child's food or clothing, but pay no heed to the child's moral upbringing or education. Parents or caregivers in other communities, on the other hand, may escape the discipline problem by staying busy. In at least one community it was said openly by parents and teachers alike that parents were too busy making money to care for their children (Plan China, 2013a). For a third sector of parents, the family-planning policy, coupled with a high drive to change the families' circumstances, leads parents to have increasingly high expectations on their children to perform in the face of competition (Plan China, 2013a). This then leads to the form of excessive discipline practices outlined in the first part of this chapter, with violent discipline gradually reducing among the general population as children enter middle school.

### *7.4 The Impact on Children and Their Behavior*

Children are strongly impacted by the absence of positive parenting practices and loose

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<sup>7</sup> China's Family Planning Policy, instituted in 1978, limits families to having one child. However, there are significant exceptions to the policy based on region and family status, so that many rural families have a second child, particularly if the first is a daughter.

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parental management structure. Caregivers report that children are easy to manage before the age of 12, but difficult to manage after that time, and evidence from teachers, parents, children, and community-members alike gives testimony to this fact (Plan China, 2013a). Of particularly concern to many adults is an influx of internet bars and pool parlors into semi-rural areas, causing children to be exposed not only to modern media with a shifting view of authority, but also to uncensored internet violence and pornographic material (Plan China, 2013a). Several sources agree that schoolyard violence and fighting between children and youth is a common issue, particularly in certain communities, and particularly when teachers are not around (Plan China, 2013a). Boys reportedly fight with fists and girls tend to fight with words. Conflict reportedly takes place among both younger and older grades, though extremely violent incidences (resulting in severe bodily injury, sexual assault, or death) have generally been limited to the middle and senior school (Plan China, 2013a).

### *7.5 Who is Responsible?*

The situation of children in communities has led to a phenomenon of mutual frustration and even blame. Caregivers expressed strong concern that schools would only manage a child's studies, and that the academic institution was failing to provide for children's holistic development and discipline (Plan China, 2013a). Meanwhile, teachers expressed frustration at what it is like for children to be left-behind by parents to go through the boarding school system, with weakening familial relationships and little accountability from caregivers. Many teachers complain that they have been forced to become the moral authority in young people's lives, and that parents are not sufficiently invested in the conversation concerning how to raise their children (Plan China, 2013a). Teachers suggested that only young parents with education would have concern for a child's moral upbringing, and that other parents would just send children to school for learning, and view this as the fulfillment of their parental responsibilities (Plan China,

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2013a).

Mapping revealed that the overall tone in the communities is one of perceived helplessness and mutual blame. Parents expressed feelings that they must make provision for their families a priority, and shared their pain as they watch children shut down in the face of migration and shifting family dynamics. They feel that – in the midst of the busy-ness – they lack both skills and capacity to offer sound discipline (Plan China, 2013a). Meanwhile, there is concern that grandparents have limited ability to care for a new generation of young people. Teachers feel that they are being asked to serve as both teacher and parent to an entire class of students. Community members reported that children who are left behind with their grandparents have become depressed, frustrated, and weary of school. In short, they just miss their parents – or the life that they had before their parents left (UNICEF China, 2010).

In this environment, while some communities have come together and maintain positive outlooks for the future of children, the elements above mean that most families face the challenges alone. As one anonymous county-level official stated, “While there is advocacy for mutual assistance in the villages, the general practice is that ‘each person should sweep the snow that falls in front of his own house.’”<sup>8</sup> (Plan China, 2013a)

## **Section 8: Theme One: Building Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms on the Foundation of Existing Structures**

### *8.1 The Target Issues of a CBCPM in China*

Prior to discussing data concerning the existing structures that should be considered in the development of community-based child protection mechanisms, it is important to be clear about the type of situations that these mechanisms might be addressing. There is a saying, in China, that “Little incidents shouldn’t leave the village, and big incidents shouldn’t leave the town.” The

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<sup>8</sup> The interpretation of this saying is that “each family will mind their own business.”

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township level in China is the administrative level at which the Public Security Bureau, Department of Justice, Department of Civil Affairs, and other governing bodies have their lowest level of office. The size of townships will vary, but in some areas of rural China can easily reach populations of 200,000 or more. As identified in the introduction, the purpose of this paper is to find recommendations for the implementation of CBCPMs at the level of society that comes below the township; though some of these structures, such as middle schools, might exist in the location of the township, they are administratively involved with reaching smaller portions of people, and therefore a better platform for taking an early-intervention approach to child protection issues (Plan China, 2013a). For this reason, it is important to assess what sort of issues community members might report to the township level, and what sort of issues would be considered worthy of handling “in the community” – the level at which our proposed CBCPM would operate.

According to the mapping data, “big incidents” were generally understood to be violent fights or situations that could have a significant impact on a family’s household and livelihood, with examples including physical health, economic issues, or a child’s education problems. Villagers reported that if they knew that a child had been robbed or raped, they would certainly report it to the township level (Plan China, 2013a). Children stated that if there was a fight between youth that took place outside of school grounds, or if a child was injured badly, they would report the incident to the police. In a domestic violence case, if a wife is physically injured or has broken bones, she might go to the police. Interestingly enough, “big things” were also understood to be things that involved influential people in the village, presumably for whom it would be easier to garner favor with township service representatives (Plan China, 2013a).

Little things, on the other hand, were reported to include matters that reportedly do not have a significant impact on the family’s household and livelihood. Examples given included family conflicts that didn’t involve the law, arguments between neighbors, domestic relationships,

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the psychological health of children, and family discipline issues. Overwhelmingly, it is evident that the root of most child protection problems occurs at what is considered by villagers to be the “little incident” level, one which, in the respondent’s eyes, can be handled by the community (Plan China, 2013a)

### *8.2 Experience from Plan and UNICEF on Existing Structure*

One of the most well-recorded experiments in community-based child protection mechanisms in China was funded by UNICEF for the period of 2006-2010, in the six urban areas of Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province; Nanjing, Jiangsu Province; Tianjin Municipality; Xuanyang, Liaoning Province; Jinan, Shandong Province; and Chengdu in Sichuan Province. During the allotted time-period, project areas were given a select amount of funds and encouraged to develop unique, localized models for child protection work in communities (Zhang, 2008).

For the most part, the pilot projects focused on activities at the urban equivalent of the township, mobilizing different government bureaus in response toward high-risk child protection cases. In some areas, however, practices were developed for child protection work at the urban equivalent of the village level (Zhang, 2008). In two locations, the “street office” (街道办), which is the urban equivalent of the rural village committee, was designated as being primarily responsible for child protection work. Either “exemplary community members” or another qualified individual was hired as full-time staff working on behalf of the project. Committees, comprised of professionals, professors, and volunteer college students, were mobilized under the street office to conduct public education and understand community issues pertaining to children. Noteworthy about both this project and others was the formality of practices instituted, whether that be the official hiring of a full-time staff, the creation and launch of advisory committees, the involvement of professors and college students, or the formal creation of service networks at the

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next administrative level. A critical assessment written at the end of the project commented that this sort of bureaucratic structure may be necessary for the success of child protection work in China (Zhang, 2008).

As noted above, Plan China launched a Child Protection Systems Development Project in 2011, which included, as one of its activities, the design of a proposed structure for an inter-agency referral network and village thru county level child protection mechanism. Under the expert advice of international consultant Stephanie Delaney, but limited by fairly vague mapping materials, it was determined at that time that the two primary structures for consideration at the local level of society were schools and the rural village committee, explored further below.

In analyzing community mapping data from across Plan project sites, one important goal was to consider what models would be appropriate for use in rural China, and also what further developments could be made on the basis of Delaney's original recommendations (Delaney, 2012).

### *8.3 Village Committee and Household Monitors*

The primary structure that offers governance below the township level is the village committee, a body of 3-7 elected members chosen according to the population of the governed territory, which offers services and governance to administrative villages<sup>9</sup> (Shaanxi Province, 2011). Feedback from anonymous county level officials in one mapping exercise stated that the village committee is seen by citizens as being a part of the national system, despite the fact that its members are locally elected in a different manner from governance for the rest of society. The members of the committee include, generally, a village chief, a vice village chief, a party

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<sup>9</sup> Administrative villages are opposed to "natural villages," which are divided according to geographic lines. A single administrative village might be composed of several natural villages.

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secretary, a women's cadre<sup>10</sup>, an accountant, and, possibly, other elected members fulfilling the role of conflict mediators<sup>11</sup>. Of these members, it is the village chief, party secretary, and women's cadre who are core members and who will generally be present regardless of the size of the village. The positions are filled by elected civil servants, so representatives do not generally come from marginalized populations. Children under the age of 18 are legally prohibited from serving on the village committee (Shaanxi Province, 2011).

The village committee and its associates have a significant role in local governance, promoting welfare and keeping peace in rural villages, acting as a buffer between the general public and the system at township level. Data reveals that when incidents related to the keeping of the peace arise, the village committee will first and foremost try to resolve issues within the community, only reporting to the township level if they cannot handle the situation themselves. According to anonymous village committee representatives, it is the village committee rather than the Public Security Bureau that generally handles domestic violence cases, though who is specifically involved varies from location to location. In some areas, community members cite that they would find the party secretary, while in other areas, it was explained that conflict resolution would be done by other associates of the committee, mobilized into a local task force (Plan, 2013a).

According to Article 62 of the Law for the Protection of Minors, the village committee is responsible in rural areas for confronting and mediating with parents who fail to fulfill their parental responsibilities, such as by inflicting abuse upon a child (People's Republic of China, 2006). While some village committee representatives report that they are able to successfully handle cases of child maltreatment in the community, others explain that their experience tends

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<sup>10</sup> The term "cadre" is the common translation of the broad Chinese term referring to representatives of the communist party, particularly those who serve in civil office.

<sup>11</sup> The role of conflict mediation is a formal one at the township level of society, and also in some villages. Mediators are persons who seek to undertake conflict resolution through mutual compromise, without seeking legal measures.

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to focus more on conflict between adults.

. Within the village committee is the women's cadre, who also serves as the lowest level of the Women's Federation structure. She is responsible for collecting data concerning women's issues, mobilizing public education and services for women in need, as well as mediating simple family conflicts – particularly surrounding issues of domestic violence. In some communities, she also coordinates the family planning household monitors, described below, in their work of monitoring the implementation of the family planning policy (Plan China, 2013a). In Plan China project communities, many women's cadres serve as volunteers for the Plan-sponsored community child development network (CCDN), a platform that offers early childhood care and development, as well as parenting education services, to caregivers of children age 0-8.

As administrative villages in Plan project areas can have populations of over 3,000 people, the village committee must rely on another level of human resource to successfully provide its services to the community. It also has the authority to establish smaller committees under itself, including committees for conflict mediation, public security, and monitoring of the family planning policy (Shaanxi Province, 2011). Though each community is slightly different, it was identified that most villages have a system of "household monitors," laypersons who help to enforce policy and ensure good governance among the local population (Plan China, 2013a). Household monitors may fulfill the role of either "security monitors" or "family planning monitors", the latter of which are mobilized by the women's cadre to conduct home visits and make reports on the implementation of the family planning policy. Though situations vary depending on the village, household monitors may be responsible for anywhere from 12 to 30 households. In some villages, the community is divided into "household groups", with every group having both a group leader and up to two household monitors. Interpersonal issues at the rural level, if they cannot be solved privately, are resolved first within the "group" under the mediation of the household monitor and group leader. (In one community, there was reference to

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a “mediation committee,” ( 调委会 ) though it was unclear if the members of the mediation committee are also household monitors or are organized according to a similar structure) (Plan China, 2013a) Community respondents report that mediation in household groups is usually successful, and does not require further intervention of the village committee. In at least one project site, village committee members recommended that each household group should designate a household monitor to be a child protection focal point, and that these focal points should report to the women’s cadre (Plan China, 2013a)

#### *8.4 “Influential Elders” and Community Volunteers – An Unofficial Task Force*

Mapping material frequently referred to the practice of mobilizing ‘influential persons’ or volunteers, whose relationship to the household monitors is unclear from the analyzed data. As stated in one mapping document, “The Village Committee will achieve their objectives through respected members of the community or volunteers. These people act on principals of fairness and justice, and are people that the community members all respect” (Plan China, 2013a) Reports cite that these people of influence are generally elders in the community who have a close personal relationship with the village cadre. Influential elders may be called upon to mediate conflict between families, domestic violence, or inheritance issues, with several sources identifying that these elders may have the ability to resolve conflicts that the village cadre does not have the ability to address – such as conflicts between children and their parents. These people operate on a voluntary basis, and though they cannot become directly involved in mediating criminal cases such as murder or rape, they will report such community incidents through the village committee to the Public Security Bureau, bringing it to the national system at the township level (Plan China, 2013a).

In a system that is unclear in its relationship to the influential elders, some project

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communities also identified the mobilization of focal points to conduct public education on behalf of certain bureaus (designating, for example, a legal focal point for the public security bureaus and justice office.) (Plan China, 2013a) One example of such volunteers includes, in Plan program areas, the use of volunteers to disseminate child sponsorship letters and – sometimes – material relating to child rights and protection<sup>12</sup>. In contrast to the use of college students and professors as volunteers in the UNICEF project, respondents in one community mapping said that it was important to find someone who was kind and who had time to go into the community and chat with busy, illiterate parents about child-rearing practices. The specific recommendation was to find elders, caring for their grandchildren, who could be organized as a volunteer task force for awareness raising (Plan China, 2013a). Others cited that parents needed someone to patiently explain concepts to them using the local dialect, rather than having someone from the outside come to share this information. Another recommendation from villagers was the need to identify “responsible villagers” to serve as child protection focal points in natural villages, which may be some distance from the administrative village center (Plan China, 2013a).

Despite the Village Committee resource and its supporting network of household monitors, influential elders, and community volunteers, members in several communities report that the village committee is considered part of the formal system and that approaching them is seen as a last resort. At least one report showed that community members would not go to these people with a child protection issue, because no one there would know how to help children (Plan China, 2012a) Instead, as anonymous respondents stated in one community, in most cases, ‘we can take care of [problems] ourselves.’ (Plan China, 2013a)

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<sup>12</sup> Plan China volunteers are persons recruited by the sponsorship of department to help collect and disseminate letters to and from sponsored children. Due to the large volume of letters circulating through these volunteers, they are not generally involved in other Plan China activities.

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### *8.5 Neighbors and Kin*

Repeatedly, it was cited that community members with concerns at home would find their neighbor or “community” to help solve the problem (Plan China, 2013a). (It is important to note that the line becomes quickly blurred between who is a “neighbor” and who may be an influential elder capable of mediating family concerns on behalf of the village committee.) According to the data, if a parent were to beat their child, the intervention of neighbors is more important than the intervention of the village committee. For example, if parents use severe corporal punishment to discipline their children, neighbors or elderly acquaintances would generally step in to persuade the parent to use positive measures (Plan China, 2013a). These same neighbors might also talk to the child, trying to persuade him or her to behave in a fashion that will not bring on the parents’ wrath. While evidence indicates that elderly neighbors would have the most authority to persuade younger parents to take on new discipline measures, grandparent caregivers are not above reproach; in one village, community members cited that if a grandparent was cursing a child with words that were ‘hard to hear’, neighbors would try to pull the elder away until he could calm down.

The constructive support of neighbors is particularly important for parents in the community. Adult respondents in community mapping explained how “society raises a child together”, how parents all talk with one another about good practices for child-rearing, and how neighbors have been influential in offering guidance to their own children (Plan China, 2013a). Some parents cited that they would intentionally involve a neighbor to act as a go-between if communication with their child had become troubled. Meanwhile, if a teacher has used corporal punishment on their child, parents will talk to neighbors about their concerns rather than going directly to the school.

Children, also, reported that in some situations they would go to neighbors, a person who had a close relationship with their parents, or other trusted adults for help if there was trouble at

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home. In fact, after grandparents, close family friends were some of the most frequently cited sources of help for a child who experienced abuse and neglect.

The threshold for neighbor involvement in domestic issues depends on the village and the quality of interpersonal relationships in that community. In one community, it was cited that neighbors would criticize parents if children experienced physical injuries or bleeding as a result of being beaten (Plan China, 2013a). In another community, it was explained that adults would only become involved in the situation of a child whose family they knew, and that if they did not know the family, they would listen but not get involved – even if the child was being beaten (Plan China, 2013a). In yet another village, community members expressed that they would certainly go up and pull apart two children who were fighting, even if the child was not their own; members of this same village gave accounts of how they had offered guidance and support to neighbor children (Plan China, 2013a). However, several sources noted that the sense of community responsibility towards children outside ones own home is not found everywhere, and is dependent very much on the “atmosphere” of the village.

By far, the persons whom young children reported seeking out most to help them if they experienced violence were members of their family and kinship network. [In fact, mapping materials explicitly stated that children would not go to the village committee or the police in the event of experiencing abuse (Plan China, 2013a).] In cases of abuse at the home, family members were often chosen to hear a young child’s concerns based on their perceived ability to handle a tough situation, with grandparents cited most frequently as sources of aid. Meanwhile, several children shared that they would find their mother, if their father hit them, their father, if their mother hit them or a grandparent if their parents hit them (Plan China, 2013a). These people were then expected to serve as go-betweens in the family. Aunts, uncles, or older cousins were also a source of support. Young children even reported that they would find their parents if they encountered sexual abuse. For older children and some younger children, however, there was not

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a willingness to talk to parents about discipline at the hands of their school-teacher. Children reported that parents would certainly side with the teacher and discipline them a second time, only making matters worse (Plan China, 2013a)

### *8.6 School Structures and Functions*

In addition to relatives and older peers, children who sought out the support of adults reported that they might tell about an incident of violence to their teacher or another administrator at the school, especially if it happened at school. Generally, this form of reporting to teachers happens among elementary school students; as will be discussed further in the following section, older students are more inclined to discuss their troubles with peers (Plan China, 2013a). Meanwhile, if parents are unable to understand a child's behavior issues, or if the child is having difficulties at school, parents will go to find teachers and discuss the challenge with them. Though schools very rarely intervene in the situation of a child at home for reasons explored below, they will use parent meetings to share with caregivers about positive discipline practices for children.

The fact that such a large number of children live in boarding schools, coupled with the relative trust that teachers have from children and families alike, means that schools in China need to be uniquely prepared for response to child protection concerns.

At present, every elementary school is equipped with a "Safety Leadership Team," which is responsible for dealing with issues of accidental injury, food safety, traffic safety, and natural disaster. Though the head principal is involved in this team, key to its function are the services of the vice-principal, who in most schools is the individual primarily responsible for the implementation of law and the preservation of child safety. In some schools, the "safety leadership team" and vice principal are already involved in keeping files on at-risk children such as orphans and those with disabilities, though how widespread this practice is remains unclear.

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Some schools have a designated “youth league counselor” who is also in charge of the “youth league,” a club associated with the communist party that encourages students to be good citizens, and which is discussed further under the theme of child participation (Plan China, 2013a). This youth league counselor may also be responsible for children’s “moral education.” This is seen as being different from the role of guidance counselors; while most schools have a room for offering counsel to children, there are no teachers trained in counseling, and schools express that this lack of human resources is a significant issue.

In addition to these teachers directly involved in child safety and psychosocial wellbeing, there is a large task force of homeroom teachers, dormitory teachers, and support staff. It is these people who interact with parents in the community through children’s day activities, parent teacher meetings, and, occasionally, home visits.

In Plan’s current project design, it has been recommended that schools establish “child protection working groups” on the basis of the existing “safety leadership team.” In the past, the recommended model has been to designate 3-4 teachers, including the vice principal, the youth league counselor, moral education teacher, or guidance counselor, and 1-2 homeroom teachers, each to take on different responsibilities relating to personal safety training for children, prevention education and awareness raising among adults, identification and reporting of children at high risk of abuse, as well as coordinating simple psychosocial support for children or families at lower levels of risk. Schools have openly agreed that this would be a positive step to ensuring child safety, while mentioning a few concerns (Plan China, 2013a).

The first concern is that teachers – particularly more capable teachers - are very busy, and that the responsibilities of the Education Bureau are “limitlessly large” (Plan China, 2013a) In order to be able to handle both prevention and support work for child protection, school administrators recommended that, in addition to core focal points, each homeroom teacher should participate in the group (Plan China, 2013a). Among the core focal points, the moral

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education teacher should be assigned to respond to child protection incidents, while homeroom teachers can continue to participate in public education and awareness for children. In short, administrators feared that placing all of the responsibilities of a proposed child protection committee on 3-4 teachers would not be possible.

Additionally, school administrators reported some apprehension about becoming involved directly in support for children in need and their families (Plan China, 2013a). As Plan China's programs have so far recommended that schools only be involved in low-risk cases that are more simple to respond to, the breadth of these cases and the complexity of family situations that can exist even within this low-risk framework cannot be ignored<sup>13</sup>. Though a portion of teachers conduct home visits already, and while a child protection group to respond to the needs of boarding school students would make sense, direct involvement in more complicated family situations would be extremely difficult for the school. Teachers feared repercussions from family members unhappy with school intervention with home affairs, fearing that they might make trouble in the community or cause them to suffer economic losses, for example, by pressuring the teachers to pay a child's medical fees (Plan China, 2013a).

Overall, it was concluded that schools could take records of at-risk children, offer public education and personal safety prevention, but that the village committee should be more involved than the school in work with at-risk families. While some teachers expressed that they did not have either the responsibility or the ability to do too many things relating to child protection, they also shared that the village committee has expressed itself as being happy to oblige and offer support in responding to cases of abuse at home (Plan China, 2013a).

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<sup>13</sup> According to Plan China's Child Protection Mechanism Guidelines, low-risk cases are described as follows: "Children facing low levels of risk are often categorized as such because they are not fully dependent on adults, and because they have appropriate levels of assertiveness and knowledge to assist with personal safety. Physically, children in this category either have not been injured, or are only lightly injured on their hands, knees or other limbs. For a child to be categorized as low-risk, this type of injury has typically been a one-time event, and has not caused the child any discernible emotional or psychological harm. The low-risk child is able to attend school as usual, and is very willing to return to his or her home. The caregiver of a low-risk child has willingness and ability to care for the child, and demonstrates desire to learn positive discipline practices.

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In rural China, schools are the place where a large number of children live for the majority of the week, and while this means that the school can take on significant protective roles, it also becomes a place where new problems can arise. As mentioned briefly above, there are instances when school teachers are themselves the perpetrators of harm against children. In these cases, though younger children might have the courage to tell their parents, other children might choose to report directly to the headmaster of the school or another supervisor. Article 63 of the Law on the Protection of Minors indicates that the Education Bureau, which has strict policies against corporal punishment, should be responsible for handling teachers who demonstrate poor conduct or inflict corporal punishment on children, with only very “severe” cases being referred to the police for intervention (People’s Republic of China, 2006). On the surface, this approach seems to work well, with teachers citing that they do not dare to use corporal punishment for fear of disciplinary action. At another level, however, there are risks to having the primary focal point for child protection located within the school. In recent years, social workers at service providing agencies have been told of child-molesting teachers who were reported to their superiors for disciplinary action, only to be switched to another school, where they continued to harm children for years before being discovered.

Another structure for child protection work in schools revolves around the issue of child participation, horizontal reporting practices, and peer-support groups. As these topics comprise a key theme of this paper, they will be explored further separately under “Theme Two.”

### *8.7 Building Networks, Mobilizing Local Resources and Strengthening Family Systems.*

One overall trend throughout the data was the need to build collaborative networks. There appears to be very little communication between the village committee and schools, with some communities specifically calling for the establishment of these partner relationships (Plan China, 2013a). There could be challenges to this, as anecdotal evidence suggests that village committee

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members and teachers view themselves to be on different levels of society and do not currently have much interaction. However, multiple sources cited a need to break down this barrier and facilitate dialogue.

Additionally, there was fragmented information about the work of existing community structures and practices other than those conducted by the village committee and the school. Many of the mapping sources were unclear in their description of the type and frequency of existing programs and activities going on in different communities to support left-behind children. Activities such as public awareness campaigns surrounding child rights or welfare were frequently mentioned with no indication of if they were an ongoing practice or a one-time event, and if so, when – and under what circumstances - these events had occurred. Meanwhile, it was clear that certain select communities had existing structures – such as mosques or cooperative networks – that could be useful in mobilizing child protection work (Plan China, 2013a).

Staffing and capacity issues were a recurring theme, with both the village committee and school reporting shortages of manpower to do the large amount of tasks set before them. Particularly at the village committee level, where education levels are lower, there was reported concern about lack of knowledge and skills, with Plan staff who currently partner with the women’s cadre to conduct CCDN work making note of the challenge it is to train these individuals with new concepts that they can share with others (Plan China, 2013b).

Finally, another trend throughout the data was the need for an increased role of families in work with children, and burden-shifting from the school to the communities. School representatives, troubled by the impact of children being left-behind, frequently called for more involvement of parents, both in child protection work and in routine care and concern for their offspring. As one mapping note stated, “The family needs to rely on parents.” (Plan China, 2013a) Without decentralizing the burden of child care from the schools, either through networks of other community resources, increasing human resources, or mobilizing parental involvement,

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the schools may not be able to live up to the task of child protection functions.

## **Section 9: Theme Two: Child Participation in Child Protection**

Child participation and the ability to mobilize children and young people for public awareness and peer support is one of the more difficult issues encountered by community-based child protection mechanisms the world over, and the situation in China is equally complex. As a traditionally patriarchal and authoritarian society, children have not always had the role of expressing their views or mobilizing themselves to take ownership over child-led activities. However, acknowledging the reality of children living in dormitories and the lack of adults available to offer support to another generation, and also in light of best practice, the purpose of this section is to candidly explore options for increasing child participation and allowing them to have a greater role in community-level child protection projects.

### *9.1 What Are Recommended Structures for Facilitating Participation?*

As noted above, it was the struggling attempt to establish child advisory boards – renamed “child participation groups” in Plan China project areas - that partly contributed to the decision to draft this paper. At the time, it was discovered that teachers who were trained to mobilize student groups were not reliable, and that secondary school teachers did not provide follow-up training for student participants at all (Plan China, 2013b). Principles of diversity and volunteerism were also implemented poorly in the first round of attempts to form child groups, with teachers appointing a number of participants, and singling out children with disabilities or children from single-parent homes to become involved (Plan China, 2013b).

An attempt to correct the problem, in which the opportunity to volunteer was again provided to students, was more successful than the first endeavor. On the second round, 50% of applicants were students who were not already involved in classroom leadership activities, while

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half of the volunteers were girls. Once another training was given directly to these students and follow-up was done appropriately, the activities that the children were involved in were reportedly quite successful (Plan China, 2013b).

Recommendations from the international literature review raised questions as to whether facilitating child participation in schools and communities might be more successful than the current model of teacher-facilitated child participation groups. Unfortunately, a review of mapping data concerning the recommended type of structure for facilitating child participation in schools was inconclusive. Particularly noticeable at this point was the absence of candid material about this question that had been gathered from children. Some mapping material indicated that it would be better for children to have their own child participation group, which would then interact with the child protection working group. Other mapping material suggested that child members in an adult group may be more appropriate – particularly when discussing activities that adults would be responsible for implementing. Data from one community suggested that a child-owned model, which would give more independence for children, might require teachers and parents to have a better understanding of the principle of participation, and to be more accommodating to the children’s work (Plan China, 2013a). As the understanding of teachers and parents is particularly important to the success of the model, the mapping material suggested that it might be easier to have children attend an adult group, where their views would be consulted. However, a review of older, published Plan literature revealed that former attempts to actually involve child representatives on adult action committees had proven remarkably unsuccessful, with children being very limited in their opportunities for expression (Ye, et. Al., 2003). Recalling the recommendations made by Moore and O’Kane, no comments were found on the ability of adults to truly facilitate child participation in a primarily adult meeting, given the cultural context.

In an effort to build upon existing structures for child participation, attention was also

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given to the existence of Youth Leagues, communist-party clubs for honorable individuals that function on elementary and middle school campuses. In areas other than the communities in which the child advisory boards were piloted, a common practice by Plan field staff has been to develop child participation groups on the basis of the Youth League. The primary problem with this approach, however, is one of diversity and volunteerism. The Youth Leagues are designed as an honor for students, and though they tend to offer admission on a very broad basis, particularly in elementary school, there is an application process in which teachers may choose to deny students access due to their behavioral or academic struggles (Plan China, 2013a). Reports from other programs around China boldly indicate that voluntary participation in such existing structures is fraught with discrimination, as teachers might directly block involvement for children who don't get good grades (UNICEF China, 2010). Even in the best case scenario for how Youth League clubs might be operated, there is a great risk for leaving out certain populations of at-risk or marginalized children.

## *9.2 Children's Roles in Public Education*

What activities would be appropriate for child participation groups to be involved in? The first subject to explore is one of children's involvement in public education and awareness, both between peers and among adults.

Prior to embarking on this discussion, it is important to explore cultural concepts about coming-of-age in children and the degree to which children are recognized by adults for their views and opinions. Second-hand data demonstrated that children are generally viewed as adults once they reach the age of 18, are able to participate in doing household chores, and are able to manage their own money. Nonetheless, multiple sources reflected significant coming-of-age for children around the age of 12, or completion of the fifth grade. This is the age at which most parents reported that they would stop using physical discipline on children, and also the age at

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which community members reported that children were “able to dialogue,” and “have decision-making abilities.” (Plan China, 2013a) Several sources revealed the cultural perception that children become very rebellious, also, around the age of 12, and that teenagers tend to have “extreme views” which they might “intentionally express to shock their parents.” (Plan China, 2013a) This indicates that some of the views and opinions expressed by children, if they are seen as being too progressive by family members, may fail to be persuasive for adults.

Referencing back to the child participation groups first established in Plan’s pilot project, mapping material revealed that the name was originally changed from “child advisory board” to “children’s participation groups” because it was culturally difficult for adults to come to terms with the concept of children serving as “advisors.” Nonetheless, modern society, in which children have significant access to information through technological means, and in which only children are treated with more care, has increased the proportional power of children in the home. Children are increasingly able to participate in decisions concerning their own lives, with parents feeling that children have more voice at home – and with parents more willing to listen – than in past generations. Some parents reported that children would talk to them openly about their parenting methods, and others stated that they feel that they cannot hit their children if their children stand up to them. Still other community members reflect that it is very important for children to be taught about their responsibilities, as well as their rights, so as to avoid undermining positive forms of parental authority (Plan China, 2013a. Unfortunately, there was no data from children available to assess this phenomenon from different angles. However, past Plan China program experiences indicate that the successfulness of child participation in project activities within this country is largely dependent upon the attitudes of adults (Ye, et al. 2003). The increase in status for children within the home, induced by migration, influx of media, and the family planning policy, is a good sign of improving groundwork for child participation in child protection activities.

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After the second trial of child participation groups in the last pilot project, children were involved in designing public education materials concerning personal safety and non-violence, which children were very eager about and which reportedly were successful (Plan China, 2013b). Children developed posters, held speaking competitions concerning children's right to protection, and utilized June 1<sup>st</sup> children's day to reach their peers and community with knowledge about protection. A similar, 4-month short term project hosted by UNICEF mobilized children to use public education leaflets, new media channels, and announcements to educate others about topics ranging from children's rights to domestic violence (UNICEF China, 2010). Response to children's involvement in this sort of public education has generally been positive, regardless of the project site. Teachers in Plan project communities felt strongly that the involvement of children would increase their sense of ownership over the topics, and once the groups were formally established, schools actually recommended that children should become more involved in public education relating to child protection. Parents in UNICEF project communities also responded positively. "Child protection forum activities are very good; they exercise the children's capacities, while also increasing our own knowledge. At the same time, we can have the opportunity to hear children express what is on their hearts, and to take a close look at where we as parents and child workers have failed."(UNICEF China, 2010, pg. 36). Back in Plan project communities, where mobilizing children to provide child protection education to adults has not yet been tried, it is reported that schools often use the methodology of "little hands leading big hands" to conduct public awareness campaigns, primarily on topics such as health and hygiene (Plan China, 2013a). Meanwhile, Plan projects utilizing Child-to-Community approaches in the past have been quite successful (Ye, et al, 2003).

With these experiences and data from community members in mind, it seems that child participation in child protection awareness through Child-to-Family and Child-to-Community approaches are worth exploring, though children need to be coached in how to present this

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information in a way that is palatable to adults and not seen as being confrontational or undermining positive forms of parental authority.

### *9.3 Peer Support, Early Intervention, and Horizontal Reporting Channels*

The role of children in peer support and early intervention is more controversial at the international level, and exploration of this theme within the Chinese context necessitates exploring the attitudes of children, parents, and responding teachers alike.

Original mapping data indicated that while primary school children sometimes prefer going to teachers and parents with their personal safety concerns, children in middle school were overwhelmingly more likely to seek the support of peers (Plan China, 2013a). This would particularly be true in cases in which there was harm perpetrated by a teacher, for students would be afraid that their parents would place the blame on the students themselves. In some communities, peer support would also be sought when parents would perpetrate harm against their children; particularly for older children, peer support might seem more helpful than the support of teachers or relatives (Plan China, 2013a).

Peer support for elementary school children and willingness to report through them is a fairly complicated affair. Mapping material revealed that most young children would not be willing to report a safety or protection concern through their peers, unless they truly felt that their peers could help them. While most classrooms have a built-in governance structure complete with class monitor – a child who is designated by the teacher to help mediate and manage classroom conflicts – children in the mapping material overwhelmingly declared that these ‘classroom monitors’ were not to be trusted (Plan China, 2013a). In some communities, it seemed that peer reporting was downright worrisome to younger children, and that this approach would stop children from reporting. There was also concern that if children knew their peers would tell the teacher, they would not be willing to report through their classmates. In the few

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cases were younger students were willing to talk with another child about their problems, they were most interested in finding older students who were more influential and capable of offering practical support, by mediating or using their relationships to resolve the problem (Plan China, 2013a).

Mapping material indicated that peer involvement in conflict resolution – similar to the adult concept of mediation used in the villages – was a quite common practice among children of all ages. The reason for this may lay in the fact that teachers and parents do not always get involved in conflict between peers, believing that a healthy amount of practice in conflict resolution is a part of their personal growth on the journey to adulthood (Plan China, 2013a). Once conflict becomes more confrontational, several sources indicated that children in both elementary and middle school who were friends with one party of a violent fight would pull the children apart. However, this sort of mediation and peer conflict resolution was purely based on friendship networks; boys, particularly, reported that if they were not friends with a person who was involved in a fight, they would not offer to become involved.

The one instance in which the concept of peer support seemed to receive positive feedback was in regards to issues of sexual abuse in middle schools. Girls reportedly spend more time together talking about their personal problems, and may be more willing to offer support about these issues if a classmate comes to them (Plan China, 2013a). Meanwhile, it was reported from several different sources that sexual abuse would be very difficult for children to discuss with their parent or teacher, and that they might choose to share about these intensely personal experiences only with a very close friend. This information suggests that it could be important to equip older students with basic knowledge about sexual abuse prevention, meanwhile encouraging them about what it means to respond appropriately to their friends and encourage reporting in the incidence that they discover these issues.

Overall, the indication was that peers are able to console their friends and offer

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suggestions, but are not able to offer more tangible support in cases of child abuse (Plan China, 2013a). If they were to support their peers to make a report about a child protection incident, mapping material suggested that it was very important for the student who supported his or her peers to feel safe, without fear of revenge from classmates, teachers, parents, or other people who perpetrated the harm. Children who were asked directly about the concept of horizontal reporting and peer support replied that it would be very important for students to understand 1) confidentiality, 2) friendship, and 3) trust-building (Plan China, 2013a). The overall indication was that children would prefer for peer support to occur as an organic function of their natural friendships, and would not be trusting of a system in which information from peer reporting was then passed on to a child protection focal point within the child protection mechanism.

Little information was available about the ability of children to advocate with the parents of their friends or take part in early intervention home visits, as practiced in some countries. Mapping data from one community revealed that children may discuss family or personal problems with their friends, but that it would not be appropriate for children to advocate with parents of friends until they were around the age of 14 – which is an age beyond that of most children in Plan’s project schools (Plan China, 2013a). Also, it was consistently noticed that when seeking to resolve a conflict, members involved would find a respected older person to be their representative. This held true both in cases of family tension (where grandparents or respected elders were asked to mediate), or in cases of peer conflict, where students in older grades or “big brothers” and “big sisters” were often sought out. The indication, which is not surprising in light of historical tradition, is that persons of age and wisdom are most respected in Chinese culture, and that it is less effective for young people to approach elders with words of advice. Taken in light of the other information gathered, it seems that this form of child participation in early intervention work would not be recommended.

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#### *9.4 Finding Time and Getting Permission*

One of the biggest questions about conducting child participation and peer work in China has been an availability issue for students. While younger children were eager to participate when given the opportunity, schools were not particularly supportive. This trend increased as children got older, with children in Grade 6 of Elementary School and Grade 3 of Middle School tending to be very busy with exams (Plan China, 2013a). For the most part it was teachers – who are assessed based on the performance of their students – who tended to argue that children were too busy for involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Though parents are frequently cited by teachers as being a problem when it comes to child participation, adults in rural areas shared somewhat conflicting information. While parents in some communities had expectations that children be involved in house chores during out-of-school hours, they didn't seem opposed to child involvement in participatory activities that might take place during or around school hours (Plan China, 2013a). In fact, several different sources suggest that parents – particularly rural parents – are very frustrated with an education system that only focuses on test scores. Instead, parents are recognizing the effect of poor social skills on children who are left behind, and they want their sons and daughters to have opportunities for healthy interpersonal interaction. Several sources cited parents, calling for teachers to put less pressure on schooling and show more holistic care for their students (Plan China, 2013a). For parents who did object to children's involvement in participation activities, one stumbling block seemed to be a lack of understanding about what went on during these times.

To complement this discussion is the fact that teachers, parents, and administrators in a number of communities have expressed fear that many children are succumbing to poor social influences and spending too much time in illegal internet bars, where violent video games and pornography are available in uncensored form. The government has called for the development of children activity centers in rural areas to keep children and young people from having too

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much time on their hands – but in a vast number of communities these projects have not been made available (Plan China, 2013a). Those centers that have been set up do not seem to be utilized well.

The question of availability as it relates to location has also been raised. Though Plan has attempted in various project sites to organize community-based child participation groups, these have been fraught with more challenges than those based in school. Originally designed to facilitate the involvement of marginalized children who may not be able to attend school, the programs still sought to be inclusive of all types of children found in the community. The result has been the tentative design of activities that are suitable for a wide age range of children with a wide variety of functioning ability (Plan China, 2013b). These groups have been found to be labor intensive and have had trouble mobilizing children for consistent involvement, particularly as a large number of children live out of town at school. The result has been a series of one-time events which, though helpful, are less able to facilitate community transformation on an ongoing basis (Plan China, 2013b).

### *9.5 Challenges that Remain*

Challenges do remain with child participation work in the Chinese context, and it may be that a season of implementation will be necessary before the most appropriate approaches can be determined.

All data pointed to the fact that healthy, successful child participation and peer support programs require the intensive involvement of committed adult mentors or monitors who understand the principles of the work. This has been demonstrated through existing child participation groups, where it was found that groups with supportive teachers and school administrators actually seemed to be quite successful. This sort of local support mechanism will be increasingly important with programs that include a component of child-to-child support, as

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demonstrated by Plan China’s recent challenges with implementing a pilot child-to-child support program in one of the most distant counties in Yunnan (Plan China, 2013b). At present, however, this sort of supportive structure – particularly at the school level – is very hard to find.

A second challenge is the issue of participation for marginalized children. Child participation groups based in the Community Child Development Network – where marginalized children who do not attend school may have better access – have met with many challenges, and the question remains as to how these children can be mobilized for participation in their own protection (Plan China, 2013b). This leads us to our next theme: Including Marginalized and Vulnerable Populations in community-based child protection mechanisms.

## **Section 10: Theme Three: Including Marginalized and Vulnerable Populations**

Prior to discussing options for engaging marginalized and vulnerable populations, international literature suggests that it is very important to have communities identify for themselves which individuals might comprise this population. It is also important to identify local practices relating to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized children and adults, in order to understand the best sources of support for their inclusion and care.

### *10.1 Orphaned or Abandoned Children, Children with Disabilities and Practices for Kinship Care*

When discussing vulnerable populations in the community, the combination term “orphan-disabled children” ( 孤残儿童 ) is generally one of the first phrases to appear (Plan China, 2013a). It is a term that tends to lump these two populations together, and is indicative of the fact that children with disabilities are significantly overrepresented in China’s population of abandoned children. For this reason, the two groups are discussed together – acknowledging that

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they are inherently different and have different needs, but also recognizing that community structures for offering support may often overlap.

The number of children registered as being orphaned or abandoned has risen 24% in the last five years, with numbers now reaching to 0.71 million (Plan China, 2012). Though this is partly due to improved registration, other sources indicate that cases of abandonment are rising. The reasons for abandonment are primarily disability (including congenital illness) and divorce.

National statistics reveal that 1.74% of Chinese boys and 1.42% of Chinese girls have disabilities, and some reports cite that this is a greater number than in previous years (Plan China, 2012). According to the adults and children alike, there is significant discrimination against children with disabilities, particularly in some communities. Children in several schools gave examples of how these peers had been harassed or teased, particularly when the children were younger. Though schools – particularly primary schools – shared that children were welcome at school despite their disability status, one group of middle school students stated that children with disabilities, who they used to see around quite regularly, gradually disappeared from community life as they got older (Plan China, 2013a).

Not all communities are unsupportive of children with disabilities, however. Children did seem to have been taught about how peers with disabilities should be respected, demonstrated by the large number of positive examples that children gave when discussing rights to protection or discrimination. Meanwhile, adult community members, though acknowledging discrimination and reflecting on the perceived burden that children with disabilities bring to a family, also shared views indicating that children with disabilities may have a special place in the heart of some. A few anonymous parents shared that children with disabilities, particularly deaf-mute children, will be supported by their own family members, who are enabled by government subsidies. Respondents in some schools indicated that teachers may have special treatment for children with disabilities, seeking to ensure their protection. While villagers used to look down

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on families of children with disabilities, this is no longer always the case. Still, a number of children with disabilities find themselves within the social welfare system or placed in the care of relatives – effectively abandoned by their immediate family members (Plan China, 2013a).

It is not only children with disabilities who are abandoned. In recent community mapping data, the Justice Bureau representative in one unidentified county reported that cases of divorce are rising, and that children are more frequently given to their mothers by the courts (Plan China, 2013a). However, in Chinese culture, it is very difficult for women who already have children to get remarried, and many women are unwilling to take their children – particularly their sons from a previous marriage - with them. In fact, as Shang, et al cite, “A mother only has a relationship with her extended family and the duty to care for her child through the father. After he [is gone], the relationship between the mother and the father’s extended family is broken, and although she has a blood relationship with the child, her [cultural] duty to care for the child is also terminated.” (Shang, et al, 2009, pg. 82). As divorce statistics rise, the rate of children who are abandoned, also continues to rise. Boys are overrepresented in this population, with national data revealing that 57.8% of orphaned/abandoned children are boys and 42.2% of orphaned/abandoned children are girls (Shang, et al, 2009).

Despite their disproportionate rate of abandonment, the safety net of kinship care, which is preferred in Chinese law, strongly favors healthy, abandoned boys, who are seen as being able to contribute to the extended family income. Girls and children with disabilities are both overly represented in state-run welfare institutes. At the national level, 46.4% of children in state-run institutes are boys, while 53.6% are girls (Shang, et al, 2009). Meanwhile, data from rural communities in a nearby province, in which respondents were given different care options based on the situation of their child, revealed that 46.7% of interviewed family members were willing to care for a “healthy” child that had been abandoned, with this percentage reducing to 31.6% for a “somewhat disabled” child, and 0% expressing personal willingness to care for a child who

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was identified as “disabled.” (Shang, et al, 2009)

Kinship care networks are not always a problem-free solution for families who do choose to use this resource. Data from published material indicates that over half of orphans in kinship care are raised by relatives over the age of 60, and once these individuals are gone, there is an increased likelihood that the child will be sent on to a welfare institution (Shang, et al, 2009). Meanwhile, published research indicates that once the child is given to a certain member of the family (usually grandparents), others don’t always contribute support. Of families raising orphans who were interviewed, only 32 out of 59 had ever received any form of help from their family, only 20 had ever received cash assistance, and only 2 received a set amount of annual child support from their relatives (Shang, et al, 2009). This may contribute to the fact that, of families with orphans interviewed in one study, 1/3 of respondents felt that they were the poorest family in their village, with 2/3 feeling that they were within the poorest 10% of community members. (Shang, et al, 2009)

### *10.2 The Risks of Gender as They Relate to Child Protection*

Orphaned and abandoned children aside, gender issues as they relate to child protection and vulnerability vary depending on the community. In some communities, it was vehemently protested that times are changing, and that boys are no longer favored over girls as in the past, except perhaps by the older generation. Some even shared that girls are favored over boys in certain communities, as they bring less of an economic burden (Plan China, 2013a)<sup>14</sup>. In other communities, however, the traditional favoritism of sons over daughters seemed to persist, a view that is commonly portrayed in published literature. Regardless of the general degree of social favoritism for boys, community members generally agreed that children of both genders

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<sup>14</sup> In modern China, young men are expected to bring significant resources into a marriage. Practices vary depending on the region, but may range from a cash gift to the bride’s family, gold jewelry to the bride, or requirements to supply an apartment or provide a car.

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are faced with unique child protection risks. Though national level data cited in Section 7.1 identifies higher risk of physical and emotional abuse for boys, community members cite that girls may be at greater risk of emotional abuse. Meanwhile, communities generally acknowledge only the sexual abuse of girls, making the relatively high percentage of boys who have these experiences a vulnerable population indeed.

### *10.3 Children Identified by Communities as Being Marginalized and Having Child Protection Risk*

An unanticipated finding among multiple sources of both mapping data and published literature was the high rate of discrimination and child protection risk brought upon students with poor academic standing. In fact, discrimination against or abuse of poor students was cited more frequently than any other risk or vulnerability factor (Plan China, 2013a).

Though some schools seemed to be in a better state than others, a recurrent theme in mapping material was the way that teachers would discriminate against children with poor grades. In fact, when asked what measures should be taken to improve their school, one of the most frequently mentioned recommendation was the need for fair treatment of all. Community members revealed that schools might give up on students with lower grades, and that this form of discrimination leads to increased school drop out. In some schools, it was even reported that this discrimination was more pro-active, with teachers – who are ranked based on the scores of their students - not allowing children with poor scores to participate in standardized testing (Plan China, 2013a).

Parents, too, seem to perpetuate the problem of discrimination against poor students, with multiple children in different communities reporting that they weren't allowed to spend time with peers who had bad grades. This information came from both students whose parents restricted their company, and from children who were discriminated against. In one unidentified

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community, two children on opposite sides of the situation sat in the same focus group, each seeming to express feelings of chagrin that they were not allowed to be companions (Plan China, 2013a) .

Parental discrimination against students with poor studies may relate to their fear that these children will also have poor behavior. Mapping data revealed that children who are stubborn, children who fight, and children who lie or steal could be vulnerable to abuse, while children who regularly play on the internet were cited multiple times as being victims of severe parental discipline (Plan China, 2013a).

However, other children were cited as being vulnerable to abuse for factors that were truly outside of their control. Poverty was recurrently cited as a marginalizing factor, and parents with high levels of economic stress and work pressure reportedly contributed to the risk of their children. It was also cited that parents from very poor families might not have the ability to assist children with their homework, and for this reason impoverished rural children would face more discrimination in school. Also connected to poverty factors were outstanding family dynamics, as with the situation of families with many children, in which children born past the family planning policy birth limit may not be given proper identification papers (户口). Other family dynamics cited to impact the vulnerability of children were households with many daughters, single-parent families, and re-married families. Impoverished families were also cited as being more vulnerable to extreme child abuse crimes, such as human trafficking, because parents might not have the social awareness to know when they were being tricked (Plan China, 2013a).

#### *10.4 Platforms for Reaching Marginalized and At-Risk Families*

What sort of existing community platforms for support are available to reach these most marginalized families? In terms of social services, it was difficult to confirm that patterns were

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the same in every community, but in general it appears that families seeking certain government benefits will submit their name to the village committee, who will then apply for welfare on behalf of the individuals. Once the application is submitted, the township level government bureaus are responsible for coordinating services directly, for example, by disseminating government-allotted “orphans aid” to families raising an abandoned child, or by bringing gifts and doing home visits to impoverished families at holiday time (Plan China, 2013a). In some communities it was indicated that the village committee controls the application list for these services, meaning that it is therefore possible for members of the committee to block certain families from receiving aid – a significant risk factor should village politics come into play. However, in other communities, it was also indicated that families, in addition to going through the village committee, can also go directly to the township or county government if they feel that they need help. The successfulness of such endeavors or the willingness of marginalized families to take these steps is unconfirmed. However, mapping indicated that it is difficult enough for members of marginalized families to go to the village committee themselves. Instead, respondents reported that if marginalized families in their community had an issue, they may ask for support from neighbors, and then neighbors will go to find the women’s cadre, or will find a respected person in the village to go through another level of relationships to bring their request before the village committee. In some communities, the women’s cadre would be proactive about going to the families and seeking them out; it was reported that she would use her family planning work to understand, number, and help marginalized families receive the support that they need (Plan China, 2013a).

Apart from coordinating social benefits and services for some of the more marginalized families in the village, mapping data indicated that most communities have few platforms, mechanisms, or networks for incorporating marginalized families into community life. In some cases each household is required to send a representative to village decision-making meetings,

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but these opportunities are limited. This is not always due to decisions made on the part of the village committee, and may sometimes be the choice of the families themselves. Mapping revealed that members of the most marginalized families will very rarely actually participate in making community decisions, and will do so only if the issue affects their family very directly. According to mapping data, some feel that these community affairs have nothing to do with them, and others feel that they don't have the ability – or opportunity – to truly engage. A part of the challenge is that members of marginalized families may not be aware of what it means to participate, but another part of the challenge is lack of time; they are too busy trying to eke out a living (Plan China, 2013a).

It was difficult to find definitive information concerning school mechanisms for parent involvement. The vice-principal for student safety appears to have some role in mobilizing communication, but the precise role was not clear. Some schools reportedly have parent committees, though it was not clear how the membership for these committees was determined and whether or not everyone can be involved. The one thing that was clear, however, was that school-based channels for reaching-parents are fairly inconsistent, with parents coming to school just once per semester, or at the most two or three times, to discuss their child's grades or problems (Plan China, 2013a). For the most marginalized caregivers who live far from the township or village center, or for grandparents who are housebound, the prospect of interaction with others through school platforms is grim indeed.

### *10.5 Reaching Marginalized Families with Information*

One of the challenges facing Plan China and other organizations has been the matter of reaching marginalized and illiterate caregivers with information concerning child protection and positive discipline practice. However, in a country where public education and propaganda is a key part of local governance, mapping data revealed that existing governmental channels and

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community practices have a wealth of information in this regard.

While Plan China associates have often shied away from using media and technology in rural areas due to fear that there are a lack of resources at the village level, mapping revealed that these tools are already in common use. Separate sources recommended that public education video or film showings in public spaces be used as a positive form of both education and entertainment; one village committee even volunteered that they had a video projector readily on hand. Meanwhile, parents cited in multiple different sources shared that their existing knowledge about child protection or child rights came from watching TV. Several sources also indicated that radio announcements or loud speakers are an effective form of public education (Plan China, 2013a).

Rural governance structures are also useful for sharing information. Some sources identified that public meetings of household groups, chaired by the household monitor, are a common practice of sharing information. According to the mapping, local news or governance information already passes through these existing structures, in addition to public awareness information about domestic violence and caring for elders. Meanwhile, the women's cadre, village doctor, and the community volunteers cited under Theme One are all people who will come into contact with illiterate caregivers, and who can pass on important information by telling stories and sharing their own life experiences (Plan China, 2013a).

Finally, word-of-mouth, including child-to-adult sharing, are common practices for passing information on to illiterate caregivers in the village. In the off-season for farming and in the evenings after dinner, community members will gather information and share it with others sitting around in the village. As mentioned previously under Theme One, community leaders feel that public awareness for these populations is something that will take time, and that it is important to find kind-hearted elders in the community who will have the time to chat with people about their lives. Mobilizing the people closest to these illiterate caregivers, including

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their grand-children and their neighbors, is identified as an important component of facilitating communication (Plan China, 2013a).

### *10.6 Neighbors and Networks*

The final trend that revealed itself throughout the mapping data is one that appeared again and again throughout the course of the secondary data literature review: the importance of good neighbors and relationship networks.

It was very evident, on this front, that different communities had different attitudes towards “neighborliness” when it came to dealing with matters of child protection. In some communities, villagers offered accounts of caring for marginalized families in their communities. One unidentified individual shared about giving clothes to the family who had a deaf/mute child, while another said that the girl next door did not have a mother, and so she taught her about safety and appropriate interaction with members of the opposite gender (Plan China, 2013a).

Not all communities, however, have this atmosphere, and in some communities where an atmosphere of mutuality and connectivity exists – there are still families who may fall outside of it. Mapping data revealed that public park dances are a common way for people to get to know each other, but these may not be very accessible for marginalized families. Meanwhile, sources reported that how to raise children are a “hot topic” for neighbors chatting together – but it was repeatedly mentioned that members of marginalized families don’t have time for dialogue (Plan China, 2013a).

In one community, it was openly cited that so long as children have food to eat, clothes to wear, and a relative to care for them, no one will intervene. This may indicate why, of families with orphans, only 38.2% had ever received any form of help from neighbors, and only one individual had ever received any form of cash help (Ye, et al, 2003). The ability of community members to proceed on in their lives without engaging the most marginalized families was

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evident in this case story from Ye and her team,

“One [of our] researchers investigated an orphan. This orphan was a 10 year old girl, living with her grandfather of over 80 years old, living entirely on the 1300 RMB relief funds from the Civil Affairs Bureau and picking up trash to survive. They had not received any assistance from relatives or friends whatsoever. The investigator observed, “Using his body weighted down with years, the old man was himself bearing the burden of the family and of raising his granddaughter. At nearly eight decades of life he could not have rest in his later years, and this left the interviewer with a sour and unsettled heart. In dialogue with the village women's cadre we could clearly feel how the gap between the rich and the poor in this village had led to the dampening of warmth in the human heart. I was dumbfounded by the difference between the tall, spacious garden walls of the village chief's house and the low, old hovel of the old man's home. While the village chief was enjoying Chinese New Year at the majhong table, the grandfather and grandchild were facing severe cold, collecting rubbish in a simple effort to maintain their survival. (Ye, et al, 2003, pg. 91)” The reader is left to wonder, how safe, from a child protection point of view, is that little girl?

While it is extremely crucial not to diminish the charity and kindness of many village committee representatives, women's cadres, and “good neighbors” found throughout China's rural society, it is important for us to recognize that not all children and their families benefit from this sort of social network. As communities increasingly break down, with young, healthy individuals going to the cities to work, those left in the villages are increasingly a marginalized and vulnerable population – who may not always have the capacity to look out for one another. Even in neighborhoods where community members do offer mutual support, such as the example cited above, there are inevitably those families who fall outside of these networks and systems, increasing the risk that they will not be reached with the support of a community-based child protection mechanism.

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## **Section 11: Discussion of Findings**

### *11.1 Reflections from the International Literature Review*

There is an important reflection from the international literature review, spurred on by conversations with Plan’s regional Child Rights and Protection Advisor, and that is that it is not technically possible to identify “international best practice in community-based child protection mechanisms,” although much literature is available to that point. The reason is that “community-based child protection mechanisms,” are, by definition, rising from the community, and each nation – each region – each village, even, would have its own version of practices, if its mechanisms were truly “community-based.”

In a traditionally hierarchical social structure where government programs have proven most successful when taking a top-down approach, the strategy of Plan China has been to develop program modules that can be easily duplicated throughout its project areas, with minimal need for technical expertise at the community level.

While this may be good practice from a managerial perspective, and also in light of Chinese traditional culture, international literature consistently reiterated that child protection mechanisms are most successful when they are organic and involve invested, interested people at the community level, who are able to take ownership over the protection process.

This is an important reminder for Plan China, as it may be necessary – particularly within the child protection program – to find a balance between offering top-down support with implementation, and allowing practices to grow out of the community.

### *11.2 Existing Structures that Fulfill the Roles Recommended in International Literature*

The assessment of existing structures on which to build community-based child protection mechanisms was particularly hopeful, as it showed not only the progress that Plan has

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already made, but also the opportunities that exist for mobilizing community members.

Those existing structures that rest at the juncture between formal and informal mechanisms, and which repeatedly appeared in community mapping as sources for support in regards to issues with children, were the school and village committee. This indicates that Plan China's attempt to utilize these two platforms for community-based child protection work is well-selected, and that it may not be necessary to identify further structures to become involved<sup>15</sup>. Nonetheless, it may be necessary to consider some revision to Plan's current strategy in regards to how the school and village committee fulfill their respective roles in child protection.

Plan's earlier project activities intended to put more responsibility on the school, due to the perceived skills and higher education level of teachers within the institution; however, mapping data revealed that teachers, limited in both their capacity and their role, may not be the appropriate people to engage in depth with family members in the community. Instead, their role may be best served as protectors within the school environment, teaching children personal safety, mobilizing child-to-child and child-to-adult public education activities, educating parents, monitoring teachers, and referring reports of abuse. In some cases, they may engage in simple support for a child, particularly left behind children who board at school. For children whose challenges stem from home and who are under the guardianship of parents or other caregivers, however, the village committee plays a primary role. While some Plan China staff have suggested a "cross-reporting" structure in which the village committee gathers reports from children in the school and the school gathers reports from children at home, mapping data did not support this practice. In fact Chinese law outlines that it is the institution of the school that should be responsible for disciplinary action and management of teachers who violate children's rights, while the village committee is responsible for working with parents who do not fulfill their responsibilities (PRC, 2006). The recommendations of Chinese law in this regard are

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<sup>15</sup> Many thanks go to Stephanie Delaney for her sound judgment when making this original recommendation.

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paramount, as this legal framework will facilitate support of work according to this structure within project communities.

Another international experience that has proven effective in countries with a similar political structure to China has been the development of community-based networks for child protection – at the juncture between the formal and the informal system. This concept of opening channels for communication between the village committee and schools was mentioned frequently from community members, and may solve some of the issues of both capacity and accountability – particularly in regard to the school. Though some continue to contest that the school and village committees exist among different classes of society and would therefore be difficult to coordinate, community members themselves did not appear to express this sentiment, and the establishment of networks, including child protection focal points from the school and surrounding village committees, should be piloted. It may also be appropriate to include one or two other representatives, or “assistant focal points” from each village, in addition to the women’s cadre. The positive implication of developing “networks” is that the Mandarin terminology for networks has the implication of being less formal than the concept of “mechanisms,” and therefore may be able to assist with retaining some of the organic nature, approachability, and collective ownership of community-based child protection mechanisms.

While the village committee and women’s representative might lack specific skills and experience in addressing child protection issues, it is no doubt that their role in communities is one that avails itself to conducting child protection work. The main question that remains has been how to mobilize volunteer networks and human resources to support the women’s cadre in her work. Mapping showed that, while each community might bear somewhat different structures, household monitors and influential persons are already a part of community governance structures and family mediation. According to communities themselves, the women’s cadre can organize these individuals; information from child and parents indicate these

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individuals might actually be more effective in their role than the women's cadre themselves. Some may question the difference between such a volunteer network and the child protection committees organized in other countries. While secondary data from other child protection mechanism projects in China highlighted the cultural penchant for bureaucracy and establishment of formalized structures (Zhang, 2008), it is important to note from international experiences – as well as from the feedback of community members themselves, found in mapping data - that this sort of organized structure quickly feels inaccessible to villagers and parents who might seek to access them. In seeking to develop effective practices at the rural level, it is important for this network to refrain from becoming yet another organized structure that families are not willing to seek out. Instead allowing the women's cadre to educate interested community members, particularly seeking to involve the existing household monitors and influential persons already involved in similar work, might be a better solution than establishing formal groups with operational protocols.

To develop a force of aware household monitors, influential persons, and elderly volunteers, it will be imperative to give thought to issues of capacity building. Without it, there are significant limitations to the scope of child protection mechanism work, and also risks that can be brought to children. Based on the experience of programs in other countries, it is important for Plan not to shy away from offering orientations and awareness to people from rural backgrounds or with lower levels of education. As explored more in theme three, it is these individuals who might have the best opportunity for impact on marginalized families in the community – even more than educated teachers or Village Committee representatives. Meanwhile, only by raising the awareness of these individuals and soliciting their involvement in child protection work can the women's cadre – faced with many responsibilities – gradually begin to share her burden with other members of the community. Nonetheless, capacity building must be careful to keep pace with the work of network members, particularly the key child

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protection focal point, so as to avoid any risk of “malpractice” by lay child protection workers.

A final discovery was the role of neighbors and kinship networks in addressing child protection issues, in degrees that proved to be even more than originally anticipated. As the findings on this front relate also to child participation and the issue of involvement for marginalized families, further exploration will be conducted separately in Section 11.5.

### *11.3 Hopes and Limitations for Child Participation*

The original outlook on methods to engage children appropriately within the Chinese context was bleak, with several field reports citing challenges with mobilizing activities involving child participation in child protection. Further review of the available data, however, showed that the challenges may not be insurmountable, but might in fact be more related to how, and where, child participation is mobilized through project programming.

While there have been ongoing challenges with facilitating an appropriate understanding of child participation against the backdrop of Chinese culture, there is no evidence that child participation is “too hard” to do in this country or that it should be discontinued. In fact, so long as proper explanation was given for what children were involved in, parents and children seemed to react quite positively to the opportunity for children to take part in extra-curricular activities that could strengthen interpersonal relationships and improve their personal and emotional safety.

The main challenge continues to lie with the willingness of school administration to allow child participation. Data showed that, where the school was supportive, child participation and child-to-child public education activities could be successful. Where the school was not supportive, the work became very difficult. The main task for Plan is work on winning over school authorities and helping them to understand the importance of child participation in child protection; their acknowledgement of the process can have a significant impact on both the willingness of parents to support child involvement, and the overall success of a program.

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Findings concerning the appropriate platform for child participation might be unpopular with program staff, for international literature was indicative that the common practice of establishing child participation groups on the basis of existing Youth League clubs – in which membership is conditional – is not a recommended practice. This was strongly confirmed by the expressed distrust of “normal” children for the star students in their class, who were seen as being teacher’s pets who created a highly political classroom environment. International literature, as well as feedback from children themselves, indicated that positive peer relationships, inclusiveness, and trust are vital constructs in the success of participatory child protection work, and that both child participation, and protection, are best achieved in environments that promote these elements. The only way in which building on the existing Youth League structures would meet standards for child participation would be to open the club to all students, remove political affiliation, and proactively allowing children from marginalized or at-risk populations – particularly students with low grades – to apply. With the academic institution’s focus on performance and grades, as well as the manner in which participation in the Youth League is linked to future socio-educational opportunities, this seems to be an unlikely possibility.

Where child participation groups are established independently from the Youth League, data did not provide a single definitive answer concerning the best form to take. Nonetheless, the fact that school-based child protection working groups may be quite involved in offering support for at-risk and marginalized boarding students, coupled with extreme distrust from children when considering whether personal information should be shared with non-familiar peers, means that it may be more appropriate to organize child-only groups that are facilitated by an adult representative. Nevertheless, it may be appropriate for the format of groups to be adapted according to the needs and desires of the school, and for close monitoring to be done of these experimental groups before the structure is rolled out to all Plan project communities.

Findings were fairly clear on the recommended role that children should have in

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participatory activities. Whether using child-to-child approaches or by mobilizing children to reach adults, child-led public education and awareness about protection issues are generally considered to be appropriate for children, particularly once they reach the age of 10-12 and onwards. However, it is important that awareness activity designed to reach adults be respectful and tactful in its framing of the issues, portraying child and parents as allies for improved child safety rather than portraying children as defenders of their rights.

Despite common practice, the wisdom of expert researcher Mike Wessels supports what children and data concerning Chinese culture seem to indicate: peer-assisted reporting and organized programs for peer-support is not recommended for children in primary school, while early-intervention, such as peer home visits to meet with parents of at-risk children, is not recommended in any situation. In middle schools, it may be appropriate to teach children, as part of child participation group training and awareness campaigns, in some very, very basic skills for peer support (such as, the importance of listening when a friend share his or her problems) and the importance of peer-assisted reporting, particularly in regards to sexual abuse. However, in light of Wessels' recommendations concerning the maturity of content for young persons involved in participatory activities, and due to the extremely sensitive nature of sexual abuse cases, it is recommended that this sort of peer support be allowed to take place organically among natural friendship channels within the student body, without using organized peer-support groups as an established reporting and support channel in schools.

As in the assessment of existing structures for responding to child protection cases, one significant finding from the mapping data was that children seek help from – and offer help to – those they trust. Once again, close interpersonal relationships and an atmosphere of mutual support, particularly in an environment where marginalized children also benefit, are both vital to the successful mobilization of children who help children.

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#### *11.4 Building Inclusive Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms*

The inclusion and engagement of marginalized children and families in community-based child protection work has proven to be a significant challenge for field workers in other countries, and findings from China suggest that the process to engaging these issues may continue to be a slow one. Nonetheless, some helpful findings were uncovered which may lead to the identification of improved entry points for work among these populations. As in the literature review, we choose here to address both issues of inclusion for adults, and for specific populations of children.

##### *11.4.1 Including Caregivers and Adults*

As identified in the literature review, one foundational act in the process of encouraging inclusion and protection of marginalized children and families is to let community members identify these individuals for themselves. Mapping material seemed to suggest that, among adult populations, it was illiterate and very poor families, including families of orphaned and abandoned children or children with special needs, who were most at-risk of lacking involvement in community child protection initiatives. Whether too busy, lacking confidence in their own ability to contribute, or simply because they are not sought out, these individuals have a tendency not to be engaged in community life and decisions. Those systems that do exist are primarily for public education – viewing these populations as recipients rather than owners of a community process.

It is important to note that tactfully engaged public education may have a place in encouraging community participation, as better knowledge about child protection concerns may lead marginalized caregivers and adults to feel that these are matters that concern them. To that end, it is very important for Plan to engage creative public education strategies – including the use of media and technology, which was demonstrated to be a current, effective practice used by

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the government in project regions.

Who should engage these individuals? Exploration into which adult populations were identified as being marginalized or vulnerable hinted that these adults are currently far outside the reach of both the school and the village committee. For logistical reasons, however, it is understood that the development of healthy families – particularly marginalized families - may start with change that takes place in the community rather than at the school. The reason for this is that intensive support may be required in order to bring about fuller transformation of community life, and schools are not currently in a position, either in regards to roles or in regards to literal location, to be deeply engaged in this dialogue.

Data concerning community level work with marginalized families was fairly comprehensive. Noteworthy was the idea of mobilizing community volunteers and influential persons, mentioned in Theme One, into a community network that can be involved in work relating to child protection and the well-being of families. This network of individuals can communicate child protection principles through word-of-mouth, and can concurrently seek to engage members of these populations on matters that concern them, bringing their views, perspectives, and concerns into the dialogue. While members in one community suggested a strategy of “family-pairing,” in which families of standing in the community could be matched with marginalized families in the community for the purposes of assistance and relationship building (Plan China, 2013a), the limited capacity of a single family, as well as the problem of targeting, may mean that an integrated network would be a more appropriate approach. A necessary precondition to the establishment of such networks would be basic capacity building, perhaps done through a simple orientation, about practices, attitudes, and interpersonal styles that facilitate inclusion.

Though gender balance in a community network was identified as being a challenge in some countries, this is not expected to be a significant problem in China. The village committee

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may be predominantly male, but it is the women's cadre who would oversee community-level work. Though secondary mapping data was not explicit about the gender breakdown of household monitors, influential persons, and community volunteers, the data and role of these individuals did hint that community volunteers may be predominantly female, while others may be predominantly male.

The benefit of mobilizing community members into a semi-formal network for word-of-mouth public education and mutual support is that members of marginalized families can themselves be invited into the process, making the network a participatory platform rather than a service-oriented group that could be seen as targeting specific populations. While this may seem somewhat similar to the more organic versions of child protection committees (CPC) established in some countries, it is important to note that such a participatory awareness network should not have the formality of a CPC, for reasons outlined in Theme One.

#### *11.4.2 Including Marginalized Children*

Though more thorough findings are outlined in Section 10, it is worth noting that the populations of children vulnerable to abuse are not always limited to those who we might think they are. Long-recognized populations such as orphaned or abandoned children and children with disabilities were among those listed by communities as being vulnerable, and yet because of this fact, they may receive more support from kin and community. Meanwhile, there are some structures in place for monitoring these individuals through the township social service program. However, an otherwise overlooked population which was very frequently cited as being at risk for child protection concerns were children who studied poorly in school. These children were less likely to receive support from the existing response structures, in some cases even becoming further marginalized due to actions of those institutions whose initial purpose is to support them.

The identified risk of children with poor studies coincides with findings related to

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participation, and reinforces the reason for which it may not be appropriate to use the Youth League as a structure for child participation groups: at-risk children, including children with poor studies and behavior problems, are less likely to be included in these activities.

Meanwhile, the question remains as to whether or not it is effective to continue piloting community-based child participation groups in an effort to engage marginalized children who may not attend school. So far, sparse data from secondary mapping seems to reveal that these activities have brought about more challenge than they have brought about change. It is important to note that current child activities organized by CCDNs rely on children coming to the platform, generally under the care of their parents. The implication is that the most marginalized and at-risk children – those whose caregivers are very busy, absent, or unconcerned with their personal development – are still being left out from CCDN child participation activities.

Reflections on the experience of Plan Pakistan, in which activities were designed to be particularly open to differently-abled children in the community, are worth considering for the ongoing activities of CCDNs that are established in many Plan China project areas. However, it seems that there is little necessity for forced one-time child participation events based in the community that seek to increase the numbers of at-risk or marginalized children in attendance – a practice that easily results in targeting and increased stigmatization. The issue of targeting is something that Plan China should be particularly wary of in its current program approaches; long-term, integrated solutions that are based in the community have yet to be identified, but are urgently needed.

A final finding in reaching marginalized children was – once more – the issue of positive relationships networks, which we will discuss thoroughly below.

### *11.5 The Overarching Theme: Committed Neighborhood and Kinship Networks*

Overwhelmingly, the single recurring theme relating to existing resources for responding

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to child protection incidents, the mobilization of children in child protection, and the inclusion of marginalized and at-risk children and families was the quality of relationships with others. Researchers and authors about Chinese culture often refer to the concept of “*guanxi*,” sometimes understood as social capital. *Guanxi*, particularly the protective roles of persons with whom someone had “good *guanxi*”, was cited repeatedly by children and adults alike as being a source of personal support. Children who were experiencing abuse would seek help from adults or peers with whom they had “good *guanxi*”. Families in conflict or having trouble with their children would seek mediation and support from neighbors with whom they had “good *guanxi*”. Children would offer support to peers with whom they had “good *guanxi*”. Marginalized families would receive help from community members with whom they had “good *guanxi*”. All forms of support, it seemed, ultimately tied back to the quality of social capital and relationships that children and families had at their fingertips.

From a child protection perspective, the impact of having a community environment in which positive relationships had been established was significant. Although data had been anonymized, it was possible to see that the culture of certain communities was different, and that communities which appeared to have a strong sense of interpersonal cohesion also reported having more natural practices that facilitate child protection. Meanwhile, those communities in which children cited significant amounts of peer violence, as well as corporal punishment at the hand of teachers and parents, were the same communities in which community members expressed high levels of distrust and poor quality of interpersonal relationships. Though it was difficult to analyze these trends thoroughly due to the anonymous data, it was evident that the quality of *guanxi* among children, families and kinship networks is closely related to the wellbeing of children in regards to child protection issues.

In many cases reported by children and family members alike, good *guanxi* with close family members and friends or neighbors had contributed to the further protection of children at

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a level of society where organized services and structures were absent. But what happens when these resources slowly begin to break down?

### *11.6 The Threat*

Perhaps the most sobering finding from this study was the fact that close relationships with family and friends or neighbors are the single most important factor facilitating child protection in project communities, coupled with the fact that there are a growing number of children vulnerable to abuse who have no access to these supportive relationships. A BBC viewpoint article written by author Gerard Lemos recently articulated the problem, “The old restricted, hierarchical, multi-generational families built on Mao’s authoritarian utopianism and an older tradition of Confucian values have been replaced by isolated and impoverished old people, listless ex-farmers, hard-pressed factory girls and children trying to cope alone with extreme educational pressure and unrealistic family expectations.” The article was titled, “Fear and Loneliness in China,” and that title itself seems to summarize the risks in child protection that have begun to manifest in the lives of children and their families (Lemos, 2012).

Across the region, parents and young adults are migrating to urban areas for work, leaving children of all ages in the care of aging caregivers and school authorities. At school, the focus on academic progress leaves little time for children to nurture healthy relationships with one another. Meanwhile, stress levels of boarding school children are high, and the interpersonal conflict that naturally arises is not often dealt with under the support and guidance of adults. The family planning policy, which restricts the number of children each family can have to one child or two children with a regulated age gap, means that many young people no longer have siblings who are able to offer them support. Instead, children living in boarding schools are essentially left to raise themselves; those who do not attend boarding school may remain in the care of equally isolated grandparents who have comparatively little capacity to protect them.

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Meanwhile, secondhand data indicated that children and families who are identified as marginalized populations or those vulnerable to abuse are not a part of the natural relationship networks that are identified as having such importance. Children with disabilities and those who study poorly are at-risk of exclusion among their peers, and each for their own reasons – whether it be poor attendance in school, living in kinship care, or facing discrimination - may lack support from teachers and parents. Meanwhile, with marginalized families being “too busy” – or living too far into the mountains – to engage with community life, it seems that those individuals who most desperately need these natural support networks are also the most alone.

In the face of this socio-cultural environment, there are increasingly few safety nets to protect children from the unspeakable dangers that isolation can bring. The social breakdown is fast proceeding, and when all the safety nets are gone, how will children be protected then? The thought alone is enough to elicit fear.

## **Section 12: Recommendations to the Client**

It is important to note, as mentioned several times throughout the course of this paper, that China is a vast country, and each of Plan’s project communities are unique to themselves – as was made clear throughout the mapping. However, the review of international literature and secondhand mapping data afforded the opportunity to identify some recommendations for Plan to consider in the further development of its child protection program.

It is important to clarify that these recommendations do not fully address challenges of management and implementation, such as human resource or funding issues. It is presumed that Plan China should be able to slowly address these challenges over time through its project management approach. Instead, these recommendations are written as a technical compass of best-practice, pointing to ideal standards for implementation, which Plan China should strive to achieve over time.

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**1. Encourage the development of child protection practices that are indigenous to local communities, while offering support at key junctures to ensure that activities can refrain from harm.**

As mentioned before, Plan's traditional practice when it comes to program development has been to design modules that are easily replicated and rolled-out over a large number of project communities. However, child protection work must be community owned, and, as demonstrated by the data above, each community will have its own unique characteristics in terms of some of its most basic grassroots level structures. It is agreed that the village committee and school child protection focal points are good starting points for mobilizing community-based child protection work. However, regarding further structuring of the village level child protection work, it is recommended that Plan encourage communities to creatively identify local solutions. Decisions about CBCPM structure involving household monitors, influential persons and community volunteers engaged in child protection work, as well as decisions concerning the specific role of these persons in relating to marginalized and vulnerable populations, can be left to communities. The most important thing is that incentive be given for communities to develop these initiatives that take place at the next level of society.

**2. Establish a community level network involving the school child protection working group and child protection focal points from the surrounding village committees.**

Opening formal channels of communication between schools and the surrounding village committee is vital, and the development of community-level networks is highly important for facilitating mutual dependency and communication. Work with schools is particularly important due to large numbers of children living in dormitories, and should primarily focus on prevention and safety of children within the academic institution. Meanwhile, the work of

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the village committee women's cadre and local volunteers is vital in addressing the safety of children in their homes and in the community, as well as the safety of the most marginalized children and families.

**3. Particularly encourage and seek to develop the work of the village committee women's**

**cadre in child protection.** It is important to recognize and build the capacity of the village committee and the women's cadre in regards to community-level child protection work, particularly in regards to reaching marginalized and at-risk families. Seek to develop simple materials for her capacity building that can be used to easily share information with others in the community, but refrain from pressuring women's cadres to engage extensively with high-caliber curriculums. Though operational protocol for a community level network should be a matter of further exploration, it is not recommended, as some have suggested, that chairmanship or coordination of inter-agency activities rely heavily on the school.

**4. Encourage women's cadres to mobilize community volunteer forces for child**

**protection; where necessary, seek to solve the human resource dilemma by recruiting an**

**assistant for the village women's cadre.** It is impossible for the women's cadre to successfully implement village-level child protection work on her own. Where human resources are an issue, seek to expand the network of community-level volunteers (including household monitors and influential persons who can offer secondary support), and encourage the involvement of members of marginalized or vulnerable populations. Ensure that each natural village has at least one person who is a participant. If the village women's cadre is unable to bear the full responsibility for mobilization of the volunteer network and community level work, recruit a voluntary assistant to serve as her helper.

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5. **Provide very simple orientations and awareness raising for community volunteer forces who assist the women's cadre.** Strive for a gender balance among the volunteer network, and particularly seek to train male household monitors in preventing gender-based violence. Particularly provide tips relating to inclusion and non-discrimination, including tips to avoid targeting.
  
  6. **Use new media and technology, particularly village centre films, to convey child protection knowledge to rural areas with a large number of illiterate caregivers.** The involvement of parents and caregivers begins with their awareness; print-based materials will not be able to make a significant impact on their level of knowledge.
  
  7. **Work closely with schools as the leverage point to mobilize child participation in child protection public education work.** While the support of parents is important for successful child participation work, the involvement and encouragement of schools is vital. Meanwhile, it is academic pressure from the school that tends to cause parents to discourage participatory activities. Assist Education Bureau administrators and principals to understand the importance of child participation for successful child protection work, and encourage their systemic support. The support of schools for participatory work is a crucial leverage point for explaining the value of these practices to parents.
  
  8. **Establish independent, inclusive, and non-politically affiliated child participation groups.** One of the primary reasons for close partnership with schools is that it is imperative for them to see the importance of establishing inclusive groups for child participation in protection. The one point on which it may be necessary to diverge from the practice of building on existing structures is that the existing Youth League clubs may not be an

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appropriate platform to facilitate inclusion, which is one of the primary purposes of child participation groups. The central reason for this is that it may – whether directly or inadvertently - exclude those children who have the greatest need of help, and the groups will be greatly reduced in their effectiveness. The sacrifice of inclusion may not be worth the cost of establishing ineffective groups. A possible alternative to this solution would be if schools were willing to have non-exclusionary membership that does not require approval, and if the Youth League activities in that school were not associated with any political activities<sup>16</sup>.

**9. In child participation work for middle school students, make sure that students understand basics of support and assisted reporting for their friends, but do not establish formal channels for peer reporting. Do not engage elementary school students with peer reporting or peer support activities.** Help middle school students understand some basic skills concerning peer support, such as how to respond when a friend shares about their personal experiences, and the importance of encouraging their peers to report. Particularly emphasize the importance of having an appropriate response and the need for reporting in regards to sexual abuse. For elementary school students, primarily encourage reporting to parents, teachers or other trusted adults.

**10. Seek creative, sustainable approaches to community-based child participation activities.**

The unfortunate reality of school-based child participation and child-oriented protection activities is that they cannot reach those children who are not in school. However, one-time events in the community that seek to encourage the participation of marginalized or at-risk groups are not a recommended solution to this challenge, and may increase inappropriate

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<sup>16</sup> Note: The lack of political affiliation is particularly important as Plan China embarks on work in ethnic minority communities, where child participation groups must remain neutral in order to facilitate greater access for all children.

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targeting of certain populations. Instead, it is important for Plan China to explore ways to include children who do not attend school – particularly differently-abled children – in ongoing activities organized by the CCDN. It is also particularly important to explore different options of accessibility for children who may lack access to these platforms, including volunteer support for transportation. The implication of this recommendation is that the child protection work of CCDNs, must be strengthened.

**11. Develop project components that are designed to facilitate positive, trusting, and mutually caring interpersonal relationships between children, within families, and across communities. Where possible, promote local employment for adults who have children.** While this may be among the more challenging initiatives for Plan China to undertake, it is only a revolution at the level of family and community life, including the healing of fast-breaking traditional safety networks, that will be able to address the root of child protection issues in Plan’s project areas. It is strongly recommended that Plan China give consideration to these needs in the design of its programs, developing platforms for increasing positive community interaction and facilitating the development of healthy, natural relationships. While the project activities themselves need not necessarily be related to the establishment of interpersonal relationships (for example, one-time parent-child activities), they should instead be activities that facilitate the ongoing, natural growth of these relationships (for example, development of accessible community recreation spaces, school-based children’s interest groups, or programs that encourage local employment over migration.) The belief at the center of this approach is that community members will develop natural relationships and natural solutions to local problems most effectively in an environment in which they have channels for positive interaction and mutual trust that occur within their daily lives.

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### **Section 13: Recommendations for Future Research**

Limitations to this study have already been discussed, and further analyses of both international literature and existing mapping data were highly instrumental in identifying areas of need for further research.

The first issue that proved itself to be highly controversial in international literature, and which has also proven to be a matter of discussion for Plan China's community-based child protection mechanism projects, has been the issue of providing financial incentive to child protection focal points and community volunteers. International literature from some countries, and most Save the Children programs, vehemently objected to this process, while other sources, including programs from some other Plan International project countries (ICPREC), argued that it was necessary in some cases, but only with certain limitations. Plan China has historically battled the issue of community volunteers being over-worked individuals who lack incentive for taking on additional responsibilities. The issue of compensation becomes further complicated as community-based child protection mechanisms stretch further into the local level of society, and include individuals such as "influential persons," "respected elders," and children in their force. For this reason, significant further research needs to be conducted concerning if, and if so, how, Plan China should go about offering compensation for participants.

A second area recommended for further research is the issue of "scope," and what community-based child protection mechanisms should be involved with addressing. While Plan China's current strategy cites that community level work should only handle low-risk cases, the mapping revealed that, in reality, these mechanisms frequently handle much more extreme scenarios. Meanwhile, in other countries, community-based child protection mechanisms at the local level of society are sometimes involved in addressing medium and even high risk cases, depending on the specifics of the situation. Though it is anticipated that high risk cases would be

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best handled at the county level, there may be circumstances in which local level child protection networks could have a greater than anticipated role.

As identified when discussing limitations, this paper was not able to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of areas that may have unique populations, such as the Plan project site in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, where ethnic Hui Muslims and ethnic Han Chinese live side by side. It is recommended that, in this area particularly, an in-depth, comparative analysis of best practices relating to community-based child protection mechanisms be carried out.

Finally, this study itself identified the need for further research relating to topics that it was initially intending to address. It is particularly observed that best practices for child participation, both in school and in the community, might only be worked out through action research. Before embarking on such studies, it is strongly recommended that Plan program staff review the lessons learned from other countries that were shared in this literature review, thereby having a good understanding of the entry point for future research and analysis.

## **Section 14: Conclusion**

As evidenced by the initial international literature review, child protection work is challenging in any country, and adapting best practices to the Chinese context proves to be no exception. The secondhand mapping data itself seems to offer a spiral of alternately discouraging and alternately hopeful accounts, with immense community level resources and equally ponderous challenges lying side by side.

Perhaps most challenging is the reality that child protection issues in rural China are rooted in systemic inequalities, historical events, and cultural beliefs. The economic and socio-political forces drawing adults from the rural villages and to the urban areas for work are significant, and promoting alternate practices is not without challenge. Silence about family troubles and patterns of distrust among neighbors and communities are parts of traditional

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Chinese culture that were further compounded by the Cultural Revolution, in which people were encouraged to report on the weaknesses of their neighbors, with end results that, in some cases, were life changing and destructive. Casual conversation at the Plan China office has ended on many days with staff commenting that the roots of child protection issues in rural project areas go deep – deeper than a single project or five year strategic plan can ever hope to intervene.

At times, the task before us may seem overwhelming. The solution must be that we cannot approach the challenge alone. Gathering the support of government bureaus and local leaders, while coordinating the efforts of these institutions with the work of both for-profit organizations and civil society, is imperative to the mobilization of a force that is able to engender societal transformation.

Beyond this, the call for practitioners, perhaps, is not only that they should be able to initiate different systemic players into child protection work, but that they should pass on the heart – the essence – of child protection to people within the community, people who can start an entire, grassroots level social movement. It may take some time, but this is the goal, and when community members themselves are the ones who are identifying and initiating solutions to the multi-dimensional challenge of protection, only then will Chinese children be safe.

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