Reimaginng a Better Future for Children

A joint learning and action initiative to strengthen protection and care





STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS

Insights on the Global Child Protection and Care Crisis

Synthesis of Phase 1

20 January 2026

HDPI Child Protection Reference Group

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Acknowledgements

Participants in the dialogues

Appreciation is expressed for the many individuals who contributed to the strategic conversations that informed this synthesis. Their depth of insight, honesty, and willingness to reflect on difficult issues shaped the collective understanding presented in this report.

HDPI Child Protection Reference Group

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Overview

Decades of progress in global protection and care of children is at risk due to unprecedented strain, 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. The Reimagining a Better Future for Children initiative emerged in direct response to urgent concerns about the pressures affecting the protection and care of children and the systems responsible for keeping them safe from harm.

The HDPI initiative Reimagining a Better Future for Children: A joint learning and action initiative to strengthen protection and care, aims to support deeper thinking and practical action across the child protection and care ecosystem. This synthesis report is the product of Phase I of the initiative and presents findings from 20 strategic conversations with global and regional leaders from key networks and agencies working in child protection and care. These strategic conversations and related consultations[1] took place between June and December 2025 and sought to identify critical issues facing the field. Phase I is the first step in a longer process that seeks to develop a unified vision for child protection and care. More information about this initiative is outlined in the concept note and next steps are presented in the conclusion section of this report.[2]



In this synthesis 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. The concept of child protection encompasses the statutory, policy, and professional functions that prevent and respond to harm and uphold children's rights. The care function refers to the range of support provided by families, kinship networks, and alternative care arrangements, and, where necessary, residential care, that contribute to children's safety, wellbeing, and development.

Participants who took part in strategic conversations conducted as part of Phase I and summarised in this synthesis report described pressures facing child protection and care in concrete and practical terms, including 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. Participants 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. Participants suggested that fragmentation was not an abstract policy concern, but had direct impact on the lived reality of children and their families, leading to 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.

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 reimagined. This synthesis summarises what participants shared during 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. This synthesis is being shared with participants to confirm accuracy, support reflection, and sustain engagement.

Context

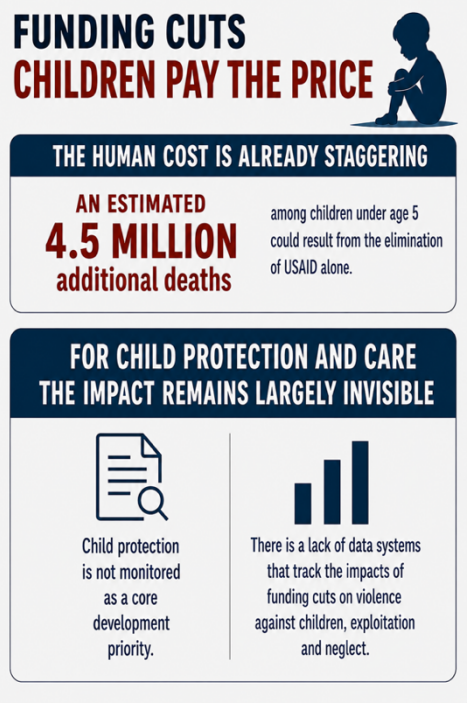
Unprecedented global crisis, financial retrenchment, shrinking aid flows, shifting institutional mandates, and rising political and economic volatility are eroding decades of progress in child protection, care and care reform, and broader social development. [3]As governments confront demographic and 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, under-resourced ministries and departments with multiple competing mandates.[4]

> **Complexity shouldn't frighten us - child protection and care are inherently complex fields.**
> –a participant

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 (CRC),[5] yet one billion children experience some form of emotional, physical, or sexual violence every year, and one child dies from violence every seven minutes.[6] In fragile settings, girls face extreme risks, with

slightly more than 1 in 4 experiencing sexual assault or rape.[7] Between 5 million and 6 million children (aged 0 -18 years) worldwide are estimated to live in institutions, rather than in family-based care.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] These conditions can drive harmful coping strategies that expose children to heightened risk, including child labour, hazardous work, early marriage, and unnecessary family separation, 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.[11]

Recent global aid reductions are intensifying these challenges and are predicted to reverse decades of progress in child survival, health, protection, education, and nutrition.[12] Simultaneously, domestic investments in child protection and care are contracting globally, further weakening already overstretched systems,[13] 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.[14] 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 (CPSS), and address violence against children.[15] 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.

Participants in ongoing 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 were invited because of their expertise and

leadership in child protection and care and are affiliated with leading organisations, including: 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 an academic institution.

Many participants took part in the strategic conversations as representatives of their organisations, 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.

Scope and limitations

This synthesis reflects the contributions of global and regional participants of key child protection and care agencies and networks 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 represented. These 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 and this report is descriptive of participants' reflections 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.

Ten findings

Ten findings emerged from individual conversations with participants then were reviewed with all who participated on 4 November 2025. Participants confirmed that these ten insights broadly reflect the key pressures, opportunities, and systemic challenges affecting the protection and care ecosystem. 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

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, and 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 are 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.

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 methods of sustaining child protection and care; some methods reflect resilience through decentralised service delivery and strengthened community networks and other methods are more short-term.

- 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 reductions in spending 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 in the way child protection and care are financed, governed, and delivered could indicate national systems stepping into rightful leadership; or they could signal international retreat and increased risk shifted to families, communities, non-governmental organisations (NGO), 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, and can be understood as aligned purpose, clear complementarity of roles, and mutually reinforcing approaches across institutions and agendas. Coherence differs from convergence, which relates to specific areas where organisations choose to work more closely together on shared priorities. Fragmentation can be understood as the proliferation of diverse actors, competing agendas, and uncoordinated funding mechanisms, and is one of the sector's most persistent weaknesses — visible in duplicative projects, inconsistent messaging, and the proliferation of sub-sectors and frameworks that pull governments and partners in competing directions.

Decades of overlapping agendas, earmarked funding, donor-driven single-issue initiatives, and competing coordination mechanisms have increased fragmentation and created confusion for policymakers, practitioners, and families and communities. 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. Protection and care frequently operate separately and 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.

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. 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 a technical, political, and moral loss

- Fragmentation is a technical barrier and a loss of shared purpose and shared language.
- Parallel global agendas, donor-driven funding streams, and overlapping coordination mechanisms reinforce fragmentation.
- 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 framework 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

- Coherence is needed 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. There is need for a common narrative to connect the field's diverse specialisations and strengthen credibility with governments and donors. Future work could be framed within broader arcs of renewal, coherence, and transformation.

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. It may be beneficial to explore 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 international non-governmental organisations (INGO), and international financial mechanisms, particularly where external assistance continues to play a significant role. National and subnational governments and local civil society organisations (CSO) lack predictable funding, and compliance systems privilege international intermediaries, limiting the space for nationally led reform. Smaller organisations and community leaders are often over-burdened by compliance requirements without the resources, sequencing, and support needed to manage these responsibilities sustainably, while also recognising that some contexts have stronger domestic systems and well-established local actors facing localisation challenges.

Insights

Local leadership, power sharing, and accountability

- 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 is 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

- Localisation needs to be defined in practical terms: roles, capacity, resources, authority, and accountability must align at the local level.
- The goal of localisation should be "domesticisation": the progressive transfer of decision making, financing, and accountability to national and subnational institutions, reducing reliance on external actors and funding over time.
- International and regional bodies have a legitimate catalytic role, 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, highlighting lived experiences in local and national contexts as a form of accountability.

Addressing deeper challenges and uneven progress

- 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 community-based organisations (CBO) 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

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. Opportunities for Phase II collaboration includes: documentation of locally led innovations; identification of practical models for sequencing support to smaller organisations; and guidance on aligning roles and accountability across community, civil society, and government agencies.

4 Child protection and care as governance, legitimacy, and stability

Challenge

Child protection and care are interdependent functions of an integrated national system for children's safety and wellbeing but are often misunderstood. 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 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.
- The field's technical language often distances it from the political conversations and public opinion it needs to influence.

Integrating child protection and care into national development agendas

- Greater integration of child protection and care is needed within national development planning, public-sector reform, and human capital strategies.
- Without public visibility and accountability, technical reforms alone will not shift political incentives or ensure attention to children's rights.
- Analysis of the health and education sectors may be useful, as these sectors have complex mandates yet maintain coherence, political traction, and sustained financing, often supported by clear ministerial anchoring.

Addressing political backlash and reaffirming rights

- The rise of right leaning populist and conservative social movements is resulting in narrowed definitions of family, limitations on the discourse around caregiving arrangements, and a framing of 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.
- 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. It is imperative to have public communication that combines moral clarity with evidence-based demonstration of measurable returns, strengthened social cohesion, and the costs of inaction. Opportunities for Phase II collaboration include: 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, Gross Domestic Product (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

- One defining achievement is a conceptual shift from an issue-based approach to a systems-based approach.
  - 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 is central to system continuity, extending beyond formal social workers to community workers and volunteers who often act as first points of contact.
- Essential elements needed in a child protection and care workforce include 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

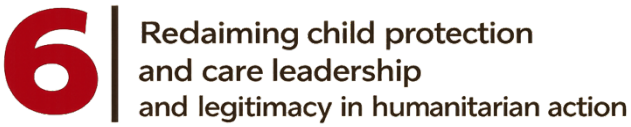
- Maturity of child protection and care systems differs not only between countries but within them.
- Workforce capacity, referral systems, and thresholds vary between urban and rural areas, provinces, districts, and communities.
- These differences create uneven access to support and inconsistent implementation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

Adapting systems to volatility

- Systems need to be able to adapt to volatility with tools that support prevention of harm, 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.
- "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. Opportunities for Phase II collaboration include: comparative analysis of minimum service packages; peer learning on costed benchmarks; development of communication tools showing how systems function; and development of methods for assessing functional system capacity under fiscal and environmental constraints.



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. Clearer direction and a nucleus capable of uniting

humanitarian and development perspectives is needed in the current context in which there is a leadership vacuum.

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 have 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 are 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.
- There is a need for renewed global and regional coordination and leadership and nationally owned systems capable of responding to crises and sustaining child protection functions.
- Both global and regional coordination and nationally owned systems are foundational and non-negotiable.

Workforce well-being and ethical concerns

- Prolonged crises take a psychosocial toll on children, caregivers, and frontline staff.
- Workforce well-being, including supervision, psychosocial support, and clear ethical guidance, are a humanitarian concern.
- Abrupt project closures that leave children without support or referral are ethical concerns.
- Transition planning and continuity protocols are core safeguards during funding contraction or recovery.

Divergent views on cluster reform and leadership

- Structural changes and cluster reform have weakened global child protection leadership. However, national ownership and clearly defined mandates can sustain child protection and care priorities across humanitarian and development settings.
- Leadership at the global and national levels must be forward-looking, accountable, and 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.
- This type of internal divide requires adaptable models that allow responsibilities, data analysis, and referral pathways to adjust to differing environments.
- Regions affected by protracted crises pursue systems development very differently from more stable areas.

Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

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. Opportunities for Phase II collaboration include 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 as foundational to system effectiveness

Challenge

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 CSOs 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 are 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.

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.
- Communities may be empowered by assuming child protection and care roles, however this tends to be the result of withdrawal by the state, national CSOs, and international organisations.
- 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 with 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 CSOs 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 CSOs and independent actors cannot operate freely or access resources, mechanisms for monitoring 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. Opportunities for Phase II collaboration include: 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.

8 Data governance as accountability and learning

Challenge

Data on child protection and care remain fragmented, uneven, and have been severely affected by cutbacks in US funding and technical assistance and reductions in aid budgets by major donors. Research on the effectiveness of child protection and care response is limited, and reporting remains process- and activity-focused rather than outcome- and results-focused. 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.

Data and technology-related challenges span 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 (AI) 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

- 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.
- Findings from data collection and analysis should be validated 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

- 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.
- AI and digital technologies represent both opportunities and threats to children and their families.
- 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 harm.
- Proactive governance and cross-sectoral frameworks are needed to bring together child protection, digital policy, education, and justice to ensure coherent standards and safeguards.

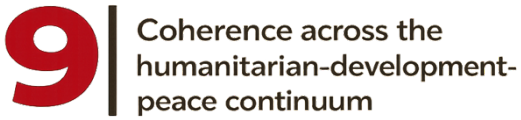
Uneven national data capacity

- 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. Opportunities for Phase II collaboration include: 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 are practical areas where collective inquiry could help countries improve data quality, governance, and safe use of digital tools.



Challenge

The long-standing divide between child protection and care systems in humanitarian vs development contexts continues 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. This problem is compounded in countries with both humanitarian and stable contexts, creating wide variation in system performance. 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

- The separation between humanitarian and development systems is largely artificial from a child and family perspective but remains a reality imposed by governments, the UN, and international organisations.
- Coherence across humanitarian and development systems 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 systems-building must occur before these areas can be bridged.
- Complexity must be embraced through a coherent, integrated system. Separating humanitarian and development functions risks weakening overall system performance.

Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

Methods of strengthening coherence across the humanitarian–development–peace continuum include: 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. This work should

align with related agendas such as addressing gender-based violence, climate resilience, and social policy, including social service workforce strengthening that cuts across the humanitarian–development–peace continuum. Coherence is essential for long-term resilience because it enables systems to support children and families in consistent, predictable, and accountable ways. Opportunities for Phase II collaboration include: 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. Fatigue and anxiety are widespread in the sector, 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. Leadership pressures affect child protection and care systems as a whole, underscoring the need for unified stewardship. Pressures are experienced unevenly across leadership levels, with turnover, workload pressures, and resource constraints disproportionately affecting those responsible for day-to-day management and supervision.

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, oversight that responds to problems only after they emerge, 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 both a safeguarding issue and 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

- Tension exists between technocratic reformers focused on efficiency and advocates calling for moral and political imagination to reconnect child protection with public conscience.
- No one is carrying the moral outrage about what is happening to children and those in leadership positions have the responsibility to express outrage — 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 is essential.
- Leadership and stewardship must be ethical, inclusive, and nationally and locally grounded if they are to restore legitimacy and purpose.
- National leadership in global forums must be robust and stewardship functions must 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.

Participant-identified opportunities and directions for further inquiry

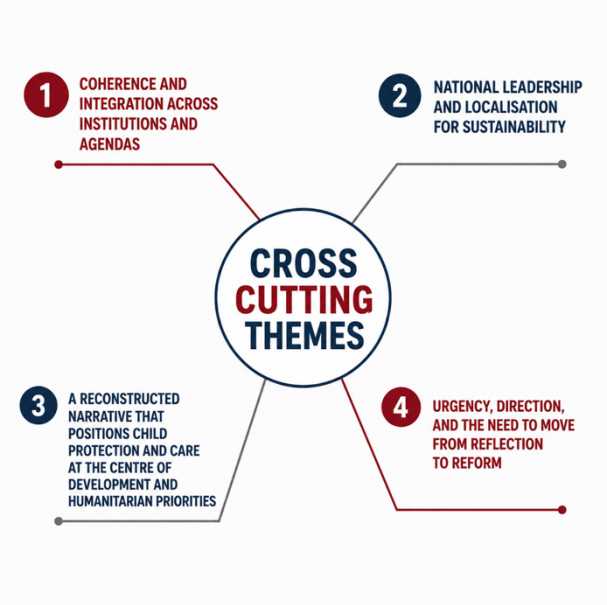
Investment in leadership development, ethical governance, and peer-accountability mechanisms can help restore integrity and shared purpose across child protection and care. Strengthening cross-regional and inter-agency exchange, collaboration, and south–south learning will further enhance stewardship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

Participants proposed three deep dives for Phase II: why child protection and care matter in the global agenda; where integrated child protection and care systems fit within social policy; and how child protection and care systems contribute through specific programmes. Participants also 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.

Cross-cutting themes

While the ten emerging insights presented above offer a solid foundation for understanding the pressures, opportunities, and systemic challenges facing the child protection and care ecosystem, participants also 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, including: 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. This section presents these cross-cutting issues identified by participants.



1. Coherence and integration across institutions and agendas

Global debates about care reform have contributed to fragmentation, including differing interpretations of deinstitutionalization, 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. However, child protection and care are overlapping foundational dimensions of both humanitarian action and development and a coherent approach to integrating child protection and care into multiple levels of the child protection and care ecosystem is essential. These are not parallel domains but rather

complementary dimensions of a single system that must operate in an integrated and coherent manner.

Coherence should not be understood as uniformity or an institutional merger but 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.

2. National leadership and localisation for sustainability

Sustainable progress depends on stronger national ownership, locally grounded leadership, and approaches shaped by local realities. 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 is essential for legitimacy and resilience, enabling countries to define their own priorities, institutional arrangements, and pathways for reform. Investment in national institutions, systems, and domestic accountability structures is needed, even 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. Operationalising localisation remains a shared challenge: it requires clearer understanding of roles, responsibilities, sequencing, and resources for both national and external actors. Power imbalances, competing incentives, and governance constraints can also arise within national systems, underscoring the need for balanced approaches.

Families, communities, and CBOs play a central role in providing the backbone of child protection and care and localisation should strengthen, not replace or overburden, community-level efforts while ensuring these are connected to accountable statutory systems.

3. A reconstructed narrative that positions child protection and care at the centre of development and humanitarian priorities

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. In order to place child protection and care at the core of development and humanitarian priorities, the sector must develop a reconstructed or redefined narrative that includes clearer articulation of the social and economic costs of violence against children and the returns of effective prevention and protection.

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

Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child can be used as a unifying framework that demonstrates how child protection contributes to broader outcomes across sectors, including education, health, and social protection.

4. Urgency, direction, and the need to move from reflection to reform

In anticipation of a rapidly expanding scale of crises and shifts in political and social contexts, the ecosystem must "lean forward". 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 reflection and learning are valuable, the moment demands direction, prioritisation, and practical reform. 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.

Other cross cutting issues

Several additional cross-cutting issues were highlighted in consultations and should be mentioned. These include the expanding role of AI 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. The risks in online spaces children and young people increasingly inhabit, have implications for mental health and wellbeing, underscoring the need for shared ethical and governance frameworks across sectors. Development of a clearer, evidence-based narrative that makes a distinction between internal reflection and outward-facing communication is needed. Finally, coherence and localisation remain essential foundations for legitimacy and sustainability, rooted in national leadership, domestic financing, and community realities.

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.

> **Are we leaning forward enough?**
>
> **Are we really looking to the future?**
>
> –a participant

Phase I outcomes

- Strategic conversations, individual reflections, and collective analysis have identified shared challenges and common priorities, built the knowledge base required for subsequent phases, and will inform the next steps.

- Findings will be reviewed by the HDPI Child Protection Reference Group and inform planning for Phase II.

Phase II priorities

- Build on insights from Phase I which drew on 20 strategic conversations with global and regional leaders, complemented by wider consultations, to examine pressures affecting child protection and care systems, including in humanitarian and crisis contexts.
- Map key literature and initiatives seeking to shape the child protection and care ecosystem.
- Global and regional thematic dialogues with regional, national, and subnational actors will enable deeper analysis of key systemic issues affecting child protection and care, including governance, financing, institutional coherence, workforce capacity, public responsibility, community engagement and equity across humanitarian and development contexts.
- Small thematic inquiry groups involving members of the Child Protection Reference Group, Advisory Board, and selected partners will help guide analysis and reflection across priority themes emerging from Phase I and ongoing dialogue during implementation.
- A limited country testing process in one selected context will be undertaken to help refine aspects of the methodology and partnership approach.
- Country lenses will examine how these issues play out within specific political and institutional contexts at national and sub-national levels. Rather than producing comprehensive country case studies, country lenses will use selected contexts to explore specific themes and system dynamics across different settings.
- Learning emerging across the three components will be consolidated through the convening process to refine shared understanding and help prepare the foundations for Phase Three.

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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[1] 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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