REIMAGINING A BETTER FUTURE FOR CHILDREN:

A joint learning and action initiative to strengthen protection and care

CONCEPT NOTE

1. Introduction

The protection and care[1] of children is facing a grave and unprecedented crisis.[2] Financial retrenchment, shrinking aid flows, shifting institutional mandates, and increasing political volatility threaten to erode decades of progress on child outcomes in protection, education, and health. Together, these trends are eroding the political will and threatening decades of progress. As a result, the systems meant to safeguard vulnerable children—especially in low- and middle-income countries reliant on external support—are at risk.

To support organisations and professionals navigating this evolving and uncertain landscape, the HDPI Child Protection Reference Group[3] and partners are launching a joint initiative to strengthen the capacity of governments, civil society, and international development actors to uphold children's right to protection and care. The initiative seeks to convene a broad network of experts and organisations across humanitarian and development settings to promote more coherent, effective, and resilient child protection and care systems. By synthesizing shared insights, new evidence, and common challenges, it aims to shape a forward-looking agenda for reform, investment, and action.

2. An unprecedented crisis in protection and care

The institutional infrastructure that has supported child protection and care for decades is under severe strain. Core elements of strong child protection systems—such as the child protection workforce, data systems, and policy frameworks—are being eroded or dismantled.[4] Governments are struggling with limited capacity while major donors reduce—or signal plans to reduce—funding for humanitarian and development efforts.[5]

These losses are occurring just as needs are escalating. Children are increasingly exposed to poverty, conflict, displacement and the consequences of eroding child rights frameworks. Yet protection and care are not consistently recognised or funded as the life-saving priorities they are—even though many children, especially in humanitarian settings, face immediate risks of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Meanwhile, divisions within the protection and care policy community over strategies such as deinstitutionalisation have undermined leadership, coordination and shared advocacy.[6] These internal tensions complicate efforts to advance children's care as a global priority.

To be sure, there have been important gains in child protection and care. In recent decades, countries have reduced reliance on institutional care, responded more deliberately to sexual violence, strengthened the child protection and care workforce, advanced global safeguarding norms, and invested in child protection systems strengthening.[7] However, in practice, these systems are still fragmented. Disconnected policies and uneven prioritisation across child labour, gender-based violence, and family strengthening have led

1

to inconsistent responses. Many organisations continue to work in isolation, face chronic resource gaps, and operate in parallel to government systems without sustained local ownership. This is particularly evident in the divide between humanitarian and development programming.

A further challenge lies in communicating the value of child protection systems to national governments, donors and global financing bodies.[8] There remains some confusion about what system strengthening looks like and what the benefits are, which limits strategic prioritisation and contributes to underinvestment. Currently prevention and response to violence against children amounts to between 2 and 5 percent of GDP globally, underscoring the urgency of framing protection and care as both a public investment and a rights-based imperative.

3. A window of opportunity for joint learning and action

The present crisis is generating a period of critical reflection across the protection and care sector. This proposed initiative aims to take stock of the crisis in order to rethink priorities, adjust approaches and recommit to a stronger, more unified vision of care and protection.

To this end, we plan to establish a consultative, multi-stakeholder process that brings together partners from humanitarian and development settings to re-imagine the future of child protection and care. The platform will spark dialogue on system reform and build a shared narrative grounded in children's rights and wellbeing, while recognising the central role of community-based protection.[9] The aim is to trigger catalytic action at every level—from national policy to family and community practice.

Despite the headwinds of the current crisis, we already know what is possible when the sector unites. To take just a few examples: child-protection targets were included in the Sustainable Development Goals through collective advocacy (e.g., SDG 16.2);[10] the *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action* created a common framework to improve preparedness and response;[11] the *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* consolidated global consensus on family-based care;[12] *Children on the Brink* reframed the HIV and AIDS response around community care;[13] and Graça Machel's 1996 report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,* [14] spurred the UN Security Council to place children and armed conflict on its agenda.[15] These milestones demonstrate that when the sector is united, it has the power to drive global shifts in policy and practice that uphold the rights of children.

2

4. Approach to the initiative

This initiative will build a coalition to refine how the sector can better support global and national child protection and care priorities in response to the current crisis. It will do so by sharing insights, encouraging inclusive leadership, amplifying local innovation, and grounding action in evidence and the real-world perspectives of children, families and practitioners across humanitarian and development settings—to help shape a forward-looking agenda for reform. To achieve this goal, the initiative will be implemented in two linked phases over a nine-month period.

Phase I – Strategic mapping and inquiry (months 1-3)

Phase I lays the groundwork by building a shared evidence base to inform future action, investment, and collective learning. Specific activities include:

- **Engage stakeholders:** Consult a wide range of stakeholders, including national governments, UN agencies, civil society organisations, donors, and regional networks. Local and national organisations will be prioritised, and the views of children, families, and communities will be actively sought. Humanitarian responders will be included to ensure relevance across crisis and recovery contexts. This process will also support the co-creation of shared priorities and alignment of efforts across the sector.
- **Map existing efforts:** Review and synthesise global, regional, and national initiatives—including evaluations, reform processes, financing strategies and localisation commitments—to identify existing knowledge, avoid duplication, and highlight gaps.
- **Develop guiding questions:** Formulate a concise set of questions to guide inquiry into the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of child protection and care systems at three levels: (1) Children, families, and communities; (2) National governments, civil society, and international partners; and (3) Practitioners and system implementers, including those in humanitarian response.
- **Produce a synthesis report:** Consolidate findings and emerging insights into a report that outlines implications for policy, practice, investment, and shared advocacy messaging. The synthesis will serve as a foundation for building a unified investment case, developing a shared narrative for sector reform, and guiding the shared learning agenda in Phase II.

Phase II – Learning, innovation and co-creation (months 4-9)

Phase II will build on Phase I to explore shared solutions, elevate promising practice, and support cross-sector learning, grounded in evidence and aligned with stakeholder priorities.

- **Convene sector dialogues:** Facilitate targeted discussions and workshops to deepen analysis, encourage peer learning, and align strategic responses across the humanitarian–development–peace continuum.
- **Document innovations:** Develop case studies of successful, context-specific approaches to child protection and care system strengthening. These will examine governance models, leadership arrangements, policy coordination, and national planning processes to identify key enablers of scalable and sustainable reform, as well as potential for adaptation in other contexts.
- **Co-create a collaborative platform:** Build a time-bound platform to sustain exchange, learning, and influence. The platform will remain dynamic and catalytic, evolving according to collective ownership and financing.

The initiative is being implemented over an estimated six- to nine-month period, beginning in June 2025. A more detailed timeline, including key deliverables and milestones for each phase, is provided in **Annex II**.

Endnotes

[1] A full explanation of what is meant by 'child protection and care' in this initiative—including why this definition was chosen—can be found in *Annex I: Definition and Framing*.

[2] UNICEF. (2025). *From promises to protection: Why sustainable investment for child protection is critical to Africa's human capital agenda*. UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office.

[3] The Child Protection Reference Group of HDPI, Inc. (Humanitarian Development Partners Initiative)—is a global think tank and network committed to advancing child protection and broader humanitarian objectives.

[4] Fraser, S. (2025, March 20). *Consequences and implications for the international development assistance sector from the closure of USAID*. Global Policy Journal.

[5] Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. (2025). *Strategic brief: Prioritising protection of children in a changing humanitarian landscape*.

[6] Shawar, Y. R., & Shiffman, J. (2023). Global priority for the care of orphans and other vulnerable children: Transcending problem definition challenges. *Global Health, 19*, 75. Recent progress—such as the CPSS Framework for Action, launched at the VAC Global Ministerial Conference, represent important progress. See: UNICEF, Save the Children, & World Vision. (2024). Framework for action: A global interagency initiative to strengthen child protection systems.

[7] UNICEF. (2024). *Strengthening systems to protect children from violence: Report card 2024*.

[8] UNICEF. (2025). *From promises to protection: Why sustainable investment for child protection is critical to Africa's human capital agenda*. UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office.

[9] Firelight Foundation. (2021). *Community-driven systems change: The power of grassroots-led change for long-term impact and how funders can nurture it*. Firelight Foundation.

[10] United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

[11] Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. (2019). *Minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action* (2nd ed.).

[12] UN General Assembly. (2010). *Guidelines for the alternative care of children* (A/RES/64/142).

[13] Hunter, S., & Williamson, J. (1997). *Children on the brink: Strategies to support children isolated by HIV/AIDS*. USAID, SARA Project.

[14] Machel, G. (1996). *Impact of armed conflict on children* (UN Doc. A/51/306). United Nations.

[15] United Nations Security Council. (1999). *Resolution 1261 on children and armed conflict* (S/RES/1261).

Annex 1: Definition and framing child protection and care

Child protection refers to the set of laws, policies, institutions, services, and practices—both formal and informal—designed to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and harmful practices affecting children. It is a core function of the state, grounded in the rights of the child, and realised through systems that are **publicly mandated**, **professionally supported**, and **community-embedded**. This framing draws on UNICEF's systems-building approach, Save the Children's emphasis on strengthening protective environments, and evolving global standards for sustainable child protection reform.

Care refers to the relationships, environments, and support systems—especially those that are family- and community-based—that promote children's well-being, emotional security, and stable development. It includes efforts to strengthen families, enable kinship and foster care, and develop safe alternatives to institutional care. This builds on the *UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, the care continuum model, and global guidance shaped by the Better Care Network (BCN) and UNICEF.

These definitions support the wider strategic effort to reframe care and protection within a coherent, rights-based, and state-led system — aligned with broader movements for global systems reform and responsive to today's compound crises in child well-being. It combines UNICEF's systems-building approach—alongside Save the Children's focus on strengthening protective environments, positioning protection as a **core public function** — with insights from the **care reform movement** and recent scholarship. The aim is to highlight that sustainable protection and care rely on **state-led systems**, **community anchoring**, and **rights-based accountability**, responsive to both global disruptions and local contexts.

Together, care and protection are **interconnected pillars** of a child well-being system—anchored in children's rights, national governance, family engagement, and community participation. This framing underscores the need for unified, resilient, and inclusive approaches to child protection in the current global context.

Annex II: Timeline and milestones

The initiative is being implemented over approximately six to nine months, beginning in **June 2025**. The timeline below reflects the two interlinked phases outlined in the main concept note and will be refined as planning is operationalised. Milestones are indicative and may evolve based on stakeholder engagement, alignment with policy processes, and availability of resources.

Phase	Timeframe	Key deliverables and milestones
Phase I – Strategic mapping and inquiry	Months 1–3	• Stakeholder engagement and consultations • Mapping current initiatives • Developing guiding questions • Synthesis report framing shared priorities and evidence base

Phase II – Learning, innovation and co-creation	Months 4–7/8	• Convening sector dialogues and workshops • Developing case studies on systems innovation • Co-designing a collaborative platform or network
Finalisation and dissemination	Months 8–9	• Preparation of final outputs (e.g. vision paper) • Stakeholder validation events • Targeted donor briefings and dissemination to align with global policy windows

Note: Timeline and sequencing are subject to adjustment based on partner availability, alignment with key strategic moments, and resourcing.

Annex III: About HDPI

Humanitarian Development Partners Initiative (HDPI) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established in 2016 to strengthen global, regional and local responses to humanitarian and development challenges. Guided by humanitarian principles, international law and a commitment to the common good, HDPI brings together a global network of experts to promote collaborative solutions and support practical action.

1. Mission and purpose

HDPI's mission is to enhance efforts to meet humanitarian needs and address critical issues affecting children, families and communities—across development, humanitarian and peacebuilding settings. The organisation works by:

- Supporting the efforts of its affiliates in their humanitarian endeavours
- Providing specialised services including training, consulting, evaluations and studies
- Facilitating collective learning and co-creation of problem-solving approaches
- Strengthening local-to-global linkages in humanitarian and child protection practice

2. Structure and expertise

HDPI is composed of a network of approximately 50 affiliates with experience across UN agencies, foundations, academia, civil society and the media. This network enables HDPI to mobilise highly experienced, cross-sectoral teams that can respond to diverse contexts and challenges.

HDPI has no political or sectarian affiliation. It is funded through private contributions, grants and service-based overheads.

3. HDPI Child Protection Reference Group (CPRG)

The HDPI Child Protection Reference Group functions as the primary technical and governance body for the initiative. Its responsibilities include:

- Shaping the conceptual framing and methodology
- Providing ongoing strategic oversight across both phases
- Supporting stakeholder engagement and regional linkages
- Ensuring quality assurance and alignment with global child protection norms

Core members of the HDPI CPRG include: Krishna Belbas, Bruce Grant, Victor P. Karunan, Jean-Claude Legrand, Peter McDermott, Thomas Mueller, Everett Ressler, Saudamini Siegrist, Cornelius Williams Timothy P. Williams, and John Williamson

Together, these members bring extensive experience in global child protection leadership, systems thinking, humanitarian coordination, and care reform. Where feasible, individual members may also take the lead on specific tasks, thematic areas, or deliverables—subject to their time and availability—bringing specialised insight and strengthening ownership of the initiative's outputs. This flexible and distributed model of leadership ensures that the initiative benefits from both collective oversight and targeted technical contributions.

4. Legal and organisational status

- **Legal status**: US-registered not-for-profit organisation
- **Incorporation**: 501(c)(3) organisation under US law
- **EIN**: 81-5014976
- **Year established**: 2016

HDPI's engagement in this initiative is based on its long-standing commitment to system strengthening, inclusive governance, and the protection and care of vulnerable populations.

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