Reimagining a Better Future for Children

A joint learning and action initiative to strengthen protection and care



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Phase 1

STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS

Insights on the Global Child Protection and Care Crisis

Synthesis of Phase 1
February 2026

HDPI Child Protection Reference Group

HDPI - https://hdpi.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction: A critical inflection point for child protection and care

Child protection and care systems globally are entering a decisive moment. Across regions and contexts, converging fiscal pressures, political volatility, institutional restructuring, and rising risks to children are revealing that the current funding crisis is not only acute, but reflective of deeper weaknesses in how these systems are designed, governed, and sustained. This is not a temporary downturn, but a structural change — one that calls for a reassessment of child protection and care systems as a core public function, embedded within communities and sustained by accountable public institutions. In this context, the task is not simply to manage contraction, but to re-examine how child protection and care functions are anchored within public responsibility — and how these systems are financed, governed, and strengthened at local and national levels.

In response to this moment, this synthesis draws on strategic conversations with global and regional leaders held between June and December 2025, undertaken as Phase I of Reimagining a Better Future for Children, a joint learning and action initiative to strengthen child protection and care. The initiative aims to help leaders move beyond short-term coping strategies and towards more fundamental questions about system capability and sustainability, recognising that incremental adjustments are no longer sufficient, and that the choices made now will shape whether child protection and care are treated as discretionary interventions — or upheld as enduring public functions essential to social legitimacy, cohesion, and long-term development.

This summary reflects what participants shared through a listening-first approach. It is intentionally forward-looking rather than prescriptive, aiming to surface shared diagnoses and strategic implications across diverse contexts as the field considers its next phase of work.

2. Shared diagnosis among global leaders

Strategic conversations held as Phase I of the Reimagining a Better Future for Children initiative revealed strong convergence around a common set of pressures shaping the child protection sector. There was consistent recognition of system contraction and growing fragility; fragmentation and loss of coherence across actors and mandates; weak political traction for child rights; and heavy reliance on external financing and parallel delivery structures, alongside the increasing entanglement of aid and financing with geopolitical priorities.

Across contexts, these pressures were understood not simply as a funding crisis, but as symptoms of deeper challenges in system ownership, investment, and alignment. In many cases, current shocks were described as exposing underlying fragilities, rather than creating them.

For children and families, this fragmentation is not experienced as a policy debate or institutional dilemma. It is felt as confusion, absence, inconsistency, and loss of trust — and, in some contexts, the loss of life-saving child protection services. Where systems lack coherence, responsibility is blurred and accountability weakens, with the consequences borne most heavily by those the system is meant to serve.

3. Child protection and care are core societal functions

The discussions point toward strong convergence: child protection and care need to be positioned as core societal functions, rather than treated as discretionary or project-based interventions. Child protection and care systems were consistently described as embedded within communities, with accountability extending from local to national levels.

These dynamics indicate that child protection and care functions are inherently child-centred, child rights-based and family-focused, reflecting the lived reality that families and communities do not experience ‘care’ and ‘protection’ as separate domains. Their legitimacy and effectiveness depend on meaningful engagement with communities and on public institutions that are visible, trusted, and accountable.

When systems are weak or fragmented, costs are borne by families, communities, and future generations. When systems are coherent and capable, they reinforce the legitimacy, resilience, and cohesion necessary for societies to function and flourish. Viewed through this lens, the analysis points to a reframing of child protection and care — not as specialised sectoral concerns, but as matters of public governance and development, requiring sustained investment, political commitment, and accountability across national and subnational levels.

4. Coherence across humanitarian and development contexts

Across the conversations, a consistent theme emerged regarding the way child protection and care operate in humanitarian and development contexts. Children and families do not experience risk, protection, or care as context-specific or time-bound; they experience crisis, displacement, recovery, and protracted uncertainty as lived realities. When institutional arrangements divide responsibility for children into separate funding streams and mandates, the consequences are severe, particularly in humanitarian settings where child protection is life-saving.

This separation — expressed through parallel coordination structures, distinct financing instruments, and differing accountability frameworks — results in fragmented planning, discontinuity of support, and short-term interventions that are difficult to sustain. In such settings, gains achieved during humanitarian response phases often dissipate once emergency financing runs dry, while longer-term systems strengthening efforts struggle to take root in contexts of chronic and high vulnerability.

These dynamics suggest that the humanitarian-development divide is not a reflection of lived realities of children and families but a result of institutional incoherence. Where continuity of responsibility is weak, children and families experience disruption of critical services and standards of care, often without clear pathways of accountability.

Viewed through this lens, coherence across humanitarian and development contexts emerges as critical to strengthening child protection and care. This does not imply a uniform approach, but rather the alignment of roles, responsibilities, and accountability in diverse national and local contexts.

Where such coherence is present, systems are better positioned to absorb shocks, maintain essential functions, and protect relationships of trust with children, families, and communities.

5. The social service workforce: A shift to national and local child protection and care

Workforce instability, loss of financing, and declining political attention were identified as contributing to system contraction, undermining continuity and trust. The pressures facing child protection and care at local, national, and global levels were widely seen as requiring informed and contextualised shifts in how systems are conceived and sustained.

The social service workforce was consistently identified as the backbone of system credibility and continuity. Fragmentation was identified as both a technical and a moral challenge, particularly where responsibilities are dispersed across multiple actors without clear accountability. At the same time, a clear distinction emerged between localisation understood as the delegation of tasks, and localisation understood as a transformation of the system itself, one in which accountability for child protection and care directly engages children and families while remaining embedded within national systems of authority and financial responsibility.

Taken together, these perspectives reflect a movement away from treating child protection and care as a collection of programmes responding to risk, and toward an understanding of child protection and care as enduring systems that require local and national stewardship and long-term investment. While these shifts will necessarily vary by culture and context, the overall direction calls for coherence and a common approach. The ten insights presented in the next section articulate core directions that emerged from the strategic conversations. The full synthesis report provides a detailed analysis and exploration of these insights and presents unresolved questions identified in strategic conversations.

Ten Insights

1. **From contraction to renewal:** Participants observed that decades of progress in systems building, policy reform, and evidence generation are at risk as bilateral funding declines, human rights erode, and governments reprioritise domestic spending. Children are often the first to experience the consequences of system stress. Participants emphasised that sustaining child protection and care requires rethinking how systems are supported, governed, and financed, with greater emphasis on resilience, adaptability, and investment in local social service workforce capacity.

2. **From fragmentation to coherence:** Fragmentation appears within child protection and care, and in the wider social development system. Fragmentation causes gaps in service delivery, inconsistent referral pathways for children, duplication, and unclear accountability. Strengthening coherence across child protection and care was viewed as essential to effective service delivery and equitable, rights-based outcomes for children.

3. **Localisation as transformation, not delegation:** Participants described localisation as grounded in national ownership, public accountability, and sustainable systems. Participants cautioned that shifting responsibility without predictable financing and training to support the social welfare workforce risks tokenism and dependency. Localisation must be understood as long-term transformation, shifting ownership and responsibilities to local actors, with transitional support as needed.

4. **Making child protection and care central to development:** Participants described difficulties in communicating the centrality of child protection and care to decision-makers. The current crisis is viewed as an opportunity to reframe and strengthen child protection and care priorities.

5. **Building sustainable systems:** The shift in child protection from issue-based to systems-based approaches has been a significant achievement, with the social service workforce affirmed as a cornerstone of sustainable child protection and care systems. Essential elements include workforce well-being, supervision supporting ethical and accountable practice, and fair, predictable remuneration.

6. **Reclaiming leadership in humanitarian action:** Participants noted that child protection is losing visibility and influence in humanitarian action due to reductions in funding and organisational restructuring that has weakened coordination, technical capacity, and the ability to deliver essential services. Participants stressed the importance of reaffirming the life-saving role of child protection and accountability to affected populations, particularly in rapidly changing humanitarian environments.

7. **Trust and legitimacy as system characteristics:** Participants described meaningful community engagement as essential for community-level trust and legitimacy. Participants highlighted the importance of protecting civic space, upholding child rights, and ensuring that civil society organisations can participate fully and independently. It is important to recognize the limits of community resilience and acknowledge that accountability ultimately rests with the state.

8. **Data governance as accountability:** Data on violence, exploitation, and neglect are incomplete and often disconnected from national planning. Participants noted that digital governance frameworks are often underdeveloped and lack the capacity to regulate, monitor, and enforce protection. Data governance is understood not only as a technical requirement but as a foundation for accountability and trust, including ethical oversight of digital and AI-enabled systems.

9. **Coherence across the humanitarian-development continuum:** Participants noted that children do not experience risk in distinct phases; they move through cycles of disruption and recovery that require consistent support. When institutional arrangements separate humanitarian and development systems through different funding streams, coordination structures, and timelines, it leads to disjointed and unsustainable gains, specifically in humanitarian contexts where child protection is life-saving. They noted the importance of governance arrangements that support shared planning and integrated responses but emphasised that such models require long-term commitment and coordination with local actors.

10. **Reasserting leadership in a sector under strain:** Participants emphasised the importance of leadership for moral accountability and safeguarding human rights, not only as a managerial function. They highlighted the contributions of younger professionals who bring energy and innovation, and noted that experienced leadership is needed to navigate complexities in real time and to maintain continuity in the long-term.