**Ministry of Gender Equality, Child** **Development and Family Welfare**

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**Performance Audit on “Response to Cases of Child Maltreatment”**

**Executive Summary**

Child maltreatment is a widespread, global phenomenon affecting children. According to data from Statistics Mauritius and the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare (MoGE) for the period January 2012 to December 2016, some 28,000 new cases were reported. They included abandonment, physical abuse, neglect cases, sexual abuse, worst forms of labour and psychological/emotional abuse. MoGE took several measures in response to the problem, and during the period January 2014 to June 2017, it spent some Rs 459 million on the protection, welfare and development of children.

The National Audit Office carried out this Performance Audit with the objective to assess the effectiveness of the measures taken by the Ministry to respond to reported cases of child maltreatment.

**Key Findings**

***Strategy on Protection Services***

Following the National Children’s Policy of 2004, the Ministry took several measures to respond to reported cases of child maltreatment. According to a Consultant from the European Union, several of these measures have improved the provision of services in the areas of health, education, child protection and social security. However, an overarching national policy framework, law or strategy would have provided a comprehensive framework for the priorities and outcomes to be achieved for children in the area of child protection.

***Case Management***

According to the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund, response to child violence, abuse and neglect involves the development of case management. However, certain core elements of the case management process, such as case planning, assessment and monitoring progress and case closure, were not followed by the Ministry.

***Child Protection Register***

Some 5,500 cases of child maltreatment were reported at the Ministry on an annual basis, and these cases were processed manually in individual files. To cope with the increasing number of cases, the Ministry, in 2012, embarked on the development of a Child Protection Register. In 2014, the Register went live at the Ministry’s Head Office, and subsequently, in 2016, it was made operational in only three outstations. As at November 2017, some
Rs 3.9 million were spent in connection with the Register. However, the input was low, as only some 1,100 of some 3,000 new cases were input from the launching date till the end of November 2017.

***Residential Care Institutions***

For the period January 2014 to June 2017, some Rs 254.3 million were spent on Residential Care. As at September 2017, there were 19 Residential Care Institutions accommodating 552 children. Only four of them with a total of 81 children were registered with the Board set up under the Residential Care Homes Act. However, these registered RCIs did not have a contract or a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with the Ministry. Of the
15 remaining RCIs not registered with the Board, three had both contracts and MoUs, one had only a MoU which was being renewed on a month to month basis since 2012, and the remaining 11 RCIs which housed 354 children, had neither a contract nor MoU with the Ministry.

Hence, the level of compliance to conditions needed to be a place of safety was not the same in all the RCIs.

***Foster Care System***

For the period January 2014 to June 2017, some Rs 6.41 million were paid as stipend to foster care parents. Since the inception of the Foster Care Programme in January 2002 to June 2017, 167 applicants had been registered as foster parents, and 143 children were placed in foster homes.

Since 2014, the Ministry took some initiatives to improve the interest of the public in the programme, such as introducing a decentralised Foster Care Service, increasing stipend to foster families and carrying out sensitisation campaign. Though no yearly target was set, the number of prospective foster parents had slightly increased. For the period prior to 2015, on average, 10 parents were being registered as foster parents annually, and from 2015 to 2017, the average was some 14 per annum. However, in the absence of the target, the effectiveness of the initiatives taken to improve interest in the Programme could not be measured by the Ministry.

The foster care aims at providing the opportunity to children victims of abuse and/or neglect to live in a substitute family on a temporary basis, and yet the number of placements in foster families was relatively low as compared to those placed in RCIs. For the period January 2014 to June 2017, the percentage of children placed in foster homes[[1]](#footnote-1) was about seven, while the remaining (93 per cent) were in shelters/ RCIs.

***Child Mentoring Scheme***

The Scheme was initiated in 2009, but kick started in September 2011. During the period January 2012 to June 2017, 63children within the age brackets of 10 to 16 were roped into the Scheme. As of July 2017, 46 of them completed the mentoring sessions, while the sessions for nine children were still ongoing. For the remaining eight, one was aged more than 16 at time of matching, in five cases, the parents retracted, and in two cases, mentor did not want to form part of the programme.

From January 2014 to June 2017, 106 cases were referred to the Child Mentoring Section. However, only a few matching activities were made for following reasons:

From July 2014 to December 2015, the Child Mentoring Committee set up under the Child Protection Act met only twice;

From October 2014 to May 2015, the Child Mentoring Section was not fully functional as there was no Coordinator responsible for the Scheme;

Though as from March 2016, there was an increase in the number of matching exercises and the number of children matched, the achievement of the objective of the Scheme was hampered by a shortage of mentors in 2016 and 2017.

As of August 2017, the mentoring sessions of four children with mild behavioural problems were still ongoing, and the matching exercise for 17 children was conducted by the Ministry who had already initiated actions for obtaining Mentoring Orders**.** Moreover, the Ministry, in 2016 initiated a recruitment exercise for child mentors. As at August 2017, 79 candidates accepted the offer, and 68 of them followed a training programme.

***Rehabilitation and Reintegration***

One of the objectives of the Child Development Unit (CDU) is the reinsertion of children victim of abuse in the society after being provided with follow-up sessions to ensure recovery from trauma.

During the period January 2014 to November 2017, 219 children from the RCIs were integrated either with their biological families or other relatives. On the other hand, none of the
143 children placed in foster homes since the inception of the Foster Care Programme in 2002 had integrated their biological families. From a scrutiny of case files, it was found that this was due to combining factors, such as unstable biological families and inadequate professional skill of Caregivers and CDU staff.

***Monitoring, Review and Evaluation***

Monitoring, review and evaluation of measures and programmes were not well developed. However, officers of the CDU carried out inspections in the following cases:

* According to reports of inspection visits effected by Enforcement Officers in nine RCIs for the period mid 2016 to October 2017, shortcomings identified and proposed remedial actions were regularly reported to the Managers thereof. However, some issues remained unresolved and became recurrent ones;
* Officers of the Foster Care Section carried out inspection at foster homes either when Court Orders were nearing expiry or upon requests of District Magistrates who, in some cases, required status on minor’s progress on a regular basis. Officers also attended visits upon requests of foster parents who were facing difficulties in coping with children. In case where a child was having behavioural issues, visits at foster homes and at schools were carried out more regularly, depending upon the complexity of the problem;
* Progress reports on children placed under the Child Mentoring Scheme were not submitted to the Permanent Secretary of MoGE. However, debriefing sessions were carried out every two months with child mentors, and data on the number of children joining and leaving the Scheme was kept.

**Conclusion**

With some 5,900 new cases of child maltreatment reported annually, MoGE has taken measures according to good practices for the best interest of the children. However, the implementation of the measures has been a major challenge for the Ministry to effectively address child maltreatment problem. Over the years, it attempted to improve some of those measures, but with limited success. In the absence of a holistic approach to child maltreatment, MoGE is functioning in a fragmented and reactive manner to address the problem.

The programmes and services were not being fully monitored, reviewed and evaluated to understand what had been the outcomes in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration of children in their biological families. There was also no proper reporting mechanism on the outcomes.

It has also been a challenge for the Ministry to reintegrate children into their biological families and society due to combining factors, such as absence of a proper case plan/care plan, inadequate training of case managers and the complex situation of biological families. Hence, the children have to stay in RCIs for longer period.

**Key Recommendations**

***Strategy on Protection Services***

As the activities in the National Child Protection Strategy 2014-2022 are too costly to implement, the Ministry should prepare a synopsis of the importance of the priority activities highlighted therein, and make preliminary demand for necessary funding.

***Develop Care/Case Plans***

All children who are currently placed in alternative care and their families, as well as all new cases reported should have care/case plans that are subject to formal review. A case plan should also be developed to effectively address child maltreatment. Cases of children within the child protection system must be followed up and reviewed throughout the period during which they are receiving support to ensure that they are not at risk.

***Develop Mechanism to Monitor, Review and Evaluate Programmes***

All the programmes and measures should be monitored, reviewed and evaluated by the Ministry**.** This will help to assess the effectiveness of the programmes, identify any shortcomings and take corrective measures in the best interest of the children and their families. Proper mechanisms of reporting the outcomes of the programmes should be developed.

The Ministry should also optimise the use of the Child Protection Register, and ensure that data pertaining to child maltreatment cases reported at the Ministry has been promptly input therein. The Register should be made operational in the remaining outstations, namely at Flacq, Goodlands and Rose Belle, as soon as possible.

***Standardisation in Provision of Service***

The Ministry should have contracts and MoUs with all the RCIs and ensure that they comply with the conditions contained therein. It should also ascertain that all them are duly registered and provide a standard service for the benefit of the children.

***Facilitate Reintegration of Children***

During the period of placement of a child victim of maltreatment, there should be continuous rehabilitative work for the child to reintegrate his/her family environment. The Ministry should identify factors preventing the rehabilitation of parents and work out solution to facilitate the reintegration of children in their biological families.

***Summary of Ministry’s Reply***

* In respect of care/case plan, it has been developed, but due to the lack of human resources at the RCI Section, considerable delay is experienced in completing the said care plans and updating same;
* As for the registration of RCIs, their specificities are not captured in the Residential Care Homes Act. Not all provisions in the “Minimum Conditions for a Residential Care Home” can be met by shelters. Regulations for places of safety, as well as provisions for registration of shelters will be made under the forthcoming Children’s Bill;
* As regards the absence of MoU/Contract, Managers/Directors of shelters are requested to ensure strict adherence to a list of Do’s and Don’ts and a pre-defined child-to-Caregiver ratio;
* All matching exercises were conducted in line with the CPA. Children with mild behavioural were kept in abeyance as the programme was optimised;
* With regard to rehabilitation and reintegration, most of the children placed in RCIs under Court Order came from unstable homes and family environments whereby their physical, social and emotional needs could not be met. The Family Welfare and Protection Unit would be called upon to work on processing cases for family rehabilitation and reintegration on a fast track basis. A call for proposals from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) willing to work on the rehabilitation of families and reintegration of minors thereat is also in the pipeline. All officers posted in the Section during the period January 2014 to November 2016 were provided on-the-job coaching, as well as formal training from the International Social Services and a local Consultant. However, they have moved to other sectors;
* RCIs have again been requested to ensure compliance with norms and standards set by the Ministry, including the submission of monthly reports on residents;
* With regard to shortcomings identified in shelters run by NGOs, it is difficult for the Ministry to apply sanctions as appropriate in the absence of an agreement between the Ministry and NGOs, among other reasons.

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1. According to the Child Protection (Foster Care) Regulations , a foster home means a foster parent or family. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)