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Peer Networking & Capacity Building for Child Protection Professionals – Lessons from "ChildHub"

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Abstract. Child protection systems across the global South suffer from common problems, one of the most critical among which is low number and skills of relevant professionals to deliver services. Additionally, child protection professionals are often demotivated, uncoordinated and isolated, with limited access to continuous training and support. Peer learning and capacity building networks help address these issue, and often leverage the spread and scope of information and communications technologies. We present one such network, ChildHub, initially developed and deployed in South-East Europe, a region whose child protection systems present features similar to those in Africa and Asia. The success of this platform, evinced by a continuously growing community and confirmed by an evaluation after three years of operation, provides motivation and lessons for contextualization to sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. Thanks to its inherent modularity, ChildHub will easily be adapted to the contexts and needs of the two regions, thus building on the interest generated in Asia and Africa for such networks. The paper also presents the approach that will be taken to implement the platform for Africa and Asia.

Keywords: Blended (online and offline) approach, Capacity building, Child protection, Information and communications technologies, Peer networking.

1 Introduction – Context and Landscape

1.1 Definition of Child Protection Systems

A child protection system is defined as [1]: "certain formal and informal structures, functions and capacities that have been assembled to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. A child protection system is generally agreed to be comprised of the following components: human resources, finance, laws and policies, governance, monitoring and data collection as well as protection and response services and care management. It also includes different actors – children, families, communities, those working and subnational and national level and those working internationally. Most important are the relationships and interactions between and among these component and these actors within the system. It is the outcomes of these interactions that comprise the system".

1.2 Child protection systems in the Global South

"Capacities" are a core element of child protection; formal examples of these include adequate number, capacity and skills of relevant professionals [2]. The child protection systems in the Global South – including sub-Saharan Africa [3]-[5] and south Asia [6]-[8] – suffer from the same problems as concerns these capacities. More specifically:

- Social services are rarely a priority in the political agenda
- Despite progress in the elaboration of regulatory systems, many countries show a lack of vision for quality improvement, no real preoccupation for "value for money" and no investment in the continuous development of the sector.
- The professional groups (especially social workers, caregivers and medical professionals) are often demotivated and uncoordinated, are understaffed and have limited to no access, to continuous training and peer support. Their capacity of effectively supporting children is significantly affected in the long term.
- Child protection systems are not capable of offering a continuum of care, from prevention to alternative support and reintegration.

1.3 Peer learning and capacity building networks in child protection

eLearning and Peer Networking have proven useful in addressing the following issues:

- Reducing fragmentation and inaccessibility of knowledge on specific topics;
- Reducing isolation felt by professionals, and increasing support and motivation;
- Increasing opportunities for development, through skill upgradation and recognition;
- Strengthening the link between practices and policies on the one hand, and knowledge and evidence on the other; and
- Improving synergies and coordination within and between teams.

There are some successful learning networks in the child protection space, such as the **CPC Learning Network** [9], the **RISE Learning Network** [10] and the **Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action** [11]. These initiatives have proven to be feasible, relevant and useful in bringing together professionals to discuss, design and feed back into policies and programmes. Terre des hommes (Tdh) has initiated such a network, the Child Protection Hub (**ChildHub**) in Southeast Europe. ChildHub's architecture and success forms the basis for the current proposal.

1.4 Structure of this paper & its Relevance to the Conference

We present a peer learning and communication platform, ChildHub, initially developed for child protection professionals in Central and South Eastern Europe. Currently used by professionals in 10 countries, this platform has also been the subject of a detailed external evaluation. The results are promising, and will form the basis of improvements of the platform in Europe. The experience and evaluation of ChildHub

also offers valuable lessons for its contextualization to other regions, notably South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

2 ChildHub – Context & Foundations

2.1 Context in which ChildHub was developed

A 2015 baseline study on the child protection workforce in areas where Tdh works, led to the identification of the main gaps in Central and South Eastern Europe: (i) Gap between content of training and practical skills demanded; (ii) No systems of licensing, accreditation; (iii) Under-qualified and insufficient staff; (iv) Feelings of isolation among professionals; and (v) No recognition of work, low motivation, huge workloads.

Consequently, the sector is confronted with significant staff turnover; limited, irrelevant and uncoordinated training; and low motivation and performance. This comes at a time when the need for efficient child protection services is critical - there is a high incidence of sexual violence, bullying, domestic violence, neglect of children, and discrimination and marginalization of ethnic minorities.

At the same time, the study identified some interesting opportunities in the Region. The similarities between social protection systems in the region would make exchange of practices possible and relevant. There is an increased momentum in the child protection sector with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and at the same time, there is a solid base of existing knowledge, promising practices, experts and organisations. These latter are willing to share experiences given the opportunity, and this sharing could be facilitated by the widespread access to digital technologies.

2.2 Approach, objectives and expected outcomes

Table 1. The foundations of the Child Protection Hub

Vision	To unlock the potentials of child protection actors by delivering innovative services, content and tools that can help them achieve positive changes for children.
Purpose	By end-2017, professionals and key stakeholders have increased access to technical resources and support networks allowing them to expand, improve, and advocate for qualitative services and policies for children in need of protection and their families.
Objectives	• Create opportunity for strong networks at regional and national levels • Increase opportunity for upgrading knowledge and skills of professionals & others • Equip professionals and stakeholders to advocate for better policies and practices
Expected outcomes	• Professionals develop skills to implement activities in more responsive & effective

	• Actors connect and cooperate, to disseminate and replicate promising practices • A regional community of knowledge and practices is created.
Beneficiaries	• Indirect - 500,000 children at risk or victims; families who will benefit from better services and enhanced policies. • Direct - child protection professionals – with a strong focus on social workers, but including other professions.

Following the above analysis, Tdh's Regional Office decided to initiate the Child Protection Hub for South East Europe, ChildHub in 2015 [12]-[15]. The founding vision, key objectives, expected outcomes and beneficiaries are given in Table 1.

3 ChildHub – Components, Implementation & Performance

3.1 The Four Components of ChildHub

ChildHub allows professionals to (i) Learn and explore; (ii) Connect and exchange. These two core components are supplemented by a support component (knowledge management) and a crosscutting component (advocacy). These are available in all the major regional languages.

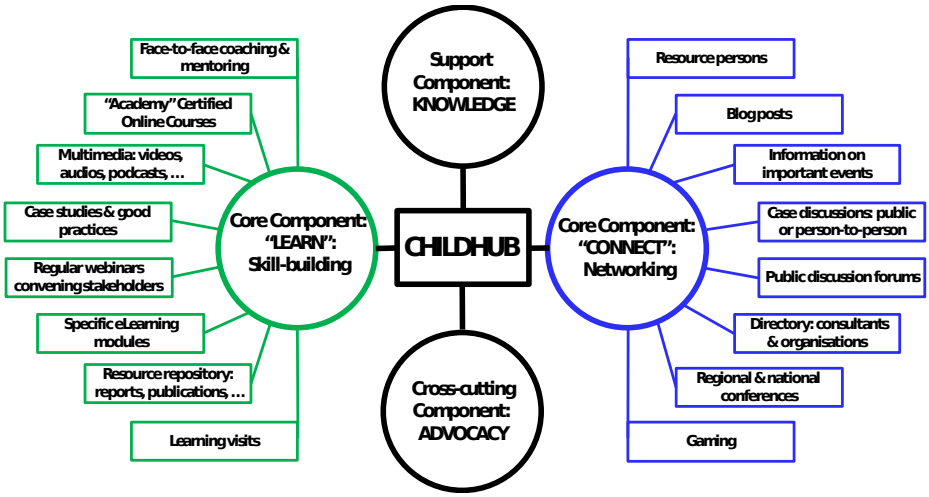

Fig. 1. Structure and components of ChildHub

The Learning component aims at providing opportunities for professionals to access resources for quick learning, such as podcasts and videos, as well as webinars, resources for trainers and materials for independent learning. ChildHub has built a significant portfolio of courses. It takes a blended approach - complementing offline with online learning. **The Networking component** proposes joint - online and face-

to-face - activities such as regional conferences, national round tables, forums for discussions/sharing of news. It contains a roster of Resource Persons, as well as game-like elements that invite actors to cooperate and synchronise their understanding of common or urgent child protection issues and relevant policy aspects

The Knowledge Management and Resources Component aims at making knowledge, information and data, available online, to all and in a user-friendly format. However, ChildHub is not only a collection of resources. It develops its own knowledge. The library contains a database of publications and easy-to-absorb information, extracts and summary documents, infographics, videos, toolboxes and child friendly materials. ChildHub can also be used to promote organisations' work regionally and initiate collaborations.

Under each of the three components, efforts are made to **advocate for change based on evidence collected**. The cross-cutting component aims to provide professionals with the tools, methodologies and data that would allow for improved advocacy at national or regional levels. For instance, in one country, several NGOs have submitted a position paper on the deinstitutionalization process, resulting in some of the network's demands being achieved. Several countries held roundtables with local stakeholders to increase collaboration and input. Resource persons in each country have highlighted areas for continued advocacy.

3.2 Scale of ChildHub

Table 2 presents the main parameters of scale of ChildHub. More details are available on the ChildHub website (https://childhub.org/en).

3.3 Evaluation of ChildHub

An independent evaluation was commissioned by Tdh and the Austrian Development Agency, and conducted by inFocus Enterprises Ltd, at the end of the third year of ChildHub. Its overall **purpose** was to assess the extent to which the project has reached its objectives, for accountability purposes towards donors, beneficiaries and stakeholders and; and draw the main lessons and generate recommendations for the next phase.

Table 1. Current scale of ChildHub in Europe

Component	Scale
Learning	• 3 eLearning modules, available in 5 languages; accessed by 1'000 professionals • 422 persons trained in face to face meetings by the 50 trained trainers • 400 people attended 43 case discussions; 600 people attended 26 webinars
Networking	• 229 resource persons trained to promote continuous improvement in the field

	• 60,000 persons visited ChildHub.org; 3000 persons became members • More than 3000 persons participated in offline activities and events.
Knowledge	• Virtual repository of 17,500 items, accessible in 6 languages • Key documents elaborated by the ChildHub community • Newsletters reaching 8,000 subscribers every fortnight
Advocacy	• 2 regional conferences brought together 120 stakeholders from 11 countries • 4 promising practices promoted and visited by 31 stakeholders • Regional observatory that produces thematic reports and papers for advocacy

The evaluation methods span summative (extent to which anticipated outcomes were produced), formative (identifying improvements that could be made to future) and process (internal dynamics of how ChildHub was implemented) elements. A mixed method approach was taken for data collection, with primary and secondary data sources of both qualitative (key informant interviews and focus group discussions) and quantitative (survey based) data. With the limitations of budget and time and the availability of respondents, the evaluation focused on the primary beneficiaries of activities: a sample of the resource persons and the members of ChildHub. The evaluation encompassed visits to two sites, in two different countries. The data collection instruments are accessible publicly: Online survey questionnaire; Interview guide for Resource People; Interview guide for Coordinators, Staff and project advisors; Focus group guide.

3.4 Findings from the Evaluation of ChildHub

The main finding in relation to the **output targets** is that they have all been significantly over-achieved compared to original intended goals (figure 2). There have also been a number of early-stage outcomes, and there is an increasingly good understanding of the range of skills and capabilities required by both formal and informal actors.

However, the timeframe for **mid- to long-term changes** to occur, for example in relation to widespread practice change, as a result of ChildHub's training and networking efforts, is likely to be longer than expected, with success dependent upon the inter-section of a number of factors, some of which are out of the control of ChildHub. Some factors can be put into place to improve the likelihood of mid to longer term changes occurring in the next phase (see recommendations below).

There have also been a number of **unintended outcomes**. Networking appears to have provided a much wider set of connections for Resource People than expected. ChildHub has started to change attitudes and behaviours towards consuming information, accessing training and collaborating online, helping ensure professionals who are unfamiliar with the online world, are able to make full use of ChildHub in the future.

3.5 Recommendations and plans for the Future and Contextualisation

The experience in the design, implementation and scale-up of ChildHub in Europe, as well as the findings of the formal evaluation, will help shape the future of the platform while also providing the motivation and the guidelines for its contextualization to other regions. In this section, we present the recommendations and future plans for the evolution and contextualization. ChildHub can be enhanced with the following elements:

- **Stronger advocacy at national and regional levels**. On the one hand, ChildHub has gathered evidence through research; on the other, it has a core group of influential people who can convey the messages and represent the cause. Also, ChildHub can be a platform for regional action on issues such as Children on the Move, as it is building a regional community and network of professionals. The advocacy pathway, in turn, should be connected with research and face-to-face meetings.
- Seek to **interface and/or collaborate with other, complementary platforms**. For instance, a concept is currently being developed for the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action to share resources and animate a community of practitioners.
- Partnerships can also facilitate the daunting task of **collecting resources**, by establishing automatic systems of pulling regional and national information into ChildHub. This would greatly facilitate the collection of resources – especially from important reference sites like the Save the Children Resource Library.
- **Innovative activities** and services using the tools and communication/learning facilities of ChildHub. Accessibility for all represents a key innovative aspect and this aspect could be further developed. Improving the workplaces of professionals, especially in rural, isolated areas, is also a key topic for innovative projects.
- **Coaching and mentoring module** highly demanded by professionals. It requires a dedicated pool of experts as coaches or supervisors. Using distance communication, the coaches should offer support to practitioners, especially those working in difficult, isolated areas, or those working with beneficiaries with complex needs.
- **'Offline' components** like the regional conferences and the country visits, have proven much more useful than initially expected. These should be strengthened, to adequately complement the intensified and diversified online activities.

SUCCESS FACTORS IDENTIFIED	CHILDHUB RATING	
Clearly define the target populations for ChildHub interventions	🔴	not being fully addressed
Ensure a diversity of cross-sector actors	🟢	are doing well
Include representation from target population in all stages of project development and delivery	🔴	not being addressed
Creatively engage the target population	🟢	are doing
Avoid paying people 'directly' to engage	🔴	sometimes addressed
Cultivate Resource People with 'system' leadership skills	🟢	often addressed
Go to them, don't expect them just to come	🟢	sometimes addressed
Continuous and clear communication	🟢	communication is very regular
	🔴	clarity of message around purpose could be improved
Ensure sufficient resources for additional 3-5 years	🟢	doing well
Remove the financial barriers to access	🟢	doing very well
Establish a Regional Coordination unit (Tdh Hungary) and Country Coordinating partners	🟢	doing very well
Remove organisational barriers	🟢	sometimes addressing
Remove language barriers	🟢	doing well
Remove technical barriers	🔴	not addressing
Provide valuable information and knowledge resources	🟢	doing very well
Use a blend of online and offline training approaches	🟢	doing very well
Use offline meetings/events to achieve complementary goals	🟢	sometimes doing
Consider the need for post-activity support	🟢	not addressing
Have a shared vision and agenda for change (regional and national)	🟢	partially doing
Ensure ChildHub is integrated into Tdh National office & partner/ member strategies	🟢	partially doing
Align with or include programmatic strategies directed at children and communities	🔴	not addressing

Fig. 2. Performance of ChildHub in terms of its main output targets

The following **technical and process improvements** are relevant in view of the findings from the ChildHub evaluation:

- **Design**: Clearly define who specific ChildHub activities are targeted towards; Leverage social media; Target supervisors and senior management more directly within organisations; Continue to address and intensify translation efforts; Address IT skills issues amongst users; Establish learning goals for training activities and consider post-activity support; and Co-create new solutions with Resource Persons and partners to address the lack of adequate supervision of social workers.
- **Governance and management**: Set up steering groups for each country; Better cultivate the resource persons with 'system' leadership skills; participatory approaches to strategic planning; Ensure that Tdh country offices and in-country partner/ member organizations align their existing plans/ activities. Finally, guided by a clear strategic framework, define functional working groups (e.g. policy advocacy, M&E) and strategy working groups (e.g. juvenile justice) to drive the mutual alignment of member efforts and the implementation of ChildHub's overall strategic plan.
- **Sustainability**: Introduce a more structured approach, best guided through the production of a common Theory of Change, which can then be used as a basis for the

community developing learning questions to be further explored and guide the documentation of good practices. Adopt a Developmental Evaluation approach [16], better adapted to initiatives with multiple stakeholders, high levels of innovation, fast paced decision-making, and areas of uncertainty than the traditional forms of evaluation which work well in situations where the progression from problem to solution can be laid out in a relatively clear sequence of steps. Finally, consider a range of potential 'end games' or routes to sustainability as early as possible.

4 Contextualization of ChildHub to Africa & South Asia

As we saw in section 1.2, child protection systems in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa share the same shortcomings with those in South-Eastern Europe. Tdh currently works in four countries in South Asia – Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Nepal – and is exploring the contextualization of ChildHub there, as a tool for Tdh delegations to connect and learn, and, more importantly still, **as an inter-agency platform for child protection professionals in the region**. Similarly, the idea of ChildHub would be as relevant for Africa, and could learn from the effort underway to contextualize it in Asia.

4.1 Learnings from Europe – scope for contextualization

The **modularity** of ChildHub means that each pillar of the platform (learning, networking, resource center) allows for the use of a variety of methods and tools. The choice can be made at regional level and adjustments are possible regularly. The **functionalities** of each component (for example the use of blogs, forums, chat, etc) can be expanded or limited, in line with the specificities of users, with the general use of collaborative tools in the region, with the infrastructure and applications that are chosen by the implementing consortium. Experience shows that there are some **minimum, necessary conditions for contextualization** of ChildHub: (i) a strong **regional executive team** which guarantees that the development is responsive to the local needs and interests; (ii) **a pool of resource persons** to boost the activity, and to ensure a qualitative macro picture of the policies and practices in the region; (iii) **online and face-to-face activities** from the very beginning, to increase trust, exchanges and effective collaboration; and (iv) a carefully designed **monitoring system**, including a regional baseline on the policies and practices, as well as the workforce in the child protection systems.

4.2 Relevance for Asia

The need to establish **a peer network around and beyond Tdh in Asia** stems from Tdh's long presence and experience in this zone:

- There is a need for child protection actors (inc. those within Tdh and its partners) to continuously evaluate and update their skills. In-job training using a virtual plat-

form could be feasible and effective way, causing least amount of disruption in operations.

- There are similar projects (such as the continuum of care for children and their mothers) and common approaches (such as moving from direct implementation to institutional strengthening). Peer learning on these could be extremely beneficial.
- Cross-border trafficking is a real menace, across several borders in the region. Collaboration between professionals across countries is thus a real need of the hour; a peer network between the Asian countries could help address this need.
- Effective communication between Tdh persons – and Tdh's partners – could take place over a virtual platform, to complement in-person meetings and other avenues of exchange.

The process of **contextualization is 'Southern-driven'** for several reasons. Firstly, the need for peer networking has been **expressed by several actors in south Asia, within, around and beyond** Tdh. The potential users and beneficiaries of ChildHub in Asia are key and historic actors in the sector, with a good understanding of the ground needs. Moreover, the technical expertise and content would come from local organisations and contexts. The starting point would thus be the experience of ChildHub in Europe, but adapted to the context and tailored to the needs in south Asia.

4.3 Outline & Avenues for Implementation of ChildHub in Asia

We saw above that there is a strong need to strengthen skills of child protection professionals and to connect them to each other; ChildHub has succeeded in doing this at the Central European region. We therefore strongly promulgate the contextualization of ChildHub to other regions, including Africa and Asia, where the challenges of the sector are essentially the same. Contextualization, rather than 'reinventing the wheel', would also be a good way to learn from past experiences (thus increasing chances of success) and increase resource-effectiveness (by reutilizing the technical resources).

ChildHub Europe's experience is well documented. An internal report presents the motivation, contents, management, costs and partnership structure. The external evaluation done in February 2018 contains a set of recommendations for both the future evolution of ChildHub in Europe and its contextualization to other regions. Together, these would provide the 'blueprint' for contextualization to Asia.

We propose an architecture for ChildHub Asia that is similar to the existing ChildHub. We plan to learn from the experience in Europe ("Recommendations and plans for the Future and Contextualization of ChildHub" section above). ChildHub Asia would involve some **additional features**. We also propose to take into account the technical and process recommendations, notably for more effective governance structures and higher sustainability. Therefore, ChildHub Asia and Africa would have the following 10 additional features:

1. Make ChildHub Asia a platform for **strengthening collaborations in the sector**. This implies seeing ChildHub for its full potential right from the outset – as a multi-agency tool.
2. Strong **links with other regions**, to strengthen cross-region learning. Our landscape analysis on ICT4D in and for Asia showed that such cross-learning is potentially very useful and under-exploited as of now.
3. **Extend the platform to other strategic priorities – going beyond Child Protection, create a corresponding section for professionals working on maternal and child health.** This will be planned for the future phases, once ChildHub Asia is up and running, and has achieved critical mass for child protection professionals.
4. **Diversifying the information** available and the sources it is collected from; it is increasingly important to involve user-generated information to make ChildHub truly participative and complete the 'top-down' structure of today (resources come from experts and are consumed by practitioners) with a 'bottom-up' approach.
5. Complementary and fruitful **partnerships with other networking platforms**.
6. **Emphasis on** using ChildHub for **advocacy** at national and regional levels.
7. Leveraging ChildHub to **monitor the situation** of child protection services.
8. **Stronger coaching and mentoring** to accompany capacity building.
9. A **more innovation-driven** approach, including child-led social innovation.
10. **Stronger 'offline' components** to reinforce and complement online activities.

4.4 Implementation

It is important to keep in mind the ultimate ambition for ChildHub Asia, irrespective of the short-term funding. So, a phased approach to implementation would help align our ambitions and timelines to probable funding options. Moreover, a phased approach will allow us to ensure a progressive evolution, from direct transposition to child protection, towards an inclusion of all the programmatic areas.

- Phase I (typically, 1 year): Creation of ChildHub Asia for child protection, thus allowing the use of existing resources from ChildHub Europe (theoretical bases, basic course structure, concepts, legal frameworks, international regulations, …). This will culminate in establishment of the overall structure and start of first training and networking activities. Creation of content in one dominant regional language. Start of main networking activities like webinars and blog posts.
- Phase II (typically, 2 years):
  - Scale-up in number and variety of members;
  - Scale-across to other areas, with sections on MNCH and juvenile justice;
  - Scale-in, with creation of content in multiple languages.

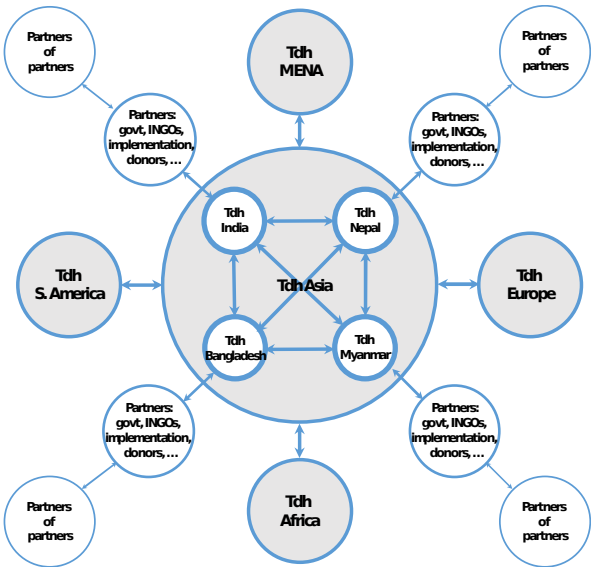

Fig. 3. ChildHub Asia (a similar model can be developed for Africa)

The **content available to members** – both the learning and the networking – will be built in collaboration with national and regional partners, and validated by external partners. We will also ensure a certification mechanism from academic institutions for eLearning. The **Front-end** (the website) will be designed for PC and mobile devices. Moreover, we propose to have offline access to courses and evaluations, to enable members to work (build and test skills) even in absence of connectivity.

Resources required: Since we propose to start the implementation using the same architecture as ChildHub Europe, as well as some of the same contents, this will ensure a dynamic and cost-effective start. The three-year experience in Europe has been well documented, including a cost analysis that provides the different expense items and the costs incurred (inc. the unit cost, since the document details the scale of each activity and its costs). This will help estimate and seek sufficient funds.

4.5 Results expected

We expect ChildHub to produce the following results in South Asia and Africa:

- A more extensive and linked child protection network, between the main stakeholders working on child protection in Asia;
- A sustainable regional collaboration, with effective engagement between country delegations to share knowledge and experiences;
- A stronger workforce, thanks to access to knowledge and modern practices which could enhance the skills of the professionals by learning from their peers;
- A stronger link between professionals, and higher satisfaction and motivation;

- Ultimately, improved outcomes for children.

5 Conclusions

Platforms like ChildHub enhance the resilient elements of the system by supporting and valuing the actors of child protection, creating a culture of collaboration, and a strong movement that can analyse and influence the evolution of children's welfare through strong, targeted and evidence-based advocacy. Professionals who are more connected to each other, with access to knowledge and practices, are more skilled, motivated and supported to make better-informed decisions for children.

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