Child Protection Systems Strengthening

APPROACH

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2021
SEPTEMBER

About this paper

For more than a decade, UNICEF has prioritized child protection systems strengthening as a key approach to child protection programming. In response to the recommendations of the 2018 evaluation of UNICEF's work on child protection systems strengthening, this paper outlines UNICEF's approach to child protection systems strengthening going forward. Guided by UNICEF's Child Protection Strategy (2021 – 2030)1 which provides the overarching strategic framework for UNICEF's child protection programming globally, the paper discusses key considerations that have shaped this approach. It then goes on to describe the programme – impact pathways for child protection, focusing on the intermediate outcomes of child protection systems strengthening work and the main UNICEF investments and priority actions to achieve those outcomes. Finally, the paper proposes a four-phased approach to child protection systems strengthening based on a maturity model. It elaborates the priorities, processes, and results to be achieved in each phase of child protection systems strengthening and provides comprehensive benchmarks to effectively measure investments and results in systems strengthening.

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CHILD
PROTECTION
SYSTEMS
STRENGTHENING

PART 01 THE UNICEF CHILD
PROTECTION SYSTEMS
STRENGTHENING APPROACH

PART 02 PHASES OF CPSS
AND BENCHMARKS
FOR MEASUREMENT

PART 03 HIGH PRIORITY
CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 The UNICEF Child Protection Systems Strengthening Approach

Contents

This is Part 1 of the Paper "Child Protection Systems Strengthening: Approach; Benchmarks; Interventions", and should be read together with Part 2 "Phases of CPSS and Benchmarks for Measurement" and Part 3 "High Priority CPSS Interventions".

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**
→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

2 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening **3**

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**
→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

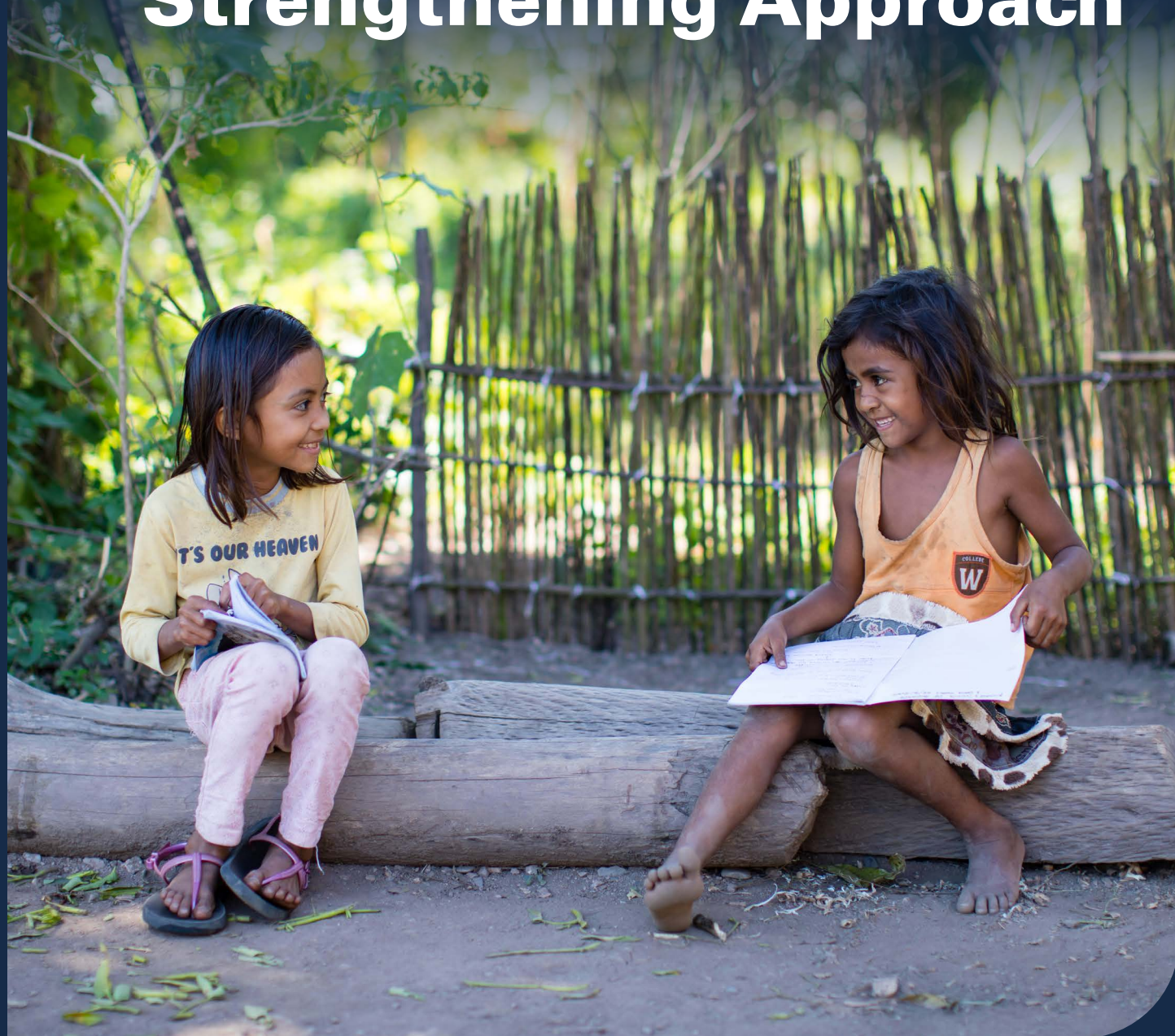**2** UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening **3**

1. Introduction

For more than a decade, UNICEF has prioritized child protection systems strengthening (CPSS) as a key approach to child protection programming. UNICEF first defined and articulated its approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening (CPSS) in the 2008 Child Protection Strategy[2] as part of a broader vision to build a protective environment for children. Since then UNICEF, in collaboration with other key stakeholders and partners, has invested significantly in CPSS to protect children.

The adoption of the CPSS approach by UNICEF marked a significant strategic shift from issue-based programming, focused on specific groups and categories of children who need protection, to a more holistic and comprehensive systems approach which can provide protection to all children across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. Since 2012 UNICEF has been systematically monitoring its contributions to child protection systems strengthening. UNICEF's most recent Strategic Plan (2018-2021) explicitly states UNICEF's intention to "intensify the strengthening of national systems to assist the most disadvantaged girls and boys" and includes specific indicators to capture results from systems strengthening in its results framework.[3]

1.1 Conclusions and Recommendations of the 2018 Evaluation of UNICEF's Strategies and Programme Performance in CPSS

In 2018, more than a decade after adopting the CPSS approach, UNICEF conducted a comprehensive evaluation,[4] "Strengthening Child Protection Systems: Evaluation of UNICEF Strategies and Programmes Performance" ('the 2018 evaluation'), to examine UNICEF's implementation of the CPSS approach at country, regional and headquarter level between 2012 and 2018.

The 2018 evaluation found that *UNICEF has had considerable success in advancing the child protection systems strengthening agenda at national level and raising awareness among national partners.*[5] Several key interventions such as capacity-building, social service workforce strengthening, leveraging public resources, evidence and policy advocacy were identified as particularly effective in strengthening child protection systems.

At the same time, the 2018 evaluation identified several challenges to CPSS that continue to undermine UNICEF's work. The evaluation concluded that, *after a decade of work in this area, conceptual clarity on child protection systems strengthening in UNICEF is still incomplete.*[6] While UNICEF has had considerable success in advancing the child protection systems agenda at the national level, this has not translated into adequate domestic investments in CPSS. Donors have continued to play a *largely negative role in advancing national child protection systems by distributing funding on a narrow issue-by-issue basis and using parallel monitoring and reporting systems.*[7] UNICEF has a clear niche focusing on state accountabilities for children's rights and partnering with government departments at national, provincial and district levels. However, *the organization has yet to define its role with regard to children's*

participation, community-based child protection mechanisms and coordination between formal and less formal actors.[8]

The 2018 evaluation also concluded that *UNICEF's corporate reporting systems on expenditures and results are inadequate to demonstrate the exact level of UNICEF's contribution.*[9] In the absence of coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS, both at the level of the intermediate outcomes and at the level of UNICEF expenditures and investments contributing to these outcomes, the evaluation noted that *UNICEF lacks the ability to systematically track its contribution to CPSS progress and performance globally, which hinders the organization from demonstrating results and mobilizing resources for CPSS.*[10]

The 2018 evaluation makes the following key recommendations:[11]

Clarify UNICEF's definition of, and role in, child protection systems strengthening, and ensure that this approach is reflected in organizational strategies, policies and plans. This should include:

- Refining the draft programme-impact pathway created for this evaluation.
- Defining the phases of the CPSS process (system-building, system consolidation and system reform, or a similar typology to be determined).
- Reflecting this clarified narrative on CPSS in any future update of UNICEF's 2008 Child Protection Strategy, setting out accountabilities for CPSS work among the various actors within the organization.

Define UNICEF's niche in CPSS and invest in the most impactful areas to strengthen child protection systems. UNICEF should unapologetically embrace a focus on state leadership and accountability, for which it is well positioned. UNICEF needs to clearly position itself in terms of topics and fora through which to push the CPSS agenda. UNICEF should:

- Articulate key priority areas of work and possible entry points for CPSS by context in order to guide programming.
- Develop a menu of interventions in each priority area, with a different package of options tailored to each phase of CPSS process and targeting different levels (formal/less formal).

Address the CPSS data and measurement challenges, the absence of coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS and the scarcity of global-level data and evidence across the steps of the CPSS results chain. UNICEF should:

- Invest in coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS.
- Close evidence gaps along the CPSS programme-impact pathway.

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 **Introduction**

2 Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

3 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

1.2 Purpose and Scope of the Paper

In response to the 2018 evaluation, this paper aims to clarify and describe UNICEF's approach to child protection systems strengthening (CPSS), addresses critical issues such as the relationship between child protection systems and child protection services, the importance of child participation and community engagement in CPSS, the relationship between issue-based programming and CPSS, and the role of evidence and data in CPSS.

The paper describes the "programme – impact pathways", including the intermediate outcomes for CPSS, and defines the phases of CPSS. In so doing, the paper also considers the varying contexts and country typologies within which CPSS programming takes place, the collaboration with allied sectors, as well as UNICEF's role in and strategies to promote community and child participation.

Aligned to the programme-impact pathways, the paper also proposes milestones and benchmarks to track CPSS progress and performance globally. It describes coherent metrics to measure intermediate outcomes by phases of the CPSS process. The metrics consider the need to capture progress in diverse settings, including humanitarian and fragile contexts.

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 **Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach**

3 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

2. Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

2.1 Defining Child Protection Systems

A "system" is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an inter-connecting network" or a "set of principles or procedures according to which something is done"; "an organizational method" or, in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a whole".

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."[12]

The definition of child protection systems was revisited and refined in 2012. It is this later definition which continues to be used by UNICEF and partner organizations today. The definition remains highly relevant in providing a structural framework for a child protection system.

Definition of Child Protection Systems

"Certain formal and informal structures, functions and capacities that have been assembled to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children. A child protection 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 sub-national 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."[13]

The systems strengthening approach requires various elements or components of a system – from policy and legislation to services and data collection to work in tandem to deliver results for children. For the system to work, individual parts of the system need to be strengthened while also strengthening the relationships between these various parts (see Section 3.2 below on Intermediate Outcomes for CPSS).

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

3 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

2.2 Child Protection Systems and Child Protection Services

Child protection services are broadly categorized under three types – namely, primary prevention, secondary prevention, and tertiary response.

FIGURE 1: Child Protection Service Typology[14]

Primary Prevention

Primary prevention activities are 'universal services' directed at the general population with the aim of stopping violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, preferably before it occurs. The purpose of primary prevention activities is to raise awareness, engage and empower the households and communities, service providers, practitioners, professionals and duty bearers to stop and address violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Secondary Prevention

Secondary prevention, also referred to as "early intervention", consists of activities offered to populations that have one or more risk factors associated with the various forms of violence against children (VAC), abuse, neglect, exploitation. Secondary services are targeted, though the "targets" may vary and may include those living in poverty, parental substance / alcohol abuse, parental mental health concerns, children with dis(abilities) and migrant children - especially unaccompanied migrant children and children left behind by migrating parents. Secondary prevention generally targets vulnerable communities or individuals where there is a high incidence of any or all of these risk factors.

Tertiary Response

Tertiary response is for children suffering or at risk of suffering serious harm – consists of response activities where violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation has already occurred (or child is highly at risk of it occurring) and seeks to reduce the negative consequences of the violence, abuse etc and to prevent its recurrence. Tertiary services generally include investigation, assessment, family support services, procedures for removal from a family, protection, legal aid, effective planning for a child, alternative community-based care and after-care, as well as services related to the administration of justice for children in conflict with the law, e.g., diversion, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

Tertiary response services and interventions have typically been recognized as central to public sector child protection systems. Tertiary child protection services are characterized by an individualised approach to service delivery for a particular child, and the engagement of a specialized child protection social service workforce for case management. For child protection systems to provide tertiary (and often specialized) services, it is critical that child protection policy and legislation provide this mandate and that services are established with adequate resources, and performance is monitored periodically. Secondary prevention services focused on early intervention are also often recognized as falling within the remit of child protection systems. Both tertiary and secondary services can involve the public and private sector including civil society and business. However, child protection systems also play an important role in *contributing* to primary prevention. Whilst primary prevention services are usually seen as being delivered through other systems such as health, education and social protection, child protection systems are also a means through which primary prevention interventions and programmes seeking to address and change gender and social norms that underlie harmful practices such as child marriage, violent discipline (corporal punishment) and female genital mutilation/cutting can be delivered. Primary and secondary prevention interventions usually require input from a range of sectors beyond the child protection system, including education, health, social protection, communications and so on. Interventions are often designed and implemented in tandem with these sectors with shared accountabilities, and in some cases, led by these sectors. The role of child protection systems in defining, designing, and implementing primary prevention interventions varies according to the context within which such interventions are implemented.

- **An important distinction must be made between child protection systems and the architecture established to deliver child protection services.**

- **Child protection services are often administered or organized by an entity, which may be referred to as "child protection services", "child protection scheme", "child protective services", and so on. It is important to understand that this service delivery architecture is a part of the larger child protection system (see intermediate outcome on the continuum of services), but is not by itself, the child protection system, as clarified in the definition of child protection systems.**

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 **Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach**

3 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

2.3 Community Engagement and Community-based Services

The 2018 evaluation noted that much of UNICEF's CPSS work in non-humanitarian developing country contexts has involved upstream approaches and is well aligned with UNICEF's institutional advantage in working directly with governments.

In certain contexts, especially where service delivery is decentralized, UNICEF invests in child protection programming closest to children and communities, with a focus on strengthening service delivery and referrals for child protection and other social services. This is especially relevant in countries where national laws, policies and structures are in place, but governance and service delivery structures are weak or ineffective. In such contexts, UNICEF also provides direct financial and technical support for child protection services and infrastructure. UNICEF offices also contribute to strengthening vertical accountability and ownership, given UNICEF's role in working simultaneously across national and sub-national levels. Simultaneously engaging in upstream, midstream and downstream approaches to CPSS is particularly important in the context of decentralization, where national law and policy reform may not have resulted in programme implementation and service delivery at sub-national levels, as well as in humanitarian situations.

UNICEF's Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement[15]

- Civil participation, inclusion and improved governance
- Social and behavior change
- Social evidence
- Accountability to affected population
- Strengthened public sector and community

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement sits at the intersection of several objectives and connects a wide range of sector specific development and humanitarian objectives, including child protection, and is critical for achieving important governance goals such as decentralization, transparency, democratization, climate resilience, disaster preparedness, and social accountability. UNICEF's Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators for Community Engagement are intended for use by government leaders, policymakers, funders, researchers, and development and humanitarian practitioners in programme design, planning, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation sysems.

As noted in the 2018 evaluation, in countries with weaker child protection systems, UNICEF often invests significantly in community-based child protection mechanisms. To be sustainable, efforts to strengthen child protection systems must have broad national ownership and 'buy-in' from communities. To achieve this, investments are required in community engagement and social and behaviour change to address harmful practices, in systematic mechanisms for participatory planning, feedback and social accountability, and in partnerships with large community networks. While recognizing that UNICEF has not been systematic in supporting community engagement as part of CPSS efforts, the evaluation underlined the importance of community-based child protection mechanisms to achieve a successful child protection outcome, including outcomes for child protection systems.

- **Working at upstream, midstream and downstream levels is not an "either or" consideration and UNICEF will continue to work at all three levels, and based on the national/local context, determine the balance between work at upstream, midstream and downstream levels.**

- **Communities are an integral part of child protection systems, and their participation is vital to the success of the systems. UNICEF has a key role in ensuring that community-based child protection services and mechanisms are supported by capacity-building, monitoring, and functioning accountability mechanisms to ensure quality and "do no harm".**

- **UNICEF will continue to support efforts to strengthen vertical coordination – from national/state level to district and community-level, where services are delivered to children and families. UNICEF will also support strengthening horizontal coordination across agencies and entities at various levels.**

- **UNICEF will focus on strengthening the vertical and horizontal linkages between community-based child protection mechanisms, public sector services, and the national child protection systems and will prioritize investments in standard setting, monitoring and oversight mechanisms to ensure quality, accountability and long-term sustainability of these community-based services and mechanisms.**

2.4 Child Participation and Child Protection Systems

The 2018 evaluation concluded that UNICEF has a clear niche focused on state accountabilities for children's rights and partnering with government departments at national, provincial and district levels. At the same time, the evaluation noted that UNICEF has yet to define its role with regard to children's participation, and concluded that *investing in children's civil rights (to information, communication, association and civic engagement in child protection systems)[16]* as they relate to child protection, may be an area of opportunity with regard to the participation of girls and boys in CPSS.

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**
→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 **Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach**

3 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**
→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 **Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach**

3 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

Promoting adolescent participation in child protection systems[17]

GUIDANCE/PD/2020/002

ENGAGED AND HEARD!
Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement

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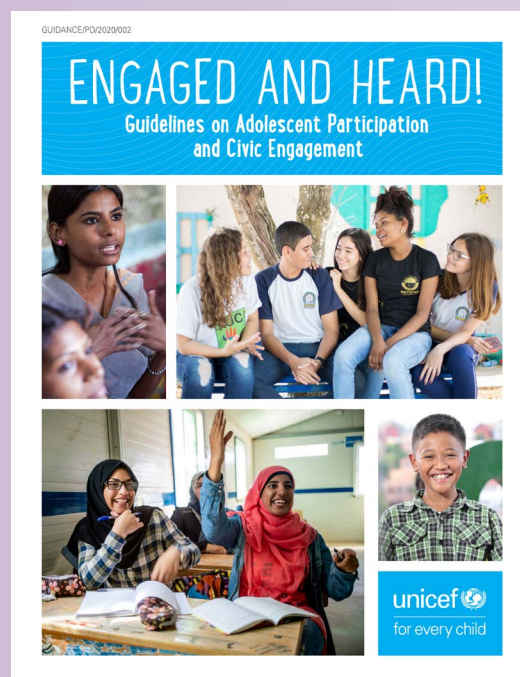
UNICEF 2020 Guidelines on adolescent participation and civic engagement state that adolescents should be able to participate in community-based child protection mechanisms, subnational and national child protection systems. These guidelines also highlight some key challenges to participation and call for systematic efforts to ensure that strategies and interventions for adolescent participation and civic engagement transform, rather than reinforce, existing patterns of exclusion, discrimination and inequity, and provide a set of actions to address these challenges. The Guidelines also provide a comprehensive set of practices to promote adolescent participation in improving child protection outcomes.

The right of children to be heard, both as agents of change in relation to specific issues, and as recipients of child protection services is crucial. It is important that individual children can contribute to decision making when they are the subject of child protection procedures (or a failure to use child protection procedures). Equally important is that they have a right of complaint and can feedback their experiences of the child protection system. With regard to services, feedback from service users is important to assess the effectiveness, efficacy and relevance of the services provided.

The direct engagement and participation of children and adolescents in child protection committees or other statutory bodies that are part of the child protection system should always be age appropriate and include child safeguarding measures to protect children from exposure to harm. Care needs to be taken to engage and hear from all groups of children without discrimination and children who tend to be excluded, such as children with disabilities, migrant, refugee and internally displaced children, or children from ethnic minority groups.

UNICEF will prioritize efforts to strengthen children's participation in CPSS by:

- Supporting efforts to establish mechanisms to hear, review and address individual child protection related complaints, including complaints related to child protection services in a safe and age-appropriate manner without discrimination, taking into account the evolving capacities of the child, as well as ensuring the inclusion of children which tend to be excluded.

- Supporting establishment of formal mechanisms through which national/sub-national/local governments receive and respond to complaints and feedback from individual children and children's groups.

- Promoting the substantive engagement of children with lived experiences of the child protection systems to inform ongoing reforms of the system.

- Supporting efforts to strengthen and monitor the functioning of child protection-related forums such as children's groups established at local government/community level.

2.5 Social and Behaviour Change and Child Protection Systems

Several of UNICEF's child protection programme interventions focus on social and behaviour change to address harmful practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation or the use of corporal punishment. While child protection systems can contribute to addressing harmful social norms through behaviour change, prevalent social norms also influence child protection systems.

Social and behaviour change has proven to be a key child protection strategy, including for primary prevention, and is often used in programme implementation. Child protection systems can build collective efficacy and empower communities through social and behaviour change

and community engagement. These approaches can challenge and shift dominant norms that uphold harmful practices by mobilizing large scale community networks for systematic engagement, establishing mechanisms for participatory planning, including feedback mechanisms, monitoring and social accountability by children, adolescents, parents and communities, and by gathering SBC data on harmful practices to inform evidence-base interventions.

Child protection systems contribute to as well as facilitate implementation of social behaviour change programmes. To support changes in harmful behaviours at the household and community levels, it is important to engage with

$\rightarrow$ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

$\rightarrow$ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

$\rightarrow$ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 2 3

Introduction

Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

$\rightarrow$ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

$\rightarrow$ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

$\rightarrow$ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 2 3

Introduction

Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

the legal and political sectors, to ensure that policies, laws and regulations, support the desired changes, thus creating an enabling environment for change. Social and behaviour change and communication capacities of social service workforce and community networks provide a vehicle for shifting harmful norms and promoting

the adoption of positive behaviours. Social and behaviour change can therefore be an outcome of strong child protection systems, engaging families and communities to achieve the desired change in norms and behaviours. and promote positive behaviour change in allied sectors, including among law enforcement, teachers and health care workers.

2.6 Systems Strengthening and Issue-specific Programming

The strategic decision by UNICEF to shift from issue-based child protection programming to a systems-strengthening approach was motivated by several factors. A 2010 paper notes that, "although issue-based programming has produced substantial benefits, this diffuse approach often results in a fragmented child protection response, marked by numerous inefficiencies and pockets of unmet need."[18] By contrast, systems strengthening work has the potential to be more efficient, comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable, ensuring coverage at-scale delivered by national governments in the context of long term legislative or policy commitments.

Despite the organizational prioritization of a CPSS approach over issue-based programming, it has been difficult to mobilize resources for CPSS. UNICEF has so far been unable to present donors with a compelling business case for CPSS as a programming approach and a priority area of investment. In the absence of a strong evidence-based narrative on how CPSS can change children's lives, there is a tendency to resort back to issue-based programming and advocacy to raise funds.

According to the 2018 evaluation, the absence of a strong narrative for investment in CPSS has resulted in donors' continued preference to fund

programmes on a narrow issue-by-issue basis. The evaluation noted some reasons for this donor preference on the donor side as well, including that many donors primarily require "readily- and quickly-measurable results expressed in terms of numbers of children benefitted".

Despite the advantages of CPSS over issue-based programming, child protection issues are frequently prioritised by donors, who then encourage programming that can demonstrate a large-scale response. Issues are, in effect, an 'easier sell'. Results are often measured through the number of individual children reached, which is compelling from a human-interest perspective. Taking funding for issue-based programmes may, however, encourage actors to address the 'low hanging fruit' or to focus on cases which fit a certain profile, rather than identifying the most difficult cases where children are subject to the highest level of risk and, as a result, detract from systems strengthening.

The narrow approach to funding issue-based work has had impacts beyond funding for and investment in CPSS and led to situations where parallel service-delivery systems that undermine systems strengthening have been prioritized. UNICEF is often challenged to design projects that meet donor expectations

for high numbers of early beneficiaries, while also contributing to broad and lasting development results in terms of robust child protection systems. Furthermore, rather than reaching the most vulnerable, this approach may be perpetuating inequalities or even further exclusion, rather than inclusion, of certain categories of vulnerable or at-risk children through the establishment of 'separate' structures, thereby undermining the very equity and 'leave no one behind' agendas that donors and partners seek to advance.

Systems strengthening and issue-based programming should not be regarded as incompatible or mutually exclusive. Child protection systems are intended to respond to

child protection issues whilst issue-based work can contribute to strengthening child protection systems. In contexts where a child protection issue is of significant concern, the development or use of specific services within the broader child protection systems may strengthen the overall response the systems can offer to a broader range of child protection issues in the future. As the 2018 evaluation concluded, using child protection issues as entry points has helped make child protection systems strengthening more concrete and focused, capitalising on issues that already had considerable traction among policymakers and donors, and has tapped into readily available sources of funding to strengthen systems while addressing specific child protection issues.

- **Issue-based funding can lead to fragmentation of the child protection systems or the creation of 'ad-hoc' parallel structures for certain categories of children which may be unsustainable; however, specific child protection issues are more likely to attract funding.**

- **UNICEF can seek issue-based funding but must ensure that it is strategically used to strengthen and enhance existing child protection systems and that this approach does not lead to investments in and the establishment of separate, parallel structures which may undermine the mandate and authority of child protection systems.**

- **Further, UNICEF will invest in a compelling business case and narrative to build understanding of the importance of strengthening inclusive child protection systems that are able to address a host of child protection issues, and to promote equity in access to and delivery of child protection services.**

- **UNICEF will strengthen the articulation of child protection and the importance of investments to strengthen child protection systems as essential to achieving the SDGs and the 'leave no one behind' agenda. To do so, UNICEF will also work closely with other UN agencies to ensure that support to national governments for specific programmatic/sectoral interventions follows the CPSS approach.**

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1   Introduction

2   **Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach**

3   UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1   Introduction

2   **Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach**

3   UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

2.7   Strengthening Child Protection Systems in Humanitarian Situations

From conflict to climate change, the increasing frequency, duration, and the sheer scale of the impact of humanitarian crises around the world call for developing and implementing responses that are systemic and embedded within larger national systems-based responses. At the same time, it is vital that specific responses are designed to suit the diverse and dynamic environment within which humanitarian actors operate.

A 2019 Alliance CPHA (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action) paper[19] highlights how, despite years of reform, the humanitarian sector continues to fall short of meeting humanitarian needs. The linkages between humanitarian action, sustainable development and conflict prevention and peacebuilding, have been referred to as the ''humanitarian – development – peace nexus'' that aims to define and achieve collective outcomes based on a common analysis as well as prevention and response measures. A 2019 evaluability assessment of child protection in humanitarian action[20] concluded that, as an area of work, CPHA is not currently able to demonstrate full contribution to either humanitarian results or results across the humanitarian – development nexus, supporting longer-term impact, partly because CPHA's contributions to strengthening child protection systems at the sub-national, national and regional levels are not well integrated into results frameworks.

It is now acknowledged that collaboration must be intensified between humanitarian, development and peace actors to collectively reduce fragility, address insecurity and decrease the vulnerability of people living in crisis-prone contexts.

Humanitarian assistance must be viewed as one part of the picture. The approach seeks to capitalize on the comparative advantages of each sector to reduce needs, risks and vulnerabilities along the humanitarian – development continuum.

Strengthening Child Protection Systems: A Core Commitment for Children in Humanitarian Action

The Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs)[21] enable UNICEF and partners to deliver principled, timely, quality and child centred humanitarian response and advocacy in any crises with humanitarian consequences, and *"Strengthening of child protection systems: Child protection systems are functional and strengthened to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices"* is one of the CCCs for child protection.

The CCCs offer specific priority actions to strengthen child protection systems to reinforce the humanitarian – development nexus. These include:

- Mechanisms to assess, analyze, monitor and report child protection concerns and their root causes are established and functional at national and local levels

- Mapping of the social service workforce is conducted, and capacity-building plans are developed accordingly

- Integrated case management system, including referral pathways for services and a safe information management system, is functional

- Families and communities are supported in their protective functions, with measures in place to mitigate and prevent abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children

- Civil registration systems provide accessible and safe birth registration and certification for children and their families

→ THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS
STRENGTHENING APPROACH

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR
MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1   Introduction

2   Key Considerations
     that Guide UNICEF's
     CPSS Approach

3   UNICEF's Approach
     to Child Protection
     Systems Strengthening

→ THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS
STRENGTHENING APPROACH

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR
MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1   Introduction

2   Key Considerations
     that Guide UNICEF's
     CPSS Approach

3   UNICEF's Approach
     to Child Protection
     Systems Strengthening

UNICEF's Strategic Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection

Strategic Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection
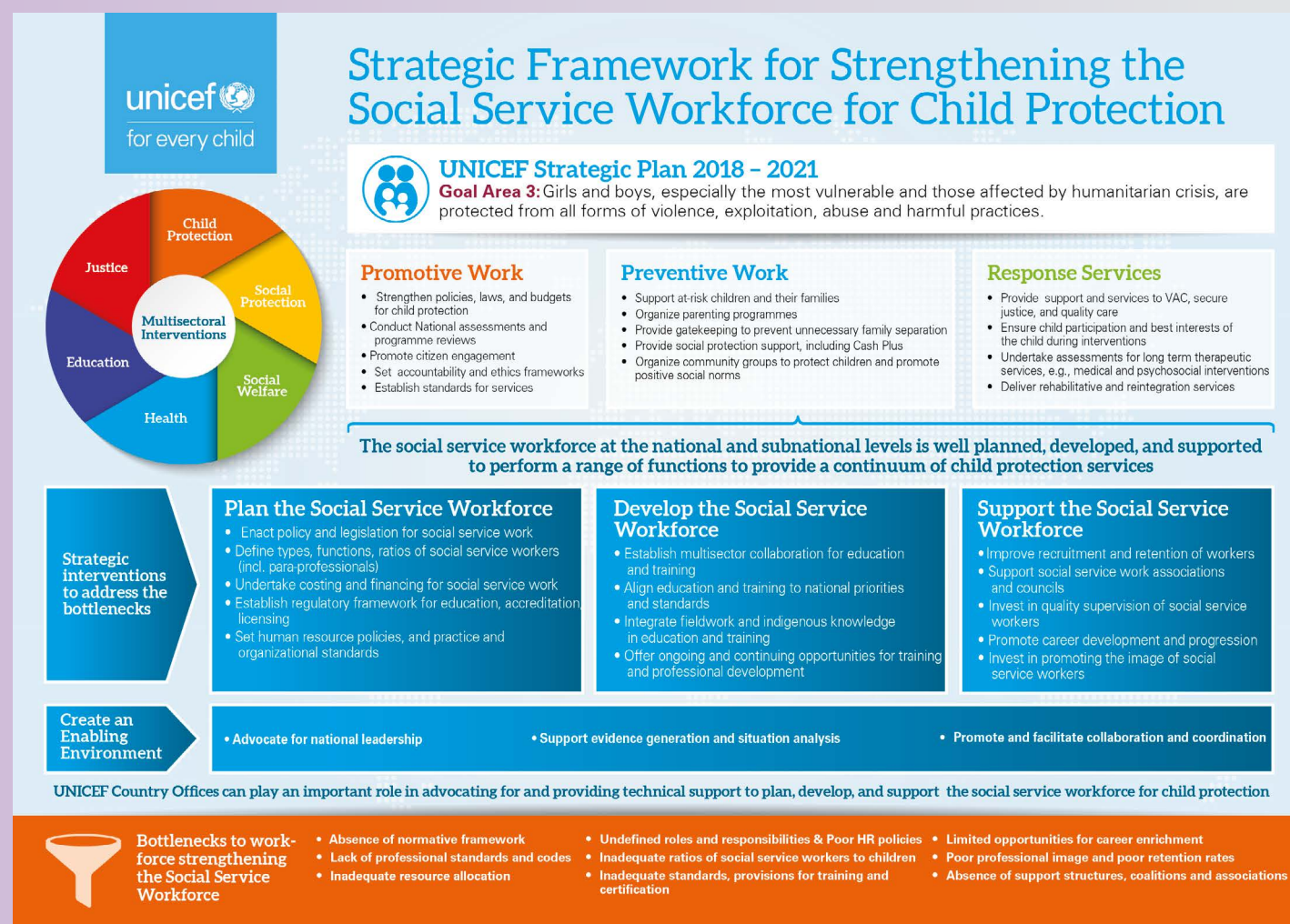
2.8 Engagement Across Sectors to Strengthen Child Protection Systems

The 2018 evaluation notes that in many countries, UNICEF country offices find themselves working with lead ministries that are among the weakest in terms of funding, internal capacity, convening power, and influence. In some cases, there is no clear lead ministry on child protection whilst in others, there are multiple ministries with related or overlapping mandates. As a result, UNICEF often finds itself taking the lead on CPSS, which, as the evaluation notes, results in limited ownership of CPSS strategies and targets across sectors, and, according to the evaluation, explains much of the observed weakness and slow progress in CPSS.[22]

For child protection systems to deliver outcomes for children, it is important to recognize and strengthen links between child protection systems and other systems, sectors, organizations. This is essential to ensure that a protective environment is available to all, that children's rights to basic services are met, and that child protection services can make efficient and effective referrals so the most vulnerable children have access to quality and timely services. As articulated in UNICEF's Child Protection Strategy, it is vital to recognize the inter-relatedness and inter-dependency across sectors to establish a continuum of services that contribute to Child Protection programming and outcomes, particularly Education, Health, Social Policy & Social Protection, Nutrition and WASH. Child Protection outcomes cannot be delivered without these sectors – their systems, institutions, resources and professional staff.

While there are no quick remedies or solutions, advocating for a stronger, better resourced social services ministry or agency should remain a priority for UNICEF. Equally important, is advocacy for the establishment and support of, or enhancement of an existing inter-ministerial child protection structure at the highest possible level of government to bring together national stakeholders in child protection and ensure cross-sectoral buy-in and ownership of CPSS at national and state/subnational levels.

- **UNICEF will advocate for a well-resourced lead ministry for child protection at the national levels and for national, subnational and local level inter-ministerial/sectoral mechanisms to ensure coordination between sectors and services within CPSS.**

- **UNICEF will support governments to proactively engage with and involve all relevant ministries and departments such as health, education, justice, interior, gender, finance, sport and culture, business, environment etc. to strengthen cross-sectoral linkages with child protection systems.**

→ THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS
  STRENGTHENING APPROACH

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR
  MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 Key Considerations
  that Guide UNICEF's
  CPSS Approach

3 UNICEF's Approach
  to Child Protection
  Systems Strengthening

Relationships between other sectors and Child Protection programming and outcomes

EDUCATION

(i) schools can and should be a safe and protective space for children, particularly in emergencies, (ii) education systems should address bullying and violence in schools, (iii) children in school can learn about threats and protective factors, e.g. gender-based violence, sexual violence, comprehensive sexuality education FGM, child marriage, (iv) schools can act as identification and referral points for specialist child protection services, (v) schools should ensure the safety of students as they travel to and from schools.

HEALTH

(i) violence-related public health research, (ii) violence prevention and case detection, particularly through community health workers, (iii) care and support – including mental health services – for children, adolescents and women who experience violations related to child protection or, for example, intimate partner violence, (iv) timely and accurate vital registration (birth registration, marriage and death) (v) behavioural and regulatory issues relating to safety for children and adolescents, including road safety, (vi) school health, as it relates to child protection issues.

NUTRITION

(i) preventing child marriage and adolescent pregnancies can make major contributions to nutritional outcomes for girls who are yet to complete their physical growth, and who would additionally be at risk of maternal mortality, pregnancy complications and low birthweight, (ii) unethical marketing of food and beverage products is both a nutritional issue and a child protection issue.

WASH

(i) gender-based violence, particularly in emergencies, (ii) climate change and water scarcity, which can both be drivers of child protection violations (iii) menstrual hygiene management.
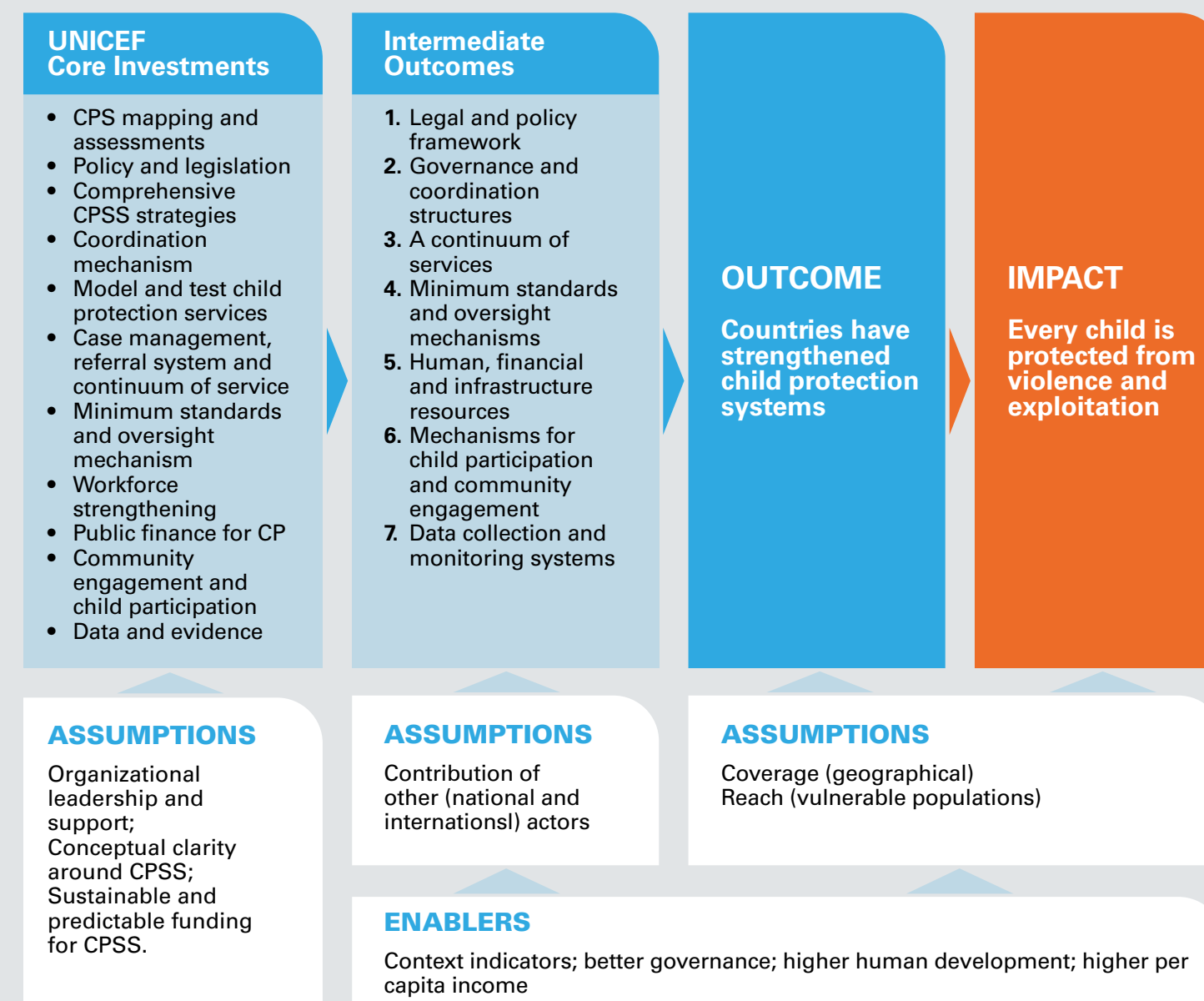
SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

(i) advocacy and technical support for public financing for children relating to child protection systems and services, (ii) cash transfers and other safety net mechanisms to support the most vulnerable children and households (both prevention and response), (iii) support to both child protection and social protection systems – including the social service workforce – to ensure a continuum of protective and responsive child protection services.

→ THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS
  STRENGTHENING APPROACH

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR
  MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 Key Considerations
  that Guide UNICEF's
  CPSS Approach

3 UNICEF's Approach
  to Child Protection
  Systems Strengthening

3. UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

3.1 Programme – Impact Pathways of CPSS

FIGURE 2: Programme – Impact Pathways for Child Protection Systems Strengthening[23]

UNICEF Core Investments

- CPS mapping and assessments
- Policy and legislation
- Comprehensive CPSS strategies
- Coordination mechanism
- Model and test child protection services
- Case management, referral system and continuum of service
- Minimum standards and oversight mechanism
- Workforce strengthening
- Public finance for CP
- Community engagement and child participation
- Data and evidence

Intermediate Outcomes

1. Legal and policy framework
2. Governance and coordination structures
3. A continuum of services
4. Minimum standards and oversight mechanisms
5. Human, financial and infrastructure resources
6. Mechanisms for child participation and community engagement
7. Data collection and monitoring systems

OUTCOME

Countries have strengthened child protection systems

IMPACT

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

ASSUMPTIONS

Organizational leadership and support;
Conceptual clarity around CPSS;
Sustainable and predictable funding for CPSS.

ASSUMPTIONS

Contribution of other (national and internationsl) actors

ASSUMPTIONS

Coverage (geographical)
Reach (vulnerable populations)

ENABLERS

Context indicators; better governance; higher human development; higher per capita income

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

3 **UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening**

→ **THE THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

3 **UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening**

The 2018 evaluation concluded that UNICEF lacks a clear conceptual framework or programme – impact pathways with associated measurements for child protection systems strengthening work.[24] It recommended that a programme-impact pathway be identified 'that offers a logical framework of how strengthening the various elements contributes to strengthening child protection systems holistically'. Following a comprehensive consultative process, Figure 2 on the previous page describes the – impact pathways for child protection systems strengthening that will guide UNICEF's work moving forward.

The following sections outline two critical components of the programme – impact pathways, namely, the key elements or the intermediate outcomes of CPSS and the core investments essential to achieve these intermediate outcomes.

The proposed CPSS programme – impact pathway identifies seven, rather than six elements or intermediate outcomes, as identified in the 2018 evaluation. While elements one to five used for the purpose of the evaluation have been retained, element six is now more explicit, focusing on child participation and community engagement. An additional element seven on data and information systems has been added to reflect the importance of administrative, statistical and behavioural data in strengthening a child protection system. Following are the seven elements of the child protection systems[24] that have been identified as priorities for UNICEF's work on child protection systems strengthening. These elements constitute a functioning national child protection system.

3.2 Intermediate Outcomes of CPSS

UNICEF's Child Protection Strategy (2021 – 2030)[25] offers the overarching strategic framework driving UNICEF's child protection programming globally. UNICEF's 2018 – 2021 Strategic Plan explicitly reflects the CPSS approach outlined in the 2008 strategy, and states UNICEF's intention to "intensify the strengthening of national systems to assist the most disadvantaged girls and boys."[26]

Noting the absence of a theory of change for UNICEF's CPSS work, the 2018 evaluation identified six key elements (intermediate outcomes) of a functioning child protection system to evaluate UNICEF's work. These were defined as:

- A robust legal and regulatory framework, as well as specific policies related to child protection.
- Effective governance structures, including coordination across government departments, between levels of decentralization and between formal and informal actors.
- A continuum of services (spanning prevention and response).
- Minimum standards and oversight (information, monitoring and accountability mechanisms).
- Human, financial and infrastructure resources; and
- Social participation, including respect for children's own views, and an aware and supportive public.

Seven Intermediate Outcomes of CPSS

1 Legal and policy framework

2 Governance and coordination structures

3 A continuum of services

4 Minimum standards and oversight mechanisms

5 Human, financial and infrastructure resources

6 Mechanisms for child participation and community engagement

7 Data collection and monitoring systems

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

3 **UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening**

Each of these seven intermediate outcomes advance the CPSS agenda, and in turn leads to the intended outcome of strengthened child protection systems. The following paragraphs describe the *state of achievement* of these intermediate outcomes.

3.2.1. Legal and policy framework

Investments in policy advocacy and technical support lead to strong legal and regulatory framework for child protection and child protection systems. Investments result in formal high-level political commitment to CPSS, adequate allocation of financial and human resources for child protection, establishment and recognition of lead ministries/agencies for child protection and CPSS. The lead agency/ministry establishes and strengthens relationships with other allied systems/sectors. Child protection interventions (prevention and response) within the broader multisectoral responses are led by the recognized national/sub-national ministry/agency and better coordinated within and across sectors.

3.2.2. Governance and coordination structures

Improved coordination and governance mechanisms result in the lead ministry/agency responsible for delivery of child protection at central government level being linked to sub-national bodies with responsibility for child protection. Multi-sector child protection coordination mechanisms are formalized and functional at the national and subnational levels, as well as across borders, and stakeholders are aware of their own roles. Intra and inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms for planning, programme implementation, monitoring and reviews are formalized, and the functioning of these mechanisms is reviewed regularly.

3.2.3. A continuum of services

Scaled-up prevention and response related child protection services are available and integrated through national case information management systems. The services may be funded and implemented by the government or civil society or the private sector, with government oversight. Protocols for child protection services are in place, are regularly reviewed and revised to adapt to emerging situations.

3.2.4. Minimum standards and oversight mechanisms

Periodic/annual audits, review and evaluation mechanisms for child protection services are established and implemented, and services often see changes and improvements based on findings of audits and external evaluations. Services are coordinated by case management and referral and supervised through robust supervision systems. Additionally, regular monitoring and reporting of child protection services is carried out by national or local governments to ensure national minimum standards are fully enforced. Child protection concerns can be reported to functional national human rights institutions and courts empowered to hold governments accountable.

3.2.5. Human, financial and infrastructure resources

A well-planned,-developed and-supported– social service workforce is in place. Licencing and accreditation systems as well as supportive supervision systems are fully functional. Human resources information is regularly gathered, analysed and used to refine/revise social service workforce strategies. All or a vast majority of child protection tertiary services are funded by the public sector. Budgets and expenditures are regularly/annually tracked.

3.2.6. Mechanisms for child participation and community engagement

There is an independent child complaints procedure (e.g., an ombudsperson) that is fully compliant with the Paris Principles, with an ability to hear, review and enforce individual complaints from children about refusal to receive child protection services or about the child protection system or services received. Specialized courts and procedures compliant with international standards are in place for children in contact with the law and for children to access justice and seek redress and remedies for violations of their child protection rights. Government supports forums such as children's groups established at local government/community level, and a formal mechanism is in place through which national/sub-national/local government receives and responds to fe edback from children and children's groups who have received child protection services. Community-based mechanisms are functional across the country where necessary and per applicability (urban/rural) and per protocols or procedures. The effectiveness of these mechanisms is monitored through fully functional accountability mechanisms.

3.2.7. Data collection and monitoring systems

Data collection takes place at regular intervals, using definitions that are in line with international standards or national legislations. Detailed and comprehensive ethical protocols are adopted and used. Data can be disaggregated according to different stratifiers to ensure that no child is left behind. Data on hard-to-reach populations, including street-connected children, are also generated at regular intervals. Data are analysed, widely disseminated and used for policy, planning and monitoring of programmes. There is legislation on data collection, transfer of data, quality record-keeping, usage of data, and the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors. Data protection protocols are in place and adhered to. There is a centralised coordination body to oversee the system and ensure effective coordination and data-sharing between the different agencies, with the national statistical offices playing a critical role in the coordination of any data collection system.

→ **THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH**

→ PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT

→ HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS

1 Introduction

2 Key Considerations that Guide UNICEF's CPSS Approach

3 UNICEF's Approach to Child Protection Systems Strengthening

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CHILD PROTECTION

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