

Deinstitutionalization during Disruption: Supporting Families and Children amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper investigates the efforts towards deinstitutionalization in Nepal amid the health pandemic that disrupted lives globally and led Nepal to a lengthy complete lockdown and several partial lockdowns. It explores the work of The Himalayan Innovative Society (THIS)—under the technical and financial support of Forget Me Not (FMN)—as a case in point to explore the support extended to families and children in Nepal amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including family reunification, family support, and psychological support to children reunified with families. The paper describes the work of THIS at the local and national level and FMN as a part of the growing regional and global discourse and movement on promoting family-based alternative care including UN DGD Theme 2021 on Children's Rights in Alternative Care. Furthermore, the paper also analyses the strengths of the interventions and identifies the areas of improvement to suggest an evidence-based intervention model for working with families and children during disruptions. The authors argue that the proposed model of intervention can be useful in a health-related pandemic as well as other disruptions, including natural emergencies and man-made disasters.

Keywords: COVID-19, Family reintegration, Family support, Deinstitutionalization, Effective intervention, Nepal

Introduction

Many children across the world have experienced institutional or residential care. Earlier literature (see Csáky, 2009) estimated that more than 8 million children grew up in institutions (Csáky, 2009) and the more recent ones estimate this to be 2.9 million (Children in Alternative Care, 2022 in Perrigo et al., 2024; Petrowski et al., 2017). About eighty percent of these children residing in orphanages or residential care facilities globally are estimated to be non-orphans (van Doore, 2016). Nepal exhibits a similar situation with institutions where up to 80 per cent could be raised by at least

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one of their parents (Pattison, 2014; UNICEF & Terre Des Hommes, 2008 in van Doore, 2016). Many children in institutions (orphanages) in Nepal are relinquished by their families in the hopes for better education leading to a better life (Gale & Khatiwada, 2016).

Browne et al. (2006) found that institutionalized young children experience developmental delays and face difficulties with social behavior and attachment. This leads to greater chance of antisocial behavior and mental health challenges. Constantinescu (2008, as cited in Dragu, 2019) similarly underscores poorly developed social skills and the inability to gradually take on responsibilities as challenges facing young people receiving institutional care. Although it is contested that many children might have had lower cognitive abilities before institutionalization, baseline findings illuminated that children who were raised in institutions exhibited significant cognitive developmental delays, poorer physical growth, and deficits in competence than non-institutionalized children (Smyke et al., 2007). The above findings underscore the importance and urgency for deinstitutionalization.

Many countries acted in response to the wide recognition of the adverse impacts of institutionalization on developmental outcomes and children's wellbeing by reducing the number of children in institutional care and reuniting them with families (Petrowski et al., 2017). However, until recently Nepal did not have any strategic plans for deinstitutionalization or provisions for foster care despite the government of Nepal mentioning that it preferred foster care among alternative care. care (Gale & Khatiwada, 2016). Furthermore, the absence of "systematic safeguards that prevent the unnecessary placement of children in alternative care" and "practice to ensure that the most suitable forms of care are provided" (Gale & Khatiwada, 2016, p. 8) in a context where institutions provided the primary form of alternative care, was concerning.

Nepal's 16th Periodic Plan (2024/25 – 2028/29) aims to achieve good governance, social justice and prosperity through structured transformation. Although not explicitly focused on deinstitutionalization, it emphasizes child protection and social reintegration. The plan prioritizes child protection ensuring safety, wellbeing and development of children through various measures like strengthening child protection systems, promoting early child development, and addressing child labor and trafficking. The plan also discourages residential protection in children's homes by implementation of the arrangement of institutional care for children as the last option. It envisions programs in the local governance for arranging appropriate alternative care for children without parents and/or in need of protection. The 16th periodic plan indirectly promotes deinstitutionalization by prioritizing family and community-based care for children. The National Child Rights Council's 5-year strategic plan, aims to advance the protection and promotion of children's rights in Nepal. The 7th Strategy specifically focuses on strengthening deinstitutionalization efforts by advocating for alternative care services such as family based and community-based care over institutional care system. The work plan also includes reducing the number of children in institutional care and increase the number of children in alternative care.

This recent governmental efforts (and the earlier limited response)—towards ensuring that children are cared for in families—underscores the importance of the role of non-governmental organizations in deinstitutionalization in Nepal. To support the nation's deinstitutionalization plan, Forget Me Not (FMN) and The Himalayan Innovative Society (THIS) and have been promoting the alternative care services like kinship care and foster care that aligns the provision mentioned in the Act relating to Children, 2018 (Article 49). Their work during the COVID-19 pandemic sets the context for this paper.

FMN is an Australia-registered charity working in child protection with partner organizations in Nepal, Uganda, and India. FMN was established as an INGO in Nepal on 22 November 2011 in Kathmandu. FMN works in collaboration with Nepal Government to bring childcare reform and deinstitutionalization in Nepal through its implementing partner NGO, THIS. FMN has a peculiar history of operations in Nepal—supporting an orphanage for eight years and then moving towards a family reunification model. FMN's changed strategy is a vivid example of learning by doing and learning from one's own mistakes and experiences. After realizing that orphanages produced more harm than good, FMN began supporting THIS in its efforts of deinstitutionalization.

THIS is a Nepali NGO registered at District Administration Office, Kathmandu in 2003 and affiliated with the Social Welfare Council. It works with central and local authorities to remove children from orphanages, both legal and illegal [registered and non-registered], and return them to their families in a supported manner, to prevent family separation and orphanage trafficking, and to respect their fundamental rights to be in families and community, as mentioned in UNCRC and Children's Act 2018 (see www.thisngonepal.org). THIS is a pioneer NGO that addresses child protection concerns related to institutional care (orphanages) of children. Since 2006, THIS has supported 1,036 children in 67 districts (THIS, 2021) in partnership with Adara Development Nepal, FMN, Terre des hommes (Tdh) and Next Generation Nepal (NGN). THIS conducted the following activities: COVID relief support to help community people meet their basic needs, transitional care for vulnerable children rescued by Nepal Government amid the pandemic, family reintegration support to reunified children and their families, community awareness to spread the messages of responsible parenting and prevention of unnecessary parent-child separation, and capacity enhancement of government officials at local levels towards a strong gatekeeping system for the children in their communities.

This paper focuses on the efforts towards deinstitutionalization in Nepal during the COVID-19 health pandemic that disrupted lives globally and led Nepal to a lengthy complete lockdown and several partial lockdowns. The paper looks at the work of The Himalayan Innovative Society (THIS)—under the technical and financial support of Forget Me Not (FMN)—as a case in point to explore the support extended to families and children in Nepal amid the pandemic including family reunification, family support, and psychological support to children reunified with families. The paper describes the work of THIS at the local and national level and FMN as a part of the growing regional and global discourse and movement on children's rights and promoting family-based alternative care including UN DGD Theme 2021 on Children's Rights and Alternative Care. It then analyses the interventions using the SWOT technique to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the interventions, and opportunities and challenges of the intervention in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the paper suggests an evidence-based intervention model for working with families and children during disruptions. We argue that the proposed model of intervention can be useful in a health-related pandemic as well as other disruptions, including natural calamities and man-made disasters.

Methodology

The goal of the study was to explore the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of interventions provided by THIS and FMN to families and children during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal. This section describes the methodology, namely the research question, research approach, research design, study population and sampling, data collection methods and data analysis.

Research Question

The main research question was: What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of interventions provided by THIS and FMN to families and children during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal?

Research Approach

The study utilised a qualitative research approach since it sought to undertake an exploration and description of the interventions provided by THIS and FMN to families and children amid the Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). The researchers also sought to answer the ‘what’ questions, particularly, what were the experiences of participants regarding interventions provided by THIS and FMN to families and children (Fouché & De Vos, 2011). The unstructured nature and flexibility of the qualitative approach enabled the researchers to acquire comprehensive information on the actual strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the interventions (Creswell, 2014). The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature since no studies on the phenomenon could be traced. As such, the researchers wanted to gain an understanding of the issues and to have a deeper meaning of the experiences. This is best fulfilled through a qualitative approach (Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

Type of Research

The study engaged in applied research as it was deemed to be the most appropriate type of research for the study. This is because the study sought to understand the complex situation of supporting families and children during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal (Fouché & De Vos, 2011). Moreover, the researchers’ endeavored to build knowledge on evidence-based models for working with children and families during disruptions nurtured the applied nature of the study. Building such a knowledge base will add value to social work as a profession since it will minimize and address challenges faced by practitioners in the child and welfare sector during disruptions, including pandemics.

Research Design

The study employed a phenomenology, more specifically, the transcendental phenomenology research design. A phenomenological design enabled the researchers to focus on exploring and describing a phenomenon of supporting families and children during periods of disruptions. The researchers were able to describe the real-life experiences of the participants and to build an in-depth understanding of their perceptions regarding services provided by THIS during the Covid-19 pandemic (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). The transcendental design also enabled the researchers to collect data from several participants who experienced the phenomenon of rendering services during the time of the time of disruption, paying more attention to how they described their perceptions of the phenomenon.

Study Population and Sampling

As part of the recruitment process, the researchers first negotiated access with THIS and FMN. Upon gaining access, the researchers engaged appropriate structures in identifying the participants. Thereafter, the researchers approached the participants and gave them all relevant information regarding the study (Creswell, 2014). The researchers applied a non-probability sampling technique in the form of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is also referred to as judgmental, which implies that the

selection of participants is solely based on the judgment of the researchers (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). The researchers approached only those people who, in their opinion, were likely to have information on the study phenomenon and were willing to and available for sharing it. The researchers obtained oral consent from the respondents. Fictitious names are used throughout this paper to protect the identities of the people involved and mentioned in this study, including interview excerpts and case studies.

Data Collection Methods

The researchers made use of two sources of data collection, primary data collection through focus group discussions and secondary data collection through document analysis. As a core qualitative data collection method, focus group discussions gather highly contextualized, in-depth, and rich data (Creswell, 2014). Through the focus groups, researchers collected data on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of interventions provided by THIS and FMN to families and children amid the Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal. The focus groups were loosely designed to allow for flexibility of discussions (Kumar, 2019). Focus group discussions were conducted until data saturation was reached. Data saturation is the stage when the data collection process is ended because no new insights about the research topic are generated by continued data collection (Kumar, 2019). In this study, data got saturated after three focus group sessions with participants.

To augment data from the focus group discussions, the researchers gathered data through document analysis. This entailed an analysis of organizational and project related documents such as policies, regulations, annual progress reports, statistics, models, implementation plans, and existing literature on rendering services to families and children amid times of disasters and pandemics. Document analysis, as Berg (2009) notes, is a useful data collection method in research studies such as this study.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from focus group discussions was analysed using thematic analysis. Six steps guided the researchers during data analysis and formulation of themes. These steps included processing the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, creating definitions, and naming themes and producing the report (Creswell, 2014).

In conducting document analysis, the researchers were guided by the concepts relevant to the study, the researchers used the directed content analysis method in the document analysis (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). The directed content analysis method focused on manifest content, which refers to the visible content of the document manifested in forms such as words and sentences. The latent content was also analysed, which refers to the underlying meaning conveyed through the document (Berg, 2009). Most of the reports used for the study were publicly available and permission to access and use the reports for the study were obtained from THIS and FMN when necessary.

Interventions

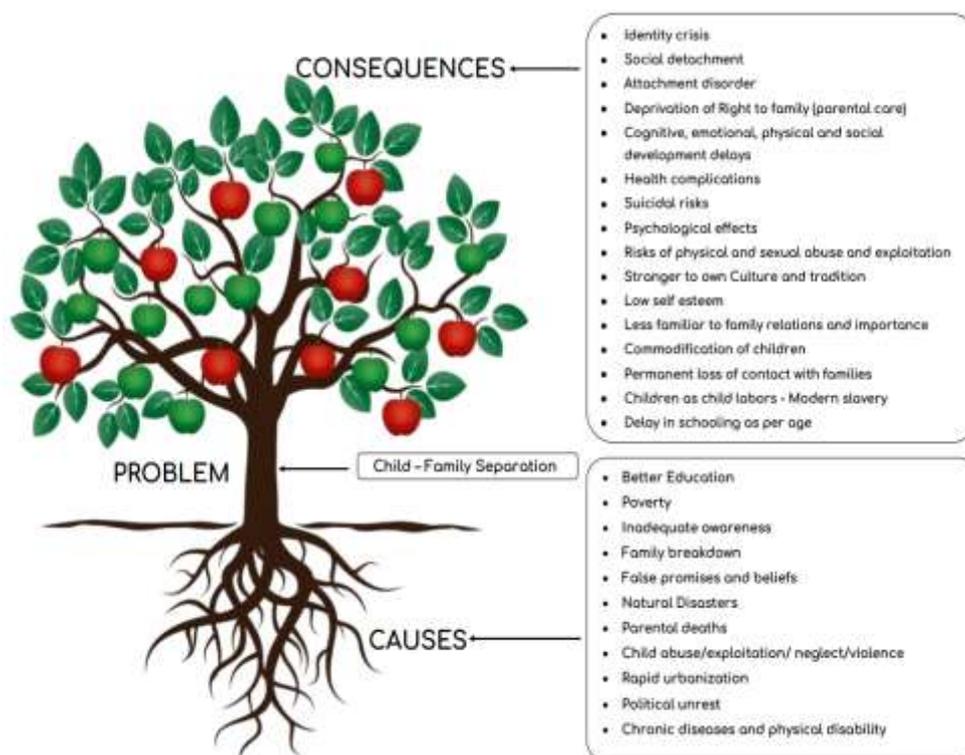
This section of the paper describes the COVID-19 child protection responses through FMN and THIS partnership supporting the National Child Rights Council (NCRC) and National Center for Children at Risk -104 for the rescue of children and closure of abusive and exploitative children's homes and family support and advocacy efforts during the pandemic. The work is grouped into micro-level

work and macro-level work based on units of intervention: work with individuals and families is discussed under micro-level work and work concerning wider engagements with communities, government, and non-government stakeholders, and advocacy is described as macro-level work.

Micro-level Work

Deinstitutionalization and Family reintegration is a notable work of THIS and FMN during the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple reasons are identified for institutionalization of children worldwide. Browne (2009) identified that children in Central Asia and Eastern Europe were more likely to be institutionalized because of a disability (23 percent), abandonment (33 percent), and abuse or neglect (14 percent). In Western European countries, the most common reason for institutionalization of children was abuse and neglect (68 percent). Abandonment (4 percent) and disability (4 percent) were identified to be nominally associated with institutionalization. Through their work, THIS identified several causes of child-family separation contributing to institutionalization of children in Nepal; Figure 1 depicts the causes of child-family separation, along with its consequences. With over a decade of experience relating to deinstitutionalization practices, THIS realized that amid multiple driving factors for institutionalization of children in Nepal, family reintegration is a sustainable solution for positive development for children separated from their family and that with the right support and intervention, a child can grow holistically in their family and community. This realization fueled their work even amid the challenges relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1 Causes and Consequences of Child-Family Separation in Nepal



THIS supported children and families in a myriad of ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. It took responsibility for the care of 14 children rescued from Sahara International Nepal on June 17,

2020. It was also involved in the rescue of children from the controversial Care Child Orphanage on August 5, 2020 and in planning children's reunification with families (THIS, 2020). THIS provided transitional care services for 76 vulnerable children rescued from 10 exploitative children's homes to carry out 8-steps family reintegration processes (THIS, 2020 and 2021). THIS carried out more than 100 missions in 41 districts in the year 2019-20 including 147 family tracing and assessments, and 281 monitoring and follow-up visits from children reunified with families (THIS, 2020). Additionally, THIS reached out to 124 children and their families with COVID-19 emergency support, 116 children with educational support, 64 children and families with food support, four children in three families with livelihood support, and four youths with vocational training support (THIS, 2019).

Case Study 1

Independent Susheli and Swastika

Susheli and Swatika (now 13 and 11 years respectively) were placed into Care Child Orphanage in Kathmandu in 2020 for a secure future by their relative after they lost their mother to uterine cancer, 5 years after their father's suicidal death. One of their key tasks in the orphanage was to stay beautiful and dance for visitors to the orphanage. Even in those tender ages, they soon learnt that the orphanage would get money to feed them if they continued to please the visitors. Through two years of work of THIS, these sisters were reunited with their elder sister Ujeli. Hailing from Rukum, Susheli and Swatika started living in Rolpa where Ujeli was married to. Ujeli's husband's family generously welcomed their daughter-in-law's younger siblings to the family and encouraged them to be independent and helped set up their room with kitchen. The family said: "We did not want to mix the organizational support as we believe anything that comes for them must be used for the defined purposes." Unlike other children in institutions during lockdown, Susheli and Swatika enjoyed the utmost love and care from her sister and her in-laws which they had never imagined before their removal from the institution. In a letter that Susheli wrote to THIS, she shared:

"We always become happy to see *Dai* [literal translation brother, referring to a team member of THIS] when he visits us here. Every brother and sister in the organization are like 'Gods' who put others' emotions first before theirs and have come into our lives. We request everyone to come to visit us."

Similarly, THIS supported 1,997 children, parents, people with disability, and elderly citizens through the COVID-19 emergency relief program in 2020-21. It also reached out to 286 reunified children and adults 409 times in 32 districts to ensure they receive adequate care in families and communities (THIS, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, they called the children on the phone regularly to find out the help they needed and how they were coping with the situation at home and counseled children and families. They also provided emergency cash payments, food, and other necessities to the neediest. THIS supported five families with access to livelihoods and 86 families with access to meals; furthermore, they helped 217 children, including 112 girls, access quality education (THIS, 2021). THIS reached out to more than 7000 individuals in 2019-20 and about 22,000 individuals in 2020-21 including children, parents, students, professionals, and leaders through community sessions like Friday Friends, Breaking the Orphanage Myth, and community awareness events (THIS, 2020, 2021).

Case Study 2

Anshu says No to Orphanage

11-year-old Anshu had spent a year and a half in the *Care Child Orphanage* before being rescued and reunited with her family in a remote village in Jumla, Karnali Province. She is happy to know she is not going back. She is a young advocate who says ‘No’ to orphanage life and tells her parents never to listen to any such people who talk about the city’s orphanages because she has suffered the pain of separation. THIS team remembers energetic Anshu during family tracing in November 2020 and how she would not stop running even on difficult roads to reach her home. The thought of meals prepared by her mother could not stop her from smiling. On the way home, she thought how tall and naughty her brother might have grown. When Anshu finally reached home, her mother Himali could not hold her happiness flowing out of her eyes at the sight of her daughter; words could not come out of her mouth on how thankful and happy she was, yet her eyes told it all.

Poor economic conditions and hopes of better education in the city forced her family to send 9-year Anshu to Kathmandu with their relative. On the contrary, Anshu recalled being famished and the discomfort at being forced to sit on the lap of visitors. Her struggles ended when a national television exposed the orphanage and the orphanage owner’s set-up of gaining attention and money by staging a rescue of a newborn baby from a nearby bush. Revelation of the set-up and child maltreatment was followed by a rescue of 11 young girls, including Anshu, by the National Child Rights Council, National Center for Children at Risk, Budhanilkantha Municipality and Police Personnel. These girls were safely transferred to THIS’s transitional care on 5 August 2020 and were reunited with their families in late 2020 with the easing of lockdown and lifting of mobility restrictions. Anshu was reunified with her family on 29 November 2020 in Jumla district.

Since reunification with her family, Anshu has been under constant monitoring until the exit from her case management in 2023. During COVID 19 lockdown, THIS team conducted remote follow ups with Anshu and her family to know their situation and to listen to Anshu and her everyday life. Anshu is in good health, and she remembers to dial 100 or call Tenzin in case of any problem or emergency.

Macro-level Work

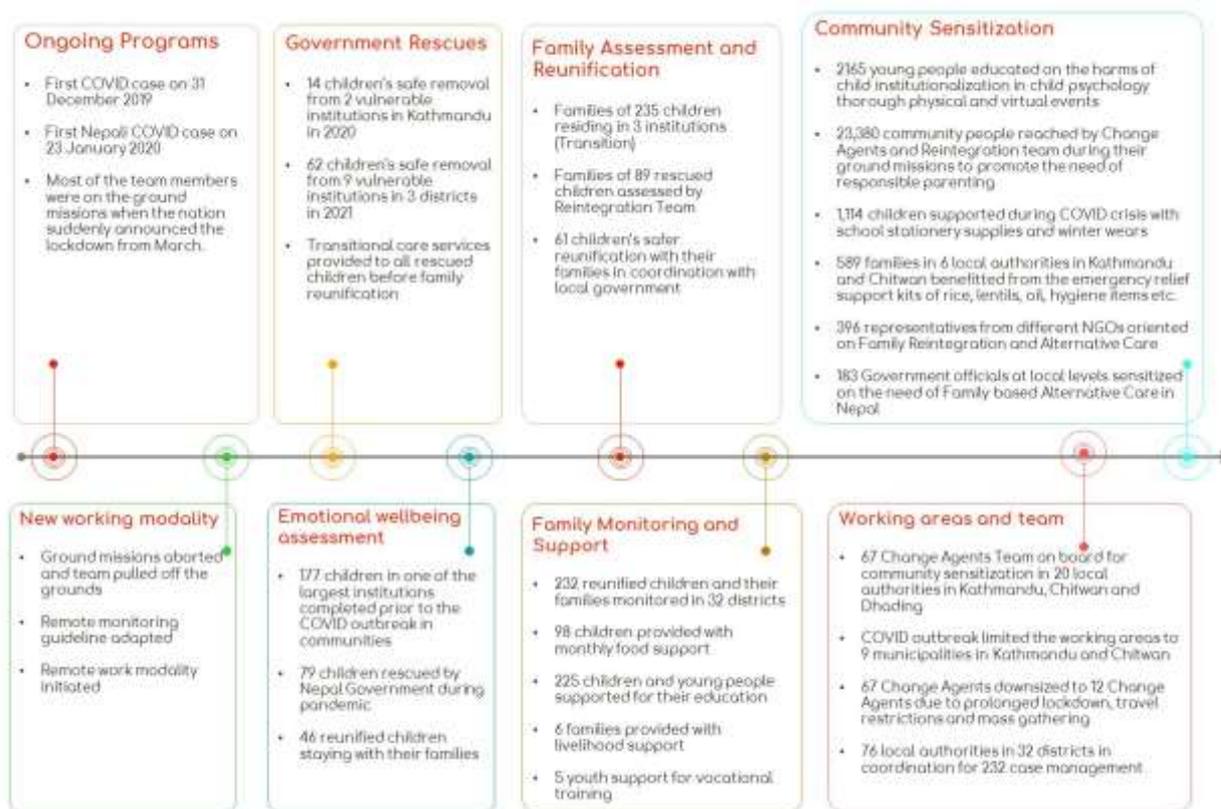
FMN has done phenomenal work in child rescue and reunification in Nepal including advocating for the best interest of children, assisting reintegration work throughout the country, supporting orphanage children, monitoring orphanages’ social media accounts to prevent illegal and unethical fundraising campaigns, and informing tourists about the harms of institutionalization of care (FMN, 2021). In 2019-20 in Humla, THIS reached out to communities with messages of safety related to COVID-19 through radio jingles, mikes, posters, and home-visits; THIS office in Humla set up a loudspeaker in the office premises to continuously disseminate information on hygiene and made water and soap available for handwashing (THIS, 2020). Additionally, they painted messages on rocks requesting parents not to send children away from families in the name of education (THIS, 2020). In 2021, THIS and Ichchhakamana Rural Municipality, Chitwan partnered for a Public Service Announcement (PSA) with the messages of the risks of violence and neglect of children in families due to the disrupted lives of parents. The Rural Municipality Vice-Chairperson recorded his own voice for a community-friendly message. Furthermore, FMN also helped establish Shine Together Care Experienced Network Nepal (FMN, 2021). A key macro-level engagement of FMN and THIS amid the pandemic is advocacy as detailed below.

Advocacy

The pandemic also opened the doors for strong collaboration and building on the momentum of care reform globally. FMN participated in the Biennial International Conference (BICON) as one of the opening plenary speakers on the UN – Day of General Discussion on Children’s Rights and Alternative Care on behalf of Asia-Pacific and presented the recommendations. FMN also spearheaded the 4th BICON on Alternative Care and shared the learning and promising practices of family-based alternative care practices in Nepal, highlighting the need for foster care. FMN has been advocating for relief and education support for children and families all over Nepal (FMN, 2021). In response to the rapid reintegration of children from residential institutions to families in the aftermaths of the COVID-19 pandemic, FMN commended the leadership of Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens (MoWCSC) and National Child Rights Council (NCRC) and collective efforts for child protection following the 2015 earthquake, illuminated child protection concerns arising due to COVID-19, urged child protection authorities to document the number of children sent home amid the COVID-19 outbreak, requested support and monitoring for children rapidly reintegrated into families, created of a ward-level mechanism for guardianship transfer from institutions to families, and drew attention to other types of family-based care including kinship and foster care. Their efforts promoted the concept that families are the best place for children to thrive (FMN, 2020).

FMN (2020) also demonstrated that the transition from institution to families needs to be meticulously planned, keeping the best interests of the children at the core of all actions. They expressed concern for children’s physical, emotional, social vulnerabilities when returning to families without adequate preparation and support system. Furthermore, FMN viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to look at care reform critically, strategize deinstitutionalization, and transition from residential care to community-based services. They offered their technical expertise in these processes (FMN, 2020). FMN strongly warned institutional care providers that children should not be sent home to families without adequate support and counseling.

Similarly, FMN contributed to the appeal issued on August 19, 2020, concerning the rapid reunification of children from institutions into families as a member of the Child Protection Working Group (CPWG). With the context that an overwhelming majority of children in institutional care have both parents or guardians and that many children within institutions are trafficked in the pretext of good education and better lives, the CPWG (2020) reiterated that unnecessary institutionalization of children is contrary to their best interests. The CPWG expressed grave concern about children in institutional care who were rapidly unified with their families before the COVID-19 compelled nationwide lockdown without adequate case management procedures. The CPWG (2020) also found that children reported mixed feelings on being unified with family—many of them wanted to return to institutional care as they had met their families for the first time in years and struggled to rebuild relationships with family members. Some expressed worries about having to return to the institution after the lockdown. Some of the key recommendations of the CPWG to the Nepal Government included restriction and prohibition of irregular admission of children in institutional care during COVID-19 and establishment of new residential institutions of care; mapping of children rapidly reunified with families and provision of stipends for families with unified children in need. The timeline given in Figure 2 presents the work of FMN and THIS amid the pandemic.

Figure 2 Timeline: Deinstitutionalization during Disruption

Analysis of Interventions

The Strengths

Collaboration is a crucial aspect and a notable strength of the work of FMN and THIS. Firstly, the strong collaboration between FMN and THIS is a unique strength that is hard to find between donor INGOs and NGO partners in Nepal. Their belief in equal partnership and demonstration of working as one does not go unnoticed. Both the organizations exhibit passion and commitment which forms the basis of their partnership. Secondly, their focus on collaborating with various stakeholders in child protection concerns during the health pandemic is pronounced, as evidenced in the following statement: "every effort has been made to work with local government and non-government organizations to protect children from trafficking and bring their collective attention to child protection during the pandemic" (FMN, 2021, p. 3). Such strong collaboration could be the cause for the increased effectiveness of interventions.

The processes FMN and THIS followed in their work, per se, is a strength of the interventions they implemented. They meticulously designed the reintegration guidelines and put significant effort into following up and providing the necessary support for family reintegration; for example, they support a care giver until the family declares that they do not need support or after the child reaches 18 or completes 10+2 (earlier the support was provided until they completed class 10). The support provided takes into consideration the health and education of the children and their relationship with the family. THIS takes the monitoring engagements seriously and family reunification for them is not limited to mere physical reunification. The belief that significant work begins when children are placed back into families speaks of their orientation towards family reunification. They consider the length of separation from family, the family environment, the psychological conditions, and the emotional well-

being of the child as important aspects of family reunification interventions. Investment in meticulous planning and sincere follow-up have resulted in notable child protection case management, viz. 90-95% success of family reintegration efforts. The family reintegration process implemented by THIS and FMN has set benchmarks for other organizations working in this area.

Another notable strength of the work of FMN and THIS is the ability to see the silver lining in the cloud—they identified chances to contribute to families and children amid challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed below under the ‘opportunities’ section. Global disasters require immediate response and the ability to deal with multifaceted problems. THIS exhibited resilience, perseverance, and swift response in the face of the pandemic. Commitment to funding was another strength that was displayed in the work of FMN and THIS during the pandemic. Although many organizations cut their funding, downsized their staff, and some even closed their operations, FMN and THIS continued all their programs; the commitment to work and the enthusiasm exhibited in the face of difficulty is a crucial strength of the interventions. THIS was listed as one of the transitional care service providers by NCRC in 2020. For every child removed from institutions by the Nepalese government and transferred to THIS transitional care for case management and family reintegration, the government supports THIS with 5,000 per month per child. This is an appreciable step and THIS can divert the resource partner’s budget to other community engagements.

Case Study 3

Bimala’s Life During and Post Lockdown in Nepal

Bimala (18 years) is the sole guardian for her younger siblings – Shital (12) and Arun (11). They have been living in the Rupandehi district of Nepal since their reunification with their family in 2015. The family has been a child-headed household since the pandemic period when Bimala was only 14. Her parents had gone to India for employment and used to send money. However, the lockdown due to COVID and resultant employment crisis meant they could neither send money nor come back to their children. Despite all the challenges, Bimala shared [during the first remote follow-up post-COVID lockdown in Nepal] that they were happy with each other. Later, THIS team reached them during lockdown with the help of neighbors and a distant relative who kept visiting them to ensure their living. THIS team also provided Bimala with a mobile phone, along with food supplies and bedding items for winter, so she could stay connected with the team. Although Bimala’s parents returned during the middle of 2021, they were forced to return to India for work. They supported with house repairs and essentials like new gas stoves so that Bimala did not have to spend hours blowing the smoke to cook food on firewood and Arun would not have to walk to the forest to collect wood. THIS also supported 2 bicycles for the children so they could save an hour of walking to their schools every day. Bimala and her siblings have been under regular monitoring and education support.

The Weaknesses

The pandemic created unprecedented circumstances for everyone. Neither FMN nor THIS could project or prepare for the substantial rise of mental health issues and thus were not fully equipped to provide the required support. The psychological counseling provided to the children could have been better; children showed signs and symptoms of psychological harm and they struggled to address the needs of these children immediately. This points to the need to develop structured mental health counseling interventions and build the capacities of the staff to intervene at times like this. Many of the families that THIS extended one-time support to expected multiple/continued support, indicating the possible need for continued support to more families in need.

Another weakness in the work of THIS and FMN was that the interventions were not adequate. Incidences of child marriages in the families of reunified children were reported. Young girls left home marrying young men and such incidences were identified only when the team reached out to these families as part of regular monitoring. The team could not prevent child marriages during the pandemic due to the delay in the flow of information and travel restrictions and THIS reflects that a joint effort with the government could have prevented these incidences.

The achievements of the work of FMN and THIS also helped them realize that they could have done better work in collaborating with local governments. They forged a collaboration with the Ichchhakamana Rural Municipality through a six-month follow-up and secured a 30% commitment to the funding of their work in the Municipality for a year. This highlights the need for stronger advocacy, collaboration with CBOs and local government to tap into local resources. For example, orphan children's allowances could be better tapped in but physical restrictions due to the pandemic have obstructed this. The NCRC has issued directives to all government bodies to provide allowance to orphan children and children with disability 3000 per person throughout Nepal to keep children in families (kinship care) so that they do not end up in institutions but this information is yet to be widely disseminated and stakeholders in the areas of child protection, including FMN and THIS, could have played an instrumental role in this.

Perhaps another weakness in the work of FMN and THIS is their nature of maintaining a low profile. Their belief in doing, rather than blowing their horn, might be limiting their reach to relevant stakeholders including communities. Better use of social media is another prominent area that these organizations could work towards including wide dissemination of information on trafficking into institutions. Documentation –of not just the work but also processes—is an area for improvement for FMN and THIS. Additionally, investing in research and strengthening organizational research capacities would significantly contribute to their work; for example, they could have conducted more longitudinal studies of children and families they had worked with. This would have served as solid evidence of their effective interventions.

The Opportunities

FMN and THIS saw the pandemic as an opportunity to learn, reflect, and innovate. The pandemic taught FMN and THIS about the alternatives of physical presence to further their work thus expanding the work modality. For example, it opened them to the possibilities of carrying out monitoring, counseling, follow-ups remotely through mobile phones and applications like Messenger and Viber (THIS, 2020). The shift from paper banking to mobile and internet banking facilitated efficient support to families and communities to ensure continued services even amid the COVID-19 pandemic (THIS, 2020). The leaders at these organizations express that the COVID-19 pandemic prepared them to work well with lockdown, *bandh*, and with other times involving risks in physical movement.

Apart from the continued programmatic intervention, FMN and THIS could also support more rescue operations during the pandemic. The Government took monitoring of orphanages more seriously during the pandemic as the vulnerabilities of children were heightened and the frequency of monitoring operations was high. Additionally, the pandemic also created circumstances for the closure of institutions that were poorly managed. Many childcare homes/orphanages that were running poorly, such as through begging and accepting leftovers from social events like weddings and *bratabandh*

(sacred thread giving ceremonies), were forced to close due to the pandemic and resultant restrictions on mobility. This forced many orphanages that were vocally against THIS and FMN to accept the path that they had long advocated- putting children in institutions back into families. The pandemic, in this sense, facilitated their collaboration with the government in taking children out of orphanages and placing them into families through the closure of childcare institutions that were not adequately caring for children. Since the beginning of the pandemic in Nepal, THIS has supported children rescued from 10 orphanages.

The rapid displacement of children from institutions in the aftermaths of the pandemic drew the attention of relevant stakeholders, highlighted the importance of family during the emergency, and illuminated the importance of children's right to alternative care. The government visibly moved towards alternative care, more so due to the pandemic, and towards a rights-based child protection approach. The pandemic also provided an opportunity for deep discussions on alternative care in Asia through the Biennial International conference (BICON) on alternative Care for Children in Asia on 8-9 December 2021. Additionally, the pandemic also provided an avenue to share the work of FMN and THIS on a global platform and to connect globally through BICON and UNDG.

The Threats/Challenges

The Nepal Government's expansion of monitoring and rescue operations in numbers and frequencies due to the pandemic led to the rapid reunification of children with families without adequate planning and support. The transition from institution to family for a child needs careful planning and management. It also requires significant work towards preparing the family for receiving the child, supporting, strengthening, and monitoring the family, thus making family reintegration a delicate and planned process (CPWG, 2020). However, COVID-19, particularly the lockdown, presented significant challenges in these processes. For example, communication with children and families had to be virtual. Mr. Dhan Bahadur Lama, the Executive Director of THIS, expressed that year 2020 was the most challenging in the 17-year history of THIS, even including various ups and downs in its initial years such as massive earthquakes and landslides in 2015 (THIS, 2020).

The pandemic presented challenges greater than the earthquake in 2015 in the sense that the challenges were repetitive. During the earthquake the time between the first and second shock was difficult. For example, while finding Tarpaulin, gas, food, etc. was difficult but people could sit together, work together, could share resources, cook together, sleep together and the challenges subsided with time. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic these challenges were repetitive due to lockdown, partial lockdown, and restricted transportation (odd and even number system). The uncertainties made it difficult for the senior management team to plan and execute the plans including field visits. An example could be the challenges in setting up the monitoring calendar by the case management teams. Following the calendar was severely impacted due to the pandemic.

In addition to following the calendar, living up to the ideals of child protection work was a challenge amid the pandemic. Since physical mobility was restricted, social workers could not be on the frontline physically. Children in institutions often do not have proper documentation on their biological families and are prevented from communicating with their biological families regularly. The lockdown presented significant challenges in tracing the families of the rescued children since physical visits to potential information providers was not a possibility under the lockdown. Hence, many rescued

children who could otherwise be reunited with their families had to wait in transitional care provided by THIS for the partial lockdowns and easing of mobility restrictions.

Repairing psychological harm virtually was a challenge. Being physically present allowed workers to observe many things including the physical, social, economic environment of the families and the body language of children and family members. This was limited through virtual media. Additionally, some severe cases required weekly follow up but that was impacted by the travel restrictions associated with the pandemic. As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic was responded to with lockdown, partial lockdown, and restricted transportation (odd and even number system) which delayed family reunification efforts. Restricted mobility also added to the challenges of preventing child marriages and intercepting adolescent girls' marriage; THIS failed to prevent these despite all their efforts remotely. They could not conduct community awareness programs as much as was necessary.

The pandemic and the resultant complete lockdowns and partial lockdowns impacted the livelihoods of many families and pushed poor families further into poverty. Many families lost income sources due to the travel restrictions resulting from the pandemic. Most of the children that THIS and FMN work with come from families with low incomes that are dependent on daily wages for a living and were also the most impacted by the lockdowns and mobility restrictions. This economic crisis increased significant pressure on THIS and FMN to expand their services and outreach. However, this was challenging. THIS reached out to some but could not cover all those in need and providing timely support was a significant challenge. The pandemic also added to the workloads of organizations committed to their service users. Many children whose cases were closed a few years back reached out to THIS for help. Addressing their needs was a challenge because of the gap in the information about their whereabouts. Additionally, having to live in constant fear of acquiring the virus from others resulted in limited social interactions and work together and this added to the challenges of work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most education institutions were also forced to close due to the threats presented by the pandemic. Most educational institutions in the country were not ready to take the teaching and learning into the online space, impacting the learning continuum of students across the nation. Loss of jobs for parents and closure of schools meant that parents and children had to share the same physical space at home for long durations and amid anxiety resulting in disrupted routines. Conflicts between parents and children increased. Loss of income opportunities for the parents and conflict between parents and children created avenues for violence, neglect, exploitation, and abuse in the families while some parents also decided to part ways. Child marriage is one of the consequences of disrupted routines and family chaos. Despite realizing the need for increased mental health support to families during the pandemic, THIS could do little on this front due to the dire need of prioritizing protecting children rescued from institutional care and reuniting them with families.

Another significant challenge concerning child protection and the pandemic was the deprivation of academic engagement, the delay in administration resulting in loss of academic years for children. Krishna, a care leaver supported by THIS, expresses, "I should have been in my 3rd year of Engineering but I am still in 2nd year. We were able to cover our courses over online classes but it is difficult as we are missing practical learning" (THIS, 2021, p. 4). The pandemic also forced THIS to diversify work modality, shifting the office from a shared physical space to an individual's home and from cash and cheques to banking through the internet and mobile phones (THIS, 2021).

In a nutshell, the pandemic and resultant rescue operations were a double-edged sword leading to rapid reunification of children in families without adequate preparation and back door entry of children in institutions. This was a prominent challenge in the child protection work during the pandemic since the government reached out to them for the reunification of children from remote parts of Nepal in brief notices and large capacities. After NCRC rescues children, cases of children from Karnali (difficult to reach) are handed to THIS, and having a bulk of children reintegrate with families in remote and hard-to-reach areas was a challenge that THIS consistently had to deal with. The politicization of relief efforts also added to the challenges of the work of FMN and THIS: community members accused them of favoring families closer to/related to the politicians over vulnerable families in dire need of support. As a crucial aspect of their intervention involves collaboration with the local government, the prioritization of public health over child protection was difficult to deal with. Local authorities asked the staff members of THIS to support with medicine and health interventions at their request of preparing for possible child protection concerns during the pandemic.

The Way Ahead: Proposing Effective and Efficient Family Reintegration

FMN and THIS deeply believe that Child Care Homes/Orphanages should be the last resort for children and that children should grow within families. A non-negotiable arrangement for effective and efficient child protection, including family integration, is the assigning of Child Welfare Officer at all local governments. The importance of a local contact is pronounced during emergencies requiring immediate interventions. The Child Welfare Officers can also tap into social security schemes to help children at risk and help in gatekeeping for such children. However, out of 753 local governments in the country, only about 60 have instituted Child Welfare Officers. Additionally, child right committees should also be in place at all levels of governance. A notable response of THIS to the families in need that are severely impacted by the pandemic is providing food stipends; this is believed to have prevented unnecessary institutionalization of many children. Such support should be integrated in the actions of the local governments for sustainability. However, many local governments did not have information on their constituencies concerning the most vulnerable families and this information should be maintained moving ahead so that families in need can be reached early. Another key arrangement necessary during disruption is the treatment of social workers as essential workers/frontline workers who are exempted from the restrictions on mobility. This will significantly help to address the needs of children in need and to prevent events like child marriages.

Several studies globally and in Nepal point out that a significant percentage of children in institutions (orphanages) in Nepal have one or both living parents. A major contributor of separation of children from families is education—parents send their children to institutions in the hope for a better education. The Government should adequately invest in education so that children have easy, unrestricted and reliable access to good education. Another key reasons for separation of children from families is the struggle of families to make a living. To address this, government should extend adequate livelihood support to families in need and vulnerable families.

Children in institutions could experience emotional turmoil in having to explain, time and again, that they are orphans. On the one hand, children in institutions suffer from psychological issues, on the other hand there are multiple benefits of family reintegration including children learning their own culture and language and strengthening their sense of identities. Another significant problem with children in orphanages in Nepal is that many of them are forced to take the family name/surname of the owner/administrator of the orphanage. This is a violation of the children's right to identity and severely

impacts their documentation with state mechanisms including birth registration and citizenship certificate. Thus, children should be reintegrated in families whenever possible and alternative family care arrangements should be made when biological families are not present. Along these lines, rapid reunification in response to COVID-19 looks like a boon for children at the outset but we are yet to notice the repercussions on children and families. Reintegration of children into families is a meticulous, slow, and guided process that requires significant time and resources which rapid reunification during the COVID-19 pandemic did not largely display. Children were not adequately counseled for reunification and families were not sufficiently prepared to take children in.

Helping families meet basic needs is the foundation to preparing them for reunification with the child. The families should be trained to receive the child, depending upon factors including the age of the child, the duration of separation and family composition. The importance of the social relations model and the ecological model cannot be underestimated in understanding the family in relation to the child. Problem tree and solution tree can significantly contribute to understanding the problems in the family and identifying solutions to these. The family reintegration process should be adaptable, easy to follow, relevant to the context of the family and the community. Making the community aware of the ill-impacts of the separation of children from families, helping the parents understand the value of raising children in families and preventing their separation and gatekeeping are important steps in child protection that the guidelines should include. It is important to note that organizations working in family reintegration have their own guidelines. The government has also issued guidelines in case management which are not widely disseminated or followed. In this context, having a uniform family reintegration guideline for all institutions in the country would be an important next step. The guidelines followed by THIS could serve as a good practice in the Nepali context; an independent monitoring and evaluation team from the Social Welfare Council that performed a mid-term evaluation of a five-year project implemented by THIS suggested that THIS should be a resource organization concerning family reunification.

The role of the government is primary in moving forward. It is clear that rescue and rapid reunification is not the most appropriate response to children in institutions in general, especially during disruptions. Orphanages should be encouraged to gradually move towards deinstitutionalization. Government should promote the understanding that families are the best places for children to grow and despite noble intentions by the institutions, they are unknowingly doing more harm than good to the children under their care. It is imperative to understand that child care reform is possible only with their collaboration. The other responsibility of the government is to issue directives, including moratorium, and to disseminate it widely. In this context, the directives issued by NCRC are appreciable since they were done both in Nepali and English—this helped guide the stakeholders within Nepal and provided knowledge to the international community on the way forward. Monitoring of child care institutions is an area that naturally needs the government's attention. Monitoring should focus more on legal compliance than on the infrastructure and services provided by the institutions.

Remodeling or repurposing of institutions is another important step moving forward. The Nepalese Government removes children from vulnerable institutions after which the institutional infrastructure resources remain idle. The resources can be used to strengthen communities in various ways and strong communities can support families in need. Study shows 90% of funding to the institutions in Nepal are international funded. This may imply the donors supporting the institutions should either stop funding or divert their funding to other institutions. Donor mapping and sensitization will help direct funding to the family-based care in communities.

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