Abstract

The development of child protection and family support in sub-Saharan Africa is inextricably linked to the interactions between the formal and informal systems. Policy makers recognise that meeting immediate basic needs for food and shelter is not enough for the healthy development of national human and social capital. There is a growing awareness that creating context specific conditions for children to not only survive but also to thrive requires heterogeneous approaches embedded in regional realities, histories, cultures and traditions.

Against a background of political and economic fragility, and the impact of HIV, government-led child and family support policies in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Mozambique are harnessing the power of individuals and communities to contribute to improved outcomes for children. Emerging statutory systems are capitalising on informal mechanisms through investments in social protection for families, community case management mechanisms and parenting support initiatives to improve access to services and to protect and enhance children’s resilience. This presents challenges in balancing constrained capacity against commitments to the rights of children without overburdening individual components of the system, especially caregivers.

By paying attention to traditional cultural philosophies and customary skilfull parenting and connecting this to statutory systems the informal and formal mechanisms are successfully intersecting. Extending support beyond basic needs, to include loving care that mitigates risks and threats to children’s wellbeing also helps to shift perceptions of beneficiaries from ‘passive recipients’ to active, participating agents in their welfare. Such empowerment of caregivers opens the door for a broader interpretation of ‘family’ and allows attention, for example, to be paid to gendered roles in parenting.

This evolution of child protection and family support policy considers the child and family holistically and integrates systems for strengthening household economy and access to basic services with adaptive social norm constructs of parenting.