

# The socio-ecology of child institutionalisation and foster care in Souss Massa, Morocco: a qualitative study

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The high number of children living in institutions in Morocco is driven by complex socio-economic, cultural, and historical factors, with limited alternative care and research to inform interventions.

**Objective:** To understand the socio-ecological factors contributing to child institutionalisation and explore the potential for foster care as an alternative in the Souss Massa region of Morocco.

**Participants:** Nine boys and eight girls living in two institutions, and 10 fathers and 17 mothers of children at risk of entering institutions in the Souss Massa region of Morocco.

**Methods:** A total of five focus groups with children and parents to explore the causes and consequences of institutionalisation and perceptions of foster care. Children created issue trees to facilitate focus group discussion. Data were coded and interpreted by a team of three researchers using the socio-ecological model for analysis and to understand the interplay between family dynamics, economic conditions, societal norms, and cultural beliefs on child institutionalisation.

**Findings:** Key drivers of institutionalisation included poverty, neglect, hostile home environments, family breakdown, and societal stigma. Despite some hesitancy, by children and parents, the concept of foster care emerged as a viable alternative.

**Conclusions:** This study highlights the need for interventions at multiple ecological levels, including low-cost improvements to institutional care and transitional support, alongside broader legal reforms, the strengthening of social services, and community-based programmes. Foster care has potential as an alternative, but its success will depend on legislation and active community engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Recognised as an adverse childhood experience, institutionalisation has long-term detrimental effects on children's health and wellbeing (Neagoe & Papasteri, 2023). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has prioritised reducing the number of children entering institutions in Morocco, recommending the creation of prevention programmes and alternative care options [United Nations, 2014, p. 39.D]. Despite the growing global evidence base supporting deinstitutionalisation [van Ijzendoorn et al., 2020a], the number of children in Moroccan institutions has been increasing annually,

estimated to reach over 600,000 by 2025 [Baghdadi et al., 2024].

### 1.1. Background

Children make up 33 % of Morocco's total population of 32 million, with those under five accounting for more than a quarter of all children [Loudghiri et al., 2021]. As in many other low- and middle-income countries, the large child population in Morocco places a significant strain on resources [Kruk et al., 2022].

This contributes to high rates of child poverty, with 9 % of children (approximately 1 million) living in multidimensional poverty and 1.5 %

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(approximately 177,000) experiencing extreme poverty, surviving on under \$1.90 a day [ACPF, 2023]. Limited economic opportunities mean that many families rely on child labour affecting 127,000 children aged 7 to 17 (1.6 % of this age group), with rural areas experiencing significantly higher rates of child labour (3.3 %) compared to urban areas (0.5 %) [Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2023]. Additionally, child abandonment is high in Morocco, with one reported case of child abandonment at birth per 650 live births, though the true rate is likely higher [Royaume Du Maroc, 2021]. Whilst these children would benefit from an organised and integrated approach to support their wellbeing, Morocco's child protection system remains fragmented, with limited alternative care options and an over-reliance on institutional placements [UNICEF, 2019a].

The Souss Massa region in Morocco is characterised by a large agricultural sector and a predominantly rural population. The region has a population of 3,006,430 with a child population of approximately 901,929 (30 %) (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2024). As is common in many parts of Morocco, provincial centres in Souss Massa have large rural-to-urban migrant populations (Waha et al., 2017). Many of these migrants lack skills adapted for urban settings and family support structures, increasing the risk of child maltreatment and institutionalisation (Bouoiyour et al., 2017). Furthermore, many of these migrants arrive in urban areas unfamiliar with the bureaucratic procedures required to access government support programmes [Boutayeb et al., 2016]. Single mothers constitute an important group amongst those migrating due to the criminalisation of both sex outside marriage and the early termination of pregnancy (Rodgers, 2021). Single mothers attempt to escape shame and persecution for having children outside of marriage, with children often abandoned directly after birth before mothers return to their villages (Berwick, 2017; Capelli, 2019). While high-level policy strategies have been introduced to address these challenges in Morocco [Royaume Du Maroc, 2014], the practical implementation of these policies remains limited due to the absence of a national child protection system and limited research informing interventions and programmes [Baghdadi et al., 2024].

In response to limited coverage of vulnerable families, particularly in rural areas [Akhniif et al., 2019; Boutayeb et al., 2016; Ikira & Ezzrari, 2021], the government launched a comprehensive social protection strategy aiming for universal coverage by 2025, including a national registry – *Registre Social Unifié* – to streamline eligibility assessments and improve access to benefits (ILO, 2022; Royaume du Maroc, 2020). While these reforms seek to enhance access to essential services, they do not directly address the legislative gaps in the child protection system. Morocco lacks a unified Child Protection Code to standardise procedures and responsibilities across sectors and there is no formal legislative framework governing the role, training, and protection of social workers [Loudghiri et al., 2021]. There is also no legal framework to regulate alternative care, including foster care, limiting both accountability and scale-up of family-based placements for children without parental support.

The CRC has called on the Moroccan government to “finalize the process of adoption of the bill on alternative care, giving priority to alternatives to institutions and notably to kinship care, foster care and family-strengthening programmes to prevent out-of-home placement” [United Nations, 2014, p. 49.B]. However, avenues for alternative care remain limited in Morocco, with only small-scale foster care projects run by local non-governmental organisations [Maestral International, 2019]. The existing *kafala* system, which allows for guardianship under Islamic law, is available only to children whose parents have relinquished their birthright [Liston, 2015]. However, many children in Moroccan institutions have not had their birthright relinquished by their parents, meaning that they are ineligible for *kafala* and remain in institutions [Baghdadi et al., 2024].

Current literature on the institutionalisation of children often reflects Western perspectives, potentially overlooking unique socio-cultural factors in the Global South [Roche, 2019], which can lead to

culturally insensitive, impractical, or ineffective interventions [El-Hoss & Brown, 2022; Krueger et al., 2015]. While there is some emerging research on the views of stakeholders across the Maghreb on addressing the high rates of adverse childhood experiences in the region [Baghdadi et al., 2025], there is little understanding of the views of children and families with direct experience of the alternative care system. To address this gap, we explore the socio-ecology of child institutionalisation and perceptions of foster care in Souss Massa, drawing from the perspectives of children and their adult caretakers in order to develop informed prevention and intervention strategies. Despite the established body of evidence on the improved health outcomes for children in foster care compared to institutional settings [van IJzendoorn et al., 2020b], there is a notable gap in studies focusing on children in institutions and their families in Morocco.

## 1.2. Aims and objectives

This study aims to understand the socio-ecology of child institutionalisation and explore foster care as an alternative in the Souss Massa region of Morocco. The study explores children's views on the perceived causes and consequences of institutionalisation, parents' perceptions of their roles and the factors influencing their decisions to place children in institutions, and the attitudes of both children and parents towards the concept of foster care as an alternative to institutionalisation within the Moroccan context.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design

This paper is part of the wider multi-methods IMPact study – Improving child welfare in southern Morocco: engaging with local families and stakeholders to develop safeguarding and fostering policies. We employed a multi-method exploratory qualitative design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), integrating a scoping review of child protection systems in the Maghreb (Baghdadi et al., 2024), with qualitative focus groups, interviews, and participatory ranking workshops with children, parents, and child protection professionals in Souss Massa. Within this broader study, we adopted a community-based ethnographic participatory approach [Roque et al., 2023] to facilitate continuous, embedded engagement with staff and current and former service users of *Fondation Amane pour la Protection de l'Enfance (FAPE)*. (n.d.), a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that provides social services to vulnerable children and families. This approach enabled meaningful stakeholder involvement in the study design, creation of interview and focus group guides, and data analysis. In this paper, we report on one component of the IMPact study: a series of focus groups conducted with children and parents in Souss Massa. These focus groups were designed to elicit local perspectives on the causes and consequences of institutionalisation, and the potential of foster care as a viable alternative.

### 2.2. Participants

The Souss Massa region has an estimated 14,101 children living across 109 child institutions [Royaume Du Maroc, 2022; Baghdadi et al., 2024]. These institutions include Dar Talibs (boarding schools operated by the Department of Education), child protection centres for children in conflict with the law (operated by the Ministry of Youth and Sport), and residential centres operated by government ministries or charities. We purposively selected 44 participants using snowball sampling to ensure diverse representation of children and families (i.e. genders, ages, and awareness of foster care) [Valerio et al., 2016]. We recruited children from two institutions in Souss Massa, selected from among the 109 child institutions in the region, based on accessibility, existing relationships with staff, and institutional consent.

### 2.2.1. Children

We conducted two focus groups with 17 children living in institutions in Souss Massa: one group with nine boys aged 13 to 16 from a boys-only institution and another with eight girls aged 14 to 17 from a girls-only institution. We only included children aged 13 and above as they were more likely to engage comfortably in discussions about institutionalisation and foster care; no children had direct experience with foster care. A social worker from FAPE – whom the children knew – was present to provide support during the focus groups.

### 2.2.2. Adults

Three focus groups were conducted with 27 parents of children at risk of entering institutions in Souss Massa. We recruited 10 fathers aged 30 to 65 through text messaging and active snowballing within FAPE's network, including those with children at risk of institutionalisation, as well as those actively engaged in informal community support networks. We also recruited 17 mothers aged 19 to 56 who participated in either a participatory women's group facilitated by FAPE or a women's community-based literacy programme, selected because they were service users of FAPE, identified as at risk of placing their children in an institution, and had prior exposure to the foster care programme. No parents to whom we spoke had experience of placing their children in foster care.

### 2.3. Data collection

Focus groups were conducted between January and May 2021 and facilitated by a FAPE staff member in Darija. They lasted 80–90 minutes and were audio-recorded. FAPE staff transcribed all audio recordings verbatim in Arabic. A professional translator then translated the transcripts into English for analysis, with back-translation (AS) to assess fidelity and sense-check final transcripts.

In the children's focus groups, children were asked to express their thoughts through the creation of issue trees, an approach used to facilitate discussions among young people (Ozer and Douglas, 2013). We asked children to think of the trunk as the *issue* of institutionalisation, the roots as representing the *causes* of institutionalisation and the branches or leaves as the *consequences* of institutionalisation, prompting further discussion in the focus groups.

Children created three issues trees in the two focus groups [Appendix 2]. In the focus group with boys, children asked the facilitator to draw the issue tree for them on a large piece of paper and then directed the facilitator on what to write as the causes and consequences of institutionalisation, discussing each point as it was being written [Appendix 3]. In the focus group with girls, children asked to be split into two groups and independently drew two issues trees which they then presented and discussed as a larger group [Appendix 4].

Among adults, we explored their views on the challenges of caregiving, their interactions with the child protection system in Souss Massa, and their views on foster care as an alternative to institutionalisation. Discussions covered the roles and responsibilities of parents in providing care to their children, including education, supervision, healthcare access, and financial support as well as the barriers parents face in caring for their children, and potential solutions at the individual, familial, community, and state levels. We concluded by asking parents for their views on introducing foster care more widely across the Souss Massa region and Morocco.

### 2.4. Theoretical framework

An initial review of FGD transcripts and the literature from the scoping review on children living in institutions highlighted a complex interplay of individual, familial, and systemic factors shaping institutionalisation experiences and perceptions of foster care [Onayemi & Hapunda, 2023]. We employed a socio-ecological perspective to understand the interplay of these complex factors described by children

and parents [Bronfenbrenner, 1979]. Ecological systems theory provides a robust framework for understanding child institutionalisation by integrating both micro and macro factors within a global child health context [Hamilton-Giachritsis & Pellai, 2017]. By placing children at the centre of its typology, a socio-ecological model is by design child-centred, upholding the principles of a child rights-based approach while maintaining the cultural relativity required in global child health settings [Goldhagen et al., 2020].

### 2.5. Analysis

We used a deductive thematic approach guided by the socio-ecological model to analyse the data [Azungah, 2018]. The coding process consisted of data familiarisation, followed by identifying, reviewing, connecting, discarding, and reidentifying codes [Braun & Clark, 2022]. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo software, allowing for systematic coding and identification of key themes into the socio-ecological concepts of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem [Appendix 1]. One team member conducted the initial coding into common themes aligning with ecological levels, with cross-checking from other team members.

### 2.6. Ethics

This study was approved by the Swansea University Medical School Research Ethics Committee (2020-0061). Participant information sheets and consent forms were translated into Arabic. For illiterate participants, the information was read aloud in Darija to ensure informed consent. FAPE staff were available to provide support if any participant experienced distress during the focus groups.

## 3. Results

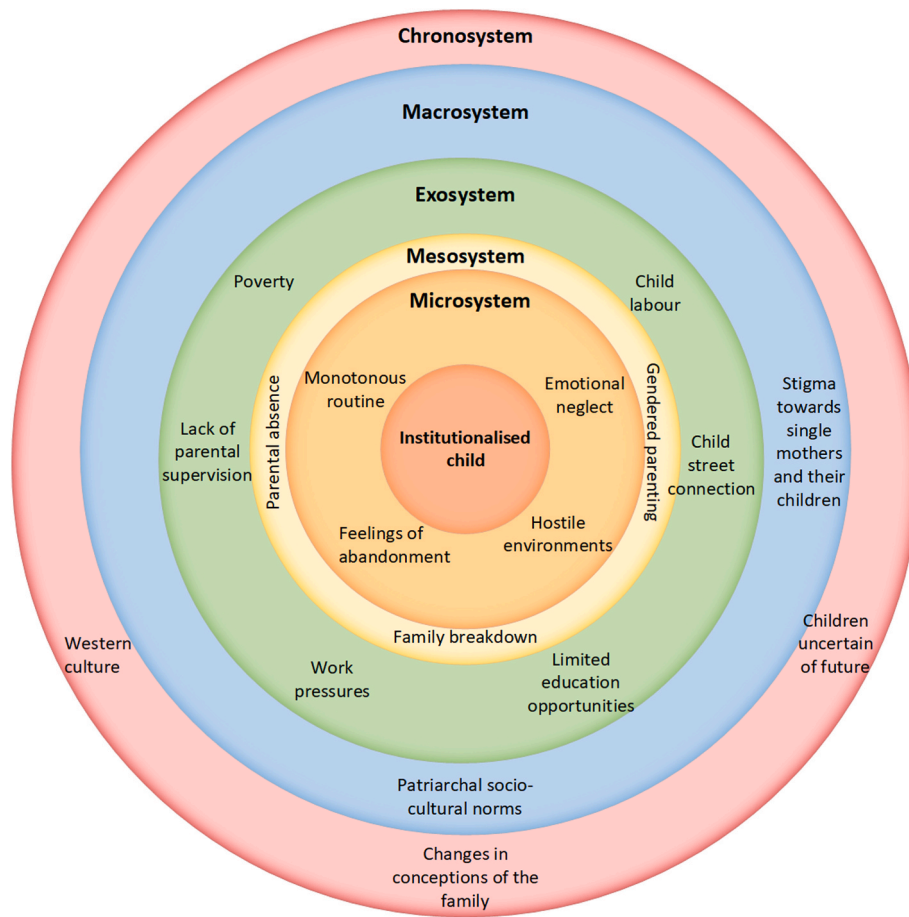
We developed socio-ecological models of child institutionalisation in Souss Massa from the common themes identified in the children's discussions about their issue trees, along with the focus groups with parents [Fig. 1]. The model categorises the factors influencing institutionalisation as expressed by participants at different ecological levels – microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. We also thematically coded participants' views on the impact of introducing foster care at each ecological level in Souss Massa. In the following sections, we present quotes from children and parents to illustrate their perspectives on these factors and the potential impact of foster care across the different ecological levels.

### 3.1. The socio-ecology of child institutionalisation and perceptions of foster care

#### 3.1.1. Microsystem: institutional life, discipline, and the appeal of foster family care

Children described daily life in institutions as following a strict schedule, leaving little space for individuality or recreation, and some children expressed a sense of resignation. One girl explained: "We repeat the same thing, you get bored" (G01-7). Parents reflected on home life, acknowledging that discipline could be harsh or physical. A mother noted, "When the child is small ... I can beat him, and I will have no problem" (M02-8), illustrating that violence was often accepted as part of caregiving.

Foster care was viewed by participants as potentially offering more emotionally responsive and child-centred experiences. Children perceived foster families as potentially being warm and attentive, in contrast to the monotony and impersonality of institutional settings. One boy shared, "They bring you into a family, so you don't feel lonely" (B01-3). A mother similarly remarked, "The child would grow up within a family environment and feel the warmth" (F01-1).



**Fig. 1.** The socio-ecological model of child institutionalisation in Souss Massa  
This figure depicts the socio-ecological model of child institutionalisation as described by our participants.

### 3.1.2. Mesosystem: family breakdown and foster care as respite

Children and parents linked disrupted family structures and gendered parenting roles to children's placement in institutions. Children linked their institutionalisation to events like parental divorce or the loss of a caregiver. One girl said, "If they divorce ... the child will be placed in an institution" (G01-2). Parents, especially mothers, explained that caregiving expectations disproportionately fell on them. One mother said, "Child rearing belongs to the mother ... she is the principal care provider" (M02-3).

Parents described foster care as a possible short-term solution, but together with children, expressed concern about the loss of contact between the child and their birth families. One girl shared, "I like my foster family, but I will miss my mother. Would she still be able to visit me like she does now?" (G01-7). A mother similarly emphasised the need for ongoing connection: "There must be communication between the child's family and the foster family ... Without this, the foster care programme will be a kind of abandonment" (M02-5).

### 3.1.3. Exosystem: poverty and stability in foster homes

Poverty dominated participants' accounts of navigating challenging environments. Many families placed children in institutions due to an inability to provide basic needs such as food, shelter, and education. A boy expressed that "Poverty is the first thing that leads to children being here" (B01-2). Mothers described being forced to leave children alone or

locked indoors while they worked long hours, with one explaining, "If they don't find someone to look after the children ... they simply lock them inside" (M02-6).

Parents described foster care as a possible short-term solution when families experience disruption, such as separation, illness, or temporary absence due to work, but children expressed concern about losing that stability. A boy reflected, "In the foster home, I had food and a bed, but I knew I might have to leave" (B01-3). One mother explained, "If you get a one-year work contract ... isn't it better to place your child in foster care?" (M02-6). These accounts illustrate how families viewed foster care as a potential form of structured respite during difficult periods.

### 3.1.4. Macrosystem: stigma, religion, and the moral imperative of care

Children and parents explained how societal pressures around gender and morality, especially concerning single motherhood, contributed to child abandonment and institutionalisation. Children described how societal rejection of unmarried mothers often led to abandonment. One girl remarked, "When a girl gets pregnant ... her family won't accept her" (G01-2). Mothers echoed these dynamics, noting that societal views frequently cast judgement on both them and their children: "When an unmarried woman has children, people harbour hatred toward the small children" (M02-10).

In contrast to exclusionary gender and cultural norms, foster care was seen by some participants as a religious and moral responsibility. A



girl said, “In the Quran it says you should help people” (G01-2), and a father affirmed, “We must remind families of the religious remuneration of fostering” (F01-9), suggesting that foster care is understood as an act of charity and social duty rooted in faith.

### 3.1.5. Chronosystem: uncertainty and transition

Participants linked their experiences to broader changes in family structures and community life over time. Children expressed a desire to build independent lives, though often felt uncertain about what awaited them after care. A girl shared, “When I leave here, I want to finish my studies and get work” (G01-3). Fathers, meanwhile, spoke of a shift in community life, with one reflecting, “We were influenced by Western culture ... the neighbour no longer knows the neighbour” (F01-9), suggesting a loss of collective support formerly the basis of Moroccan communitarian culture.

Foster care was seen as a potential bridge to adulthood, especially for adolescents lacking strong male role models or quiet spaces to study. A girl said, “I could stay ... during exams when it’s too loud at home” (G01-4). A father similarly noted, “If a young boy has no father ... he can go into another family and learn how to be a man” (F01-8).

## 4. Discussion

This study explored the socio-ecology of child institutionalisation and foster care as a potential alternative in the Souss Massa region of Morocco. Children’s perspectives of the causes and consequences of institutionalisation provided a vivid picture of the challenges they face, including poverty, lack of parental care, and emotional distress from a monotonous institutional routine. Focus groups with parents highlighted how hostile home environments, corporal punishment, and socio-economic pressures drive children towards institutional care. The socio-ecological model that emerges from these perspectives highlights the need for multi-faceted interventions across ecological levels to effectively address child institutionalisation in Morocco.

### 4.1. Children’s views on the causes and consequences of institutionalisation

Children described how hostile family environments, marked by neglect and violence, contributed to the institutionalisation of children. These findings align with national trends, with reports indicating that 90 % of children aged 2 to 14 experience corporal punishment at least once a month, and more than 40 % of caregivers believe that physical punishment is necessary for disciplining children [UNICEF, 2019b]. Similarly, the findings align with broader global evidence on how community-based interventions and support services can reduce institutionalisation (Lo and Cho, 2021). However, their effective implementation in Morocco is constrained by legislative gaps including the absence of a dedicated child protection code.

All the children we spoke to were in contact with their parents, and like most of the children in Moroccan institutions they did not have their birthright relinquished, meaning they are ineligible for *kafala* and could return to their parents if their families were supported [Baghdadi et al., 2024]. Both children and parents expressed that poverty was a significant factor contributing to child institutionalisation. Economic hardships or long hours worked on farms by parents increase child street connection, force children into child labour, and limit their educational opportunities, often leading to their placement in institutions. The loss of extended family networks and community support further isolates these children and places them at high risk of entering institutions. While national social protection programmes like the RSU aim to reduce poverty, our findings suggest that access remains uneven in rural areas.

### 4.2. Parents’ perceptions on their roles and factors influencing institutionalisation

We found that societal stigma towards single mothers and patriarchal gender roles significantly influences child institutionalisation at all ecological levels. Cultural norms stigmatising unwed mothers were said to result in the abandonment of children born outside marriage, and girls were reported to face discriminatory attitudes hindering their education and development. Interventions in other settings have focused on public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and promote gender equality, which can lead to better health outcomes for children and potentially reduce the number of children entering Moroccan institutions (Clark & Hamplová, 2013; Negash & Maguire-Jack, 2016). However, significant barriers to implementing these interventions in Morocco include entrenched patriarchal norms, high rates of female unemployment (approximately 75 %) and gender-based violence (over 50 % of women reported experiencing violence annually between 2009 and 2020) [Lopez-Acevedo et al., 2021; Wafqui et al., 2024]. Nonetheless, the feminist movement in Morocco has recently achieved legislative success, including repealing Provision 457 of the Penal Code that allowed a rapist to marry a minor victim to escape punishment, expanding abortion rights, and introducing gender quotas to parliament [Salime, 2016; Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013]. Building on these legislative advancements, engaging community leaders and religious figures in advocacy and public health efforts to reduce stigma towards single mothers and their children is essential to reducing the number of children entering institutions.

Fathers in our study expressed that the effects of globalisation – articulated as access to the internet and increased materialism – have influenced a shift in Moroccan family structures, leading to a breakdown of extended families and community ties, a pattern also reported in other Middle East and North Africa settings [Al Gharaibeh and Islam, 2024; Gilbert and Brik, 2022]. These challenges underscore the importance of considering temporal and societal shifts when addressing child institutionalisation, highlighting the need for interventions that support children throughout their life course and adapt to evolving family and community structures [Goldman et al., 2020].

### 4.3. Perceptions of foster care as an alternative to institutionalisation

Foster care represents a potentially viable alternative to institutionalisation in Morocco. While our study highlighted positive feedback from children and parents regarding foster care, it also revealed some hesitancy. Some girls and mothers expressed concerns that another family might not provide the same emotional support and love that they could offer or feared that children placed in foster care might not want to return home. Adopting a bottom-up approach, where children and families are actively involved in the development and evaluation of foster care programmes, can help address these concerns, ensuring that foster care is recognised as a viable and caring option [Harlow, 2022; Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2024]. Local non-governmental organisations would play a crucial role in this process by facilitating community engagement and supporting both potential foster families and children, and they would need to be included in the creation and maintenance of future foster care programmes in Morocco.

### 4.4. Policy and practice implications

While the broader aim of child protection reform in Morocco should be to strengthen family-based alternatives, our findings point to several actionable improvements that can be made within existing institutional settings. Institutions could train staff in child-centred relational care

models, such as assigning a key worker to each child and providing basic trauma-informed care training, to ensure consistent emotional support from a trusted adult [Goldman et al., 2020]. Simple, low-cost changes such as designating quiet study rooms, establishing recreational programming led by trained staff, creating structured one-on-one time between staff and children, and involving children in planning their transition out of care, have been implemented in other settings to improve wellbeing and reduce the sense of monotony and isolation described by children [Van IJzendoorn et al., 2020a]. Facilitating regular contact with birth families, where appropriate, may also mitigate the emotional disruption of institutionalisation [Waid & Wojciak, 2017]. While not a substitute for legislative reform, the improvements described above offer immediate and constructive steps that could enhance the quality of care for children who remain in institutional settings.

Beyond the institution, community-based responses have proven effective elsewhere in reducing institutionalisation by improving access to social services, strengthening parenting practices, and providing financial and housing security [Negash & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Lo & Cho, 2021; Morello et al., 2022; Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020]. However, in Morocco, the absence of a unified child protection system and the limited formal recognition of the social work profession remain significant barriers [Wessells, 2015]. For such strategies to work, stronger coordination between government bodies, NGOs, and community stakeholders is essential. This could involve establishing provincial child protection coordination committees that include representatives from municipal services, local NGOs, and institutional care providers to jointly review cases and referrals. However, for these reforms to be effective, they need to be supported by the creation of a national child protection code and the professionalisation of social work roles.

Lastly, children's and parents' optimism about foster care provides a valuable starting point for the incremental development of a formal alternative care system. To enable the scaling up of foster care in Morocco, a comprehensive legal framework must be developed. In the interim, government-NGO partnerships could initiate further pilot programmes in select provinces to trial recruitment, training, and placement monitoring systems ahead of national rollout. Pilots should include clear guidelines for judicial decisions, protocols for foster family recruitment and training, and mechanisms for monitoring placements [UNICEF, 2024]. Morocco may benefit from adapting elements from Tunisia's state-sponsored foster care system, which operates alongside kafala, or from rights-based approaches such as Brazil's [Schwinger, 2007]. Reallocating resources from institutional care to community-based family support services would create a more balanced and sustainable care ecosystem. Developing a foster care roadmap, with cost estimates, phased implementation targets, and responsibilities distributed across ministries and NGOs, would support structured scale-up in line with Morocco's child protection reform agenda. Future research should compare outcomes between institutional and foster care settings to build a stronger evidence base for national policy.

#### 4.5. Strengths and limitations

We adopted a qualitative approach to gather the perspectives of children and parents, which may be influenced by personal biases and experiences. The translation process may also have hindered the capture of the nuances of participants' perspectives. Additionally, while we adopted a socio-ecological framework, we acknowledge that perspectives from extended family members, local religious leaders, and

community-based child welfare groups would further enrich the analysis. The study also does not capture the long-term experiences of children who have transitioned out of institutions, which is a critical area for future research. Additionally, the focus groups included a limited number of participants from specific institutions and communities, which may not represent the broader population of institutionalised children and their families in Morocco.

Despite these limitations, to our knowledge this is the first time that children and parents' views have been gathered through research in this region. Future research should incorporate quantitative methods and larger sample sizes to explore whether these findings are reproduced and to assess their applicability in different settings in Morocco and the wider Maghreb region.

## 5. Conclusions

This study highlights the socio-ecological factors contributing to child institutionalisation in Souss Massa, Morocco. Systemic reforms and practical, community-informed strategies are needed to reduce the number of children entering institutional settings and to better support those requiring safe and stable out-of-home care. These include low-cost improvements to institutional care, better support for transitions to adulthood, and the gradual development of a culturally grounded foster care model. By combining immediate action with structural change, Morocco can strengthen its child protection system and improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Fadi Baghdadi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Christopher Hands:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ann John:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology. **Ashrafunnesa Khanom:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Mary Elizabeth Rauktis:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Abdellah Soussi:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Helen Snooks:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chipro.2025.100192>.

## Appendix 1

Socio-ecological codebook.

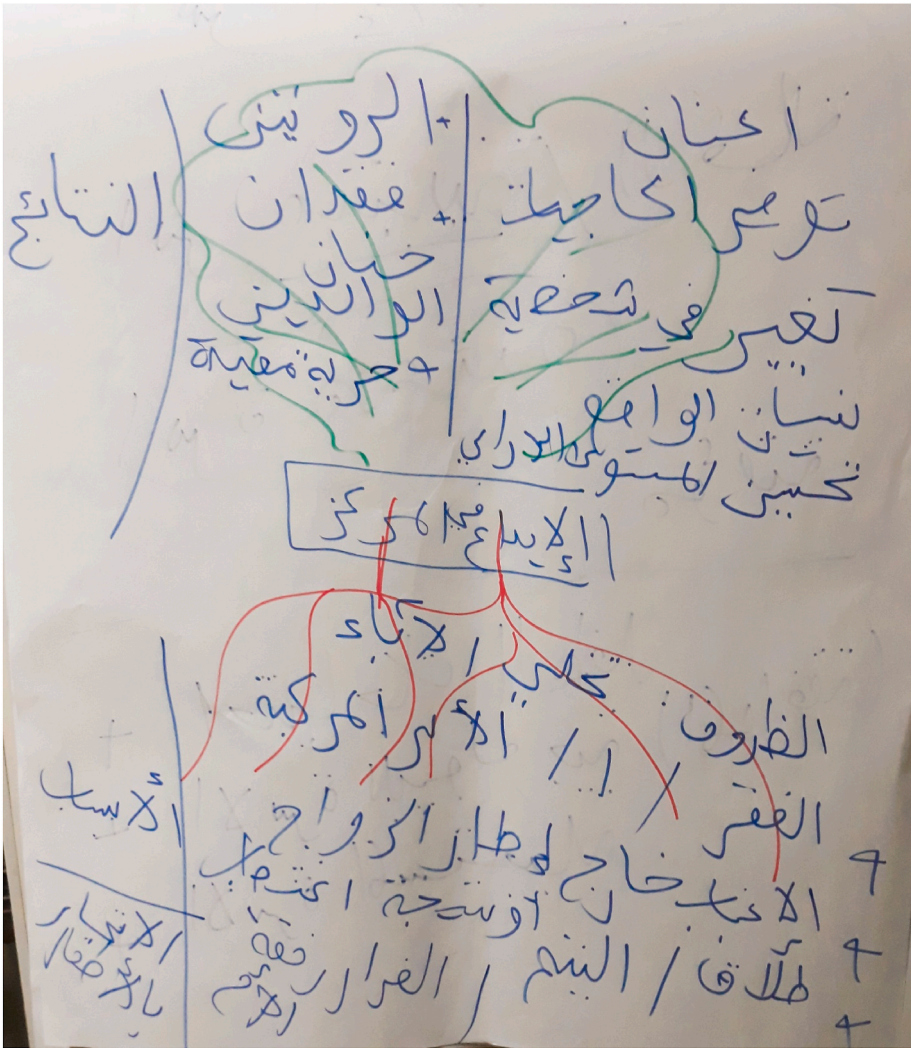
Level	Code	Description
<b>Microsystem:</b> Immediate surroundings influencing the child's daily life	Daily routine and institutional life Emotional well-being Parental relationships Foster care views Family dynamics	Monotonous routine, limited freedom, basic provisions Feelings of boredom, loneliness, depression Lack of visits, feelings of abandonment Perceptions of foster care, feelings of inclusion/exclusion Impact of divorce, death, remarriage on children's placement
<b>Mesosystem:</b> Interactions between different parts of the child's microsystem	Cultural and religious beliefs Parental supervision Relationships in foster care	Influence on family roles, particularly gender roles Lack of supervision due to work or economic pressures Importance of maintaining birth family connections
<b>Exosystem:</b> Broader social systems influencing the child's environment	Economic conditions Educational and work opportunities Community and government responsibility Poverty and foster care	Poverty leading to institutionalisation Access to education and necessity of child labour Shared responsibility for child welfare
<b>Macrosystem:</b> Overarching cultural and societal norms impacting the child's life	Cultural norms and gender roles  Restrictive laws and social stigma	Difference between foster and birth families Discriminatory attitudes affecting child development and education Impact on children born outside marriage and their institutionalisation
<b>Chronosystem:</b> Life course	Duty of foster care Future aspirations Changes in society The resources of foster care	Cultural and religious incentives for fostering Hopes for education, employment, independence Changes in family structure and community ties A form of respite when needed in critical moments or stages of a child's life

## Appendix 2

Causes		
<b>Boys</b> - Bad financial circumstances -Children born out of wedlock -Death of mother and father -Divorce -Escaping physical abuse from family with mother -Family issues and conflicts Family's lack of desire for the child -Failure to protect children from danger -Lack of care and love by parents -Restriction of children's freedom <b>Consequences</b> <b>Boys</b> -Boring routine -Depression -Homelessness -Improving level of education -Limited liberty -Parents lose interest in you -Risk of being sent to the child protection centre -Suicide -They only provide essential needs	<b>Girls A</b> -Bad financial circumstances -Bad relationships with parents and other family members -Children are not able to do what they want -Death of mother and father -Lack of care and love by parents -Problems between father and mother  <b>Girls A</b> -Enjoy making friends and playing -Parents lose interest in you -Possibility of homelessness -Possibility of suicide -They only provide essential needs	<b>Girls B</b> -Bad relationships with parents and other family members -Child labour -Lack of care and love by parents -Parents do not want children -Parents not providing basic needs -Physical abuse of children -Problems between father and mother  <b>Girls B</b> -A chance to be in foster care -Being in school -Being safe from street-connected dangers and substances -Depression -Encourage positive thinking -Making new friends -Possibility of homelessness when we get older and becoming addicted to drugs -Possibility of physical abuse in the street when we leave the centre

Appendix 3

Boys issue tree.







\* انتماء في العقد ان  
 \* التعرف للتعرف  
 \* في القضاء  
 \* الايجاع في  
 \* أسر بدلية  
 \* التدافع في مركزه مما يشاءه  
 \* ما زاد من ضعف التعرّف  
 \* التي عاينها على الآخر  
 \* التنازع التقاضي  
 \* الحق التمدد  
 \* توفير نسبة قليلة من  
 \* المحنات  
 \* الحرمان من الرعاية الاسرية  
 \* \* رفضات أسر بيت الأم والأب.  
 \* \* الوضعية المادية للأسرة  
 \* \* عدم رعاية الطفل من طرف الأسرة  
 \* \* عدم الاهتمام بالطفل والتفصيل  
 \* \* عدم تشغيل الأطفال  
 \* \* عدم توفير الحاجات الخاصة  
 \* \* بالطفل  
 \* \* عدم حماية الأطفال من الخطر  
 \* \* لسوء العلاقت بين الاب والابن والابن والابن  
 \* \* العنف من طرف الوالدين تجاه الطفل  
 \* \* عدم حماية الطفل  
 \* \* إلى الشارع

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