The Move to Implementation

Bamboo 2 demonstrates both an interest and commitment to continuing to learn about if and how children's lives can be improved. Applying what children themselves reported as useful, and creating a framework for understanding and developing practice that builds from, operationalises, and unpacks the concept of resilience, is neither easy nor straightforward. It requires imagination, coordination, flexibility and an openness to being surprised by what we hear and see.

It does however offer the prospect of programming that truly recognises and builds on strengths, that sees children and communities as experts in their own lives, and supports partnerships and more joined up approaches.

Whether or not all of these possibilities will actually materialise within the planned interventions is unknown, but the prospect of it happening is the key rationale for Bamboo2.

Starting Point

The Bamboo project was always envisaged as a two phase research initiative. Phase 1 focused on finding out about children's realities, with a focus on resilience: what really helped them avoid or recover from sexual abuse and exploitation. Phase 2 is the chance to learn if changes in practice or approaches, developed to accurately reflect what was learned in the initial research, can be developed; and if so, to determine whether or not such developments improve outcomes for children.

The Challenge

Translating the findings from phase 1 into practical, action-able new interventions or initiatives within existing programmes, that truly reflect the research data, from which further valuable lessons can be distilled, involves a number of steps. These elements will be needed *regardless of the specific recommendations for interventions*:

1. **Generating concrete ideas from the cross project findings** (Synthesis report of Bamboo 1). While it may be possible for all of us independently to come up with some good ideas, it will be important to develop an agreed set of activities or approaches, through **a process of discussion**. The following recommendations for practice have been developed by members of the International Steering Committee that was formed to advise and support Oak Foundation during phase 1 of the project.
2. To distil new findings about their impact, there will need to be **coordination and oversight** to ensure that the practices retain the **integrity** of the original research

findings, even while understanding and accepting that this is not "laboratory" research.

3. Considerable thought will need to be given to the process and direction of **monitoring and evaluation**, from the basic question of what changes are expected, to how to ensure children and young people are part of the process. This will need to recognise:

    a. The potential for some cross project learning and reflection is a significant benefit of this next phase.

    b. Generating approaches to M&E that can be applied across the practice phase (not a comprehensive, single M&E framework; more a s**mall set of agreed indicators** that could be part of the M&E of all practice projects.

    c. Agreeing what some of the dimensions of **better outcomes**, or an increase in children's wellbeing, look like, if this is integrated as a key measurement of change.

    d. With a number of small projects, it will be important to be comfortable with **qualitative monitoring and evaluation data**, including children's own perceptions of change.

4. The project cannot look at every and all forms of support; it is about learning what approaches and interventions **by external actors** contribute to better outcomes for children. This does not limit the action to direct interventions with children, but might include **a range of different approaches**, including how to build on solutions the children have worked out for themselves before any form of intervention.

5. Many of the ideas involve **a shift in orientation or approach, or perception by the service providers**. It requires a shift from experts delivering standard packages to one of **facilitating** discussion, respectful listening, and development or refinement of ideas and action with children and other community members. This may be a process of **training, practice mentors, and feedback and reflection**. It is not necessarily throwing away everything that has been developed by professional agencies, but maybe encouraging openness, adaptation and flexibility, that responds to what children (and their communities) advise.

6. Many trainings never result in change in professional attitudes; **how could this process be different?** And how could we find out what difference it makes for children?

7. Facilitating some element of exchange across projects and beyond, including potentially a community of practice and learning, to explore work from across the Bamboo 2 implementation groups, **plus other work that is also inspired by the concept of resilience.**

Strategic considerations

- **New practice? –** the Bamboo findings consolidate some current knowledge and encourage some existing practices. Even though the children did not talk about resilience, the children and their stories seem to confirm and refine such previous thinking and knowledge.

- **Time element –** resilience should be observed over time[1]: it shows in an underlying upwards trend that may be surrounded by short term ups and downs. Even resilience

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[1] P. 27 of synthesis report

factors may vary over time. This may be very challenging in projects which operate on short time scales, and will need to be considered in the development of Bamboo 2.

- **Context –** we have to take into account the context, both that which is close by, (i.e. culture, family, peer group, community) and further away (i.e. the wider society).

Learning

Do these new programmes or approaches result in better outcomes for children and young people?

These questions highlight the critical importance of:

- clearly reflecting aims and assumptions,
- making clear how the anticipated changes are connected to planned interventions, and
- a monitoring and evaluation framework that generates the data that is needed to answer those questions.

Bamboo 2 is essentially about learning if and how applying new ideas, practice and approaches to interventions aimed at preventing and supporting children's recovery from sexual abuse and exploitation, results in better outcomes for children. The ideas have been generated through the Bamboo 1 research, and are supported by other resilience-informed practice and research.

But the processes of implementation and evaluation are not simple; there are a number of challenges.

I.   Refining our understanding of resilience

The Bamboo **research** project (Bamboo 1) was developed to explore and reflect on the relevance of the concept of resilience in the everyday lives of children in difficult circumstances. In particular it looks at how they addressed, recovered from or avoided the threats of sexual abuse and exploitation, that were evident in the three very different countries and contexts, in Ethiopia, in Bulgaria and in Nepal. In the main, the children were simply asked about what and who had helped them. We highlight here what we learnt about resilience, because it sustains all of the subsequent practical implications which we draw from the research results and that will be proposed. It repeats what is already included on resilience in the synthesis report, but we thought that this must be explicitly considered during the process of translating findings and reflections from the research, into practice.

Resilience: reality and definition

- Resilience is necessarily a qualitative and often slippery concept that defies a ready or rigorous definition. It is both seductive and elusive. It lends itself more easily to description than precise measurement. The word exists in English in order to indicate human resilience, but English seems to be the exception. French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, Russian, Chinese, Tamil and other languages originally do not seem to have a word for indicating human resilience. Yet in spite of not having a specific word for it, people with some life experience in all those cultures easily recognise the human reality of resilience and they recognise in their own environment life stories witnessing resilience. This suggests that an appreciation of it is deeply rooted in real

life. In that sense resilience seems to be like other words indicating profound human realities but eluding any clear cut definition, as "time" or "love" or even "humour".

- This linguistic challenge may imply that there is a strong cultural vein running through how resilience might be defined or understood. There may be many 'resiliences' rather than one, within and across cultures. Ethnic and linguistic identity and social class are among the categories of status and experience that may colour how resilience is imagined or perceived.

- The theoretical and empirical base to underpin a proper understanding of the concept of resilience, in any of its possible guises, is still a work in progress. While this work is largely centred in a number of books and articles in English, published in higher income countries, it has been spreading among researchers and practitioners in other languages such as French and Spanish and beyond Europe, US and Australia to other places, including Latin America.

Resilience is helpful

- Resilience is often useful as a source of inspiration. For some it even seems close to being an ethical framework to understand and guide work with people in need. **With a resilience lens, the emphasis is on recognising and valuing the significance of positive elements in the given profile, process or context, while not forgetting the problem.** Those seeking to help thus are guided by questions such as "what is working well already, what is the person achieving already, which people are important to the person, what are the person's strengths, what solutions has the person worked out" , and so on.

- Resilience could be seen in many of the stories of the young people. The children in the study and their families were almost always looking for ways to find strength and to improve their situation, although we should not under-estimate how entrapment in difficult circumstances may drain motivation and belief in the possibility of change. Nevertheless we should value practices and policies that appreciate the value of human commitment and support in family, social and professional relationships with vulnerable people.

- For different children and in different circumstances, resilience may offer some relief from immediate pressures; it may encourage hope that things can be better again; or it may lead on to enduring transformation in the young person's life. Children draw strength – and resilience – from simple experiences whose importance may easily be under-estimated by an 'outsider'. That experience may sustain the child in challenging circumstances and keep open a doorway to hope. An example is the symbolic value to child domestic workers in Nepal of being equal participants with everyone else at religious community festivals.

Resilience in time: variable but steady

- Resilience may show through many short term ups and downs, as an underlying positive trend in life. Episodes of relief and enjoyment may cultivate a sense of well-being and hope, and strengthen the young person's capacity to survive in the face of adversity. But to thrive, rather than just to survive, to do better than might reasonably be expected in the face of formidable difficulties, to display 'deeper' resilience, it seems necessary to do better than expected *over an extended period of time.* This constancy through the passage of time dimension seems very important to any meaningful understanding of 'deeper' resilience. Evidence in this study supports this point, as does a wider set of studies. Enduring displays of resilience produce some kind of transformative change in the young person's life. Examples from the Bamboo study would include the inspirational power of memories of the values and priorities of deceased relatives. In a number of accounts these served as a source of enduring

resilience as they inspired the young person made new choices that sustained significant changes in their lives.

Resilience is never absolute

- Resilience commands wide support as a general and inspirational concept, but it is also frequently the subject of critical debate. There is, for example, concern that the term may be invested with too many expectations, or too partial a view in certain circumstances. Too much preoccupation with resilience, it has been claimed, may divert attention from the power of negative forces and factors in people's lives. According to this view, resilience may 'give' or reflect strength, but it does not necessarily ensure that such strengths outweigh other powerful influences.
- When set against major challenges and stressors in people's lives, the expectations of resilience must therefore be tempered with some caution(after all, Anne Frank showed a lot of resilience, but she died in a concentration camp). Resilience is never absolute. Hence **it can never be and must never be a substitute for inadequate economic or social policies.**

Resilience is influential and often needed – but it is not a 'magic bullet'

- The study findings imply the need for caution in how we understand and use the concept of resilience. They remind us that resilience is not a magic bullet, no miracle solution to the impact of deeply embedded poverty, inequality and multiple disadvantages. **It cannot be the singular platform to drive the development of intervention programmes.** Resilience alone cannot change social structures, but it can sometimes change mindsets, including the way policy developers and implementers develop and deliver structural change.
- But the findings are most definitely not saying that resilience is irrelevant. Resilience, as in any ingredient in creative effort, must be used with care and sensitivity. Resilience is meaningful; it can shed light on hidden possibilities in the most challenging of circumstances. It can transform understanding of the potential of people facing great difficulty. Resilience may be able to influence how a person copes with or perceives their circumstances. It may be able to help stimulate the confidence to ask questions and imagine new possibilities. Resilience is a valuable concept that deserves serious respect. The study does not suggest that resilience is, or can become, some kind of 'magic bullet' in children's lives. The nature of the data uncovered does not reveal a pattern that contains some ready formula for instilling resilience in children who seem not to display the quality.

II.   Operationalising the findings

As previously highlighted, Bamboo was always planned as a two phase project. The research undertaken directly with children, their families and community members generated a wealth of data about children's lives and their experiences. The second phase will begin with the translation of some of those findings into programmatic responses or approaches, that will then be implemented in a number of sites, and rigorously evaluated, to determine if and how they improve outcomes for children.

The following five points incorporate what the Bamboo International Steering Committee believes are some of the most important and actionable implications generated through the research. They believe they will need to be integrated together into all Phase 2 pilots. They should be pilot tested in a limited number of contexts to be defined by the new Advisory Group.

1. ***Listening to and learning from children gives individuals and organisations a much more accurate sense of their lives and experiences. This should be at the heart of developing programmatic interventions.***

   Getting closer to children's lives to find out about their experiences and their ideas, should be the starting point for those wanting to help or intervene. Interventions should be informed by the experiences and expertise of children, their families and communities.

   Rather than arriving with a template for intervention, assessment must include meaningful discussion and consultation with the community, including engaging with and listening to children and young people. It must include looking both at the problems and challenges faced AND at the strengths and strategies, including those already tried and/or adopted by individuals and groups in those communities, and try to understand them and learn from them, (even if they are awkward or even illegal, and not sustainable or acceptable in the long run).

   In addition to delivering better programmes, such an approach has additional benefits for the community, including children, in terms of their being respected, having influence over some decisions and a sense of being in full or partial control of their future. This is in marked contrast to an approach which sees children as passive beneficiaries, focuses only on the deficits, assumes an absence of local resources and ideas, and imposes a programme designed externally.

2. ***Children are not passive victims. They play an active role in addressing the difficulties they face, and in finding and using a range of supports.***

   Rather than ignoring or undermining children's agency and resources, external actors need to explore how these operate and if and how they might be supported or strengthened. The most consistent and accessible sources of support will often be the informal helpers who are trusted by children. The Bamboo research identified family members, friends, local shop-keepers, neighbours, as some of the key sources of support for children facing enormous challenges and risks.

   Children have ideas about what is helping, what else is needed, and these ideas need to be integrated/considered in the design, development and evaluation of programmes. It is an approach that puts children in the position of partnership, rather than passive beneficiary, with a role to play in design, monitoring and learning.

   This is not about leaving children to get on with the solution in isolation, but about engaging in conversation and reflection about what would help, how, who etc. It demands a substantial degree of flexibility and confidence; the ability to listen and suggest and discuss new ideas and alternatives that might not have been considered already, that might be relevant if adapted and developed to reflect these children's strengths and challenges. It also needs implementers to recognise children's diversity, particularly around age, and the different ways in which children will be able to contribute ideas.

3. *Non-formal actors are the most consistently cited and accessible sources of support for many children.*

Non-formal actors and processes are generally already engaged in supporting and protecting children. External providers need to recognise this, and ensure that their assessments are designed to identify them and to assess their strengths. An approach that assesses both strengths, resources, and concerns or challenges, is far less likely to undermine what is already working effectively. Such sources of support cited in the research included grandmothers, siblings, neighbours, teachers, shop-keepers. They also included some of the more formal elements that were accessible in some communities; elders or village chiefs, women's groups, the church or the school.

Any "external" intervention needs to build on and strengthen these "local" resources, rather than ignoring, undermining or replacing them. This recognises the benefits of systems of support that are close to the child and to the child's experience and are sustainable in the long term.

All parts of any system, formal and informal, need to engage with the other, to ensure that they are working in the same direction to create strong, sustainable and accessible resources for children.

This may equate to a very different sort of contribution by the external actors, with an emphasis on community engagement and support; their entry into the situation may not be directly with the child but at a different point in the "concentric circles" that are frequently used to illustrate the child in his/her context. The role for the external players may be in promoting resilient communities that are able to prevent or respond to threats and risks to their children. It may involve different skills and different partnerships. It might suggest some key settings where much of the informal support is already happening. Schools, skills training establishments for example, are settings in which many of the children found support.

Of course these same settings were also cited as examples of where children were threatened, undermined or harmed. This clearly demonstrates that there is no single solution. The same categories of people, teachers, neighbours, fathers etc figured in the research data as heroes and villains! The totally unproblematic "no risk resilience factor" does not seem to exist.

4. *Recognising the importance of context*

Sexual abuse and exploitation are damaging but they must be seen as part of the wider picture of violation and adversity that many children and young people are experiencing. Interventions that try to address these issues and the affected children as somehow isolated from the context in which poverty, violence and stigma are pervasive stressors in their lives[2], are inadequate and inappropriate. They may fail to reflect the children or communities' experiences and priorities.

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[2] While acknowledging that sexual abuse or exploitation occurs in many other settings and contexts, ones not typified by poverty, violence and stigma. But all three elements were pervasive in each of the three Bamboo research sites.

Interventions, prevention and recovery efforts, have to address both the substantive issues of abuse/exploitation and the wider context of social stress in which they often arise.

They need to reflect children's and communities' views about priorities, and their thoughts on the 'cause and effect' relationships between these different factors, if they are to contribute to positive change.

For example the impact of and links between family poverty and the risks of sexual exploitation. The study heard that many children in Ethiopia and Nepal were prepared to endure sexual exploitation so that they could support siblings through school. Efforts to help children exit sexual exploitation through counselling and returning children to their homes, without understanding their reasons, risks failure and/or major disruption of family relationships. An alternative approach might be through interventions in the education system, and/or alternative income generation.

5. Diversity and differences in vulnerability

Different groups experience different levels of risk or vulnerability. Certain minorities of children are more vulnerable because of their low status. Some children, eg new migrants into a community, may have less access to support. Children who have been abused or exploited face increased risks of re-victimisation. In practice, a whole range of factors can result in a child or children being stigmatized. Being seen as different carries enormous risks of being victimized.

Age is another variable that influences risk and vulnerability. There are enormous risks in generalizing about children's experiences or opinions, based on the selective experience or voices of a small group of older children.

Those seeking to intervene must recognise both the diversity and different risk profiles of certain groups. They must also ensure that the least visible, the least powerful, the most stigmatized, those that are least likely to be represented in community meetings, are explicitly considered, and real efforts made to hear them. They are likely to be the ones with the weakest links to protective individuals or organisations and face the greatest challenges in accessing support.

Some strategic considerations about operationalising the concept of resilience

- **Resilience factors are ambivalent** – the same factor can have positive or negative effects); they can be variable, they are not absolute and hence cannot be magic solutions to problems, they are normally insufficient for changing wider structural influences as poverty or violence; resilience is a complex process that evolves over time. .
- **New practice?** – the Bamboo findings consolidate some current knowledge and encourage some existing practices. Even though the children did not talk about resilience, the children and their stories seem to confirm and refine such previous thinking and knowledge.
- **Time element** – resilience should be observed over time[3]: it shows in an underlying upwards trend that may be surrounded by short term ups and downs. Even resilience factors may vary over time. This may be very challenging in projects which operate on short time scales, and will need to be considered in the development of Bamboo 2.

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[3] P. 27 of synthesis report

- **Context** – we have to take into account the context, both that which is close by, (i.e. culture, family, peer group, community) and further away (i.e. the wider society).
- **Special attention to marginalised groups** and the risk of marginalisation, as they play a key role in increasing vulnerability.
- **Avoid simplistic solutions**. Can the implication be that we must abandon an exclusively mechanical way of thinking and closed pre-set procedures? In a metaphor: resilience perspective requires thinking and an approach that goes beyond the focused spirit of repair of the car mechanic, (which may also be needed in a number of cases) to integrate the open minded spirit of the child with a building game: what can we build together with those building blocks, there may be a variety of possibilities?
- **Ethical issues** – The complexity of certain situations and the ambivalence of resilience factors may require some ethical discussion and positioning[4].
- **National and global learning?** Some specific pilot projects in different regions may want to take some inspiration from the respective country reports. This should not detract from Oak Foundation's ability and willingness to focus on moving the consolidated findings and reflections from the synthesis report to action.

III.   Learning

Do these new programmes or approaches result in better outcomes for children and young people?
These questions highlight the critical importance of:

- clearly reflecting aims and assumptions,
- making clear how the anticipated changes are connected to planned interventions, and
- a monitoring and evaluation framework that generates the data that is needed to answer those questions.

Bamboo 2 is essentially about learning if and how applying new ideas, practice and approaches to interventions aimed at preventing and supporting children's recovery from sexual abuse and exploitation, results in better outcomes for children. The ideas have been generated through the Bamboo 1 research, and are supported by other resilience-informed practice and research.

But the processes of implementation and evaluation are not simple; there are a number of challenges.

- Translating the findings into concrete, practical activities or approaches is difficult. It involves judgement and selectivity.
- Many or most of the interventions that will be part of Bamboo 2 will be implemented by external organisations; this contrasts with the frequent citing of the local or community sources of support by the children. This challenges those organisations to look for new entry points and expertise, different partnerships, and different ways of articulating their impact or influence.

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[4] P 19-20 of synthesis report re benefits of gangs for children in very chaotic and unpredictable situations – at least in the short run

- Implementing the approach, in a way that is consistent with the original research is often about a change of individual mindset, not necessarily a different action. The assessment of if and how this changes are probably best made by the child or community member, but might also involve staff training and mentoring.
- Children should experience both new activities and approaches that explicitly demonstrate respect and interest. It would be helpful to look for information from children about the respective benefits of both elements.
- Defining well-being is not always straightforward. There will need to be more discussion/consultation with children and communities about what well-being looks like in those contexts, to determine if positive change has occurred. Self-reporting tools that look at things like self-confidence, community engagement might be helpful. Community discussion can include monitoring through the use of tools like "most significant change" stories that create a record of reflections over time, from the perspective of those communities.
- Having a number of smaller projects, implemented in diverse settings is both a challenge and an opportunity. Through the coordination mechanism, it should be possible to agree a small number of shared or common indicators that can be used across all or most of the projects, to support learning.
- Change, or sustained change will often take time. It will be important to generate both longer term indicators and some ideas of interim indicators or steps along the way. These should not be confined to the usual process indicators. It will require a long term light- touch coordinating structure or platform to sustain the process.