

RESEARCH PAPER

Creative and flexible deployment of systems methodologies for child rights and child protection through Holistic Flexibility

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Abstract

Holistic Flexibility is a conceptual lens in systems thinking that enables intellectual, emotional and tactical elasticity in systems practice. This paper will demonstrate Holistic Flexibility in practice in an NGO setting to design and implement a programme to address the widening gap between government policy and its implementation. Critical Systems Heuristics was chosen as the preferred methodology, strengthened with two methods from two other systems methodologies—CATWOE (a mnemonic for Customers, Actors, Transformation, Worldview, Owners, Environment) from Soft Systems Methodology and issues (assumption) rating method from Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing. Following a participative programme design exercise, two phases were identified. The strategy, implementation and impact of phase 1, which covered work undertaken between the period 2018 and 2020, is provided. Phase 2 was under consideration at the time of writing this paper.

KEYWORDS

child protection, child rights, critical systems heuristics, Holistic Flexibility, UTSAH

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore a development in systems thinking known as Holistic Flexibility (Chowdhury, 2019a, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). A case-study informed by Holistic Flexibility with the Universal Team for Social Action and Health (UTSAH), a child protection non-governmental organization (NGO) based in India, will be discussed. The paper will begin by introducing Holistic Flexibility and its place in systems thinking. The context of child protection in India is then described before the case-study demonstrating Holistic Flexibility in use is presented.

Next, reflections on Holistic Flexibility are offered followed by a critique of the intervention along with avenues for future research.

2 | HOLISTIC FLEXIBILITY

Chowdhury (2019a, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2023) reviewed key issues in applied systems thinking before presenting Holistic Flexibility as a conceptual lens for the discipline. He defines Holistic Flexibility as the 'dynamic interplay between a state of mind that has the ability to absorb

systemic complexity and a state of intervention that has the ability to embrace flexibility both in intent and form' (Chowdhury, 2019a, p. 404); see Figure 1.

To be clear, Holistic Flexibility is not a new methodology to be added to the systems armoury; rather, it is a conceptual lens for practitioners that can enable intellectual, emotional and tactical elasticity in systems practice. The approach is further enhanced by notions of continual change, adaptiveness and fluidity drawn from Eastern philosophy (Chowdhury, 2022a) that reflect the complexity of situations that systems practitioners encounter. Based on the symbolism of the *Nataraja*—the dancing *Shiva* from Hindu mythology—as a metaphorical archetype, Chowdhury (2022a) proposes five principles of Holistic Flexibility as follows:

- *System as becoming* suggests a dynamic approach based on the negotiation of boundaries, appreciation of interrelationships and cognizance of emergence.
- *Transformative flexibility* based on the trilogy of flexibility in cognition, formulation and substantiation.
- *Responsible practice* aimed at addressing problems holistically, meaningfully and sustainably touching both human and non-human dimensions.
- *Spiral of learning* embraces single-, double- and triple-loop learning to enhance efficiency, effectiveness and value-centricity, respectively.
- *Pragmatic artistry* embraces pragmatism as necessary in dynamic situations and artistry, requiring understanding, elegance and poise.

Holistic Flexibility presents an advancement in systems thinking as it promotes a pragmatic stance that emphasizes a practitioner's ability to identify, manage and work with multiple stakeholders and contextual variables through a learning-based process leading to the emergence of satisfying outcomes. With Holistic Flexibility, practitioners can deploy systems thinking as a

cognitive skill (Chowdhury, 2023) with or without explicitly using any traditional systems methodologies; this also implies that practitioners can work across mainstream management and systems frameworks. Holistic Flexibility facilitates the various activities in an operations research/systems intervention as outlined by Ormerod (2018) that involve making use of 'various types of thinking, reasoning, and doing; of anticipating, creating, and negotiating; of managing, enabling, and facilitating; of investigating, modelling, and analyzing' (p. 1359).

Having discussed Holistic Flexibility as an advancement in systems thinking, we now present a case-study to demonstrate it in practice.

3 | SETTING THE CONTEXT

3.1 | Child rights/child protection in India

India is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC (1989) that sets out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all children (individuals under the age of 18) are entitled to in law. Child protection translates these principles to tangible practices for the government, police, educational institutions and civil society. Child protection is the process of preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children. Hence, child protection serves to uphold child rights. The government of India adopted the National Plan of Action for Children (2005) that identifies the key priorities that require utmost and sustained attention for the security, protection, education and well-being of children in need of care and protection and children who come in conflict with the law. The Juvenile Justice Act (2015) of India sets the legal framework in cases where child rights are infringed or where children come in conflict with the law. See Table 1 for the three key components underlying the Juvenile Justice Act.

TABLE 1 Components of the Juvenile Justice Act of India (adapted from Center for Child Protection, 2020).

Prevention	Intervention	Rehabilitation
Law and policies	Law and policies	Law and policies
Processes and protocols	Access and assistance	Long term care until age 18
Mechanisms and systems	Immediate relief	Skills and training
Monitoring	Restoration of rights	
Sensitization and awareness	Punishment of violators	

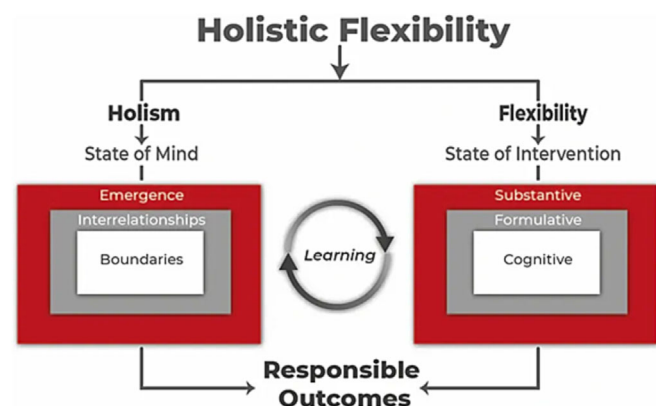


FIGURE 1 Holistic Flexibility (Chowdhury, 2019a, p. 404). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

NGOs play an important role in bridging the gaps in India's policy implementation, acting as enablers at the grassroots level, playing a role in participative governance and mobilizing public opinion and supporting attitudinal and behavioural change (Baviskar, 2001; Bhaker, 2014; Nanda, 2000; Rai, 2017; The Indian Express, 2020). Various NGOs have come to the fore in addressing the status of children in India; notable among them are Child Rights And You, Pratham Education Foundation, Katha, Uday Foundation, Smile Foundation, Haq Center for Child Rights, Arpan, Tulir, Udayan Care and Humana People To People India, among others. Several other small NGOs have also sprung up in various parts of the country, which can contribute significantly to social impact because of their knowledge of and popularity at the grassroots level (Segal, 2017).

Although at the policy level, India is committed to providing a safe, just and equitable environment for children, there is little evidence that such commitments have effectively trickled down to having real, on the ground impact (Nair, 2009; Rickard & Szanyi, 2010; Roy, 2019; Vadiraj, 2008). Several organizational, administrative and competency-related issues pose serious impediments to the operation of the institutional structures that protect and uphold child rights in India. Poverty and lack of awareness are significant factors that lead to violations in child rights (Barkhry, 2006). Child labour is endemic (Jain & Saraswat, 2006) in India with the country having the world's highest number of working children (Pathak, 2012). According to UNICEF (2020), numerous Districts (an administrative area under a State) in India witness high rates of child marriage, child labour, female feticide and child sexual abuse. A study conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), Government of India, in 2007, noted high incidences of physical, sexual, emotional and gender-based violence against children (Roy, 2011). The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, a statutory body that functions under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, reported gross violation of guidelines and procedures in the childcare system in the country and that not a single Child Care Institution in India was fully compliant to the provisions of the Juvenile Justice Act (Suren, 2020). The situation is further aggravated by a lack of understanding of the real extent of problems faced by children and a lack of clarity on how different stakeholders can come together to address the issue (Barkhry, 2006). There is absence of or poor understanding of child rights in the Indian society, in general, due to poor education and a traditional patriarchal culture (Deb et al., 2016).

Working within the realities of the operating environment discussed above, the organization on which the case is based is introduced next.

3.2 | Universal Team for Social Action and Help

UTASH is an NGO based in the city of Guwahati in the North-Eastern State of Assam in India. It was founded in 2011 by Miguel Queah (referred to as the 'founder' from here-on), a co-author of this paper. UTSAH has to work within the constraints of the operating environment that were highlighted in the Section 3.1. In addition, the State of Assam, where the organization's work is based in, presents a unique set of challenges. Assam is located in the North-Eastern part of India and has historically been regarded as distant from mainstream India due to geographic, ethnic and political reasons. According to the Crime in India (2016) report and an UTSAH Child Rights Fellowship Program (2020) document, the geo-politics of the region translates to ethnic conflict, natural calamity and social and political marginalization of hill and tea tribes in the region compound the problem of violence against children in the State. Further, most of the child protection issues in Assam relate to the lack of accurate reporting of cases, proper understanding of violence against children and exploitation of vulnerable children.

UTSAH's approach can be broadly divided into three areas:

- *Direct child support*: Providing psychological, social and legal support to affected children.
- *System support*: Supplying technical and programme support to child protection stakeholders within the State administration.
- *Community awareness*: Empowering children and communities to understand the intricacies of child rights and how the civil society needs to engage with children who come in conflict with the law.

Over the years, UTSAH grew to be recognized as a leading NGO in its space (Wangchuk, 2021). The organization is supported by UNICEF under a multi-year partnership, and it also receives donations from private companies and philanthropists.

In 2013, UTSAH called on Rajneesh Chowdhury (referred to as the 'consultant' from here-on), a co-author of this paper, to partner the organization as an external consultant. The consultant is trained in systems thinking and systems methodologies. This partnership was agreed on a pro-bono basis with the consultant offering systems change advice on a case-by-case basis. The first engagement (Chowdhury, 2015, 2019b) involved the consultant working with UTSAH to develop a child protection framework using Interactive Planning (Ackoff, 2001; Ackoff et al., 2006).

In mid-2017, UTSAH constituted a programme team (see Table 2) to work closely with the consultant on

TABLE 2 Respondents of the CSH questions.

Stakeholder group	Respondents
UTSAH programme team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Founder • Programme officer – Direct child support • Programme officer – System support • Programme officer – Community awareness • CP volunteer
Duty bearers	<p>Assam Police</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director general of police • Additional director general of police – Administration, modernization and logistics • Inspector general – Criminal investigation department <p>Assam Government Bureaucracy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deputy commissioner – Kamrup Metropolitan District • District development commissioner – Kamrup Metropolitan District <p>Government of Assam CR/CP agencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member secretary – State CP society, social welfare department • Chairperson – Child welfare committee, Kamrup Metropolitan District • Secretary – National Child Labor Project

options to address the challenges posed by the realities of the operating environment. During the first meeting between the consultant and the programme team, the following voices surfaced:

The community, the police, and the bureaucracy will need to work together if we want to change reality in favor of the child. (Founder)

The local community is not aware of child rights/child protection issues; the right of the child is commonly violated even in middle-class households. (Programme Officer)

No point blaming the police for their brash behavior ... they are themselves under tremendous stress. (Child protection volunteer)

We need an initiative that touches multiple prongs in the child rights/child protection ecosystem; piecemeal efforts will not yield results. (Founder)

In light of the above, it is worth commenting on the role of the police in child rights/child protection. The Indian *khaki* (a dull brownish yellow) colour of the police uniform comes with the baggage of rough behaviour and insensitivity that is often ingrained into children's minds due to the way popular media in India portrays the police (UTSAH, 2018). Although the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act says that during the recording of statement of a child, the police officer should not be in the *khaki* uniform, this is hardly the case (UTSAH, 2018). Use of the *khaki* uniform by police at the time of interacting with children can, in a way, be itself seen as an act of emotional violence towards vulnerable children.

Various agencies in the police force are responsible for first response and case-management. However, the police itself suffers from a range of occupational hazards. Shane (2010) talks about five types of occupational challenges: internal (poor management, red-tape, career stagnation and a culture of non-appreciation of work), external (complexity in stakeholder management, stringent media scrutiny and overcritical public), performance (multiple priorities, adverse working hours, occupational hazards and mental and psychological stress) and individual (expectation to conform with prevailing organizational culture). In India, such challenges are multiplied as the police have to demonstrate accountability to several bodies—courts, bureaucracy, State police Accountability Commissions, Human Rights Commissions of the Center and States and the Central Services Organizations (Choudhury, 2019). Police training budgets are regarded as insufficient, especially for the junior levels, with less than 1% of police personnel in some States receiving any formal in-service training (Bajpai, 2020). Additionally, aspects around fundamental human rights often do not get covered in such training (Hindustan Times, 2019). In addition, challenges associated with occupational hazards of the police force lead to physical and mental stress among law enforcers that impact their capacity to deliver on the job (Dixit, 2019; Ramachandran, 2019; Roy, 2019; Sharma, 2019; Sreelekha, 2019). Talking about mental health is also a taboo that leads to further suppression of such issues resulting in mental health being completely ignored as a significant factor of good policing (Saha, 2019).

It emerged from that initial meeting that, for UTSAH to make a stronger impact on child rights/child protection in Assam, a holistic approach needed to be employed that would create change from within the system and help address the widening gap between government policy making and their implementation. The information provided represents the situation at the time of the initial drafting of this paper in August 2021.

4 | PROGRAMME DESIGN

4.1 | Methodological choice

The initial meetings with UTSAH highlighted that multiple stakeholders were involved presenting complexities at various levels—power dynamics, authority and resource constraints, police-community interaction and bureaucratic constraints, among many others. Taken-for-granted beliefs need to be made explicit and challenged and established assumptions about who should be included and excluded in the decision-making process needed to be questioned. Additionally, there was a need to enhance the readiness of law-enforcers and justice-delivery agencies (referred to as ‘duty bearers’ from here-on) in terms of their knowledge, competence and mental health. Consequently, the consultant chose to commence the programme design with a flexible use of Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH) (Ulrich, 1983), a systems methodology that helps in unfolding and understanding ‘tensions such as “situation” versus “system,” “I” versus “ought” judgements, concerns of “those involved” versus “those affected but not involved,” stakeholders’ “stakes” versus “stakeholding issues,” and others’ (Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010; p. 243).

Ulrich (1983) presents CSH as a set of 12 questions in the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ mode that are known as boundary questions. The boundary questions aid in unravelling the boundaries that circumscribe our understanding of a reference system (Ulrich, 2005, 2006). These questions are grouped into four dimensions: motivation (where a sense of purposefulness and principle value comes from), control (where the necessary resources and power are located), knowledge (where sufficient expertise and experience is assumed to be available) and legitimacy (where social and legal approval is assumed to reside). The 12 questions ask fundamental questions regarding what an intervention is about, what it aims to achieve, who does it aim to serve and what success really means and for whom (Reynolds, 2007, 2008). The 12 questions are elaborated in the case narration in Section 4.1.1.

4.1.1 | Flexible use of CSH with CATWOE and an issues (assumption) rating matrix

The 12 boundary questions of CSH were deployed in an interview style with the UTSAH programme team and senior-level duty bearers in Assam; see Table 2. Each interview lasted for about 45 min. The consultant conducted the interviews for the UTSAH programme team, and the Founder did the same with the external

stakeholders after gathering the required skills going through the process with the consultant.

The 12 boundary questions and a snapshot of the insights from the interactions are presented in Table 3. Each of the four CSH dimension is taken up under three boundary categories (Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010): first, the standing for a social group or an individual involved and/or affected—‘stakeholder’; second, the concern specific to a stakeholder—‘stakes’; and third, the key problem that needs reconciliation between stakeholders—‘stakeholding issue’.

Insights generated from the boundary questions were consolidated, and a convergence workshop was facilitated by the consultant with the UTSAH programme team. Apart from deliberating on the insights, the workshop was intended to prioritize the programme areas and arrive at the design for the future roadmap, and it was realized that, to achieve these ends, CSH needed to be complemented with other methods. To provide a more action-oriented focus, two systems methods were employed: CATWOE and an issue rating matrix.

The mnemonic CATWOE stands for Customers, Actors, Transformation, Worldview, Owners, Environment. It is a method in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland, 1981; Checkland & Poulter, 2006; Checkland & Scholes, 1990) that helps articulate key factors that influence and impinge upon a problem situation. A CATWOE analysis offers holistic understanding to serve as inputs for what a programme needs to focus on. A discussion was facilitated with the programme team based on the CATWOE parameters. See Table 4 for the outcome of this exercise.

The CATWOE analysis helped in consolidating several areas that emerged in the CSH exercise. Insights from CSH and CATWOE presented a wide canvass of improvement-oriented actions for UTSAH to consider.

An issue or assumption rating matrix is a method in Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing (Mason & Mitroff, 1981) that facilitates rating of key stakeholder assumptions in a four-quadrant matrix defined by the axes of importance and certainty. The former indicates how important an assumption (used here to indicate ‘issue’) is and the latter indicates how certain it is. Ratings help prioritization of actions and can serve as inputs for a programme to focus on issues that are of high importance and high certainty. To arrive at priorities for action areas and a future roadmap, specific aspects needed to be identified, for which the issues rating matrix was deployed. A discussion was facilitated with the programme team that led to the following issues being agreed as requiring priority attention:

TABLE 3 Boundary questions and their answers.

Stakeholders		
The involved – motivation	Stakes	Stakeholding issues
<p>1. <i>Beneficiary</i> Who is/ought to be the intended beneficiary of the system?</p> <p>Vulnerable children ought to be the intended beneficiaries. However, vulnerable children often suffer in the system rather than benefitting from it.</p>	<p>2. <i>Purpose</i> What is/ought to be the purpose of the system?</p> <p>The purpose of the system ought to be ensuring CR and dispense justice in favour of children in the need of care and protection and children who come in conflict with the law as per the law. However, interacting with the current system often brings delay in justice, causing them considerable agony and further mental dissonance.</p>	<p>3. <i>Measure of improvement</i> What is/ought to be the system's measure of success?</p> <p>Measures pertaining to prevention of violence against children, and effective intervention with and rehabilitation of vulnerable children ought to be integrated into the juvenile justice process. Currently success measurement for juvenile justice is ignored or is not integrated in the system.</p>
The involved – control		
<p>4. <i>Decision maker</i> Who is/ought to be in control of the conditions of success of the system?</p> <p>Law enforcers and justice delivery agencies need to be in control. However, currently, there is no effective control of the system due to red-tape, bureaucracy, and apathy.</p>	<p>5. <i>Resources</i> What conditions of success are/ought to be under the control of the system?</p> <p>Adequate and skilled workforce, information access, unbiased decision-making, and safe infrastructure to handle children, among others, are the key conditions of success. Currently, there are serious gaps in each of the above aspects.</p>	<p>6. <i>Measure of improvement</i> What conditions of success are/ought to be outside the control of the decision maker?</p> <p>Political interference that seeps in while dealing with influential perpetrators and lack of community awareness and support in preventing violence against children are outside the control of the decision maker. The wider system ought to address such gaps.</p>
The involved – knowledge		
<p>7. <i>Expert</i> Who is/ought to be providing relevant knowledge and skills for the system?</p> <p>The Home Ministry and the Ministry of Women and Child Development need to sanction and initiate educational and capability enhancement sessions. Currently, trainings schedules are staggered and ad-hoc. They also lack quality and are poorly attended.</p>	<p>8. <i>Expertise</i> What is/ought to be relevant new knowledge and skills for the system?</p> <p>Technical training on child rights/child protection laws and procedures, behavioural training on handling children, and wellbeing session for duty bearers ought to be conducted in a serious and regular manner. Relevant training is currently not on the agenda, causing serious gaps in the system.</p>	<p>9. <i>Guarantor</i> What are/ought to be regarded as assurances of successful implementation?</p> <p>A process ought to be designed that would track effectiveness of knowledge delivery and their impact on closure of cases in favour of children as per child rights laws. Currently no measure of successful implementation of knowledge programmes exists.</p>
The affected – legitimacy		
<p>10. <i>Witness</i> Who is/ought to be representing the interests of those negatively affected by but not involved with the system?</p> <p>Guardians and care-providers ought to represent the interest of vulnerable children. However, they often lack awareness of child rights/child protection laws leading to their inability to navigate or challenge the system.</p>	<p>11. <i>Emancipation</i> What is/ought to be the opportunities for the interests of those negatively affected to have expression and freedom from the worldview of the system?</p> <p>An objective and transparent grievance redressal process and adequate support for those negatively affected (guardians and care-providers) ought to be set up. Currently, guardians and care-providers often struggle in the quagmire of the legal, bureaucratic, and law-enforcement structures.</p>	<p>12. <i>Worldview</i> What space is/ought to be available for reconciling differing worldviews regarding the system among those involved and affected?</p> <p>Child-friendly mediators between duty bearers and children ought to be set up to reconcile worldviews and bring justice to vulnerable children. Currently, there are provisions to enable the same but there are serious implementation gaps.</p>

TABLE 4 CATWOE with UTAH.

Customers	Children are the final 'customers' of the programme. Any programme needs to work towards enabling safer and better conditions for children to live and thrive.
Actors	A range of stakeholders need to work in-tandem: Communities and families to protect child rights; police to uphold justice; bureaucracy to execute child rights/child protection policies; judiciary for speedy case disposal; statutory child rights bodies/agencies to ensure transparency and to enable rights-based processes.
Transformation	Need to move from top-down decision making to inclusive change, from a pressure-based strategy to a responsibility-based mindset, and from short-term initiatives to sustainable interventions.
Worldview	A rights-based worldview where every individual can be considered as a child rights defender.
Owners	Legal representatives and senior level bureaucrats and police officers who can take decisions and influence action.
Environment	A challenging operating environment with social, economic, regulatory, political, and bureaucratic complexities that pose roadblocks at various levels.

1. Absence of training of duty bearers leading to mis-handling of children.
2. Lack of accountability in child rights/child protection processes causing delay in or non-closure of cases.
3. Occupational hazard leading to frustration of duty bearers.
4. Lack of awareness of child rights/child protection in the community leading to violation of child rights.
5. Social biases and legacy justifying discriminatory behaviour against children.
6. Biases in decision-making in favour of perpetrators who are in a position of power leading to further perpetration of violence against children.
7. Bottlenecks in the child rights/child protection justice delivery system leading to delay in or non-closure of cases of child sexual abuse.
8. Lack of an equitable platform for guardians and care providers to contest systemic injustice causes fewer people to come forward and challenge the system.
9. Absence of allocation of training time for duty bearers by the government leads to poor uptake of attendance even when trainings are organized.

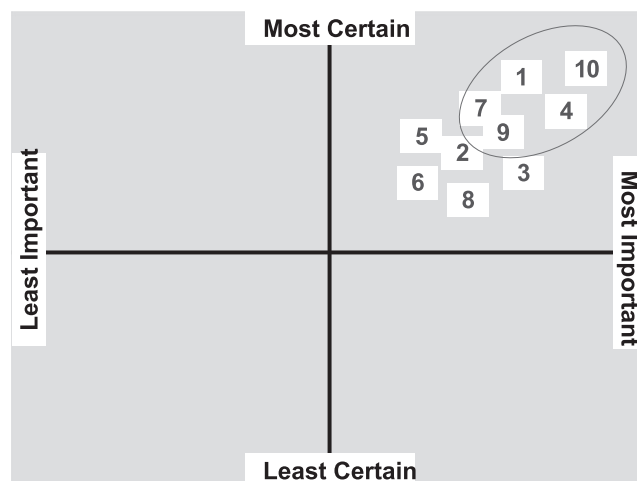


FIGURE 2 Issues rating by UTAH programme team.

10. Lack of child rights/child protection conversations in the society leading to the issue being sidelined as unimportant.

The above issues were then rated in a rating matrix (see Figure 2).

Five issues emerged as being most important and requiring urgent attention, and these were merged into three priority areas for the programme design:

- **Support Persons and case management (issue 7):** to provide comprehensive support to children, who have been victims of child sexual abuse. In addition, there was a clear need for larger systems level administrative enablement for speedy policy implementation, capacity building of senior-level duty bearers and technical support.
- **Police reforms (issues 1 and 9):** to facilitate child-friendly policing by enabling junior-level police officers to acquire necessary knowledge and skills to engage with children in need of care and protection. In addition, there was a clear need for overall wellbeing for the officers.
- **Community sensitization (issues 4 and 10):** to spread awareness of child rights/child protection in the community and create empathy in the public for children in need of care and protection.

5 | PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES

The programme was funded under a grant by UNICEF, that also provided the required technical support. The

UTSAH programme team worked closely with UNICEF for allocation of funds for and within the programme and accommodate changing priorities with respect to earmarked UNICEF allocations. This meant that several compliances of UNICEF needed to be fulfilled from time-to-time.

The following account of the UTSAH child rights/child protection programme divides the work into two phases. Phase 1 covers work undertaken in the period 2018–2020 and focuses on support persons and case management, and junior level police reforms whereas phase 2 covers work beyond 2020 focused on senior levels police reforms.

5.1 | Phase 1 implementation: *Rakshan*

This phase was named *Rakshan*, or protection, in Hindi.

5.1.1 | Support Persons and case management (issue 7)

As per the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, a Support Person is mandated to provide comprehensive assistance to child sexual abuse victims during the process of investigation and trial. The role of Support Persons is crucial in justice delivery as they play a central role in helping victims navigate the maze of the legal and administrative processes. Hence, the training of Support Persons is essential for effective case management facilitation. In an attempt to strengthen the capacity of staff in the District Child Protection Unit to act as Support Persons, UTSAH organized training sessions in association with the State Child Protection Society. The training content covered case management administration, interview techniques with the victim and their guardians, conducting and documenting counselling sessions and aspects that need to be kept in mind whilst engaging with duty bearers.

It was agreed that efforts needed to be directed to strengthen and solidify the nature of support that UTSAH could extend to the Child Welfare Committee to facilitate case management for child sexual abuse victims. This involved:

- **First Information Registration support:** As per the Indian Penal Code, First Information Registrations are meant to collect evidence regarding commission of an offence by examining and recording the statements of the witness. UTSAH took on the task of assisting children to file First Information Registrations. It is the prerogative of the police officer to record the statement

of a witness examined. In the police stations covered, UTSAH provided guidance to police officers on engagement techniques with children.

- **Counselling support:** A dedicated counselling service for children in need of care and protection and their guardians was set up by UTSAH to offer both case-related information and emotional support.
- **Compensation support:** Children were assisted in drafting and filing compensation letters with the District Legal Services Agency. UTSAH supported children and their guardians on the documentation, filling of forms and follow-up with the District agency to award them the compensation they are eligible for. In case where the children were non-literate, the UTSAH team supported on all documentation.
- **Court appearance support:** In all the cases, UTSAH ensured children were provided briefs and received explanations about the proceedings of the Special Court designated for children. In all the stages of appearance and cross-examination, children were represented by an UTSAH team member in the Special Court.
- **Arrest, bail and chargesheet support:** UTSAH appointed a social worker, a legal programme associate and two assistants to follow-up with the police on the timely filing of chargesheets and the arrest of the accused and also advise for objection of bail for perpetrators. The team implemented a case-management process that tracked and documented the entire process.

The above actions, at the time of writing this paper, had been replicated in all 33 Districts of Assam with funding assistance from the Social Welfare Department of Assam.

5.1.2 | Police reforms (issues 1 and 9)

A comprehensive plan for police reforms was designed and delivered that was launched by the then Chief Minister of Assam State, Sarbananda Sonowal, on 22 August 2019. At the launch event, the Chief Minister said (UTSAH Annual Report, 2019):

Our police officers at all stages must take special care and work with responsibility and accountability. The police must take care of a child's mental health condition and communicate and speak with a child in a friendly manner, either during investigation or during any other process. A police person shall never be the cause of fear for a child.

The plan focused on the following:

- **Child-friendly policing:** A child-friendly police kit was introduced comprised of a blue-coloured police jacket and a manual for the officers for engaging with children. The front of the jacket was co-branded with UNICEF and Assam Police and the back of the jacket read, 'Child-friendly police officer'. During the launch of the kit, the then Chief Minister of Assam lauded it as a 'unique initiative [that] will set a benchmark across the country' (Republic World, 2019). The Assam Police distributed the kits in all police stations across the State.
- **Police wellbeing and capacity building:** A 2-day workshop event with officers across the Districts of Assam was delivered that sought to address the challenges of stress and anxiety that the officers face by teaching them wellbeing practices that they can integrate into their daily lives. Both physical and mental dimensions of wellbeing were covered in the workshop.

The first day began with a 30-min jogging and mobility drill session that was conducted by a health and fitness expert. This was followed by a 30-min session of meditation and relaxation techniques that would help officers manage stress more effectively. Guidance was given by facilitators on how participants can incorporate such exercises in their daily lives through an orientation on understanding indicators of stress, anxiety and depression, and techniques for managing and sustaining mental wellbeing.

In addition to wellbeing, the workshop also focused on capacity building, managing change and bottom-up leadership capability with participants being encouraged to think about how they could act as leaders in their individual roles. Creative and visual techniques were deployed to encourage participants to reflect on the responsibility of the police as a system and on what their role was in the system. Participants individually created post-it mind maps of selected processes of handling children in terms of the current realities and gave a narrative presentation to each other. Following this, they revised their mind maps to depict what they believed the system ought to be and how it ought to work. The idea was for them to articulate the steps that needed to be taken to improve their role as duty bearers. Small groups of participants deliberated on what was within their domain of control to change to move the system closer to what they believed it ought to be. Assumptions, resource and support requirements, constraints and dependencies were articulated as part of the discussion.

An interactive and visual 'card game', based on practical skills and competencies, sought to help participants to (i) gain insights into child protection, (ii) gain technical knowhow on procedural provisions under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and Juvenile Justice Act, (iii) develop high quality drafting skills necessary for recording of statements and preparation of chargesheets and (iv) enhance the quality of services towards victims and their families. The pedagogy centred around interaction, engagement and action-orientation rather than on the delivery of theory.

5.1.3 | Community sensitization (issues 4 and 10)

This aspect of the work sought to broaden awareness and knowledge child rights/child protection in the community with an objective to change people's attitudes and behaviours towards children and consequently lead to better reporting. This involved the following:

- **Social media campaign:** A sponsored Facebook page called *Rakshan* was created with the handle being shared between UTSAH and the Assam Police. The page published information on child rights/child protection with anecdotes from everyday life where people may be unknowingly involved in violence against children through their actions and behaviours. A digital engagement strategy was adopted to attract members through paid promotional campaigns and activities with the support of local influencers. A digital media agency was engaged to assist with content creation, publishing frequency and campaign-wise engagement tactics. Prominent personalities in Assam were recruited as 'Child Protection Ambassadors' who expressed their views on child rights/child protection.
- **Child rights/child protection conversations:** Conversations and debates were organized in colleges in Guwahati to give a space to young people to take part in child rights/child protection matters that affect them directly. 'Child Protection Champions' were mobilized from the student-participants who took 'pledges' to be the eyes and ears on children in need of care and protection in their colleges, families and communities.
- **Child protection awareness campaign:** This was targeted at residents in apartment blocks in Guwahati to address the issue of children being used as domestic help. To raise awareness of the issue and create empathy for vulnerable children, public awareness campaigns, or *Jan Sabhas*, were organized in partnership with the Guwahati Municipal Corporation, District

Child Labor Task Force, Ward Counsellors, Labor officials, the police, senior officials from the District administration and eminent local personalities. Residents were provided with information on how to protect vulnerable children from sexual abuse, kidnapping, trafficking and domestic appointments. Police officers, who participated in the campaign, provided detailed information on police procedures about crimes against children. The UTSAH team moderated question-and-answer sessions between the public and the police officers. An anti-child labour poster was distributed among the participants for display in their doorways. The participants also signed a self-declaration committing to anti-child labour.

5.2 | Phase 1 outcomes

Outcomes of the child rights/child protection programme phase 1 between 2018 and 2020 are consolidated and presented in Table 5.

5.3 | Challenges and next steps

Being the first programme of its kind in Assam, the State administration welcomed it from the start and advised the UTSAH team on how to enrich the programme going forwards. Indeed, the child rights/child protection campaign was suggested by the State administration. The State administration also facilitated a partnership with the Child Labour Project Office and invited officials from the administration to act as resource persons for the delivery of the module. The Assam Police saw value in the programme and supported the work carried out under project *Rakshan*.

As part of the periodic review process, the consultant worked with the programme team to identify gaps, advise on overcoming loopholes and revisit the project plan, whenever required. Such changes also required approvals from UNICEF. On several occasions, the programme team struggled to create buy-in from residents' associations and schools to cover workshops on a topic that is often not openly discussed as it is considered a socio-cultural taboo. The programme team looped in local influencers to engage with senior members of the society and educational institutions to establish the importance of the programme and win their support. Persistence and resilience were characteristics that helped the team keep at the programme to see it through to completion. There were issues with quality of videos, timeliness of deliverables, training documents and logistics that had to be addressed. The

TABLE 5 Outcomes of child/child protection programme phase 1 between 2018 and 2020.

Activity Support persons and case management (issue 7)	Deliverables (in numbers)
Case management facilitation	69
FIR support	69
Counselling support	69
Compensation support	69
Court appearance support	69
Arrest, bail and chargesheet support	69
Training sessions of support persons	4
Police reforms (issues 1 and 9)	
Districts in which child-friendly police kits were distributed	33
Police wellbeing workshops	320
Police personnel covered	320
Police capacity building	320
Police personnel covered	320
Community sensitization (issues 4 and 10)	
Social media poster campaigns	76
Video messages	45
Outreach webinars senior police officers	4
Children covered by the above outreach webinars	500
Child rights/Child protection conversations	8
Conversation organized	8
Colleges covered	8
Students participated	728
Panellists participated	22
Volunteers enrolled as child protection champions	64
Child protection awareness campaigns	27
City wards covered	27
Apartment blocks covered	27
Residents covered	1317

programme team had to make several adjustments and reconsideration of contract partners for programme deliverables wherever there were issues with quality and timeliness.

Interactions with stakeholders and exercises with junior-level police officers during the programme exposed several challenges with regard to the functioning of various institutions and duty bearers. These challenges were brought to the fore in feedback gathered from the police and local community. Insights drawn were

corroborated with experiences of children in need of care and protection and children who come in conflict with the law that the UTSAH team had gathered over the years during its case management experiences.

A series of informal discussions took place between the UTSAH founder and the consultant on various issues relating to the strategies and operations of UTSAH. During early 2021, the consultant and the UTSAH programme team formally reconvened to visit the insights generated from phase 1 of the programme and deliberate on how a programme can be designed to address systemic issues that surfaced. The discussions soon morphed into a deliberation on crafting an administrative reforms programme for senior-level duty bearers. The exercise that lasted few months, with deliberations still ongoing at the time of writing this paper, resulted in the creation of a visionary fellowship programme—the UTSAH Child Rights Fellowship—that is intended to be delivered during phase 2 of the programme. A summary into this programme is offered in the next section.

6 | PHASE 2 PLAN: UTSAH CHILD RIGHTS FELLOWSHIP

The UTSAH Child Rights Fellowship endeavours to enable institutional strengthening of the child rights/child protection ecosystem in Assam by training and mentoring 100 Fellows (senior level duty bearers in the Government of Assam) over a period of 5 years that will enhance ownership and efficiency at the highest-level executive structure of the District machinery. The pedagogy adopted is inspired by the Water of Systems Change (Kania et al., 2019) framework created by FSG, a leading international development sector consulting organization. The Water of Systems Change is a framework consisting of six system conditions clubbed under three parameters: structural change (explicit) that include policies, practices and resource flows; relational change (semi explicit) that include relationships, communications and power dynamics; and transformative change (implicit) that include mental models (Kania et al., 2019). The UTSAH Child Rights Fellowship pedagogy borrows the six system conditions to deliver shifts in the system conditions by working on the three levels of change—explicit, semi-explicit and implicit.

The overall impact of the programme will be the effective justice delivery for children in need of care and protection and children who come in conflict with the law. Expected outcomes of the programme will include overcoming gaps in policy implementation and establishment of best practices in child rights/child protection that are replicated and sustained across the State.

7 | REFLECTIONS IN LIGHT OF HOLISTIC FLEXIBILITY

This section will reflect on the work with UTSAH in light of the five principles of Holistic Flexibility.

7.1 | System as becoming

Through every step of the intervention, child rights/child protection was considered as a ‘system as becoming’ where new understanding and new perspectives emerged through the process leading to new knowledge and new modes of intervening. The approach adopted challenged pre-conceived notions that change in complex systems, especially those that relate to policy and government administration, need a top-down roadmap drawn by a consultant in the role of expert advisor/investigator rather than that of a facilitator who drives a participatory/empowering process (Ormerod, 2014). In this case, the consultant recognized his own position as a researcher (Gregory et al., 2020) in the system and that of the funders, UNICEF and others as stakeholders driven by their own respective interests. Hence, the situation was regarded as dynamic and evolving, which was reflected in the nature in which the discussions on the programme scoping developed and the way systems methods were introduced, as necessary, as the intervention progressed rather than working to a pre-design. Overall, the focus was on small steps being taken collaboratively with stakeholders, as taken-for-granted beliefs were challenged, and the contours of the team's shared mental models were constantly altering. Indeed, it became apparent that answers to specific programme design questions may not be available at the same time when they arise. For example, although case management and police reforms were identified as problematic during the initial stage of programme scoping, the team could only address these issues partially in phase 1 by designing a programme that addressed junior level police officers. Further work, integrating learning from phase 1, with senior level bureaucracy and police is planned for phase 2, but receptivity for this only emerged due to the success of phase 1. Notable here is Chowdhury's (2022a) analogy of a ‘time-shot’ and a ‘time-lapse’ for a ‘system as becoming’ in Holistic Flexibility. Chowdhury states, ‘A manager [practitioner] needs to address a problem/situation as an emergent representation of a time-shot in the entire journey of a system that can be understood in terms of a time-lapse’ (Chowdhury, 2022a, p. 164). Hence, a manager's role is to craft the next adaptive move (Schein, 2016).

7.2 | Transformative flexibility

Transformative flexibility calls for a demonstration of different kinds of flexibility in problem-structuring and problem solving:

- The ability of the team to think creatively and adopt a programme design that challenged existing mental models is a sign of cognitive flexibility. Erstwhile notions of which stakeholders needed to be included and did not were challenged and disrupted reflecting Midgley's (2000, 2003) notions of valued or devalued participants in systems design. Cognitive flexibility supported the team in extending the boundaries of the system to include children, junior level police officers and the civil society to include previously excluded and subjugated voices.
- Formulative flexibility was demonstrated in the deployment of systems methodologies with a sense of bold experimentation. In the case presented in this paper, CSH was complemented with CATWOE and the issues rating matrix to arrive at the programme design. Moreover, the issues rating matrix was a reformulation of the original assumption rating matrix in SAST, which reflected an ability to customize traditional systems methods for their context. The use of the two systems methods was not pre-decided, but they emerged as the intervention progressed. Flexible use of systems methodologies helped to consolidate complex information that was generated during the intervention and in prioritizing the programme design elements. This can be treated as an example of how systems methods, 'if used correctly, will deliver a desired outcome' (Jackson, 2020; p. 20). Other studies (Chowdhury, 2019c, 2019d, 2021, 2022b, 2023; Jackson, 2000, 2019, 2020; Midgley, 1989; Mingers, 2000; Mingers & Brocklesby, 1997; Pollack, 2009; Reynolds, 2014; Sushil, 1994, 1997) have also noted the benefit of flexible and creative use of systems methodologies in complex settings. This corroborates the pragmatic view that deployment of systems methodologies needs to be led by the end to justify the means (Ormerod, 2014; Taket & White, 1996, 2000).
- Substantive flexibility made it possible to see the phase 1 of the programme through till the end. UNICEF was open to reallocating funds as per an evolving programme design. It is to be noted that changes and reallocation of funds were not easy, and the programme team had to go through reapprovals for the grants already commissioned. Use of alternative spaces for the programme delivery and empanelment of specialists to conduct specific activities were leveraged during the phase 1 implementation. As phase 2 is currently

being planned, there are discussions on allocations for floating budgets in the plan, as dynamic nature of the programme is expected to demand changes, adjustments and reallocations.

7.3 | Responsible practice

The consultant took a conscious step to associate with UTSAH on a pro-bono basis that demonstrates consulting with responsibility (Ackoff, 1977) and the ethical stance of social good (Ackoff, 1974; INFORMS, 2020; Wong & Mingers, 1994). Rosenhead (1986) argued that the customers for operational research (OR) are, in the main, 'big business, public utilities, the military and central government departments, with a thin scatter of local governments and health and other public authorities' (p. 336) and largely neglects other groups 'located outside the power structure' (Rosenhead, 1986; p. 337). Consequently, a rich stream of work in community OR was established, which is based on a level of professionalism that mirrors that in more mainstream OR that is based on contractual financial arrangements. Today, pro-bono research is a well-established area in systems practice. For example, the UK OR Society has a dedicated chapter to pool in expertise for pro-bono projects. This also aligns with Wong and Mingers (1994), who say that the desire to do socially beneficial work has always been a motivator for the vast majority of OR practitioners.

Inclusion of vulnerable children and junior-level police officers in the programme was a break away from conventional programme design work for large scale systems change that is normally top-down and one-directional. Convergence workshops, creation of Child Protection Ambassadors among the community, creation of Child Protection Champions among school children and introduction of Child Protection Pledges to show commitment by official and residential premises helped give voice to the stakeholders.

The consultant was engaged with the UTSAH programme team at all strategic stages of the intervention as an advisor. Close engagement between systems practitioners and their clients is an important trait of responsible practice (Jackson, 2000). This allowed for building shared emotions towards a common goal. The engagement also helped transfer systems thinking skills from the consultant to the UTSAH team as evidenced in the founder conducting the CSH interviews with the government duty bearers. An open and empowering approach to programme design using systems thinking can help to establish transparency to inspire stakeholder confidence and commitment to the outcomes of such programmes (Gregory & Ronan, 2015).

7.4 | Spiral of learning

Various deliberative discussions and convergence workshops were organized to learn from the programme team's wisdom and make collaborative decisions:

- Single-loop learning was demonstrated through the review of work and monitoring of deliverables ensuring that agreed deliverables were adhered to and changes undertaken so that quality of work was not affected. In such cases, learning is about doing things right.
- Double-loop learning, or doing the 'right things', rather than 'things right', was inherent in the approach. The conceptualization of the programme phase 1 was itself a result of a realization of UTSAH over the years that a linear approach to address the problem-situation needed a revamp and what is needed is a systems change model that is both top-down and bottom-up, involves multiple stakeholders, hears suppressed voices and works with the State machinery. The same approach is further strengthened with phase 2 of the programme that seeks to make a further dent in the system through administrative reforms.
- Triple-loop learning was at the heart, with the source of motivation of the entire intervention being creating better conditions for children in need of care and protection and children who come in conflict with the law. The programme went further to bring junior-level police officers into the fold of its developmental efforts by initiating the police wellbeing module in phase 1, and phase 2 of the programme will bring senior-level duty bearers into its fold. Subtle aspects such as even the uniform redesign module in phase 1 is a demonstration of asking deeper questions about why certain things may work and why they may not.

It is important to note that in the 'spiral of learning' principle, the three loops are not exclusive but are mutually inclusive, and they draw from one another's strengths. The programme team displayed sincerity and courage in being open to challenge, questioning conventional paradigms, being ready to embrace diversity and shifting between thinking and acting with tenacity, whilst constantly striving for outcomes that are meaningful, empowering and sustainable.

7.5 | Pragmatic artistry

This is the summative principle that calls for an effective display of the above four principles of Holistic Flexibility

(Chowdhury, 2022a) with systems thinking being a cognitive skill as second nature to the practitioner. The case demonstrates how a systems mindset was inherent through all the stages right from the time when informal interactions on the problem-situation started to when the intervention was formally initiated leading to the programme design and delivery of phase 1 and in the way, in which, phase 2 is being conceptualized.

It is important to note that Chowdhury (2022a) highlights the need for a practitioner to identify, balance and maintain symmetries and patterns that are inherent in a system that is constantly undergoing change as an essential element of pragmatic artistry. Through the intervention, the consultant not only mentored the change but also, along with the programme team, strived for balance and worked towards syncing creative methodologies and radical ideas with the overriding values of the system. The idea was never to wreck existing structures but to create conditions that would signal a departure in thinking and action set within established institutions. This reflects the team's ability to look inwards while at the same time respect the larger systems, some of which are mandated by law. Such behaviours are essential to provide reassurance to stakeholders as any attempt to challenge legally established institutions can only create unconstructive tension. The intervention shifted the focus on working on parts to working on interrelationships. As Gregory (2007) says, 'this shift is important because the behavior of a system is a product of the interactions of the parts not the behavior of the parts in isolation' (p. 1503). The team responded as the intervention progressed adapting to the constantly emerging knowledge and patterns as a result of such interactions and interrelationships.

Discussions presented open up new avenues for further research that are taken up in the next section.

8 | CRITIQUE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This section presents a critique of the discussions presented highlighting some of the gaps in the research. The critique also presents respective avenues of future research in these topics that are beyond the scope of this paper. The critique and corresponding future research avenues are categorized under three headings below:

- **Position of the consultant:** In the discussion presented, the consultant to UTSAH, one of the co-authors of this paper, does not delve into the details of his own position in the intervention and how it would have influenced its journey. The consultant was

trained in systems thinking and systems methodologies that enabled him to design and navigate the intervention in a certain manner from a position of expertise. However, apart from stating that ‘the consultant recognized his own position as a researcher’, there is no clear evidence of how this was achieved. Discussion in Section 7 alludes to certain aspects of how he navigated the journey including his commitment to responsible practice demonstrated in choosing to work on a pro-bono basis. However, this is not sufficient for a critical understanding of how expertise knowledge and skills played a role in shaping the power dynamics in the situation. Examining the role of a consultant with expertise knowledge working in the development sector and how this may result in political implications in the context is an avenue for future research. However, this research must be carried out noting that the systems expertise of the consultant was matched by the expertise of the UTSAH programme team in child rights/child protection laws and practices and understanding of the local nuances. The intervention was based on the valuing of multiple sources of expertise relevant to child protection in this particular context.

- **Success claim of the intervention:** The claims to success of the intervention are largely drawn from the outcomes achieved, as presented in Table 5, and in the proposed phase 2 of the programme. However, this is a one-sided view and does not take into account the actual impact of the work in terms of how the larger set of stakeholders (police, community, students, target children and families, etc.) perceived of the impact of the programme. In one example, the narration talks about a 2-day workshop to address the challenges of stress and anxiety in the police, together with developing bottom-up leadership capacities. Whilst this as an important activity, there is no reflection on the limitations of such a short course in achieving embedded long-term change. This critique presents an avenue for future research to inquire how biases of the researcher can be overcome in ascertaining success of a development intervention by considering different stakeholder voices.
- **Definition of cognitive flexibility:** The paper talks about the demonstration of cognitive flexibility in Section 7.2 but fails to address deeper aspects of what enables cognitive flexibility and how it can be developed. Cognitive flexibility in systems thinking demands a separate and dedicated research that must seek to ask certain fundamental questions: Is cognitive flexibility an outcome of creatively applying systems approaches? Is cognitive flexibility, if present, something which facilitates creative thinking and the challenging of mental models and, if so, what is it? Is

cognitive flexibility something which can be developed to support the challenges of working systemically and, if so, what is it? To develop this understanding further, the research must extend further to examine how cognitive flexibility may relate to the dimensions of individual attention and perception and the anticipatory nature of the brain (Lilley et al., 2022).

The next section concludes the paper.

9 | CONCLUSION

This paper presented an account of Holistic Flexibility, a development in systems thinking, in practice in light of a child rights/child protection case study based in India. Holistic Flexibility is neither a methodology nor a framework. It is, rather, a conceptual lens that encapsulates the dynamic interplay between a state of mind that has the ability to absorb systemic complexity and a state of intervention that has the ability to embrace flexibility both in intent and form. The paper began by defining Holistic Flexibility and its principles. The realities of child rights/child protection in India were presented next. Although at the policy level, India is committed to providing a safe, just and equitable environment for children, there is little evidence that such commitments have real impact. With this background, UTSAH, a child rights/child protection NGO that works in Assam, a North-Eastern State of India, was introduced. The context of the operating environment of UTSAH was presented that called for a holistic approach to create change from within the system and help address the widening gap between government policy making and its implementation. The paper then progressed to talk about the programme design and methodological choice. CSH was chosen as the preferred methodology, strengthened with two methods from two other systems methodologies—CATWOE from SSM and issues (assumption) rating method from SAST. Following a participative programme design exercise, two phases were identified. Phase 1 covered work undertaken between the period 2018 and 2020 and focused on support persons and case management, junior level police reforms and community sensitization under the overall brand of project *Rakshan*, or protection. The programme was funded under a grant by UNICEF; the organization also provided the required technical support. Challenges encountered during phase 1 implementation were discussed. Phase 2 covered work beyond 2020 and focused on senior levels police and administrative reforms. Phase 2 was at the planning stage during the time of writing this paper, and it involves the UTSAH Child Rights Fellowship, a visionary fellowship

programme, that endeavours to enable institutional strengthening of the child rights/child protection ecosystem in Assam by training and mentoring 100 fellows (senior level duty bearers in the Government of Assam) over a period of 5 years. Next, a reflection was provided on the initiative in light of the five principles of Holistic Flexibility. Finally, a critique of the intervention was presented along with avenues for future research.

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