

# Reimagining a Better Future for Children

A joint learning and action initiative to strengthen protection and care

Child Protection Reference Group – a working group of HDPI, Inc.

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## Synthesis of Phase I: **Strategic Conversations – Insights on the Global Child Protection and Care Crisis**

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### Participants in the dialogues

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# 1. Overview

## 1.1 Introduction

This synthesis is a product of Phase I of the HDPI Reimagining a Better Future for Children: a joint learning and action initiative to strengthen child protection and care. It is merely the beginning of a process to capture the reflections of people across the field. Drawing from 20 strategic conversations with global and regional leaders between June and December 2025, and related consultations,<sup>1</sup> the synthesis is intended to support deeper thinking and practical action across the child protection and care ecosystem. In this report, the child protection and care ecosystem refers to the full set of institutions, services, community networks, and policy frameworks that work together to protect and care for children.

As outlined in HDPI's Concept Note,<sup>2</sup> this initiative emerged in direct response to urgent concerns about pressures affecting the protection and care of children globally and the systems responsible for keeping them safe from harm. The protection and care of children are facing an unprecedented period of strain. Decades of progress are now at risk due to financial retrenchment, shrinking aid flows, shifting institutional mandates, and rising political volatility. These pressures are eroding the systems that protect children, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where national capacities are already stretched and external support is declining.

Participants described these pressures in concrete and practical terms. Across the strategic conversations summarised in this synthesis report, they spoke of systems under intense strain, marked by fragmentation, diminishing capacity, and widening gaps between what children need and what governments, organisations, and communities are able to provide. They highlighted how fiscal tightening, aid dependency, political volatility, and donor retrenchment — including sudden or uncoordinated donor withdrawals — are weakening core functions such as workforce stability, supervision, data systems, and frontline services. For many participants, fragmentation was not an abstract policy concern, but a lived reality experienced by families as confusion, inconsistency, and, in some cases, the complete absence of help.

Participants also emphasised that internal divisions within the sector, coupled with weakened humanitarian leadership and growing humanitarian–development divides, are undermining coherence and credibility at a time when children face rising levels of harm. Several also noted a longstanding and often unacknowledged dependency on external funding, technical assistance, and donor-supported data systems—particularly in low- and middle-income countries—which has deepened the impact of retrenchment and exposed structural vulnerabilities. Their reflections reveal how the systemic pressures identified are being experienced in practice at the levels of governance, service delivery, community engagement, and children's everyday lives.

Taken together, the perspectives captured in this synthesis point toward a shared underlying proposition: that the only sustainable path forward is to establish child protection and care as core societal functions. Participants consistently emphasised that protection and care must be embedded within formal and informal public systems, anchored in national and subnational responsibility, supported by domestic and external financing, and upheld through clear accountability structures. When these functions are performed well, they generate significant social and economic returns; when they are weak or absent, the costs are borne across generations. This synthesis should therefore be read through a localisation lens that centres national stewardship and public responsibility, with the subsequent insights elaborating what such systems require and how leadership, coherence, and legitimacy can be strengthened around this agenda.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The overall purpose of this collaborative effort is to improve how child protection and care are understood and organised by identifying core weaknesses and considering how the ecosystem could be re-imagined. This synthesis summarises what participants shared during the individual strategic conversations and a group consultation on 4 November 2025. Its aim is to provide a clear and faithful account of the perspectives, observations, and concerns raised, including areas of convergence and divergence.

The report serves mainly as a feedback loop to keep participants engaged and informed and to demonstrate how their contributions have been reflected, as well as to support a transparent and collaborative process as the initiative moves into its next phase. It is being shared with participants to confirm accuracy, support reflection, and sustain engagement.

## **1.3 Scope and limitations**

This synthesis reflects contributions primarily from global and regional participants in strategic conversations during Phase I. Local and subnational perspectives, as well as the direct views of children, young people, families and communities, are not yet fully represented; relevant consultations are under way and will inform later phases. The findings should therefore be read as an initial snapshot rather than a comprehensive picture of the child protection and care ecosystem.

The initiative has adopted a listening first approach, so this report is descriptive rather than analytical. It does not represent a position of the HDPI Child Protection Reference Group and does not offer recommendations. At this stage the synthesis draws on dialogue-based reflections and does not include systematic evidence review, quantitative analysis, or primary data collection with children, families, or frontline practitioners. Perspectives may reflect uneven emphasis across protection, care, and care reform depending on who participated.

## 2. Participants in ongoing strategic conversations

The initial conversations reflected in this paper are the starting point of a longer dialogue that will continue through further engagement at regional, national, and local levels.

Participants included individuals invited from the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action; Better Care Network; Child Helpline International; Coram International; ECPAT International; Family for Every Child; Georgetown University's Children in Adversity Project; International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect; Maestral International; Oak Foundation; Office of the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative on Violence Against Children; Save the Children; the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child; UNICEF offices at headquarters, East Asia and the Pacific, and Eastern and Southern Africa; World Childhood Foundation; World Health Organisation; World Vision International; and Professor Mike Wessells, a leading researcher in child protection and care.

Many took part in a formal organisational role, while others contributed in a personal capacity, drawing on their professional experience. Together, these individuals and organisations represent a wide range of institutional mandates, geographic contexts, and areas of expertise. Each conversation included several members of the Child Protection Reference Group to support continuity, shared reflection, and collective interpretation.

## 3. Context

The protection and care of children are experiencing an unprecedented global crisis.<sup>3</sup> Financial retrenchment, shrinking aid flows, shifting institutional mandates, and rising political and economic volatility are eroding decades of progress in child protection, care and care reform, and broader social development. As governments confront demographic and fiscal pressures, and donors scale back support, the infrastructure and systems designed to protect children are under severe and growing strain, compounded by the sector's governmental placements within weaker, under-funded, and under-resourced ministries and departments with multiple competing mandates.<sup>4</sup>

These changes are occurring as needs are rising and evolving. The right of children to protection from harm is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>5</sup> (CRC), yet still one billion children experience some form of emotional, physical or sexual violence every year, while one child dies from violence every seven minutes.<sup>6</sup> In fragile settings, girls face extreme risks, with slightly more than 1 in 4 experiencing sexual assault or rape.<sup>7</sup> Between 5 million and 6 million children (aged 0–18 years) worldwide are estimated to live in institutions, rather than in family-based care.<sup>8</sup> Child rights, protection and care are being subjected to overlapping and changing challenges, including unsafe migration, displacement, climate change, armed conflict, and digital violence and crime. Globally, armed conflict levels are at their highest since World War II, with one in six children affected.<sup>9</sup> Systemic discrimination and poverty remain pervasive; an estimated 1 billion children live in

multidimensional poverty and 1.4 billion lack access to basic social protection.<sup>10</sup> These conditions can drive harmful coping strategies that expose children to heightened risk, including child labour, hazardous work, early marriage, unnecessary family separation or placement, especially in contexts where social protection systems are weak. The resulting exclusion from essential services, like health and education, further undermines children's long-term wellbeing and life trajectories.<sup>11</sup>

Recent global aid reductions are intensifying these challenges and are predicted to reverse decades of progress in child survival, health, protection, education, and nutrition.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, domestic investments in child protection and care are contracting globally, further weakening already overstretched systems<sup>13</sup>, particularly in contexts marked by deep and widening inequalities. Analyses suggest that the elimination of USAID alone could result in 4.5 million additional deaths among children under age 5, and 435,247 child deaths related to funding reduction have been recorded to date.<sup>14</sup> No comparable global estimates exist for child protection because it is not recognised as a core development sector and lacks the data systems needed to track impacts of funding reductions on violence, exploitation or neglect. Therefore, the full impact of cuts on child protection outcomes remains largely invisible, despite evidence from multiple contexts that economic shocks and weakened services are increasing harm to children.

Children, families, communities, regions, and countries are experiencing the global crisis in profoundly different ways. Economic contraction, political instability, conflict, and social disruption are reshaping childhood across and within regions, between countries, and even from one community to the next. Children's experiences are further shaped by intersecting inequalities (including gender, age, disability, migrant status, and poverty) which influence both their exposure to harm, experiences in the current crisis, and the extent to which they are reached by existing systems. These differences determine not only children's immediate safety and wellbeing, but also how families cope, how communities mobilise support, and how governments prioritise protection when resources are scarce.

In recent decades, there has been meaningful progress, including action to strengthen the child protection and care workforce, prevent separation and institutionalisation, support family-based and kinship care, invest in child protection systems strengthening, and address violence against children.<sup>15</sup> Even so, systems and responses have remained fragmented and poorly coordinated, with inconsistent prioritisation across issues and chronic under-resourcing. Many organisations continue to operate in isolation or in parallel to government systems without local ownership. As a result, even where progress has occurred it often remains fragile, with vulnerabilities sharply exposed by the global crisis.

## 4. Ten insights and early reflections

The following ten insights were developed based on individual conversations with participants and then reviewed collectively in a group dialogue on 4 November 2025. Participants confirmed that the ten insights broadly reflect the key pressures, opportunities, and systemic challenges affecting the protection and care ecosystem, as well as recommending additional points that reinforce them. So, the ten insights are presented here in a refined form. Each insight is organised into three parts: an overview of the core challenge, key insights that emerged through the conversations, and participant-identified directions for further inquiry.

### 1. From contraction to renewal: sustaining child protection and care

#### Challenge

Participants described how inconsistent political commitment, fiscal tightening, workforce attrition, and donor retrenchment have hollowed out child protection and care systems, exposing the limits of externally dependent models, as well as vulnerabilities within government-funded systems. Contraction was seen as fiscal and structural, driven by austerity, fragmented short-term projects, and shrinking civic space. Governments face mounting demands, with child protection and care displaced by higher-profile sectors such as health, education, and climate response.

Unanticipated donor exits were highlighted as a particular risk. When transitions are not managed, families and communities are left to cope, increasing harm and undermining trust. The effects of contraction differ across regions. Countries with more advanced systems face pressures of consolidation, while low-income, fragile, or crisis-affected contexts face challenges linked to weak capacity, humanitarian demands, and political volatility. These differences shape the pace and direction of renewal.

#### Insights

##### System contraction and uneven impact

- Erosion of service capacity directly affects children's rights to protection and care.
- Contraction leaves fewer services, longer waits, and inconsistent follow-up for families and children.
- Countries experience differing pressures depending on system maturity, stability, and fiscal context.

##### Government responses and coping strategies

- Governments and partners are experimenting with ways to sustain child protection and care; some reflect resilience, others represent short-term coping through decentralised delivery and stronger community networks.
- Some governments are reframing child protection and care as national priorities; others are scaling back services, including minimum package provision.

#### Community-level burden and system maturity

- Informal caregiving networks, including extended family and kinship care, are absorbing increased burdens as formal case management and psychosocial services pause or downsize.
- Expectations for system development must reflect differing levels of maturity, with some systems requiring foundational strengthening and others needing long-term integration of established practices.

#### Workforce, financing, and institutional readiness

- Renewal begins with the workforce. Training, supervision, workforce well-being, and stable domestic financing were viewed as prerequisites for continuity and credibility.
- Engagement with public fiscal management, civil service reform, and ministries of finance and planning will be essential to anchor child protection and care within sustainable national systems.
- Public financial management reforms underway in many countries offer entry points but require stronger advocacy for child protection and care and alignment with localisation and national ownership.

#### Fragility, leadership, and shifting responsibility

- Donor exits or fiscal consolidation often outpace domestic capacity or readiness, particularly in the transition to upper-middle-income status, creating a handover gap that risks undoing progress.
- Current adaptations could indicate national systems stepping into rightful leadership; or they could signal international retreat and increased risk shifted to families, communities, NGOs, and others.
- Where national commitment is weak or absent, global movements and regional alliances can act as accelerators, providing legitimacy and political pressure for renewal.

### **Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry**

Embedding child protection and care within national plans, budgets, and macro-economic frameworks can shift temporary adaptation into sustained reform. Strengthening the workforce through supportive and accountable supervision and stable domestic resources was viewed as foundational. Diversified financing through domestic revenue, regional partnerships, philanthropy, private-sector engagement aligned with child rights, and donor support to scale-up promising interventions offer possible pathways. These areas provide

potential directions for Phase II inquiry, collaboration, and co-creation of a unified narrative for restoring the moral and material foundations of child protection and care.

## **2. From fragmentation to coherence: a moral and technical imperative**

### **Challenge**

Coherence is essential to achieving the consistent and equitable fulfilment of children’s rights across contexts. Participants described how decades of overlapping agendas, earmarked funding, and competing coordination mechanisms have weakened coherence and created confusion for policymakers, practitioners, and families and communities. Coherence refers to aligned purpose, clear complementarity of roles, and mutually reinforcing approaches across institutions and agendas. It differs from convergence, which relates to specific areas where organisations choose to work more closely together on shared priorities; coherence is broader, focusing on how systems function as a whole.

Fragmentation was described as one of the sector’s most persistent weaknesses — visible in duplicative projects, inconsistent messaging, lack of critique, and the proliferation of sub-sectors and frameworks that pull governments and partners in competing directions. Donor-driven single-issue initiatives are another factor. Fragmentation is multi-layered and context specific. Within child protection, different thematic areas and delivery models often operate in parallel, driven by separate funding streams and institutional mandates. Within care and care reform, longstanding debates around deinstitutionalisation and cross-sector responsibilities have produced their own patterns of fragmentation. Participants noted that protection and care frequently operate separately but emphasized that this separation reflects institutional arrangements and funding patterns rather than the lived experience of children and families, who encounter them as interrelated functions within a single ecosystem of support and accountability.

Fragmentation reinforces division in service operations: competition for visibility, donor branding, and institutional incentives. Political incentives, budget stability, and institutional leadership vary widely, producing uneven coherence. In some contexts, strong governance systems support integration; in others, political turnover, funding inconsistencies, restricted civic space, and uneven decentralisation create gaps between national design and local delivery. Several participants noted a risk that coherence reforms—especially when they involve shifting responsibilities to stronger ministries—could further marginalise social welfare ministries, which already hold broad mandates but lack the resources and authority to fulfil them. Fragmentation between humanitarian and development systems creates additional barriers, with separate funding streams, coordination structures, and reporting cycles pulling actors in divergent directions despite children and families experiencing a single continuum of risk, disruption, and recovery.

### **Insights**

### Fragmentation as technical, political, and moral loss

- Fragmentation is a technical barrier and a loss of shared purpose and shared language.
- It has been reinforced by parallel global agendas, donor-driven funding streams, and overlapping coordination mechanisms.
- For children and families, fragmentation results in confusion, gaps in support, unconnected entry points, and missing or non-functional services.
- Achieving coherence is both a moral and a technical imperative; without greater complementarity across integrated child protection and care systems, and their interface with related sectors, even well-funded initiatives risk losing legitimacy, trust and effectiveness.
- A stronger rights-based frame can help unify diverse mandates and reinforce accountability.

### Competition and convergence

- Competition for visibility and resources across areas such as violence prevention, mental health, and justice for children can deepen fragmentation.
- Convergence offers opportunities for shared advocacy and resourcing but must be guided by coherent national strategies and shared accountability frameworks that prevent duplication.
- Coherence should not suppress innovation or context-specific practice; alignment should enable diversity, not impose uniformity..

### Coherence across crisis and stability

- Participants stressed the need for coherence across both crisis and stable contexts.
- Humanitarian and development approaches must function as an integrated continuum if child protection and care are to be sustained before, during, and after crises.

## **Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry**

Building coherence requires a system capable of connecting prevention, response, workforce, financing, and data across all settings, grounded in national ownership, shared purpose, and core principles. Participants stressed the importance of a common narrative that connects the field's diverse specialisations, across child protection, care, and the wider social sectors, and strengthens credibility with governments and donors. Some proposed framing future work within broader arcs of renewal, coherence, and transformation as a communication tool.

These perspectives highlight potential areas for Phase II collaboration, including analysis of coordination models, comparative learning on how diverse mandates can reinforce rather than compete, and co-creation of shared accountability principles that bridge child protection, care, and the other social development sectors across humanitarian and development contexts. Several participants also encouraged exploring models that sustain

continuity across crisis and recovery phases, including shared indicators and governance arrangements that strengthen alignment between humanitarian and development systems.

### 3. Localisation as transformation, not delegation

#### Challenge

Traditional aid models are being challenged and reconfigured. While development assistance is contracting, decision-making power and financial control remain concentrated among global institutions, large INGOs, and international financial mechanisms, in many contexts, particularly where external assistance continues to play a significant role. National and subnational governments and local CSOs lack predictable funding, and compliance systems privilege international intermediaries, limiting the space for nationally led reform. Participants cautioned that smaller organisations and community leaders are often overburdened by compliance requirements without the resources, sequencing, and support needed to manage these responsibilities sustainably, while also recognising that other contexts have stronger domestic systems and well-established local actors facing different localisation challenges.

#### Insights

##### Local leadership, power sharing, and accountability

- Evidence from conversations suggests that when local organisations lead, families and communities experience more responsive services.
- Progress depends on genuine power sharing, predictable resources, adequate training, and government accountability for planning, budgeting, and system performance.
- Localisation must be anchored in strong government ownership and leadership at national and subnational levels, as these are central to legitimacy, sustainability, and public accountability.
- Localisation was framed as a transformational process rather than an administrative handover or delegation from global to national and local actors.
- Communities provide the backbone of child protection but cannot replace state accountability or professional responsibility. Their contribution must be recognised, supported, and financed, with clear distinctions between community roles and statutory functions.

##### Defining localisation in practice

- Participants emphasised the need to define localisation in practical terms: roles, capacity, resources, authority, and accountability must align at the local level.
- Some reframed the goal as “domesticisation”, embedding decision making, financing, and accountability within national and subnational systems rather than relying on external institutions and funding.

- Others noted the legitimate catalytic role of international and regional bodies, particularly where political, cultural, or institutional barriers exist.
- Those most affected by failures of child protection and care should help assess and shape system performance, with highlighting lived experiences in local and national contexts as a form of accountability.

#### Addressing deeper challenges and uneven progress

- Participants cautioned that localisation is often reduced to advocacy for greater recognition and funding for local organisations, but the challenges are deeper and exist at every level.
- Aid and related financial dependency, uneven governance, and power imbalances can arise both externally and within national and local systems.
- Local ownership and capacity building have long been policy objectives, yet progress remains uneven, underscoring the need to understand how localisation can be achieved in practice and deliver real benefits for children, families and communities.
- Localisation efforts must reinforce the state's primary obligation to uphold children's rights to child protection and care.

#### Risks of shifting responsibility without resources

- Shifting responsibility without resources risks tokenism and harm.
- Failure to share power between external organisations, national institutions, and local and community organisations perpetuates dependency.
- Genuine localisation requires predictable domestic financing, strengthened civil-society space, and regulatory frameworks that allow local and community organisations to operate confidently and safely.

#### Regional and contextual variation

- Localisation differs significantly across regions and within countries.
- In some settings, local NGOs and CBOs are co-designers of reform with strong community legitimacy; in others, they function primarily as implementers with limited influence over national priorities.
- These differences require context-specific approaches that recognise varied power dynamics, institutional capacity, and the role of NGOs and community-based networks.

#### Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Participants emphasised that genuine localisation must be underpinned by national ownership, domestic resource mobilisation, and budget allocations for child protection and care. Supporting regional financing compacts and cross-country peer learning can anchor reform within sustainable, nationally led systems. Participants also identified opportunities for Phase II collaboration, including documentation of locally led innovations, practical

models for sequencing support to smaller organisations, and guidance on aligning roles and accountability across community, civil-society, and government agencies.

## **4. The crisis is an opportunity for governments and partners to make child protection and care central to social and economic development**

### **Challenge**

Child protection and care — interdependent functions of an integrated national system for children’s safety and wellbeing — continue to be mistakenly perceived. As a result, they remain underrepresented in national priorities and planning and largely absent from fiscal and political debates — “everybody’s priority in theory but nobody’s budget line in practice.” This invisibility limits investment and accountability, despite evidence that child protection and care contribute directly to trust in government, stability, and social and economic development. Shrinking civic space and politicised debates on family, the human rights of children, gender, and the role of the state further constrain discourse and weaken public accountability.

### **Insights**

#### **Child protection and care as governance, legitimacy, and stability**

- When integrated child protection and care systems function, they enhance trust in government, support social cohesion, and prevent crises that undermine economic stability.
- Integrating these functions into governance strengthens citizenship and legitimacy.
- Participants stressed that the field’s technical language often distances it from political conversations and public opinion it needs to influence.

#### **Integrating child protection and care into national development agendas**

- Some participants called for greater integration of child protection and care within national development planning, public-sector reform, and human capital strategies.
- Others emphasised that without public visibility and accountability, technical reforms alone will not shift political incentives or ensure attention to children’s rights.
- Participants suggested learning from sectors such as health and education, which have complex mandates yet maintain coherence, political traction, and sustained financing., often supported by clearer ministerial anchoring - conditions that do not typically apply to child protection, which spans multiple institutional mandates.

#### **Addressing political backlash and reaffirming rights**

- Participants noted the rise of political populism and conservative social movements often narrow definitions of family, limit discourse on plural caregiving arrangements, and frame child protection and care as private rather than public responsibilities.

- This backlash underscores the need for evidence-based advocacy that reaffirms child protection and care as universal rights and essential public functions, and as critical contributors to broader sectoral goals, including health, education, and social protection.
- Participants cautioned that while economic arguments can secure political attention, they must not eclipse rights-based foundations.

#### Regional and contextual variations in political traction

- Political traction for child protection and care measures varies across and within regions.
- Planning and budget cycles, institutional incentives, and levels of donor engagement differ, shaping whether child protection and care are positioned as public responsibilities, social-welfare functions, or humanitarian issues.
- These variations influence both the possibilities and the pace of integrating child protection and care within national development agendas.

#### Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Linking child protection and care to broader development priorities, including health, education, climate resilience, gender equality, and economic inclusion, can help attract diverse political constituencies and domestic financing. Participants emphasised the importance of public communication that combines moral clarity with evidence-based demonstration of measurable returns, strengthened social cohesion, and the costs of inaction. Taken together, these perspectives suggest areas for Phase II collaboration: collective reflection on national policy experiences, shared advocacy to elevate child protection within development planning, and evidence generation on how investment in child protection and care contributes to national stability, GDP, human capital, and social cohesion.

## 5. Building sustainable systems by protecting what matters most

### Challenge

A major global achievement in child protection and care has been the adoption of a systems-building approach by many governments. Yet ambitious goals have often outpaced political will and investment. Efforts to establish stand-alone ministries or fully professionalised child protection systems have proven challenging and been undermined by recent cuts in bilateral funding. Many systems now operate in an environment of permanent volatility shaped by climate shocks, economic instability, and protracted crises, which further tests institutional resilience and magnifies the consequences of weak thresholds, inconsistent referrals, and limited data.

### Insights

### From issue-based to systems-based approaches

- The shift from an issue-based to a systems-based approach was seen as a conceptual defining achievement.
- Progress is measured by a system's ability to protect and care for children effectively, particularly during crises and fiscal constraint.
- A "good enough" system emphasises essential capacities needed to keep children safe when resources are limited, including a minimum package of support delivered by frontline workers with effective referral pathways, basic psychosocial support, and consistent follow-up.

### Workforce as the cornerstone of sustainable systems

- The workforce was repeatedly affirmed as central to system continuity, extending beyond formal social workers to community workers and volunteers who often act as first points of contact.
- Essential elements were seen as workforce well-being, supervision that supports ethical and accountable practice, and fair and predictable remuneration.
- In many countries the social service workforce is not formally recognised in law or through registration and licensing systems, limiting professional status, career pathways, and accountability.
- Clear definitions of roles between volunteers and professionals were seen as necessary to protect quality and accountability.

### Uneven system maturity and variable thresholds

- Maturity of child protection and care systems differs not only between countries but within them.
- Workforce capacity, referral systems, and thresholds vary between urban and rural areas, provinces, districts, and communities.
- These differences create uneven access to support and inconsistent implementation of national standards.

### Adapting systems to volatility

- Participants emphasised the need for systems to adapt to volatility with tools that support prevention, communication, and public understanding of how systems should function.
- Strengthening professional judgment and risk assessment, supported by reliable administrative and prevalence data, were viewed as essential for equitable and consistent delivery of minimum packages.
- Some voices warned that "good enough" may be misunderstood as accepting a lower level of protection, risking normalisation of inadequate responses if minimum packages are not clearly defined and continuously strengthened.

## Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Defining essential service packages can guide investment across levels of government and across humanitarian and development settings. Embedding workforce development, supervision that ensures ethical practice, and consistent support for community-level practitioners will help sustain minimum standards and prevent further erosion of quality. Participants identified opportunities for Phase II collaboration through comparative analysis of minimum service packages, peer learning on costed benchmarks, development of communication tools showing how systems function, and methods for assessing functional system capacity under fiscal and environmental constraints.

## **6. Reclaiming child protection and care leadership and legitimacy in humanitarian action**

### **Challenge**

In humanitarian operations, child protection and care are losing visibility and influence. Budget reductions, leadership transitions, and the restructuring of humanitarian clusters (including the dismantling of the Child Protection Area of Responsibility) have eroded coordination and technical capacity. Reduced focus on protection and gender-based violence has further weakened coverage and accountability. Participants noted a leadership vacuum and called for clearer direction and a nucleus capable of uniting humanitarian and development perspectives.

### **Insights**

#### **Immediate consequences of service contraction**

- Reducing the number of critical practitioners and service cuts in emergencies have had immediate and often devastating consequences for children and caregivers.
- Loss of coordination posts and trained staff left separated and unaccompanied children without safe care, and survivors of sexual violence without psychosocial support and referral.
- These gaps have resulted in preventable harm, including reports of child deaths.
- Uncertainty over leadership and accountability during transitions has increased risks for families seeking help.

#### **Services central to humanitarian effectiveness**

- Child protection and care were affirmed as life-saving and central to humanitarian effectiveness.
- Strengthening systems before, during, and after crises is essential.
- Humanitarian and development systems form a continuum that must remain functional through all phases of crisis.
- Some participants called for renewed global and regional coordination and leadership; others emphasised the need for nationally owned systems capable of responding to crises and sustaining child protection functions.

- Both perspectives share the conviction that child protection and care are foundational and non-negotiable.

#### Workforce well-being and ethical concerns

- Participants highlighted the psychosocial toll of prolonged crises on children, caregivers, and frontline staff.
- Workforce well-being, including supervision, psychosocial support, and clear ethical guidance, was identified as a humanitarian concern in its own right.
- Abrupt project closures that leave children without support or referral were ethical concerns.
- Transition planning and continuity protocols were viewed as core safeguards during funding contraction or recovery.

#### Divergent views on cluster reform and leadership

- Views differed on the implications of cluster reform. Some felt structural changes have weakened global child protection leadership; others argued that national ownership and clearly defined mandates can sustain child protection and care priorities across humanitarian and development settings.
- Both perspectives recognised the need for forward-looking, accountable leadership that can adapt to growing demands driven by climate change, political crises, conflict, instability, and displacement.

#### Adapting to internal divides and protracted crises

- Within countries, some districts operate under humanitarian conditions while others function within standard government systems.
- These internal divides require adaptable models that allow responsibilities, data analysis, and referral pathways to adjust to differing environments.
- Regions affected by protracted crises pursue system development very differently from more stable areas.

### **Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry**

Participants emphasised that child protection and care must remain core, non-negotiable components of humanitarian response, integrated across all sectors. Emergency funding should reinforce national systems, build shock-response resilience, and ensure continuity through recovery. Demonstrating effectiveness and system-wide impact can help reassert the centrality of child protection and care in humanitarian action. Participants identified opportunities for Phase II collaboration through collective learning on planning transition from crisis to recovery, financing models that sustain child protection and care capacities across the humanitarian–development continuum, and emerging leadership models capable of bridging humanitarian and development perspectives.

## 7. Trust, community engagement, and legitimacy as system characteristics

### Challenge

Participants framed trust not as a by-product of good systems but as a core characteristic that determines whether child protection and care services are credible and used. Despite progress in systems strengthening, many families and communities still view government services as distant, bureaucratic, or punitive. Families disengage quickly after negative experiences, making systems effectively invisible or irrelevant when trust is lost. Opportunities for meaningful community involvement remain limited, weakening legitimacy and accountability. Shrinking civic space and restrictive political environments erode trust by reducing the ability of civil-society organisations and independent entities to operate freely.

### Insights

#### Trust as foundational to system effectiveness

- Trust is both a foundation and an outcome of effective child protection and care systems.
- Services function only when families and communities expect to be treated with respect, support, confidentiality, and consistent follow-up.
- Community participation in monitoring services, tracking referrals, and providing feedback improves transparency and reduces abuse.
- Trust strengthens credibility and increases service use, especially when community voices are consistently included in decision-making rather than considered episodically.

#### Limits of community resilience and the centrality of accountability

- Communities are increasingly asked to assume child protection and care roles without adequate resources or authority.
- For some, this resilience reflects empowerment; for others, it reflects withdrawal by the state, national civil society organisations, and international organisations.
- Trust cannot substitute for accountability: communities can support child protection, but they cannot replace the responsibility of the state or trained professionals.
- Accountability rests with governments, service providers, and other authorities to ensure systems function as intended and to respond when they do not.
- Children's experiences of system failures should inform assessments of system performance, but adults, regulators, and public authorities are responsible to hold institutions to account.

#### Variations in community realities

- Community-level realities differ widely within countries.

- Household dynamics, social norms, informal support networks, and the presence or absence of civil-society organisations shape how trust is built and how systems are used.
- These variations influence whether families perceive services as protective, punitive, or irrelevant.

#### Conditions for meaningful community engagement

- Meaningful engagement depends on an enabling civic and institutional environment.
- When civil-society organisations and independent actors cannot operate freely or access resources, mechanisms for monitoring performance and holding authorities responsible become weaker, and national ownership stalls.
- Examples from several countries show that genuinely decentralised systems, where responsibility and resources are transferred to provincial and local levels, can foster stronger community engagement and more responsive systems.

### Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Embedding participatory governance should be recognised as a core system function implemented through child- and family-led feedback mechanisms, community monitoring, and joint planning. Systems that are trusted and effective are used, and systems that are used can evolve and endure. Participants identified opportunities for Phase II collaboration through shared documentation of participatory approaches, listening to the voices of children and young people, peer learning on community accountability mechanisms, and co-creation of practical guidance on embedding children's and community voices within child protection governance frameworks, especially in contexts of restricted civic space.

## 8. Data governance as accountability and learning

### Challenge

Data on child protection and care remain fragmented, uneven, and severely affected by cutbacks in US funding and technical assistance and reductions in aid budgets by major donors. Research in these areas on effectiveness is limited, and reporting remains process and activity focused rather than outcome and result focused. Participants emphasised that data governance is not a technical add-on but a public accountability function, referring to the authority, responsibility, and safeguards for how data are collected, managed, accessed, and used at national and subnational levels. It is essential for decision making, quality improvement, and transparency between national and local levels. Fear of failure and constrained learning environments further stifle innovation and honest reflection.

Participants discussed data and technology-related challenges across several interconnected but distinct dimensions. These included the availability and quality of data; how data are governed, used, and shared as part of public accountability; the role of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in strengthening systems; and the growing risks posed to children

within digital environments. The reflections below are organised around these interrelated issues to clarify their implications for learning, governance, and protection.

## Insights

### Data and evidence as political currency

- Participants agreed that data and evidence have become a form of political currency.
- Rights-based data systems are essential for assessing progress toward the fulfilment of children's rights and for strengthening public accountability.
- Demonstrating effectiveness and measurable impact is central to system legitimacy, particularly during scrutiny and scarcity.
- Evidence must capture not only what was done but also the experiences of children and families and the results of interventions.
- Tracking service disruptions, missed follow-up, and harmful coping strategies reveals the cost of system decline.
- Data collection and analysis should validate findings with communities, support feedback loops that strengthen trust and credibility, and empower nationally led strategies.
- The absence of systematic rights-based monitoring means the full impact of cuts on violations of children's rights remains largely invisible.

### Data governance as a core system function

- Participants emphasised that data governance must be embedded within public institutions.
- Reliable and transparent data are essential for planning, budgeting, course correction, and accountability.
- Prevalence and administrative data provide complementary insights that build a clearer picture of risk, access, and outcomes.
- Inclusive datasets that reflect diverse lived experiences are necessary to avoid reinforcing biases.

### Digital risks and the need for ethical safeguards

- Digital risks are rapidly expanding and outpacing national regulatory frameworks.
- Children face online exploitation, harmful content, and data misuse in digital environments.
- Participants highlighted concerns about artificial intelligence and digital technologies as opportunities and threats.
- AI can facilitate early warning, case analysis, and predictive modelling, but without ethical safeguards and regulatory oversight it may amplify bias, compromise privacy, or expose children to new harm.
- Participants called for proactive governance and cross-sectoral frameworks that bring together child protection, digital policy, education, and justice to ensure coherent standards and safeguards.

### Uneven national data capacity

- National data systems vary widely across and within regions.
- Some countries have robust administrative datasets and governance arrangements; others lack basic interoperability between national and subnational levels or across sectors.
- These disparities affect the capacity to assess risk, monitor service quality, and generate trusted evidence.

### Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Investment in integrated national data systems with disaggregated results-based indicators will strengthen accountability and credibility. Evidence that is widely disseminated and presented in clear, accessible ways can help rebuild public confidence and strengthen political will. Participants identified opportunities for Phase II collaboration on child protection and care data systems through joint reviews of data-governance practices, comparative work on measuring outcomes, strengthening learning cultures within systems, and co-creation of ethical and responsible approaches to digital technology and AI. These were described as practical areas where collective inquiry could help countries improve data quality, governance, and safe use of digital tools.

## 9. Coherence across the humanitarian–development–peace continuum

### Challenge

Participants reflected that long-standing divides between child protection and care systems in both humanitarian and development contexts continue to disrupt continuity of support for children and families. Despite global commitments to strengthen coherence across the humanitarian–development–peace continuum, divides persist. Separate funding streams, coordination structures, and reporting requirements pull actors in different directions, making it difficult for governments to plan, budget, and deliver sustained child protection and care. Children and families do not experience these systems as separate — they move through a single trajectory of risk, disruption, and recovery — yet institutional discontinuities frequently fracture that trajectory. The problem is compounded in countries with both humanitarian and stable areas, creating wide variation in system performance. Participants stressed that these divides reflect institutional arrangements and financing patterns rather than any inherent separation between child protection and care systems.

### Insights

#### Artificial divides between humanitarian and development systems

- Participants agreed that the separation between humanitarian and development systems is largely artificial from a child and family perspective but remains a reality imposed by governments, UN, and international organisations.

- Coherence across both areas is essential for resilience and recovery.
- Emergency response, case management, law enforcement, family support, alternative care, and long-term capacity-building must be connected through nationally led, integrated child protection and care systems that function before, during, and after crises.
- Achieving coherence requires governance arrangements that enable compatibility, financing models that support continuity, and data systems that track risks, services, and outcomes across all phases.

#### Variation in how divides constrain systems

- The degree to which these divides constrain systems differs widely across and within countries.
- In some regions, priorities include alignment across sectors such as health, education, and social welfare; in others, foundational system-building must occur before these areas can be bridged.
- Several participants stressed that complexity must be embraced through a coherent, integrated system, noting that separating humanitarian and development functions risks weakening overall system performance.

#### Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Participants identified ways to strengthen coherence across the humanitarian, development, and peace continuum. These included developing nationally led frameworks that link preparedness, response, child protection, and family support during a crisis; creating shared indicators showing whether child protection and care are consistent across settings; and documenting governance and financing models that help systems function during and after emergencies. They also highlighted the importance of aligning this work with related agendas such as for addressing gender-based violence, climate resilience, and social policy, including social service workforce strengthening that cuts across humanitarian, development, and peace contexts. Coherence was seen as essential for long-term resilience because it enables systems to support children and families in consistent, predictable, and accountable ways. These opportunities point toward potential areas for Phase II collaboration, including deeper analysis of nationally led coordination models, comparative learning on institutional arrangements that bridge crisis and stability, and co-creation of tools that strengthen continuity of child protection and care across preparedness, response, early recovery, and long-term reform.

## 10. Reasserting leadership and stewardship in a sector under strain

### Challenge

Leadership across the child protection and care ecosystem is under intense pressure. Many organisations have focused on sustaining their own operations and workforce rather than the impact of disruption on children and families. Competing mandates and short-term funding

cycles have fostered fragmentation. Stewardship is uneven. Global and donor-driven leadership receive disproportionate attention, while national and subnational actors closest to children often lack the authority, resources, or platforms to shape the global agenda. Participants also noted widespread fatigue and anxiety, reflecting the cumulative effect of austerity, crisis overload, institutional turnover, and personnel change. At the same time, local networks, regional coalitions, and younger professionals bring new energy and ideas. Participants stressed that leadership pressures affect child protection and care systems as a whole rather than distinct 'sectors,' underscoring the need for unified stewardship. They also noted that these pressures are experienced unevenly across leadership levels, with turnover, workload strain, and resource constraints disproportionately affecting those responsible for day-to-day management and supervision.

Participants also noted that gender-based violence agendas are themselves under significant strain, even as their growing prominence has, in some contexts, unintentionally overshadowed child protection, with insufficient recognition of child protection systems as a critical foundation for preventing and responding to gender-based violence and violence against women and girls.

## Insights

### Leadership and governance as safeguarding and moral accountability

- Weak governance, reactive oversight, and ineffective leadership undermine credibility and resilience, particularly during fiscal strain.
- For families and communities, governance failures appear as closed doors, lost files, inaction, incoherent or absent case management and lack of follow-up.
- Strengthening leadership and governance is a safeguarding issue and a moral accountability issue, not merely an internal management concern.
- Participants stressed that leadership is less about position than purpose — guiding people, priorities, and resources toward shared goals for children's rights.
- Leadership must be grounded in advancing and safeguarding children's rights, particularly during periods of crisis and fiscal pressure.
- Stewardship refers to responsible management and safeguarding of systems, resources, and values to ensure long-term sustainability and public trust.

### Leadership tensions: technocratic reform versus moral and political imagination

- Participants highlighted a tension between technocratic reformers focused on efficiency and advocates calling for moral and political imagination to reconnect child protection with public conscience.
- Several observed that no one is carrying the moral outrage about what is happening to children and noted the need for leadership capable of expressing this — grounded in evidence, legitimacy, courage, and humility.
- Stewardship is multi-level rather than centralised, with functions shared across global, regional, national, and community organisations.

### Renewing stewardship across global, national, and local levels

- Renewal of stewardship at all levels was seen as essential.
- Leadership and stewardship must be ethical, inclusive, and nationally and locally grounded if they are to restore legitimacy and purpose.
- Participants called for stronger national leadership in global forums and for stewardship functions to be embedded across government, civil society, and communities.
- Declining trust among children and young people in institutions — including government, UN agencies, and international organisations — is both a symptom and a driver of weakened legitimacy.
- Rebuilding this trust is essential for restoring the moral authority of the child protection and care ecosystem.

### Variations in leadership capacity

- Leadership capacity is uneven across and within regions.
- Some countries demonstrate strong national or subnational leadership, while others face fragmented authority, weak decentralisation, or inconsistent political commitment.
- These variations shape system maturity and influence the degree to which stewardship can be shared across government and community leaders.

### Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Investment in leadership development, ethical governance, and peer-accountability mechanisms can help restore integrity and shared purpose across child protection and care. Strengthening cross-regional and inter-agency exchange, collaboration, and south–south learning will further enhance stewardship and coherence. These perspectives identify areas for Phase II collaboration, including joint exploration of leadership models, development of governance benchmarks, and creation of peer-learning and accountability mechanisms.

Participants also proposed three deep dives for Phase II: why child protection and care matter in the global agenda; where an integrated child protection and care system fits within social policy; and how they contribute through specific programmes. They encouraged new workstreams on climate, technology, and gender-based violence, and emphasised the inclusion of government, family, youth, and children’s voices in future conversations.

## 5. Cross-cutting themes emerging from the conversations

The conversations in this initial set of dialogues confirmed that the ten emerging insights offer a solid foundation for understanding the pressures, opportunities, and systemic challenges facing the child protection and care ecosystem. At the same time, participants emphasised the importance of stepping back to identify the deeper, cross-cutting issues that connect these insights and that could shape the direction of future reform. These issues

reflect the need for greater coherence across institutions and agendas; stronger national leadership and localisation for sustainability; a renewed narrative that positions child protection and care at the centre of development and humanitarian priorities; and a sense of urgency and direction as the sector moves from reflection to practical reform.

## **5.1 Coherence and integration across institutions and agendas**

Participants emphasised that coherence is essential at multiple levels of the child protection and care ecosystem. In this context, coherence refers to aligned purpose, clear complementarity of roles, and approaches that reinforce one another rather than duplicate across institutions and agendas. It differs from convergence, which relates to specific areas where actors choose to work more closely together on shared priorities; coherence is broader and concerns how systems function as a whole rather than collaboration around individual themes.

Fragmentation is not confined to one part of the system; it appears across different functions within child protection and care systems, and across the wider social development architecture. Child protection and care are foundational dimensions of both humanitarian action and development that overlap, but neither fully encompasses the other.

For the purposes of this initiative, the care function refers to the range of support provided by families, kinship networks, and alternative care arrangements, including family-based and, where necessary, residential care, that contribute to children's safety, wellbeing, and development. Child protection encompasses the statutory, policy, and professional functions that prevent and respond to harm and uphold children's rights. These are not parallel domains but complementary dimensions of a single system that must operate in an integrated and coherent manner.

Global debates about care reform have also contributed to fragmentation, including differing interpretations of deinstitutionalisation, varying emphases within care reform, and uneven reforms that result in families encountering multiple actors who do not share common principles, tools, or financing pathways.

Across these levels, participants highlighted the need for coherence not as uniformity or institutional merger but as converging approaches and strategies, aligned incentives, clear governance, and practical mechanisms that allow systems to reinforce one another. Strengthening coherence internally within child protection and care and externally across sectors and systems is fundamental to bridging gaps between policy and lived experience and ensuring that reform efforts deliver real impact for children and families.

## **5.2 National leadership and localisation for sustainability**

There was widespread agreement that sustainable progress depends on stronger national ownership, locally grounded leadership, and approaches shaped by local realities.

Participants emphasised that localisation looks different across regions and countries, requiring context-specific strategies reflecting differing political economies, institutional capacities, and the strength of national and subnational systems.

Strengthening national leadership was seen as essential for legitimacy and resilience, enabling countries to define their own priorities, institutional arrangements, and pathways for reform. Participants highlighted the need to invest in national institutions, systems, and domestic accountability structures while recognising that many countries face austerity, political volatility, and overstretched institutions. These differences reinforce the need for tailored context-aware approaches rather than uniform expectations about how localisation should proceed.

Localisation must move beyond rhetoric and involve practical shifts in power, resources, and alignment with national strategies, plans, and decision-making authority. Participants stressed that operationalising localisation remains a shared challenge: it requires clearer understanding of roles, responsibilities, sequencing, and resources for both national and external actors. They noted that power imbalances, competing incentives, and governance constraints can also arise within national systems, underscoring the need for balanced approaches.

Some participants also highlighted the central role of families, communities, and community-based organisations in providing the backbone of child protection and care and emphasised that localisation should strengthen, not replace or overburden, community-level efforts while ensuring these are connected to accountable statutory systems.

### **5.3 A reconstructed narrative that positions child protection and care at the centre of development and humanitarian priorities**

A recurring message from participants was the need for a reconstructed or redefined narrative that places child protection and care at the core of development and humanitarian priorities, including clearer articulation of the social and economic costs of violence against children and the returns of effective prevention and protection. Despite broad support for a systems-strengthening approach, the sector has struggled to communicate its purpose convincingly to national authorities, policymakers, other sectors, donors, and the public.

Participants highlighted the need for two complementary narratives: a candid internal narrative that confronts externally driven and siloed priorities and an outward-facing, accessible narrative that clearly explains how child protection and care contribute to human capital, social cohesion, resilience, and equity. These overarching narratives will need to be adapted for different audiences, including policymakers, donors, practitioners, and the public, using targeted communication that clarifies what child protection and care are, why they matter, and the forms of evidence that resonate with each group.

Participants proposed using Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child — linking survival, development, care, and child protection — as a unifying frame that demonstrates how child protection contributes to broader outcomes across sectors, including education, health, and social protection.

## **5.4 Urgency, direction, and the need to move from reflection to reform**

Participants conveyed a strong sense of urgency and emphasised that the ecosystem must “lean forward” in anticipation of a rapidly expanding scale of crises and shifts in political and social contexts. The number of children affected by conflict, displacement, climate-related shocks, and economic stressors is likely to increase significantly, requiring systems capable of withstanding pressures far greater than those faced today.

While participants valued reflection and learning, they stressed that the moment demands direction, prioritisation, and practical reform. Several highlighted that complexity should not deter ambition. Child protection and care are inherently complex fields and attempts to oversimplify them have often weakened credibility and impact. The task is not to reduce complexity but to design strategies that can navigate it, building integrated, resilient systems grounded in ethical leadership, evidence, and the lived experiences of children and families.

This sense of urgency forms the bridge between Phase I’s diagnostic insights and the need for practical approaches in the next phase of the initiative.

## **5.5 Other cross cutting issues**

Participants identified several cross-cutting issues. These include the expanding role of artificial intelligence and digital technologies, both as an opportunity to strengthen learning and early warning, and as a source of new risks linked to bias, privacy, and online exploitation, including the online spaces children and young people increasingly inhabit and associated shifts in behaviour, with implications for mental health and wellbeing, underscoring the need for shared ethical and governance frameworks across sectors. Participants also emphasised the need for a clearer, evidence-based narrative that distinguishes between internal reflection and outward-facing communication. Finally, they reaffirmed that coherence and localisation remain essential foundations for legitimacy and sustainability, rooted in national leadership, domestic financing, and community realities.

## **6. Critical questions (or themes) going forward**

The conversations surfaced a set of pointed questions that could help shape the road ahead for the protection and care ecosystem. Raised by participants across regions and institutions, these questions highlight both the sector’s unresolved dilemmas and its future possibilities. They offer a candid picture of where clarity is needed, where ambition must grow, and where the field must confront its own assumptions.

## 1. Systems strengthening and the CPSS case

“While the sector stands behind a CPSS approach, why has it been unevenly taken up and more difficult to secure sustained buy-in, particularly among donors and global financing actors, despite demonstrable government engagement and progress in system maturity in many contexts?”

- This question went beyond communication, pointing to issues of credibility, coherence, and confidence in explaining why systems strengthening matters and what difference it makes in practice, particularly to donors and global financing actors.
- It underscored how systems language can fall flat with external partners, even where governments have adopted CPSS and are demonstrating progress in system maturity..

## 2. Fragmentation and real-world impact

“Fragmentation is not only a structural problem — it’s about results and impact for children and families.”

- Participants asked whether observed disruption was occurring in communities “or within our own sector?”
- These questions pressed the group to examine whether fragmentation is lived reality or sector-generated, and to see it as a barrier to real-world results rather than a technical issue.

## 3. Duplication, reinvention, and cumulative learning

“Why does the sector continue to duplicate efforts or reinvent approaches rather than systematically building on existing services, evidence, and practice?”

- Participants raised concerns that repeated cycles of pilot projects, parallel systems, and new frameworks often fail to build on what already exists.
- They questioned why institutional incentives, funding modalities, and leadership arrangements appear to reward novelty over consolidation, learning, and scale.
- This prompted reflection on whether fragmentation is reinforced not only by coordination failures, but by structural barriers to cumulative learning and system continuity.

## 4. Purpose and ambition of the initiative

“Is Reimagining a Better Future for Children about plugging holes, or are we genuinely reimagining?”

- The question cut to whether the initiative is pursuing incremental adaptation within existing structures or setting a forward-looking agenda.
- It highlighted the sector’s tendency to oscillate between crisis response and short-term fixes despite the scale of need.

## 5. Leadership, legitimacy, and moral authority

“Leadership is absent — too few voices are carrying the moral outrage about what’s happening to children.”

- This reflection captured concerns about the absence of sustained political leadership and collective moral authority, despite the presence of individual advocates and champions..
- It raised questions about who speaks for children, how their voices are heard, and the need for leadership grounded in integrity, evidence, and public accountability.

## 6. Learning from other systems

“Health and education systems are complex and specialised, yet they function coherently — what can we learn from them?”

- Participants asked what child protection and care can learn from fields such as health and education.
- This encouraged reflection on governance, financing, and workforce models that allow other systems to cope with scale and scrutiny, while recognising that health and education benefit from sitting clearly under one Ministry and one sector.

## 7. Local realities and lived experience

“Local actors don’t make the same distinctions we do between care and protection.”

- This highlighted that some entrenched sector debates do not resonate at community level.
- It emphasised the need for framing rooted in how families, communities, and service providers actually experience children’s care and protection.

## 8. Complexity and honest framing

“Complexity shouldn’t frighten us — child protection and care are inherently complex fields.”

- Participants cautioned that oversimplifying frameworks or narratives may undermine understanding and credibility.
- There was a call for honesty and confidence in naming complexity.

## 9. Communicating with different audiences

“Two narratives are needed — one honest and internal, the other outward-looking to government and donors.”

- Participants recognised that internal conversations require candour about deficits, while external communication must remain clear, credible, and forward-looking.

## 10. Rights-based framing

“Article 6 of the CRC could help frame how survival, development, care, and protection interconnect.”

- Rights language re-emerged as a unifying frame.
- This pointed to a more integrated rights-based foundation for explaining the ecosystem’s contribution to children’s well-being.

## 11. Looking to the future

“Are we leaning forward enough? Are we really looking to the future?”

- This was paired with a warning that the number of humanitarian crises, and the scale of need, will likely grow three- to four-fold.
- The message was clear: systems built today must withstand pressures far greater than those faced now.

Taken together, these questions serve as both challenge and invitation: to look deeper, think more boldly, and confront the sector’s most difficult dilemmas honestly. They provide a compass for the next phase of work, ensuring the initiative moves beyond diagnosis toward a shared, forward-leaning agenda for reform, investment, and collective action.

## 7. Next steps

As outlined in the concept paper, this initiative was established to take stock of the current crisis, reassess priorities, and support a more unified vision for child protection and care. Its longer-term aim is to strengthen the capacity of governments, civil society, and international development partners to uphold children’s right to protection and care. With this synthesis, Phase I is complete, bringing together shared insights, evidence, and common challenges to guide a forward-looking agenda for reform, investment, and action.

### Phase I outcomes

- Drew on strategic conversations, individual reflections, and collective analysis.
- Identified shared challenges and surfaced common priorities.
- Built the knowledge base required for subsequent phases.
- Findings will now be reviewed by the HDPI Child Protection Reference Group and inform planning for Phase II.

### Phase II priorities

- Focus on learning, innovation, and co-creation.
- Mapping of key literature and initiatives seeking to shape the child protection and care ecosystem.
- Continue strategic conversations with regional, national, and subnational actors.
- Facilitate deeper problem-solving, sector dialogues, workshops, and case studies documenting effective and emerging approaches.
- Use these activities to shape engagement across all levels.

- Ensure the realisation of children’s rights remains central to strengthening protection and care systems.

### Phase III focus

- Consolidate results from earlier phases.
- Prepare final outputs and validate them with participants.
- Support targeted dissemination linked to key policy moments.
- Produce clear, actionable outputs, including a vision paper or synthesis product, a stakeholder validation process, and donor briefings.

### Implementation considerations

- Maintain an adaptive timeline responsive to participant availability, policy opportunities, and resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Additional insights were drawn from related exchanges, including discussions with donors, practitioners, researchers, and participation in global and regional forums such as the ISPCAN Rise Up Policy Forum and the launch of the UK Government’s Global Charter on Care Reform. This diversity of perspectives has deepened understanding of the policy and institutional contexts in which protection and care systems are evolving.

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