

# DEVELOPING A CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM FRAMEWORK.

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*March 2026*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Although there is wide support for the systems approach in child protection, there is no generally accepted framework describing the child protection. Therefore, this paper proposes the following Child Protection Systems Framework:

### CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

#### SYSTEM BUILDING BLOCKS



ACCESS

COVERAGE

CO-ORDINATION

SERVICES

CHILD-CENTRED

QUALITY

SAFETY

#### OVERALL GOALS / OUTCOMES

SAFE FAMILIES &amp; COMMUNITIES

SAFE &amp; THRIVING CHILDREN

PREVENTION MAXIMISED

RESPONSIVE &amp; TRUSTED SERVICES

EFFICIENT &amp; SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS

It is envisaged that:

- The Framework will provide a coherent, easily communicated definition of the child protection system, which can support efforts across governments to get recognition as a distinctive sector.
- The Framework will provide a benchmark for mapping national child protection systems, performing gap analyses and exploring how the different components need to work together.
- The Framework will guide the development of strategic child protection systems strengthening interventions – like the *Framework for Action*.
- The Framework highlights the importance of adopting a systems approach to child protection, countering the fragmentation often caused by issue-based programming and funding.
- The Framework will facilitate building a strong narrative for investments in strengthening the child protection system and so move the emphasis in funding away from a narrow issue-by-issue basis.

For the Child Protection System Framework to become an authoritative global benchmark it would need to be endorsed and championed by UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision, Plan International and the many other organisations working on child protection issues. Who is up for the challenge of moving this forward?

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## List of Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Definition                     |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| CP           | child protection               |
| SSW          | social service workforce       |
| UN           | United Nations                 |
| UNICEF       | United Nations Children's Fund |
| WHO          | World Health Organisation      |

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Is there a common understanding of what a child protection system is? What are its key building blocks? How do the parts work together? What does the system aim to deliver? What are its main attributes?

A conference on *A Better Way to Protect ALL Children* held in 2013 put forward a definition of a child protection system, but then concluded that “the lack of agreed terms and definitions continues to plague the child protection field”<sup>1</sup> Have things changed since then? Not really. UNICEF’s 2021 paper on Child Protection Systems Strengthening<sup>2</sup> uses the same definition.

This paper presents a proposal for a Child Protection System Framework. The aim is to provide a systematic description of the building blocks, goals and desirable attributes of the child protection system to serve as a reference point for mapping child protection systems and analyses for strengthening such systems. This framework was inspired by the WHO Health System Framework.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 DEFINING THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

The UNICEF *Child Protection Strategy* of 2008 defines a child protection system as:

the set of laws, policies, regulations and services needed across all social sectors – especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice – to support prevention and response to protection-related risks. These systems are part of social protection and extend beyond. At the level of prevention, their aim includes supporting and strengthening families to reduce social exclusion, and to lower the risk of separation, violence and exploitation. Responsibilities are often spread across government agencies, with services delivered by local authorities, non-State providers, and community groups, making coordination between sectors and levels, including routine referral systems, a necessary component of effective child protection systems.<sup>4</sup>

At the conference on *A Better Way to Protect ALL Children*, Susan Bissel noted that in preparation for the conference a range of organisations agreed that a child protection system can be defined as:

Certain formal and informal structures, functions and capacities that have been assembled to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children.<sup>5</sup>

She then added that:

A CP system is generally agreed to be comprised of the following components: human resources, finance, laws and policies, governance, monitoring and data collection as well as protection and response services and care management. It also includes different actors – children, families, communities, those working at subnational or national level and those working internationally. Most important are the relationships and interactions between and among these components and these actors within the system. It is the outcomes of these interactions that comprise the system.<sup>6</sup>

The *Framework for Action* (2024) puts forward the following definition:

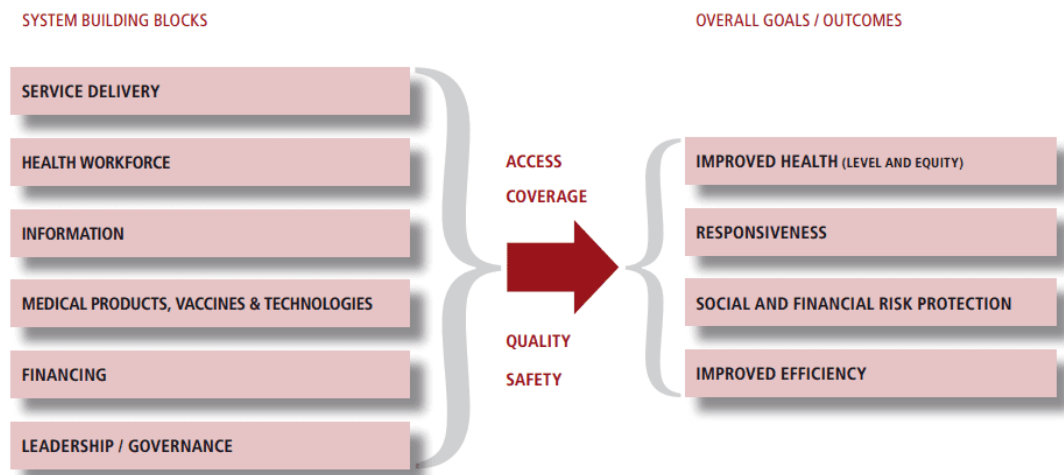
A child protection system can be defined as the informal and formal laws, policies, regulations, services and support that are needed across multiple sectors to prevent and respond to the violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children.<sup>7</sup>

These definitions reference many system components without providing details. The first two are also dated, while the third is too brief. More recent work on child protection and child protection system strengthening mention additional elements. For example:

- UNICEF's *Child Protection Systems Strengthening* (2021)<sup>8</sup> identifies seven intermediate outcomes of its strategy to strengthen child protection systems which are analogous to building blocks
  - Legal and policy frameworks
  - Governance and coordination structures
  - A continuum of services
  - Minimum standards and oversight mechanisms
  - Human, financial and infrastructure resources
  - Mechanisms for child participation and community engagement
  - Data collection and monitoring systems.
- *The Framework for Action* (2024),<sup>9</sup> an interagency initiative led by UNICEF, Save the Children and World Vision, sets out six priority actions “to make national child protection systems stronger and more inclusive for all children”. These actions are arranged across six areas as follows:
  - *Policy and Legislation:* Adopt and implement laws and policies that protect all children from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and harmful practices in all contexts.
  - *Governance and Coordination:* Establish and invest in a dedicated lead government agency for child protection with authority to coordinate child protection across sectors at national and subnational levels.
  - *Human and Financial Resources:* Establish and invest in a diverse, qualified and well-supported child protection social service workforce.
  - *Continuum of Services:* Provide a continuum of child protection prevention, early intervention and response services. Support parents and caregivers to care for their children and prevent unnecessary separation.
  - *Child and Community Participation:* Engage children and communities in decisions and actions aimed at eliminating violence against children.
  - *Data and Evidence:* Enhance government data systems to improve planning, programming and policies to prevent and respond to violence against children.

These initiatives are clearly working from an implicit systems framework which explains the common elements. However, their focus is on proposing actions for system strengthening, rather than defining the key building blocks of the child protection system. Indeed, there is no generally accepted equivalent to the WHO's *Health System Framework* for child protection.

### THE WHO HEALTH SYSTEM FRAMEWORK



Source: World Health Organisation, *Everybody's business — Strengthening health systems to improve health outcomes. WHO's framework for action.* Geneva, World Health Organization, 2007.

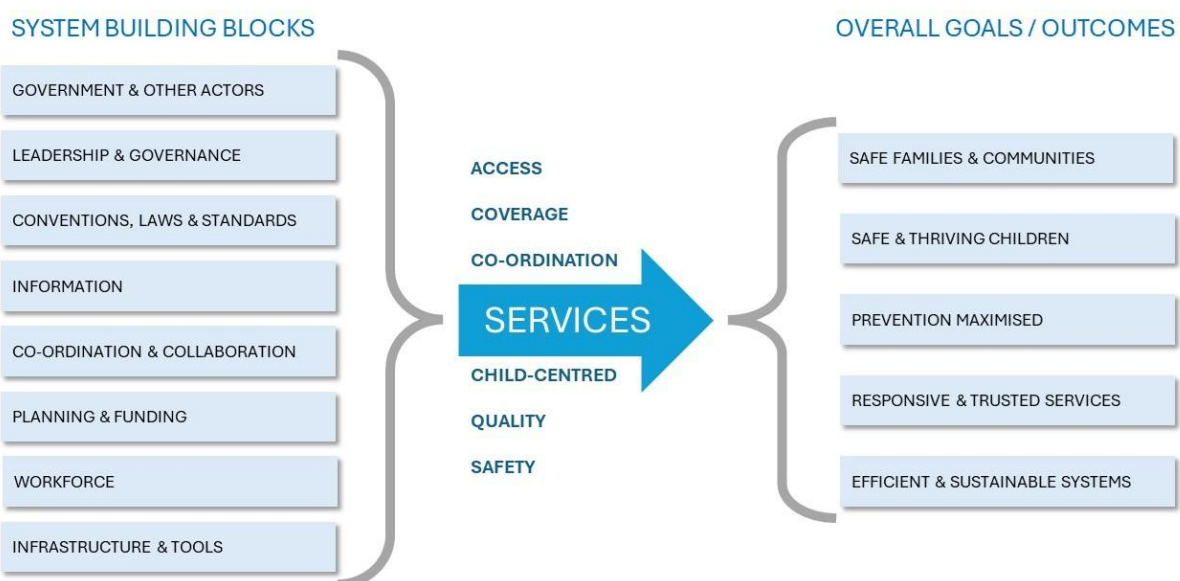
It is submitted that it would be useful to revisit the definition of a child protection system and develop a Child Protection System Framework that answers the following questions:

- What are its key building blocks?
- What does the system aim to deliver?
- What are its main attributes?

## 3 PROPOSAL FOR A CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

The Child Protection System Framework proposed below aims to bring greater structure and coherence to our thinking about child protection systems.

### CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM FRAMEWORK



Source: Developed by Conrad Barberton, Cornerstone Economic Research.

The following sections describe each of the components:

### 3.1 Services at the centre

The child protection system exists to deliver a co-ordinated continuum of safe, quality, child-centred services and other interventions scaled to reach all children when and where needed. The system should prioritise awareness and prevention interventions. There should be safe, accessible reporting mechanisms. Response and support services should be integrated through referral and collaboration arrangements between service providers and tracked using a case management system. The aim is to develop the capacity to prevent and respond to the full range of child protection risks and violations.

The following attributes should characterise child protection services:

- **Access:** the child protection system should aim to deliver services that are directly and permanently accessible with no undue barriers of cost, language, culture, or geography. Services may be provided in the home, the community, at schools, health facilities, the workplace or wherever people are easily reached. Routine points of contact should be based in communities. There should be safe, well-publicised, confidential and accessible reporting mechanisms, including 24/7 helplines or hotlines.<sup>10</sup>
- **Coverage:** service delivery should be inclusive – able to reach all children at risk and in need, able to address the full range of child protection issues. Issue-specific interventions should be used strategically to strengthen and enhance the child protection system, and not lead to the establishment of separate, parallel structures.<sup>11</sup>
- **Co-ordination:** the awareness and prevention interventions should be co-ordinated vertically across levels of government, and horizontally across sectors. Reporting mechanisms, early interventions, response and support services must be co-ordinated through an integrated case management system, and formal referral systems. To ensure continuity of action, the child protection system must designate a focal person responsible for the child from reporting and referral through to follow-up and reintegration, ensuring coordination across services and a coherent, comprehensive response.<sup>12</sup>
- **Child-centred:** the child protection system must be built on the best interests of the child principle. Every child must be recognised, respected and protected as a rights holder, with non-negotiable rights to protection.<sup>13</sup> Every child must be treated with dignity and as a unique and valuable human being with an individual personality, distinct needs, interests and privacy, with due regard to the child's right to participation.<sup>14</sup> Children must be involved in decisions that concern them, taking into account their level of maturity.
- **Quality:** child protection services must be of high quality. This means they are effective, safe, centred on the child's needs and given in a timely fashion by competent and committed staff. Supportive supervision systems must be fully functional to provide support and oversight. Ideally, all scaled-up services and interventions should be evidence-based, supported by in-service training, clear manuals, standard operating procedures and relevant performance indicators.
- **Safety:** To ensure the safety of children in accordance with the do-no-harm principle, organisations working directly for and with children must establish and implement child safeguarding policies and reporting mechanisms to prevent and address harm.

### 3.2 System building blocks

There appears to be an emerging consensus that the child protection system consists of the following building blocks:

- **Government and other actors.** The government of each country is responsible for building the child protection system. This means the Parliament, the President and ministers need to provide leadership on child protection matters. It involves establishing a suitable ministry or agency at national level with overall authority and responsibility for driving the national child protection agenda, defining the responsibilities of sub-national bodies and putting in place a framework for facilitating the involvement of companies, non-profit organisations and communities in the sector, as well as of international organisations working in the country. This ministry or agency must have the authority to co-ordinate policy and implementation with the education, health, social protection, justice and other relevant sectors, and exercise oversight of all role-players working on child protection issues.
- **Leadership and governance** involves ensuring each of the building blocks of the child protection system are in place and systematically strengthened to progressively achieve the intended goals. This requires the leaders of government, and specifically the head of the ministry responsible for child protection, to provide strategic leadership in coalition building, determining policy direction, putting in place appropriate laws and incentives, designing and strengthening the system, providing effective oversight of implementation and ensuring accountability. There need to be mechanisms to meaningfully engage children and communities in the development and implementation of child protection laws, policies, and services.<sup>15</sup>
- **Conventions, laws and standards** provide the legal framework for child protection and the child protection system. Building on the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, other regional and issue specific conventions, governments need to put in place appropriate child protection laws that define child protection violations and provide the legal basis for suitable interventions. It is also important that entities delivering services put in place appropriate standards, protocols and operating procedures to ensure safe, quality, child-centred services.
- **Information** is critical to the effective design and functioning of the child protection system. A well-functioning information system is one that is governed by ethical protocols and ensures the production, analysis, dissemination and use of reliable and timely information on the prevalence of child protection risks and violations, and the performance of the child protection system. This involves defining roles and putting in place arrangements to conduct periodic surveys, developing suitable indicators and administrative systems to keep records, consolidate data and monitor services, and the capacity to evaluate performance. Where appropriate information processes should involve children and communities in defining indicators, gathering information, monitoring services and evaluating performance. All this contributes to ensuring the child protection system delivers evidence-based, responsive services.
- **Co-ordination and collaboration** across government levels, sectors, civil society, and research communities is necessary to ensure an integrated, holistic approach to child protection. There needs to be vertical co-ordination and collaboration across national and sub-national government agents and with other in-country role-players. There needs to be

horizontal co-ordination with other sectors (education, health, social protection, policing, justice, etc.) on child protection interventions. There also needs to be international collaboration across countries on child protection issues including child maintenance, adoption, children on the move, trafficking and on-line exploitation. The Committee on the Rights of the Child calls on each government to develop a national coordinating framework to provide a common frame of reference and a mechanism for communication among all role-players involved in addressing child protection issues.<sup>16</sup> It is important that actors working with communities, families and children put in place mechanisms to co-ordinate their policies, plans and budgets. In some instances, formal co-operation agreements are needed to manage referrals and provide integrated case management. Collaboration and communication with communities, families, parents, children, religious and traditional leaders and civil society groups is also critical to ownership, relevance and sustainability of effective services and interventions.<sup>17</sup>

- **Planning and funding.** Governments need to lead in developing plans to strengthen child protection systems and in providing adequate funds for implementation.<sup>18</sup> Costed plans should inform budgets, and funds must be released for implementation. There also need to be arrangements in place to ensure the equitable allocation of funds across regions, and to fund non-profit organisations providing services on behalf of the state.
- **Workforce** consists of those professionals, para-professionals and volunteers in government agencies and other actors that spend most of their time working on child protection issues. They are generally referred to as the social service workforce (SSW) or the child protection workforce. They work with allied workers in sectors such as education, health or justice, who have critical roles related to the care, support, empowerment of children, as well as the protection and promotion of the rights of children. They work closely alongside the core SSW, but are aligned with other professional groups, such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, teachers, and police.<sup>19</sup> There need to strategies to plan, develop and support the child protection workforce to ensure there are sufficient and an appropriate mix of staff distributed fairly across regions and institutions.<sup>20</sup> Priority should be given to ensuring the core child protection workforce consists of accredited social workers. Attention needs to be given to providing in-service training and supportive supervision.<sup>21</sup>
- **Infrastructure and tools** must be available to enable the child protection workforce to deliver the required services effectively. Staff need to have adequate office space, furniture, access to wifi, laptops and cell phones. They need to have access to transport either by way of vehicles or transport allowances so that they can do home visits and carry out child rescues. There needs to be an integrated case management system and formal referral systems. Priority needs to be given to establishing the infrastructure required to support one-stop services where appropriate. Amidst the move away from institutional care, the system still requires an appropriate minimum number of institution-based alternative care places for use in emergencies, for hard-to-place cases, certain categories of child in conflict with the law, as well as to provide in-patient treatment of substance use disorders. The critical element is to have suitable gate-keeping protocols and permanency planning in place to regulate appropriate use.

Both UNICEF's *Child Protection Systems Strengthening (2021)*<sup>22</sup> and the interagency *Framework for Action (2024)*<sup>23</sup> identify "mechanisms for child participation and community engagement" respectively as a key area for system strengthening or a priority action area. Why does the

proposed framework not include *Child and Community Participation* as a key building block? The answer: if one reads the descriptions of this component in the above two sources it is clear that child and community participation is not a stand-alone building block, but rather a cross-cutting element that needs to be built into how services are delivered (see the description of “child centred”), and that needs to characterise the other building blocks:

- under “Government and other actors” the ministry or agency responsible for child protection must ensure communities are treated as distinctive actors in the child protection system.
- under “Leadership and governance” it is noted that there need to be mechanisms to meaningfully engage children and communities in the development and implementation of child protection laws, policies, and services.
- under “Information” it is noted that processes should involve children and communities in defining indicators, gathering information, monitoring services and evaluating performance where appropriate.
- under “co-ordination and collaboration” it is noted that collaboration and communication with communities, families, parents, children, religious and traditional leaders and civil society groups is critical to ownership, relevance and sustainability of effective services and interventions.
- the definition of the “workforce” explicitly includes volunteers who are community members.

### 3.3 System Goals / Outcomes

It is proposed that the desired goals or outcomes of the child protection system are:

- **Safe families and communities** where social norms, practices and values protect children as rights holders, and affirm and support families as the primary caregivers of children.
- **Children are safe and thriving**, living in loving families, attending safe schools and engaging in supportive communities; protected from all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation.
- **Prevention is maximised** to prevent harm before it occurs, and because it is more cost effective.
- **Responsive and trusted services.** The child protection system must deliver safe quality, child-centred services built on the best interests of the child and facilitating child participation according to their maturity. There must be appropriate safeguarding mechanisms in place, as well as supportive supervision to maintain professional standards and accountability.
- **Efficient and sustainable systems.** All components of the child protection system are functioning effectively and efficiently, delivering on-going, safe, quality, child-centred prevention, response and support services to children, families and communities.

## 4 USING THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

The WHO Health Systems Framework introduced in 2007 has been hugely influential in evaluating health systems and planning interventions focussed on strengthening national health systems. It is envisaged that a Child Protection System Framework could play a similar transformative role in the child protection sector, specifically:

- The Framework will provide a coherent, easily communicated definition of the child protection system, which can support efforts across governments to get recognition as a distinctive sector – like health, education, social protection – which has the potential to transform how governments plan for and fund child protection services.
- The Framework will provide a benchmark for mapping national child protection systems, performing gap analyses and exploring how the different components need to work together.
- The Framework will guide the development of strategic child protection systems strengthening interventions – like the *Framework for Action*.<sup>24</sup>
- The Framework highlights the importance of adopting a systems approach to child protection, countering the fragmentation often caused by issue-based programming and funding.
- The Framework will facilitate building a strong narrative for investments in strengthening the child protection system and so move the emphasis in funding away from a narrow issue-by-issue basis.

## 5 MOVING FORWARD WITH THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

This paper sets out an initial proposal for a Child Protection System Framework. I have only consulted with my colleagues in Cornerstone Economic Research on this idea. Obviously, it would benefit from wider discussion and input. So please feel free to share your thoughts and suggestions with me.

Secondly, in the language of process mapping, the proposed Child Protection System Framework provides a Level 0 depiction of the child protection system. There is an extraordinary amount of detail underlying each of the eight building blocks which needs to be elaborated on. This would require writing a document similar to the WHO's *Everybody's business (2007)*,<sup>25</sup> as well as its *Monitoring the building blocks of health systems (2010)*.<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, for the Child Protection System Framework to become an authoritative global benchmark it would need to be endorsed and championed by UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision, Plan International and the many other organisations working on child protection issues. Who is up for the challenge of moving this forward?

## ENDNOTES

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