Programme Management
Best Practice

Front cover photo: Jenny Matthews

Programme Management Best Practice

What is this Manual?

This manual contains governance best practice guidelines. At the back there is a Benchmarks section which is an easy-to-use checklist.

How can you as an Alliance Member use it?

As a resource to inspire and empower you in your own organisational development efforts. Learning from best practice from the private, public and not-for-profit community is a proven technique to achieve excellence.

How was it produced?

Through the collaboration of Alliance Chief Advisers, experts in Member organisations and the Secretariat, and by drawing on both internal and external sources. All material is tested by Members before being endorsed.

What are our guiding principles?

• To concentrate on principles, not prescriptive detail.

• To recognise that the application of these principles will vary between Members, all of whom operate in different cultural and regulatory environments.

• To be relevant and challenging to as many Members as possible.

• To be user-friendly.

• To allow for updating at appropriate intervals.

Contents

Introduction

Save the Children is the world's leading independent organisation in fighting for children's rights. The fundamental purpose of the work of Save the Children is to improve the lives of children.

The International Save the Children Alliance works toward a worldwide movement for children's rights and ensures cooperation among the Members in their programme work. Success of the individual national organisations and thereby the Alliance as a whole depends on good governance, strong management, effective programmes, widespread support, clear communications, adequate funding and – of great importance – public trust and confidence.

The purpose of Programme Management Best Practice is to provide Members of the International Save the Children Alliance with guidance, key principles and a framework for effective programmes. It is meant to help build capacity and professionalism and serve as a resource to guide Members in the planning, implementation and evaluation of successful programmes. It is not meant to provide strict prescriptive rules or detailed guidance on implementation of specific programmes. It does not set out to define a distinctive programming approach for Save the Children; that would require considerably more debate among Members and is well beyond the scope of this document.

Members of the International Save the Children Alliance have a long history of successful programme activity built upon the professional expertise of skilled programme staff, strong leadership, practical experience, collaborative activities and proven results. However, Members work in different environments, reflect national norms and culture, must respond to specific donor interests, and have a wide range of capabilities, expertise, experience and mission focus, and therefore must adjust best practice to local conditions. Nevertheless, the basic principles and concepts have proven to be sound under a variety of circumstances and are common elements of successful programme activities worldwide.

The expertise and knowledge gained from past experience is well documented. For example, the Child Rights Programming Group has produced a handbook that includes core concepts, working principles and a basic framework to develop rights based programming. Similarly, the Child Participation Working Group has developed papers and publications that provide specific guidance in the area of children's participation rights.

Detailed documentation exists in other programme areas such as conflict and disaster, education, exploitation and abuse, HIV & AIDS, and advocacy. Key Alliance documents are listed in the reference section of this document. Members are strongly encouraged to examine these documents and training material on the Alliance Xtranet for specific programme guidance.

Programme Management Best Practice provides an umbrella over the more specific guidance available in each of the programme areas. The focus of Programme Management Best Practice is to highlight the overarching key principles and essential elements of successful programme activity irrespective of the specific thematic area. This document is divided into five major sections:

1. Alliance Mission, Vision, & Strategy

2. Quality Programmes

3. Guiding Programme Principles

4. Programme Methodologies

5. Programme Management

Alliance Mission, Vision, and Strategy

The International Save the Children Alliance is a federation of national Members each committed to achieve demonstrable results and positive impact. Effective programming at all levels starts with our mission and global vision.

Our Mission:
Save the Children fights for children's rights. We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

Our Vision:
Save the Children works for:
A world which respects and values each child
A world which listens to children and learns
A world where all children have hope and opportunity

Our Strategy:
In May 2004 the Members unanimously endorsed the Alliance Strategy to 2020 and the Five Year Plan to 2010. It provides a clear sense of future direction, which enables us to work together to achieve our common goal:

"By working together as a global Alliance we want to maximise our contribution for the benefit of children."

The Alliance Strategic Plan defines activities where we intend to work together to achieve specific outcomes. For the next five-year period, we will focus globally on three key challenges, all of which have programme implications:

1. Quality Education for Children Affected by Armed Conflict

2. Stronger Members in 18 Countries

3. At least 5 Members achieve Unified Presence at the Country Level and at least 15 move one step closer

The Alliance goal and key challenges focus on global collaboration. Members, whether contributing specifically to the success of these global challenges or working to become a stronger Member and a more significant organisation within their national environment, must conduct activities that achieve meaningful and lasting improvement in children's lives – that's our raison-de-être.

Quality Programmes

Save the Children aspires to the highest quality programmes. Quality programmes:

• Are consistent with the Save the Children vision and mission.

• Address significant obstacles to the well-being of children, especially the most marginalized children.

• Focus on areas of organisational priority, expertise and capacity.

• Are based on a clear set of programme principles and therefore result in positive, measurable and sustainable changes.

Satisfying these general characteristics is a first step in ensuring programme quality; however more specific criteria are useful in evaluating specific programme activities and making programme decisions. Appendix 1 contains a set of more detailed selection criteria which can be used when addressing specific programme decisions.

Guiding Programme Principles

a) Alliance

i. The Rights of the Child

Save the Children bases its work on The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which defines universal principles and norms for the status of children. The provisions of the Convention call for a universal commitment to the protection, respect and promotion of the rights of children and must be given primary consideration in planning and conducting Save the Children's programme activities. Key provisions of the Convention are summarized in Appendix 2.

ii. Thematic Areas

Among Save the Children Members worldwide, activities centre on education, health, HIV/AIDS, citizenship, community development, exploitation and abuse, institutional development and emergency response to conflict, war and natural disasters. All our work delivers concrete, measurable and lasting outcomes for children.

iii. Advocacy

Advocacy is a necessary and fully integrated part of our work. Addressing complex issues and finding lasting solutions requires the mobilization and organisation of large numbers of people and resources as well as changes in policy and practice. Total integration of advocacy activities, communications and programmes is the most effective way to protect the rights and improve the well-being of children over the long term.

Within the context of the Alliance mission it is essential that each Member develop its own set of programme goals and objectives based on its local environmental conditions, specific mission focus and organisational capacity.

b) Member specific

Each Member should develop a set of programme principles to guide programme selection, design and execution. An example of a set of programme principles and a brief content description follow.

i) Child Focused

Children, as defined by the CRC as anyone up to the age eighteen years, are central to all of Save the Children's work. Every programme must directly or indirectly contribute to lasting improvements to children's lives and the realisation of their rights.

Save the Children focuses its efforts towards the most marginalized children whose rights are most infringed and whose needs are the greatest. The four general principles of the CRC, non-discrimination, best interest of the child, survival and development and the child's opinion should be applied in all aspects of programming.

Involving children directly in programmes and activities as active participants rather than passive beneficiaries provides a positive contribution to their communities while providing children with the opportunity to acquire skills critical to sustainable development. The voices of children should be listened to and influence activities to improve their situation.

ii) Empowering

Programmes are designed to empower individuals to make choices and take actions on their own behalf.

Participation is linked with and reinforces empowerment. Participation provides the opportunity for individuals, especially children and their parents and caregivers, to identify their own needs and contribute to developing solutions through planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes. Such participation results in individual investment in activities, a greater interest in outcomes, self-reliance and self-esteem, longer-term sustainability and greater impact.

iii) Sustainable

Sustainability implies lasting positive change in institutions, behaviours or policies affecting human rights and well-being.

Sustainability involves enabling individuals, communities and institutions to promote change and to adopt new behaviours and systems that endure during and after Save the Children' involvement. Sustainable programmes evolve and adapt to changing environmental conditions over time as a consequence of an effective partnership and dialogue between citizens and governments, and among women, children and men.

Sustainability may be defined in four categories and must be planned from the first discussions of any programme activity.

• Institutional / Social sustainability – the willingness and capacity of local institutions (families, organisations, governments for example) to assume full responsibility for continuing positive changes.

• Financial sustainability – the ability of an institution, a policy or a practice of behaviour to be financed from a reliable source of funds.

• Behavioural sustainability – the demonstrated knowledge or skills that continue to be developed and applied over time.

• Policy sustainability – the acceptance and application of policies by other institutions that support the initial efforts of Save the Children, for example nation-wide replication of Save the Children initiatives.

In a broader sense, a key issue is the importance of building a constituency of support and the capacity of civil society to support children's rights.

iv) Achieving Scale

The goal of achieving scale is to achieve greater impact. Size alone is not a guarantee of programme success or positive impact, yet programme scale is frequently correlated with achieving sustainable social change. In this regard, working in partnerships, coalitions and networks is an excellent way to achieve critical mass for change.

Scale provides an opportunity to achieve cost-effectiveness, leverage funding sources, and gain public attention thereby creating conditions for greater impact. The objective is to maximize the positive impact on children in cost-effective ways that can be sustained.

Scaling-up can be achieved by geographic coverage, partnerships, policy and legislative impact and new vision.

• Geographic coverage means reaching a larger population through communications, expanded service delivery systems and replication of models or messages. Reaching greater numbers of people through different strategies is the essence of scaling-up.

• Partnerships result from working in collaboration with other institutions and have many forms: participating on a consultative basis with other agencies to strengthen institutional capacity and programme activities, providing technical assistance and building capacity among partner agencies or working jointly with other organisations with complementary capacities on a shared objective. Alliance building, especially with national and international agencies leads to greater impact.

• Policy and legislative-level impact recognizes the linkages between national and international policy and conditions at the local level. Whatever is done locally can have added value and wider policy implications. Therefore, the International Save the Children Alliance, the UN system and other strategic alliances serve a crucial role in affecting policy change.

• New vision seeks new models of collaboration, new technologies, and new funding relationships that can achieve change on a greater scale than otherwise possible.

v) Measurable Impact

Continually assessing programme quality and measuring impact are critical activities to ensure that meaningful outcomes are achieved. Evaluation is essential to improve effectiveness and make sound decisions on future actions. Also of increasing importance is the need to provide quantifiable information and demonstrate impact in order to mobilize donor resources and support.

There are three fundamental processes involved in sustaining this principle of measurable impact: critical self-awareness, action research and information management.

• Critical self-awareness involves working with communities or governmental organisations to plan, implement and evaluate initiatives that result in lasting improvements to children's lives.

It also involves objective evaluation, using qualitative research methods if necessary, of programme data compared with desired outcomes.

• Action research is a systematic approach to understand programme context and impact. It is not academic – it's based on actual measured outcomes. It allows the evaluation of activities and how they affect programme impact.

• Information management is a means to collect pertinent data and present it in a form so that decision-makers can make strategic decisions.

Involving children themselves in evaluating a programme is an effective way to judge impact, both positive and negative and the intended and unintended consequences of our work[1].

Programme Methodologies

The Members of the International Save the Children Alliance employ a number of methodologies to achieve lasting improvements to children's lives and the realisation of their rights. Knowledge of facts and methods through research and analysis is a precondition to implementing meaningful activities that make a difference.

The work methodologies can be defined as follows:

• Direct support – these are practical project and programme activities, ranging from direct service delivery and provision of material assistance through to demonstration and active learning projects with partners to build their capacity and achieve lasting improvements in children's lives. Knowledge and experience from direct support are essential for credibility in advocacy initiatives which promote reform and which result in such delivery and provision becoming sustainable.

• Partnership – partnerships and collaboration with governments, civil society, children and child organisations, networks and coalitions and similar groups are key methodologies to implement effective programme activity and achieve sustainable impact.[1]

1. See Reference 10 for more information.

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- Knowledge dissemination and capacity building – sharing and reviewing information, providing a forum for promotion of key issues, and reinforcing skill sets are key elements of this methodology.

- Advocacy and awareness raising – drawing on the knowledge and experience gained from direct support projects, and research and analysis. Effective advocacy initiatives influence attitudes and perceptions, practices and behaviour, policy, and economic and political decisions.

- Research and analysis – Knowledge about facts and methods is a precondition for being able to wield influence and make a difference. Supporting surveys on the situation of children and also on the individual, familial, economic, social, and cultural risk factors contributing to child development; helping monitor local political decisions.

- Support to and involvement in the processes of monitoring and reporting to which the state has obligations following its ratification of the CRC.

The most effective outcomes are achieved when the methods most appropriate to the programme context are implemented in a reinforcing manner. Partnerships with other relevant NGOs that focus on methodologies not being implemented by Save the Children on a specific project should be considered to achieve the overall objective. Save the Children should promote networking and partnership opportunities.

It is important, even if engaging all work methods, to focus or limit activities to programmes that exhibit the greatest need and possess a reasonable possibility of success. The principle of doing a few things very well versus doing a lot of things in a non-effective way certainly holds true in planning programme activities. It is equally important to establish a strategic niche by focusing on a few key programmatic areas where Save the Children has the expertise and the potential for meaningful outcomes.

Programme Management

The project cycle provides a framework for detailed programme planning and management and consists of research, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and impact analysis.

a) Research

Comprehensive research is essential before planning meaningful programmes. This is defined as the systematic collection and analysis of information and includes both carefully planned studies as well as ad hoc information collection. It is important to maintain objectivity in conducting research and to minimize bias when data are collected and analysed. The objective is to achieve a balanced view so that good decisions can be made about programme activities.

There are a number of techniques that are commonly used in research: qualitative, quantitative and participatory methods:

- Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, discussions, observations and other informal means of gathering information work well when time and money are limited, and usually give a rapid sense of the nature of the problem. Qualitative investigation reveals the attitudes, concerns and perceptions of the target group, as well as feedback on efficacy of previous programmes

- Quantitative methods work best when more precise information is needed and when it is possible to define issues clearly. Quantitative methods pose the questions who, what, when, where, how much, how many, how often? Responses to these questions are analysed in numerical form. More sophisticated statistical methods can be used to provide support for programme decisions.

- Participatory methods represent a principle of research and provide the opportunity for affected individuals to analyse their own situation and reach their own conclusions.

A mixture of methods is recommended to reach a good understanding about programme opportunities or conditions.

b) Planning

Planning is defined as the process of identifying and understanding an issue and developing actions to address it. The objective is to end up with a specific set of activities with clear goals and measurable outcomes with appropriate indicators to measure progress and success. Whenever possible and practical children should be involved in the planning process.

An essential first step in planning is to identify and establish relationships with the individuals and groups most likely to be involved in the design and implementation of programmes. They include not only those who will be affected by a programme but often those who do not participate directly as decision makers or beneficiaries but who are invested in the success of the programme. Such individuals and groups include, for example, donors, research institutions, and government agencies. These interactions provide valuable input in programme design and in the development of a consensus for planning appropriate activities.

In general there are five stages in the planning process:

• Problem identification – identifying issues, problems and needs. The problem identification/causal analysis may follow the situation analysis. It is an iterative process.

• Situational analysis – conducting a more detailed child rights and needs analysis and a baseline study of the characteristics of the population that the programme hopes to change. Later, the same characteristics can be studied to measure whether they have changed. The analysis should map those with obligations and responsibilities relating to the unsatisfactory situation of children the identification of the obstacles and constraints which prevent them from fulfilling their duties.

• Programme design – developing a plan of action to address aims and objectives, selecting indicators to measure progress and deciding how best to monitor and evaluate the programme.

• Programme appraisal – determining whether the programme fits with the policies, principles, values, expertise and capacity of the organisation.

• Approval– obtaining approval and finalizing funding.

See Appendix 1 for suggested programme selection criteria and Reference 10 for a comprehensive set of best practice planning tools and techniques.

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Budgeting must be conducted concurrent with planning and programme design. It is important to establish a realistic budget taking both direct and indirect costs into account. A budget includes the amount of money needed to complete the programme successfully over a specified timeframe, how much money will be reasonably available from all sources and when it will be available, and how and when the money will be spent to best achieve the programme objectives.

It is equally important to consider the sustainability of funding over the required timeframe and the longer term source of sustainable funding. Programmes should not be undertaken unless there is certainty over the funding. Programme expenses should be tracked on a monthly basis and compared with budget information to ensure proper expenditure of funds.

Reporting should be in the appropriate format and frequency to meet donor requirements. Full transparency of budget information both within the organisation as well as with the donor is essential.

In the broader context, it is critically important that Save the Children Members conduct and periodically update long term strategic plans. Such strategic planning defines long term goals, objectives and strategies that provide direction to the organisation and a strategic framework for short term operational plans. Strategic planning should take into account the Save the Children Alliance Strategic Plan, particularly as it relates to Key Challenges.

c) Implementation

Effective planning is a necessary prerequisite for effective programme implementation. Programme implementation requires that all needed resources, human, financial, systems and guiding policies come together to achieve the programme objectives defined in the programme plan.

d) Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are essential to ensure programmes and activities provide lasting and positive change, to provide understanding of how activities affect conditions that impact the well-being of children and to identify what is needed to improve on such efforts.

Monitoring is the systematic assessment of progress and involves the collection of information related directly to selected indicators. Monitoring ensures the work stays on course, measures progress toward objectives, identifies problems, defines any variance between the planned programme and the actual programme and informs programme managers of needed change. The monitoring process should ensure the participation of all stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Evaluations are periodic assessments of how well programmes have been implemented (programme success) and how programmes affect change (measures impact) based on defined objectives and indicators established at start-up. It provides a basis for decisions on future direction. Its purpose is to study the work in terms of its objectives, effectiveness, impact, efficiency and sustainability. A participatory approach helps ensure results will be accepted.

e) Impact analysis

Whereas planning, monitoring and evaluation focus on the direct results of a programme, impact analysis focuses on the longer-term changes resulting from the programme within 7-10 years. Impact can be defined as the extent to which a programme has produced significant changes in the lives of children, young people and their communities, both the intended and the unintended changes.

There are multiple dimensions of change which must be considered: changes in children's lives, changes in policies and practice affecting the realisation of children's rights, changes in children's participation and active citizenship, changes in equity and non-discrimination of children, and changes in the capacity of civil society and communities to support children's rights[1].

1. See Reference 10 for more detailed best practice impact assessment.

Summary

As we seek to improve the lives of more children, and as our supporters demand increased levels of accountability, there is a growing need for Save the Children to deliver high quality sustainable programmes with social and legal guarantees that the benefits will continue into the future. Successful programmes are based on clear set of programme principles, and are implemented and managed in a disciplined manner with strong research, planning and budgeting, monitoring and impact analysis.

References

Readers are encouraged to refer to the following documents which have been developed over time by experienced programme staff within the Alliance. These documents provide excellent guidance on specific programme areas based on successful activities and the collective wisdom and experience of programme representatives.

The Child Participation Working Group has developed comprehensive reference material, including the following:

1. Toolkit on Child Participation in Research on Violence
(Alliance, 2004, 80 pages)

2. Toolkit of Good Practice in Consultation
(Alliance, 2003, 98 pages)

3. Practice Standards for Child Participation
(Alliance, 11 pages)

4. Good Practice in Working Children's Participation
(Emily Delap, 2003, 27 pages)

The Child Rights Programming Coordinating Group and Member organisations have produced guidance and training material, to include the following:

5. Training Manual on Child Rights Programming
(Save the Children Sweden)

6. Toolkit on Child Rights Programming. Analysis and Choice
(Save the Children Denmark, 2002)

7. Child Rights Programming: How to Apply Rights Based Approaches in Programming (2nd edition, Alliance, 2005)

8. An Introduction to Child Rights Programming
(Save the Children UK, 2000)

9. UN CRC CD-rom Training Kit – Save the Children Alliance 2004

Additional reference material includes:

10. Toolkits – A practical guide to planning, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment by Louisa Gosling, Second Edition, 2003, Save the Children UK. Includes detailed descriptions of useful techniques in all aspects of programme activities written for programme professionals and decision- makers. They are easily adaptable to local circumstances and appropriate for both straightforward local programmes and also global initiatives.

11. "Concepts – Framework and Direction for Save the Children Sweden"

12. International Programmes Handbook
(Save the Children US, Sept 1996)

13. "Gender Mainstreaming: A Resource Guide"
(Save the Children US), May 2000

14. "Partnership Resource Book (Save the Children US, May 2002)

15. "How to Mobilize Communities for Health and Social Change,"
Health Community Partnership (Save the Children US 2003)

16. Alliance Training Kit on the UNCRC

17. Global Impact Monitoring Guidelines
(Save the Children UK 2004)

18. Gender Guidelines for Child Rights Programming
(Alliance, 2003)

19. Gender Policy Booklet
(Alliance 2001)

20. Diversity Primer
(Save the Children UK 2005)

21. Catalogue 2005 Publications for Making Change Happen
(Save the Children Sweden)

Additional reference material on child rights programming can be found on the Alliance Xtranet.

Appendix 1: Criteria for Programme Selection

Programme activities should fulfil as many of the following criteria as possible. These criteria also provide a framework to consider programme decisions under conditions of limited resources or when evaluating closeout.

- Are based on sound research, planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, and impact analysis.
- Have a significant impact on a key issue affecting children.
- Are consistent with the programme principles and organisational strategic plan.
- Will make a contribution to the sustained realisation of children's rights.
- Are consistent with selected programme focus areas.
- Are considerate of Alliance Gender Guidelines based on Women and Development/Gender and Development principles.
- Show potential of being accomplished with excellence.
- Have capable, experience people available.
- Include available, necessary system support and basic supporting infrastructure.
- Contribute to Save the Children's reputation and capability in a priority area.
- Are a financial success and cost effective, breaking even on a full cost basis.
- Have the potential for long-term financial feasibility.
- Have demonstrated government support or successful advocacy outcomes.
- Provide for effective partnerships.
- Count on the presence and cooperation of qualified, facilitating organisations.
- Are comprehensive and understandable to the public and key stakeholders.
- Have sponsor preference.
- Show financial viability on a national or regional level and potential for fundraising.
- Address environmental issues through an environmental assessment.
- Are implemented efficiently and are responsive to changing circumstances.
- Have demonstrated previous success (pilot experience) in the programme area.
- Encourage and support innovation.
- Contribute to Save the Children's image and visibility.
- Are consistent with advocacy positions.
- Have an acceptable level of security for staff.

The desired outcome is to select and build on quality programmes that are cost effective, replicable and have demonstrable impact resulting in desired national and international change affecting the positive well-being of children.

Source: Save the Children US International Programmes Handbook, September 1996 and Member suggestions.

Appendix 2: Summary of Key Provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child consists of 54 articles. Following is the internationally recognized way of summarizing the articles of the CRC:

- General measures of implementation (e.g. legislation, implementation, independent monitoring structure) (articles 4, 42, 44.6)

- Definition of the child (article 1)

- General principles (non-discrimination; best interests of the child; right to life, survival & development; respect for the views of the child) (articles 2, 3, 6, 12)

- Civil rights and freedoms (including Birth registration) (Articles 7, 8, 13–17, 37)

- Family environment and alternative care (articles 5, 9–11, 18–21, 25, 27)

- Basic health and welfare (articles 6, 18, 23–24, 26–27)

- Education, leisure and cultural activities (articles 28–29, 31)

- Special protection measures (e.g. refugee and internally displaced children) (articles 22, 37– 40)

For the complete version of the CRC use the following link:
http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm.

For a child friendly version of the CRC use the following link:
http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/temp/scuk/cache/cmsattach/61_uncrc.pdf