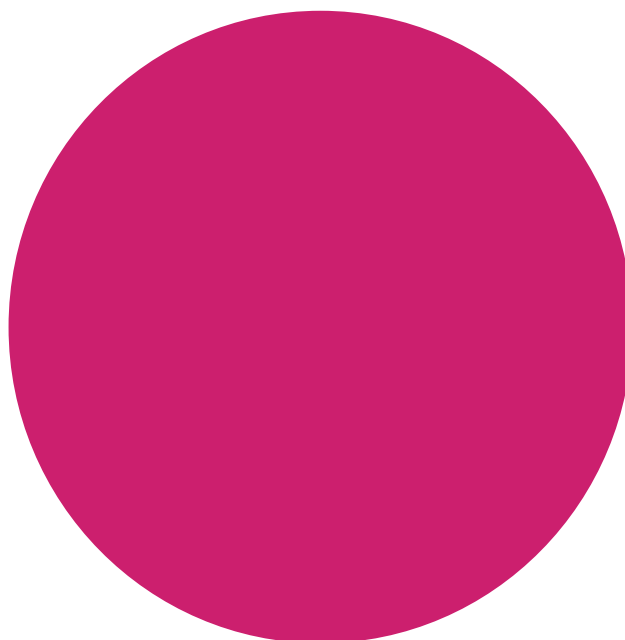


Misean Cara Learning Brief No. 2022/01

Caring for the Entire Child

Learning from research into projects supporting vulnerable children



misean cara
Mission Support from Ireland

1. Introduction

Development work in general, and missionary development work in particular, involves working with people who are experiencing vulnerability in their lives. This state of vulnerability may be transient or of a longer duration, and can be exacerbated by dimensions such as gender, ethnicity or poverty. In all cases, children are especially vulnerable, and working with children in such situations requires careful planning and execution.

In early 2022, with support from the US-based GHR Foundation, Misean Cara commissioned research into the work of five projects engaged with vulnerable children in three countries – Kenya, Zambia and India. This Learning Brief presents the learning identified through the research.

2. Background

Given the missionary approach to development¹ which typifies their work, Misean Cara member organisations are naturally drawn to the most vulnerable groups in society. As a result, many projects focus on children. This resonated with the GHR Foundation's interest in seeing all children growing up in families or family-like environments and led to a partnership between Misean Cara and GHR with a focus on this theme.

Under this arrangement, five Misean Cara member projects were supported, each with a focus on vulnerable children in different situations: living on the streets in urban environments; living with their families in an impoverished urban area; living with disabilities; and migrating with their families to find seasonal work.

The purpose of the research, conducted in the spirit of a learning exercise, was to investigate the different approaches adopted by Misean Cara members, to find out what works best when dealing with vulnerable children, looking especially at experience and practice in working with children in family or family-like settings as opposed to institutional settings. The exercise was carried out remotely by two consultants, one based in Ireland and one in India. With an emphasis on learning

from practice, the process followed a think-reflect-conclude path.

3. What We Learned

The research showed that a holistic, comprehensive approach can help to ensure the best results for vulnerable children. Interventions also work well when there is a strong community-based dimension. The following are the main learning points from the results gathered by the consultants, drawing on the thinking and activities that are contributing to success in the projects concerned. What is common across all projects is a primary focus on the child, with complementary initiatives focusing on other stakeholders including parents, teachers and duty bearers.

Ensuring children are safe with their families

- 1. Build a circle of protection around the child:** this means connecting with all the actors in the community who are concerned with a child's well-being, such as teachers, local religious and lay leaders. If a child is living in an abusive home environment, this can be noticed, and action taken.

"We want to bring them together to see how we can work together. It is not only us, but everybody has a responsibility."
Kenya
- 2. Have an individual plan for each child:** just as no two children are the same, no two approaches will be the same either. And, importantly, these approaches need to be flexible and adapt to changing realities.
- 3. Have a network of community volunteers:** properly trained volunteers can make home visits, getting a sense of the home environment and providing help and advice where it is most needed.
- 4. Have a qualified social worker in the project team:** a qualified and competent social worker can be a key link between the child, the parents,

¹ MADI, see <https://www.miseancara.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/LB2018-02-Faith-based-and-Missionary-Approach-to-Development.pdf>

and other services such as health and education.

- 5. Offer after-school programmes:** Parents are often unable to help children with homework. An after-school club can provide a safe environment where children can do school-work or recreational activities before returning home.
- 6. If a child has to stay away from their family, set a clear timeframe:** sometimes, it is necessary to care for a child outside their home for a period of time, e.g., when transitioning from street living back to the family environment. This period should be as short as possible but as long as necessary to ensure good outcomes for the child. Every effort must be made to ensure a child does not become institutionalised.

“[C]hildren need to be with their parents, their relatives – we cannot give the whole support – it is beneficial for the children to be with their parents. In the evening, the parents are teaching the children, telling them stories while they are sitting around the fire.”

Zambia

- 7. Be aware of local beliefs and practices that can protect or endanger children:** ingrained taboos and cultures of silence can perpetuate abuse and harm. Girls and children with disabilities can be particularly vulnerable in this regard. Project workers need to be sensitive and respond accordingly when issues arise.

Dealing with vulnerable children

- 8. Listen:** this may seem obvious, but it can be forgotten in the haste to implement solutions. All children, and vulnerable children in particular, need to be listened to by an adult who has their best interests at heart.
- 9. Focus on the child’s potential:** just because a child is born into challenging circumstances does not mean they don’t have potential. Often, it can be a question of providing opportunities to see a child flourish. In the same

vein, ensuring there is hope in a child’s life is important.

- 10. Ensure that children are active participants,** not passive recipients of assistance or education. Giving a child agency in their own life can nurture self-esteem and leadership.
- 11. Providing a quality education is essential:** a good education can make a huge difference in a child’s life and contribute to ending the cycle of inter-generational poverty. But children need also to learn about their responsibilities and rights.
- 12. Be aware that children may be survivors or perpetrators of abuse, or both:** it’s essential not to make any assumptions but to gather the full story of each child, and then identify appropriate responses.
- 13. Allow for a spiritual dimension in any solution:** in keeping with the holistic approach, this can give a structure to the life of children or adults and provide a framework against which to understand their situation.

Working with parents

- 14. Work with parents and/or care givers in parallel with working with the child:** this is a key consideration, so that parents or other significant adults in a child’s life are equipped with the skills to be able to support the child, but also to empower the adults as part of the solution to the challenges they and the children face.
- 15. Make regular home visits:** to remain abreast of the evolving situation in the home.
- 16. Support the economic well-being of families:** as so many problems are rooted in poverty, providing a way out of poverty will help in other areas of life also.
- 17. Provide support to deal with substance abuse:** substance abuse can be a source or a result of poverty and dysfunction within the home, and it can be difficult to implement lasting solutions while this is a factor.

Some final points

18. Good record-keeping is important: It's important that a complete set of written records is kept for every child that comes into contact with a project. That way, a continuum of care can be ensured that does not depend on the memory of the child, the parents, or the project staff.

19. Start by understanding yourself: while this point may be applicable to any type of project, it is especially important when dealing with vulnerable children that project staff understand their own experiences and opinions, so that the child is treated fairly and objectively.

Projects involved in the research

Sincere gratitude is due to all who contributed to the research described in this Learning Brief. Project teams in the three countries concerned engaged enthusiastically with the two consultants, Nicole Moran (based in Ireland) and Lakshmi Rahman (based in India), throughout the research and reporting process. Misean Cara wishes the project teams continued success in their endeavours to improve children's lives.

Country	Project Title	Organisation
Zambia	Bauleni Special Needs Project	Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus & Mary, Chigwell
Kenya	Kisumu Urban Apostolate Project	Franciscan Missionaries of St. Joseph
Kenya	Street-connected Children Project	Franciscan Missionaries of St. Joseph
India	Kannagi-Nagar Children's Project	Salesian Sisters
India	Brickfields' School Project	Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto)

About Misean Cara

Established in 2004, Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development organisation made up of 88 member organisations working with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in over 50 countries in the Global South. Adopting a human rights focus, we support communities addressing basic needs in the areas of education, health and livelihoods, as well as advocating for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. At times of humanitarian crisis, the trusted and long-term presence of missionaries in affected communities allows for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

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