

Oak Foundation and Learning: Reflections from Grant-Making and Beyond

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Oak Foundation is a private grant-making foundation that commits its resources to address issues of global, social and environmental concern, particularly those that have a major impact on the lives of the disadvantaged. In its Child Abuse Programme (CAP), grant making and support are targeted on initiatives that contribute to one or all of the following priorities:

- elimination of the sexual exploitation of children;
- engagement of men and boys in combating the sexual abuse of children; and
- promotion of violence prevention and the protection of children from all forms of violence in all settings.

This series of brief papers is based on what the Child Abuse Programme of Oak Foundation has and is learning through its funding partnerships, and through reaching out to others in practice, policy development and academia, in respect of the first two of these priority aims. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all relevant work. It is a snapshot of some of the work that is influencing our thinking and planning, that we hope will evolve and enriched through future work.

One of the challenges to expanding learning around the prevention of violence is the difficulty of establishing if and how an intervention has stopped something from happening. This is always difficult; but in an area of work such as sexual violence, with poor data around incidence, and addressing an issue that is so often un- or under-reported, it is especially hard.

However, Oak Foundation's (and others') increased attention and funding that targets prevention of violence against children is clearly justified, and starts from the assumptions that:

- preventing abuse or exploitation from happening in the first place is always the best option;
- the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is not inevitable; and
- effective prevention efforts that both mitigate risks and promote resilience, probably need to be targeted at all levels – individual, family, community, organisational and societal.²

This shared emphasis on prevention creates opportunities for the development of new thinking around learning about what works. This includes improving monitoring and evaluation that looks at change over time, across organisations and from diverse entry points. This would contribute to a better understanding of what is effective in preventing violence against children, including sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

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² Oak Foundation – Child Abuse Programme Strategy 2012-2016.

Recognising the importance of a strong evidence base to inform systems change and practice and policy development, and the significant gaps in the evidence of what works or contributes to achieving these ambitious goals, Oak Foundation is committed to explicitly and deliberately supporting learning. This includes support for new research, encouraging and funding rigorous evaluation, and facilitating exchange and reflection by implementers, policy developers and academics, across projects, programmes and regions.

In a few instances, learning is *the* critical outcome of a grant. However in most instances, learning is supported and encouraged as a key component of all grants, an important outcome that accompanies and is derived from action and implementation. The starting assumption is that there are opportunities to facilitate and encourage learning in many different settings, as an element of projects *and* as a direct and deliberate activity in its own right. Learning is not a one-off event, it is cyclical. It involves research, thoughtful monitoring and rigorous evaluation, critical reflection, sharing and exchange, translation into action, which is in turn evaluated and adapted. When undertaken in an atmosphere of mutual respect, the outcomes of this learning cycle are the key ingredients that should strengthen the field, improve practice, and underpin the development of positive and facilitating policy frameworks.

Recognising gaps in the evidence is not to deny the value and importance of much of the work that is taking place. The absence of good data about programme outcomes does not in itself imply that the work is ineffective; it is simply that in many instances, there is insufficient evidence about the outcomes to inform future development, scale up and mainstreaming of efforts.

It is important to be clear about what is meant by “good or effective interventions”. To be considered “proven” practice, the same approach will have been implemented in different contexts, with different populations, and explicitly and rigorously evaluated in terms of impact on the issue. There are also a range of interventions that are “promising”,³ these have a clear theory of change, are well documented and evaluated, but perhaps limited in terms of scale or geographical scope.

Some of the work currently being funded and implemented is not based on good data about outcomes. One critical gap in the evidence is about the long term influence and sustainability of any positive change. Another gap is the absence of children, families and communities’ voices and perspectives on “success”. Often process indicators are monitored, but these are rarely accurate or sufficient proxies for measuring changes that actually impact the lives of children and their families.

Being aware of the gaps in evidence and being strategic in identifying opportunities for learning are two key steps in building or contributing to a stronger, robust and credible body of knowledge. This series of papers aims to pull together some of the work that we have found interesting and helpful, in providing some answers and posing some interesting challenges and insights.

³ Example – http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/What_We_Are_Learning_About_Protecting_Children_in_the_Community_Full_Report.pdf.