Editorial
Supporting children with child welfare concerns in Africa: Involving formal and informal systems

Child welfare in Africa has been topical, owing to the dearth of enforced child protective and development policies and programmes in many African countries. Without doubts, many countries in Africa have local policies and legislation to protect and promote the wellbeing of their children. At the moment, 49 countries have ratified the African Children's Charter, demonstrating a communal commitment to uplift, promote and protect the rights of children. However, governments, policymakers, philanthropists and relevant stakeholders in Africa have too often focused on the political-economy of their countries without much exclusive attention provided to protecting and advancing the welfare of children, among other vulnerable groups. Notwithstanding, we are aware of some policy documents targeted at the wellbeing of children in some African countries, but enforcement has been an issue. More so, many of such policy documents do not get reviewed for decades, which reflects poor commitment to the wellbeing of children that has typically characterised many African governments.

It is troubling when we think that the population of children in Africa will continue to rise. Compared to Europe's less than 2 births per woman fertility rate, Africa's fertility rate is capped at about 4.4 births per woman, and the highest birth rate in the world. UNICEF has predicted that Africa's child population might reach 1 billion by 2055, leaving the continent with the question of care, protection, and overall welfare for this large child population. There is an urgent need to gather rapid continental evidence to address the child welfare concerns of children in Africa, as this will help the continent fulfil its aspirations of protection, provision, and promotion of child rights in line with its 2063 Agenda.

We understand the relevance of the priority African countries offer to their political-economy, especially at this time of building back better after the pandemic. Yet we believe same relevance should be accorded social welfare, even more, the welfare of children on the continent. It is unclear what the agenda for the welfare of the African child is, even though we find this subsumed into the broader 2063 Agenda. This lack of clarity accounts for weak progress in advancing the wellbeing of the Africa child to at least be at par with children in the global north. Understandably, most cultures in Africa entrust child welfare to the family, and at best the local communities. The argument that this culture should be respected, reformed, or dismantled can be connected to the question whether there should be an African agenda for the welfare and wellbeing of the African child; and whether it is the ripe time for most African countries to adapt

the protectionist and welfarist policies of child support that are obtainable and enforced in most parts of the global north. Albeit some African countries are already on this path of providing formal child support services to children, and lessons from these countries will add significantly to the body of literature on child welfare.

This special issue puts together evidence about how best the large numbers of African children in diverse vulnerable situations can be supported and nurtured through a combination of formal and informal structures. Of course, our goal in this special edition as well is to throw more lights on the problems limiting the children's positive outcomes. After all, we wouldn't be able to proffer solutions to the children's problems if we don't know what it is they are grappling with. Based on our research and practice experiences within child welfare services in parts of Africa, we have observed that formal services for children and their families can be limited. But this does not deny the fact that issues like child abuse and neglect, child trafficking, substance abuse, disabilities, parental mental illness, among others, continue to cause strain. It is important to consider how formal and informal systems can be utilised towards optimal gains for children and their families who may need child welfare intervention. Especially in low-resource settings and contexts where formal services are always not the first priority for issues concerning child welfare. It is essential to take a balanced approach in understanding needs and developing intervention/supports for children and their families with dual recognition of the strengths and limitations of both non-exclusive options.

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We are delighted to have received a range of submissions that carefully navigate the balance between formal and informal systems of supports in child welfare. We were overwhelmed with the high quality and quantity of submissions we received, which goes to show the attention that this topic needs in Africa. We are happy to announce that there will be two issues for this special edition, and thanks to the publisher for making space for a second issue. Contents from each of the accepted papers are summarised next.

Asamoah et al (2023) used photovoice to highlight the challenges that children with disabilities experience in inclusive education in Ghana. The agenda for inclusive education is common in many countries in Africa, especially following the 1994 Salamanca statement of "Education for All" as well as priorities for equal access to education in the UNCRPD (2006). After engaging with six students with various forms of disabilities, the authors concluded that the structures in basic schools in Ghana are not "ready" for inclusion. These structures include the physical properties of building, access to learning aids, school personal and ideologies that shape inclusive practices. The study identifies some key areas of supports to improve the experiences of children with disabilities in inclusive schools. While the authors admit their small sample size, the rich and in-depth nature of their analysis provides important directions to make changes to how we can provide targeted support to these children.

The study by Ajibo et al (2023) documents the plights of under-18 domestic helpers in Nigeria where they also cast doubts on the capability of child protection services to deal with the abusive concerns of these young domestic helpers. These under-aged helpers are unable to report their abusive experiences due to the unbalanced power relations existing between themselves and the families that host them, many of these young helpers come from poor families. While there are legislations like the Child Rights Act of 2003 to protect these children, it seems to only exist on paper without impacting on care and protection of this category of children. The authors were concerned about the lack of intervention from social workers to deal with the prevalence of various forms of abuse towards these children. It goes again to show how there is a lack of attention in some African countries to the welfare needs of children.

In some parts of Africa, it is a given to assume that kinship may be involved in some caregiving responsibilities when parents are unable/unwilling or even as part of the socialisation process where there isn't necessarily a child welfare concern. The idea of non-kinship foster care may be treated with ambivalence in parts of Africa, particularly because there is a value attached to blood relatives taking care of each other. However, Isangha et al. (2023) attempts to break the glass ceiling by examining the possibilities for non-kinship foster care. This is a welcome investigation as several countries in Africa are recently exploring the potential to formalise non-kinship foster care. Findings from their study could be helpful in providing directions to African countries on the need and how to formalise non-kinship foster care within the child welfare system. Specifically, the authors looked at what socio-economic drivers could determine mothers' likelihood to foster a child. Not surprising, though, only a minority of the mothers were likely to foster a child, even so when it comes to children with special needs. However, there are some nuances, without trying to generalise here because a significant minority of the mothers agreed to foster children under six years. What the study shows, however, is that there is more work to be done if African countries are to move towards non-kinship foster care. Or is it the case that we look to formalising kinship care instead?

There are ongoing uncertainties and debates about what child neglect means especially due to the contextual nature of the concept. Having some form of "consensus" about what child neglect constitutes could help social workers identify, assess and provide support to children who are neglected. It is also important that we understand neglect from people who are close to or perpetuate neglect themselves. Manful et al (2023) address this issue by exploring what actions parents in Ghana deemed as constituting neglect. Some interesting analysis was revealed using the age of the child to determine neglect. When omission of care involved children below 10 years, this was acknowledged by parents as being neglectful. But if it involved children 10 years and above, it was seen as the child's failure to conform to reciprocal norms between parent and child. This shows that culture influences what behaviour is neglectful. Social workers are expected to be aware of the influence of culture when working with cases of neglect and encourage families to talk about what behaviours of theirs they consider neglectful before providing intervention.

In Nigeria, a paper from Anazonwu et al (2023) describes the political-economy evolution of the Nigerian State in neo-liberal direction, stating how that has affected the welfare of children. The authors argued that the neo-liberal state of Nigeria means that it has been transformed into a capitalist entity, where it has become profit driven, and matters of welfare receive little or no attention. For instance, according to the authors, while Nigeria pursues its economic policies and political strategies vigorously, policies and programmes meant to protect and promote the welfare and rights of children are barely popular in public domain and least considered by the government. Policies like free healthcare and free and quality education for children, and protective services like formalised fostering and special court services to deal with the concerns of child safety have been swallowed by the neo-liberal nature of the current Nigerian state. This, again, is a reminder of how negligence and a lack of committed responsibility characterizes the welfare of children in Nigeria, which needs to rapidly change.

Lastly, Onalu et al (2023) discusses the abusive concerns faced by under-18 domestic helpers in Nigeria that have persisted without targeted remedial committed actions. They explained that the social protection space for children in Nigeria is not optimal based on accessibility and responsiveness. The 2003 Child Rights Act has not made any significant difference in child protection. Hence, children who serve as domestic helpers in the homes of adults who are not their biological parents suffer a range of physical and emotional abuses, and most times they go through such silently. The authors present evidence that shows the need for social workers within Nigeria's social protection space for children, while devolving child protection strategies to the grassroots.

These are but the highlights of first few papers to be included in the first part of this special issue. Longer time has been spent in finding suitable reviewers for the submissions, and in the rounds of revisions. We will expect to have a second part later for other selected papers in the pipeline. By then we shall augment another brief mention of the second part.

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