Child Protection Systems Strengthening

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BENCHMARKS

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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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2 Phases of CPSS and Benchmarks for Measurement

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

Contents

1. Measuring Progress of CPSS Interventions

The 2018 evaluation concluded that UNICEF does not have coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS, either at the level of the intermediate outcomes or at the level of UNICEF expenditures and investments contributing to these outcomes. The evaluation noted the lack of clarity on how UNICEF's investments in CPSS could be assessed, given the absence of standardized and uniform understanding of which investments were considered "systems strengthening" at country office level when expenditures were recorded. According to the evaluation, 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.

The 2018 evaluation recommended that UNICEF should invest in coherent corporate-level metrics for CPSS, including establishing qualitative and quantitative milestones/benchmarks for measuring progress along the different phases of CPSS rather than just at the final stage of functioning child protection systems and identifying means of verification.[1]

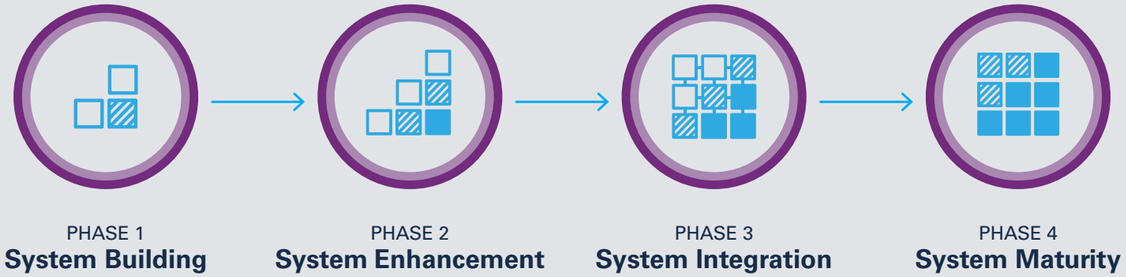
There are two purposes in putting in place benchmarks: first to measure results against the "intermediate outcomes", and second, to assist UNICEF in determining where it should invest its resources and in measuring the value of this investment.

1.1 Phases of CPSS

The 2018 evaluation found that, as systems mature, the priority interventions and investments in CPSS change, and so do UNICEF's programming and investment approaches. The evaluation highlighted the importance of articulating how the systems evolve as they pass from one stage to another, calling for optimal sequencing of CPSS investments and recommended that UNICEF country offices invest differently depending on the stage and capacities of a country's child protection system.[2]

UNICEF recognizes the need to determine the different stages of CPSS and proposes the use of a maturity model with four levels or phases of CPSS.

FIGURE 1: The four-phase model of CPSS



The four phases are 'system building'; 'system enhancement'; 'system integration' and 'system maturity'. This four-phase approach to measurement will enable a more nuanced view of the level of development of the child protection system and better illustrate the differences between a child protection system that is still being built, and a fully functioning child protection system that is mature and continues to adapt to changing circumstances and child protection issues.

While the model is designed for an individual country context, it will also offer UNICEF valuable comparative information across various countries and programming contexts within which UNICEF works.

This model will enable UNICEF and its Government partners to assess the state of the child protection system, identify priorities or critical investments for systems strengthening, and build consensus around the system strengthening approach and priority interventions.

Some important considerations that must be kept in mind to understand each of these phases and assess where a country stands at any given point in time are:

- The descriptions in the following paragraphs are meant to be indicative of how several parts (intermediate outcomes) of the systems evolve and are not supposed to be a mandatory checklist of exclusive criteria.
- Each intermediate outcome, and very often, the subdomains within each of these intermediate outcomes evolve and move from one phase to the next independently of another. It is important to note that not all seven intermediate outcomes and the subdomains move in tandem from one phase to the next.
- Similarly, various parts of the systems, i.e., intermediate outcomes (and individual subdomains), have the potential of moving back from a higher phase to a lower phase; e.g., sudden shocks and humanitarian situations can set back the progress made in systems strengthening, and some or all intermediate outcomes or subdomains may witness negative progress as a result.

2. Benchmarks for Child Protection Systems Strengthening

While the four phases of CPSS are not watertight compartments, they are remarkably distinct – in terms of priorities, processes, and the results achieved in each of these phases. Based on the recommendation of the 2018 evaluation, the following comprehensive benchmarks have been developed to determine at which stage a country finds itself in the process of CPSS. This in turn will enable UNICEF country offices to tailor their investments and resources for maximum impact and to ascertain the appropriate sequencing of their investments. While setting up these benchmarks, it is well recognized that several external factors may impact investment decisions and programme approaches. Though the four-phase approach is intended to guide the CPSS process in a sequential manner, the reality on the ground may be different. Country contexts, including ever-changing political, social and economic factors, may slow down progress in certain areas whilst creating opportunities or "entry points" to strengthen the CPS in other areas. Whilst opportunities should be exploited, it should not detract from the bigger picture and efforts should be sustained to also make progress in areas which are lagging.

The benchmarks are based on the seven intermediate outcomes of CPSS. As shown in the table below, multiple subdomains have been identified for each of the seven intermediate outcomes. Various priorities, processes, and results have been articulated for each subdomain across the four phases of CPSS.

The CPSS benchmarks, described in the table below elaborate on the characteristics of each of the subdomains through the course of systems strengthening, indicating a gradual progression/ advancement of that subdomain from system building (Level 1) to system maturity (Level 4). These benchmarks will be converted into a benchmarking tool that will enable UNICEF Country Offices to determine the level of maturity of the child protection system in the country and identify interventions across various elements and subdomains that need further investments to systematically move along the systems strengthening trajectory.

THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH
PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS
1 Measuring Progress of CPSS Interventions
2 The State of Play – Systems Building to Systems Maturity

TABLE 1: CPSS Benchmarks

Intermediate Outcome	Subdomain	Criteria according to 4 phases of systems strengthening			
		System Building	System Enhancement	System Integration	System Maturity
1. Legal and policy framework	**1.1** Understanding and articulation of national child protection systems	Limited understanding of child protection system among policymakers. Child protection interventions (both prevention and response) are issue-based, may exclude certain population groups and addressed as standalone interventions or ad-hoc responses.	Increased attention to understanding and responding to child protection concerns in a systematic manner results in analysis of the existing system(s). Mapping and assessment of existing child protection system is undertaken/ completed but interventions/response continue to be issue-based/standalone.	The (national) child protection system (and its key elements) is/are clearly defined and agreed upon in national policy (and plans). The definition of child protection system includes a clear articulation of its boundaries and relation to other/allied systems (i.e., health, justice, education, social protection etc.) Specific issues may be identified and addressed, but the responses designed are system wide.	There is formal high-level (political) commitment to child protection system strengthening, including adequate allocation of financial and human resources and its relationships with other/allied systems. All child protection interventions (prevention and response) within the broader multisectoral responses are led/coordinated by the recognized national/sub-national child protection system.
	1.2 Legislation on child protection systems and implementation structures/mechanisms	Normative framework/legislation outlining the national child protection system does not exist.	Normative framework/legislation outlining the national child protection systems exists, and is inclusive of all children in a country, but implementation structures/mechanisms do not exist or are weak/ad-hoc.	Implementation structures/mechanisms for the normative framework/legislation outlining the national child protection system is in progress but not uniform (across the country and across workstreams) and progressively become gender responsive and inclusive of all children.	Implementation structures/mechanisms for the normative framework/legislation outlining the national child protection system are mostly/ fully in place. Regular reviews, evaluations and audits of functioning of the national child protection system are undertaken, and recommendations are made for revision to legislation and regulations that govern the child protection system.
2. Governance and coordination structures	**2.1** Lead ministries/ agencies with responsibility and mandate to strengthen child protection	There is/are no lead ministries/agencies at national government level in charge of child protection.	There are lead ministries/agencies at the national government level in charge of child protection systems, but it is weak due to limited authority, human capacity, financial resources, and limited mandate.	The lead ministries/agencies in charge of child protection systems are functional and adequately resourced (human and financial resources). Its mandate and authority related to child protection has been established, well-articulated, and formally communicated and recognized across government at national and state levels, as well as outside of the government. Work is underway to improve/strengthen its links with other national/sub-national bodies with responsibility for child protection.	The lead ministries/agencies responsible for delivery of child protection at central government level is linked to sub-national bodies (either ministerial departments or local government authority) with responsibility for child protection and is active and effective in fulfilling its child protection responsibilities across the country.
	2.2 National, multi-sector, coordination mechanisms	There is no national, multi-sector coordination mechanism that steers/directs child protection work and functioning of the child protection system.	Multiple national, multi-sector child protection coordination mechanisms have been established; however, all or most of such mechanisms are issue-based (e.g., child labour task force, anti-trafficking coordination committee), and often work in silos/in isolation from one another due to the lack/absence of mandate with the lead ministry/agency or the child protection authority to unify such mechanisms.	A national, multi-sector child protection coordination mechanism has been established under the aegis of the lead ministry responsible for child protection, with specific terms of reference, high-level authority/leadership to convene different sectors/ministries and is currently working towards strengthening coordination across sectors.	The national, multi-sector child protection coordination mechanism is formalized and fully functional, its role is known to stakeholders and its work is reviewed against the terms of reference and disseminated regularly. The terms of reference are revised as needed and the lead ministry/agency has oversight of the functioning of the mechanism.

THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH
PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS
1 Measuring Progress of CPSS Interventions
2 The State of Play – Systems Building to Systems Maturity

Intermediate Outcome	Subdomain	Criteria according to 4 phases of systems strengthening			
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2. Governance and coordination structures	**2.3** Availability of intra- and inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms at the implementation level	Informal coordination (in the absence of formal SOPs) exists amongst service providers at the implementation level, but it is largely voluntary, driven by individual initiative.	Formal coordination mechanisms across select agencies/departments at local level, including for humanitarian coordination, exist but such mechanisms are ad-hoc and primarily related to service provision.	SOPs/regulations for formal coordination mechanisms that focus holistically on planning, programme implementation, monitoring and reviews across agencies and departments have been established but implementation of these mechanisms is not uniform across the country.	Intra- and inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms for planning, programme implementation, monitoring and reviews have been formalized and the functioning of these mechanisms is reviewed against SOPs/ regulations and disseminated regularly.
3. A continuum of services	**3.1** Modelling, testing and scaling of child protection services	Child protection services are available but are ad-hoc and do not address all child protection concerns. Government funded programmes primarily/largely focus on response services for specific "groups" of children and address some child protection issues. Some "pilot" prevention focused services exist, but are largely donor funded, and limited in geographic/programmatic scope.	Systematic modelling and testing of a host of prevention and response related child protection services is currently underway, mostly funded by partners and donors. Governments continue to focus on response related services, which see expansion across the country.	Increased investments are currently being made by the government in replicating proven models of prevention and response related and gender-responsive child protection services in various parts of the country. Partners increasingly limit their investments to technical assistance for policy advocacy and investments in capacity building shift from trainings to systematic institutional capacity building. Significant focus is on routine and regular monitoring of child protection services, but majority or all such monitoring is internal monitoring.	Government managed and funded national level scale-up of prevention and response related child protection services is underway through national programmes. All child protection services are subject to periodic/ annual audits and external evaluations, and services often see changes based on findings of audits and external evaluations.
	3.2 Availability of Standard Operating Procedures and/or Protocols for child protection services, as outlined in statutory provisions	No SOPs or protocols exist that set out child protection roles, referral processes and procedures to be followed, or SOPs are developed by individual agencies for their own personnel and are not fully compliant with national legislation and international standards.	Comprehensive SOPs/protocols largely compliant with national legislation and international standards are currently being developed or are already in place, including in humanitarian situations, but implementation of these SOPs/protocols is ad-hoc at best, often constrained by lack of adequate financial or human resources and limited capacities.	Comprehensive gender responsive and inclusive SOPs/protocols largely compliant with national legislation and international standards are available and are widely disseminated and effectively implemented in practice by most/all agencies/organizations while delivering child protection services.	Implementation of such SOPs/protocols is institutionalized through formal case management systems and these SOPs/ protocols are regularly reviewed and revised to adapt to emerging situations.
	3.3 Availability of child protection case management and referral systems	There are no standardized child protection case management and referral SOPs; case workers are often trained on agency-specific SOPs for case management and referrals, and case management approach to service delivery is practised in an ad-hoc manner.	Standard child protection case management SOPs have been established, but implementation of SOPs is weak/ad-hoc due to (a) absence of commonly agreed referral protocols between child protection/social welfare and other sectors (education, health, law enforcement, justice etc.) and (b) absence of a formal and nationally/sub-nationally adopted training and supervision system for case workers and supervisors.	Gender responsive and inclusive SOPs for child protection case management as well as multisectoral referral system have been established and formalized, and efforts are underway to train case workers and supervisors to increase the use of formal case management and referral systems across the country.	A formal child protection case management and referral system is fully implemented and integrated through national case information management systems.

THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH
PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS
1 Measuring Progress of CPSS Interventions
2 The State of Play – Systems Building to Systems Maturity

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4. Minimum standards and oversight mechanisms	**4.1** Availability of independent accountability and oversight mechanisms for child protection	Independent accountability and oversight mechanisms for child protection do not exist or do not cover child protection as part of their mandate.	Accountability mechanisms have been established in-house within the lead ministry/ agency responsible for child protection and are not independent.	Clear accountability and oversight systems have been established within the government, e.g., through hiring child protection experts, setting up inspection units, Management Information Systems and Quality Assurance Systems but lack independence.	In addition to accountability and oversight systems have been established within the similar mechanisms are also set up independently, e.g., by national human rights institutions/ombudsperson, etc., through hiring child protection experts, setting up inspection units, Management Information Systems and Quality Assurance Systems, and undertake independent reviews of implementation of minimum standards.
	4.2 Monitoring and oversight of minimum standards for child protection services	No minimum standards for child protection services are available, or minimum standards are available, including in humanitarian contexts, for some and not all child protection services.	Nationally adopted minimum standards for a range of prevention and response related child protection services are available, but there is an absence of formal mechanisms for monitoring and oversight of services.	Mechanism for monitoring and oversight of children's services based on nationally adopted minimum standards for a range of prevention and response related child protection services exists, but monitoring is ad-hoc and does not cover all services.	Regular monitoring and reporting of child protection services is carried out by national or local government to ensure national minimum standards are fully enforced.
5. Human, financial and infrastructure resources	**5.1** Availability of qualified social service workforce for child protection	In the absence of comprehensive strategies to plan, develop and support the social service workforce for child protection, majority of workers undergo ad-hoc trainings, often on the job, that are supported by partners. There is an absence of normative framework for social service work, and licencing and accreditation systems for social service workers do not exist. There is no formal system of supervision of workers, and human resource information is not collected and used at national/sub-national levels.	The normative framework for social service work is being defined. Efforts are underway to introduce/strengthen social service workforce education with focus on knowledge and skills related to child protection and select government institutions provide on the job certified child protection trainings. Worker recruitment doesn't require following licensing and accreditation standards and there is an absence/lack of formal systems of supportive supervision. Efforts are underway to improve the human resource information/worker data for social service workers.	Normative frameworks for the workforce are well-defined. Trainings are streamlined through improved accreditation processes for pre- and in-service courses and hiring processes mandate consideration of qualifications of workers. A formal system of supportive supervision is in place but not uniformly implemented across the country. Efforts are underway to strengthen and scale the supervision system. Efforts are underway to enhance the capacity of the social service workforce on gender responsive social and behavioural change communication. A human resource information system for social service workers for child protection has been established and is being increasingly used to gather human resource related information.	A well-planned,-developed, and-supported social service workforce in place. Licencing and accreditation systems as well as supportive supervision systems are fully functional. Information of human resources is regularly gathered, analysed and used to refine/revise social service workforce strategies.
	5.2 Financing of child protection services	Child protection services are mostly funded by donors or provided by NGOs with minimal government funding.	Significant number of child protection services are funded through public finance, but are mostly response oriented and infrastructure related, e.g., establishment, running costs of residential care facilities, etc. Efforts are underway to track and analyse child protection budgets (e.g., using budget briefs) but there is an absence of systematic analysis of public finance for child protection.	National/sub-national budgets increasingly support a wide range of prevention and response related child protection services and there is a shift in focus from moving investments from infrastructure to human resources. There is a yearly review of child protection expenditures and budget adjustments to child protection policy requirements. Host of public finance tools (e.g., budget briefs, costing models, expenditure analyses, financial benchmarking) are used to influence public financing for child protection in a gender responsive and inclusive manner.	All/a vast majority of tertiary child protection services and some secondary child protection services are funded through national/sub-national budgets. Budgets and expenditures are regularly/annually tracked.

THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH
PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS
1 Measuring Progress of CPSS Interventions
2 The State of Play – Systems Building to Systems Maturity

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6. Mechanisms for child participation and community engagement	**6.1** Child-friendly and gender-responsive legal procedures for children's access to justice	There are no child-friendly and gender-responsive legal procedures for children to access justice.	There are specialized law enforcement and court personnel (including judges and magistrates) for children in conflict with the law and in contact with the law (but no specialist court) who operate in a child-friendly and gender-responsive manner (i.e. fully or mainly in compliance with international standards).	There are specialist courts (Juvenile Court / Family Court / Children's Court) for children in conflict with the law, operating with child-friendly and gender-responsive procedures that comply fully or mainly with international standards, but not for children in contact with the law or vice versa. In some instances, while specialist courts for children in conflict with the law and/or contact with the law are established, they are not present across the country.	There are specialist courts for children in conflict with the law and contact with the law and its procedures are child-friendly and gender-responsive (i.e., comply fully / largely with international standards).
	6.2 Independent complaint mechanisms exist for children	There are no complaint mechanisms (independent or otherwise) for children who are refused or receive child protection services.	Local service providers have a child complaint procedure in place to address complaints by or on behalf of children refused or receiving child protection services. Such procedures/ mechanisms are not independent.	There is an independent body/authority at local level that accepts complaints by or on behalf of children refused or receiving child protection services.	There is an independent complaint procedure that hears, reviews and responds to individual complaints from children about refusal to receive child protection services or about the child protection system or services received within a stipulated timeframe.
	6.3 Child and adolescent empowerment for child protection	Children who have received or are receiving prevention or response related child protection services have no access to forums (groups/ organizations) that work with them and enable them to express their views or experiences to service providers and government bodies.	Forums have been established at local level, largely through efforts of partners/NGOs, for children who have been/or are receiving prevention or response related child protection services to enable them to discuss issues and provide feedback to service providers; however, the establishment of such forums is not uniform across the country, and mechanisms to ensure children's views are effectively communicated to the government do not exist or are informal.	Government supports (in terms of human capacity and financially) such forums (e.g., children's groups established at local government/community level for children who have been/or are receiving prevention or response related child protection services) to enable them to discuss issues and provide feedback to service providers; or those receiving child protection services in a gender-responsive and inclusive manner. Efforts are underway to establish or strengthen existing mechanisms to ensure children's views are effectively communicated to the government at national/sub-national/local level.	Government supports (in terms of human capacity and financially) forums such as children's groups established at local government/community level. A formal mechanism is in use through which national/ sub-national/local government receives and responds to feedback from children and children's groups receiving or who have received child protection services.
	6.4 Existence of community-based mechanisms for child protection	Community-based mechanisms exist but only in select parts of the country and are largely supported by partners/NGOs. These mechanisms are often accountable only at community level or local level, but do not work with national or sub-national government bodies responsible for child protection.	Community-based mechanisms are more widely available but continue to be led and supported by partners and NGOs. These mechanisms frequently engage with actors in the formal child protection system including at national and sub-national level but continue to function in an ad-hoc manner and no formal structures for accountability/oversight exist.	Community-based mechanisms are formally recognized, either as part of, or through its linkages with the public child protection system, and function according to standard terms of reference or written procedures and protocols, and in a gender-responsive and inclusive manner. These mechanisms are increasingly supported by the Government, both financially and with technical support. While formal accountability structures may be defined through terms of reference or written procedures and protocols, implementation of accountability structures continues to be weak.	Community-based mechanisms are fully functional across the country where necessary, and as per their terms of reference/protocols/procedures and their applicability (urban/rural). Functioning of these mechanisms is monitored through fully functional accountability mechanisms.

THE UNICEF CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING APPROACH
PHASES OF CPSS AND BENCHMARKS FOR MEASUREMENT
HIGH PRIORITY CPSS INTERVENTIONS
1 Measuring Progress of CPSS Interventions
2 The State of Play – Systems Building to Systems Maturity

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7. Data collection and monitoring systems	**7.1** Administrative data systems that routinely generate quality child protection data	There is no system in place to gather routine data on child protection, or countries are still in the process of developing formalized systems in one or multiple sectors.	Core administrative data systems that capture child protection data exist at national level, with national coverage, but administrative data gathered by different sources are not based on a standard format/data collection tool. Training, resources, and capacity for those responsible for gathering data are limited and there is a lack of institutionalized quality assurance processes and procedures. Data on child protection are not consistently disaggregated by sex, age and other domains most relevant to the issue (e.g. types of care; types of violence).	There is effort to integrate administrative data as part of a broader national statistical system, for example, to develop national metadata standards (or data dictionary) that defines the format/ structure of key data fields shared across multiple core systems). All child protection data are disaggregated at least by sex, while other disaggregation remains limited. There are institutionalized mechanisms and processes to ensure quality assurance.	Administrative data is part of a broader national statistical system. Administrative data systems are inclusive; effectively monitoring that "no child is left behind", as well as providing the data needed for systems to effectively address disparities where they exist. Data are regularly analysed or used for planning purposes, programme and policy design and monitoring the adequacy and effectiveness of programmes and policies or improving access to essential services.
	7.2 Surveys	There are no data collection plans nor mechanisms in place to generate data on child protection.	Data collection plans and mechanisms are in place, but only a few child protection topics are covered, and data are collected irregularly.	Data on a range of child protection topics are collected at regular intervals, but inconsistent definitions and approaches are used to gather data. In addition to prevalence data, information is also collected on risk and protective factors, and data can be disaggregated by sex, age and other variables most relevant to the issue (e.g. types of care; family's characteristics).	Data collection happens 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 on non-household population, including street-connected children and other children outside of household, are also generated. Data are regularly analysed or used for monitoring the impact of programmes and policies. In addition to data on prevalence and on risks and protective factors, data on social and behavioural change are collected periodically, according to internationally comparable tools and methodology.
	7.3 Data governance (coordination, oversight, and secure management)	There is no legislation on data collection, transfer or sharing of data, usage of data, or there is no accountability in terms of the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors on the generation of data. There are no policies and procedures to ensure safety of all those involved in data collection processes and management and there are no data protection and confidentiality protocols.	Ad-hoc approval processes are in place for data collection, access to data, data sharing, and researcher requirements. Record-keeping systems are generally weak. Data management systems are not regularly updated. Certain safeguards are available within limited ministries and agencies to regulate who has access to child protection information and for what purpose.	There is legislation that generally encompass data to be collected and by whom but does not cover essential elements and standards of quality data collection and record keeping. Efforts are also underway to pass legislation which stipulates how data is to be transferred from operational sources to a centralised storage system, and what the data may be used for. Efforts are underway to develop policies and procedures to ensure safety of all those involved at all stages of the data collection process and management to minimize the inherent risks, including data protection and confidentiality protocols.	There is legislation on data collection, transfer of data, quality record-keeping, usage of data, and the roles and responsibilities of relevant actors. Policies and procedures ensure safe and secure data management (includes data sharing protocols, which also cover sharing data securely to minimize potential harm to children). Financial resources and organizational and staff capacity are ensured to enable key data collection and analyses. There is a centralised coordination body to oversee the system and ensure effective coordination of sharing information and data between the different agencies, with the national statistical offices playing a critical role in the coordination of any data collection system.

Endnotes

1. Strengthening Child Protection Systems: Evaluation of UNICEF Strategies and Programmes, December 2018.
2. Strengthening Child Protection Systems: Evaluation of UNICEF Strategies and Programmes, December 2018 at p. 80.

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