



# Framing child protection systems: Toward a normative framework and operational definition for policy and practice

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an expanded conceptual and normative framing of child protection systems to support more coherent, inclusive, and accountable approaches in both development and humanitarian contexts. The term normative framework refers to the shared rules, standards, and social values that guide how institutions should function and what they aim to achieve. The paper responds to persistent gaps in how child protection systems are defined. The analysis is situated within a wider global context in which child protection systems are under strain due to multiple global pressures.

Building on foundational work from 2010 and drawing on recent momentum from the 2024 Bogotá Call to Action and the Framework for Action, the paper describes what a child protection system is. It introduces a dual-axis normative framework that distinguishes between norms of operation and norms of intent.

The paper examines evolving expectations of system components, draws on benchmarking data from over 150 countries, and addresses persistent challenges. The last section proposes a working, field-tested definition of a child protection system to guide national planning, partner alignment, and systems-focused reform.

Clear definitions play a policy-like role in shaping implementation and resource flows, and inclusive and accountable systems are essential to upholding every child's right to protection.

## 1. Why a normative framework and expanded working definition are needed now

Most international development practitioners, regardless of their sector or technical background, can readily describe the key features of a health or education system. They do so because they have interacted with those systems as students, parents, or users. These systems are complex, but their purpose, functions, and components are widely understood. By contrast, far fewer people can describe a child protection system. Most practitioners, including those in adjacent sectors, rarely engage directly with child protection structures, making the system less tangible.

Child protection practitioners themselves come from diverse professional traditions—social work, child welfare, gender, law, psychology, policy, child rights, human rights, and international development. Asking twelve practitioners to define the system may indeed yield thirteen thoughtful answers. This plurality reflects the richness of the field, but it also means that discussions about child protection systems are often “multilingual” in a conceptual sense: people may use similar terms but draw from different frameworks.

These dynamics reinforce the need for a working definition (see Section 10), one that is practical, flexible, and grounded in field realities. The aim is not to offer a final or universal definition, but a shared

reference point that can improve dialogue, promote consistency, and guide national system development. A collective understanding of their core dimensions enables more aligned and effective investment and supports better results.

This paper is grounded in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), including Article 19, which requires states to take legislative and administrative measures to prevent and respond to all forms of harm against children (United Nations, 1989).

The paper is situated at the intersection of three key milestones in the evolution of child protection systems thinking. The first is United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2008 working paper *Adapting a Systems Approach to Child Protection* (Wulczyn et al., 2010), which introduced systems thinking, but provided limited guidance on operationalisation. The second is UNICEF's *Child Protection Systems Strengthening* approach, which defines the institutional, operational, and normative expectations of a functional child protection system (UNICEF, 2021). It consolidated earlier frameworks and introduced operational tools, benchmarks and maturity models, that made system strengthening measurable and actionable. The third is the 2024 Bogotá Call to Action (Government of Colombia & Government of Sweden, 2024), which renewed global attention to inclusive, resilient, and results-oriented child protection systems, particularly in fragile contexts.

While the core components of child protection systems — legal and

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policy frameworks, governance, service delivery, standards and oversight, capacity, participation, and data, have remained conceptually consistent, their application has evolved. There is now greater emphasis on enforceability in emergencies, decentralised structures, conflict-sensitive delivery, and participatory accountability. These shifts signal a broader transition from system design to system effectiveness.

In response, this paper offers a dual contribution: a *normative framework* and an *expanded operational definition of child protection systems*. The normative framework clarifies the shared rules, standards, and social values that guide how institutions should function and what they aim to achieve. The expanded operational definition builds on this framework to support policy dialogue, resource mobilisation, and systems strengthening. Together, they support a more coherent, principled, and results-driven approach to national child protection systems development. Section 9 provides a fuller explanation of the normative framework.

Developing child protection systems is not only a technical exercise. Political incentives, fiscal choices, and bureaucratic dynamics all shape whether laws and policies are financed, enforced, and translated into sustained practice. Competition among ministries, donor influence, budgetary trade-offs, and shifts in political attention affect how, and whether, reforms take root.

The paper draws from UNICEF's evolving approach to child protection systems strengthening and engages with broader global and regional frameworks that complement it. The analysis is rooted in the normative framework outlined above, which provides both the ethical and operational basis for building systems that are technically sound and socially just.

This work is also situated within a wider global crisis. Decades of progress are at risk due to financial retrenchment, shrinking aid flows, shifting institutional mandates, and rising political volatility. These pressures are eroding the systems intended to keep children safe, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where national capacity is already stretched (HDPI Humanitarian Development Partnerships International, 2025). This systemic crisis underscores the need for greater conceptual clarity and strategic focus. This paper contributes to that effort by clarifying the conceptual and normative foundations.

## 2. Filling the gap: A definition for practice and policy

A well-functioning child protection system is expected to be resilient, interdependent, and responsive to context (UNICEF, 2021; Wulczyn et al., 2010). It must maintain core functions during conflict, disaster, displacement, or economic crisis and adapt to emerging risks, including those linked to digital environments. Although the terminology can appear technical, systems thinking is practical at its core. Its purpose is to strengthen the everyday safety and wellbeing of children and the families who care for them. Any framing must therefore remain grounded in children's lived realities.

Systems thinking within UNICEF predates the 2010 framing. In the 1950s and 1960s, UNICEF saw child protection as part of broader social service systems that strengthened families, improved living conditions, and supported social change. A 1959 report to the UNICEF Executive Board stressed

“... the fundamental importance of assisting in the improvement, extension and establishment of comprehensive national systems of social services ... to strengthen the family, improve levels of living, and provide children with care and protection” (Sicault, 1963, p. 134).

Regional work in East Asia and the Pacific (Hong & Bridle, 2007) described child protection as drawing on interconnected subsystems such as legal, welfare, and behaviour-change structures, while (Grant, 2007) emphasised the need for clearer institutional boundaries. These strands show that systems ideas have longstanding roots in UNICEF practice even if the language has evolved.

The strength of a child protection system lies in how its components work together. Laws require enforcement, services depend on sustainable financing and coordination, and family and community engagement strengthens prevention and accountability. Effective systems address acts of commission and omission, upholding children's rights across diverse contexts. They respond not only to individual violations but also to structural conditions that place children at risk, particularly for those affected by poverty, displacement, climate change, humanitarian crises, or separated from their families, or living in residential institutions or detention.

The need for a practical definition has persisted for more than a decade. The 2010 paper *Adapting a Systems Approach to Child Protection* (Wulczyn et al., 2010) marked a shift toward understanding child protection as a system rather than a set of issue-specific interventions. This framing was tested in Malawi in 2011 (UNICEF Malawi, 2011) (See Fig. 1) and further developed across Eastern and Southern Africa with United Nations Economic and Social Council (2008). However, available definitions remained abstract and difficult to apply.

An early attempt defined child protection systems 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 [...] Their aim includes supporting and strengthening families to reduce social exclusion, and to lower the risk of separation, violence and exploitation” (United Nations Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC], 2008).

This definition, while useful, lacked operational detail.

Subsequent efforts, including the 2012 Delhi Conference *A Better Way to Protect ALL Children* (UNICEF et al., 2013), offered a more comprehensive description. Dr Susan Bissell characterised child protection systems as the formal and informal structures, capacities, and actors, including children, families, communities, and national authorities, working together to prevent and respond to harm. The Delhi Conference reinforced the idea that systems require human resources, finance, laws and policies, governance, data, and service delivery. Earlier milestones such as the 2008 Bucharest workshop (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2008) and the 2012 Dakar Conference (Maestral International, 2013) similarly called for nationally owned systems grounded in law and inclusive of both formal and community-based mechanisms.

Despite these advances, challenges persisted. A 2019 global evaluation of UNICEF's systems strengthening approach found progress to be uneven (UNICEF, 2019). Many UNICEF country offices lacked clear guidance, domestic investment remained limited, and systems often relied on donor-funded projects. The evaluation identified a central gap: the absence of a coherent conceptual framework to guide system-wide work. Country offices focused on individual components rather than a unified system vision, which made it difficult to prioritise investments, support government leadership, or monitor progress. These findings contributed to operational tools such as the benchmarks and the Child Protection Report Card series (UNICEF, 2024), shifting attention toward measurable progress.

The First Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children (Government of Colombia & Government of Sweden, 2024) reflects this shift. It defined child protection systems as:

“The informal and formal laws, policies, regulations, services and support that are needed across multiple sectors to prevent and respond to the violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children [...] working in close coordination with health, education, social protection, and civil registration to ensure children and families receive the support they need to thrive” (UNICEF et al., 2024).

Yet even this expanded framing offers limited insight into how system components interact or how governments and partners can strengthen system functioning. This gap led the author to develop an



Fig. 1. An early example of systems thinking (2011)

expanded working definition (see Section 10), first used in field settings in 2011 and updated to reflect evolving frameworks such as the *Bogotá Call to Action*.

In 2010, the central question was “A child protection system … is new. The question that arises is: what is it?” (Wulczyn et al., 2010, Preface). In 2025, after substantial national reforms, new regional frameworks (ASEAN, 2016, p. 50), and global milestones such as the Ministerial Conference, the concept is widely recognised. The African Union’s *Agenda 2040* similarly reinforces the expectation that Member States build integrated, rights-based child protection systems.

The more urgent question is why child protection systems continue to lag behind health and education systems in structure and investment.

This paper argues that several interrelated factors contribute to this gap. Child protection systems still lack operational clarity, making implementation and coordination difficult. Their cross-sectoral nature means they are spread across ministries without a clear institutional anchor or dedicated budget, which weakens leadership and accountability. Politically and fiscally, child protection remains marginal, often viewed as outside core development priorities. Donor investments frequently target specific issues or short-term interventions rather than strengthening the system as a whole. These dynamics have slowed the transition from conceptual frameworks to nationally led, functioning, and accountable systems.

### 3. UNICEF’s approach to systems strengthening

UNICEF’s *Child Protection Systems Strengthening* (CPSS) approach sets

out seven components and 19 related subcomponents that together define the institutional, operational, and normative expectations of a functional child protection system (UNICEF, 2021). These components provide a coherent, rights-based framework grounded in the CRC and aligned with the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

They also reflect UNICEF’s understanding that child protection outcomes depend not only on laws or services but on the collective performance of interconnected institutions. The components must therefore be interpreted as a whole; *weaknesses in any one area reduce the effectiveness of the system overall*.

#### 3.1. The seven components and how they function together

The first component is the *legal and policy framework*. It formalises the State’s obligations, defines mandates, and creates the institutional architecture for multisectoral action. Legal reform alone cannot achieve child protection outcomes, but it provides the enabling environment for rights-based practice. Its effectiveness depends on political commitment, resource allocation, and clear institutional mandates. In the Philippines, for example, strong laws coexist with local inequities, uneven prioritisation, and resource gaps (Andaya et al., 2025). This illustrates how political economy (DFID, 2009) factors shape implementation.

The second component, *governance and coordination*, gives the system its operational coherence. It requires an institution with the authority and budget to convene actors across government and ensure complementarity with social welfare, health, education, justice, and social

protection. Coordination must extend from national to subnational levels, where implementation occurs. Variability in staffing, financing, and local capacity, as seen in the Philippines and South Africa (Strydom et al., 2020), often undermines alignment between policy commitments and service delivery. UNICEF's CPSS Benchmarking Framework requires formalised coordination mechanisms and clear lines of accountability to address these gaps (UNICEF, 2022).

The third component, the *continuum of services*, covers prevention, early intervention, and response. It requires evidence-based programmes, trained frontline workers, integrated case management, and functioning referral pathways. Muchabaiwa (2024) highlights how limited domestic financing and low political visibility constrain service coverage. As a result, many countries retain fragmented projects rather than sustained national systems.

The fourth component focuses on *minimum standards and oversight*. Strong systems ensure quality, consistency, and accountability through supervision, independent oversight bodies, complaints mechanisms, and enforcement of standards. These arrangements translate policy commitments into meaningful protection. UNICEF's benchmarks require both internal and external oversight mechanisms, recognising that accountability strengthens public trust and system performance (UNICEF, 2022).

The fifth, sixth, and seventh components relate to the enabling environment: *a trained and supported workforce; mechanisms for child participation and community engagement; and robust data and monitoring systems*. Workforce capacity remains a critical bottleneck globally (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2020). Child participation enhances accountability and responsiveness through feedback, advisory bodies, and direct involvement in decisions that affect children. Data systems support planning and monitoring but often face challenges of interoperability, coverage, and ethical safeguards. When properly developed, data enables evidence-based decision-making and helps identify inequities in service reach.

Taken together, these components and subcomponents outline a holistic and interconnected view of what a child protection system must include. Their strength lies in how they function collectively rather than individually.

### 3.2. Benchmarking and measuring system maturity

The CPSS maturity benchmarks translate the structural components of child protection systems into measurable indicators of progress. They outline how systems move from initial design to institutionalisation, reflecting increasing clarity of mandates, strengthened coordination, predictable financing, improved service standards, and institutionalised oversight (UNICEF, 2022).

Benchmarking gives governments a structured way to diagnose strengths and gaps. It assesses not only whether laws or services exist but how well they function. Analysis may focus on individual sub-components or be aggregated across the system, allowing governments to identify targeted priorities for reform.

UNICEF's *Measuring the Maturity of Child Protection Systems* (UNICEF, 2022) provides detailed guidance on applying the benchmarks, while the *Child Protection Systems Strengthening Report Card* series (UNICEF, 2024) tracks progress across 158 countries. By 2024, fifty countries had improved maturity since 2021, with Indonesia and Gabon showing notable gains. Indonesia has integrated child protection into national development planning, established Child Protection Units in most districts, and developed an integrated national information system. Gabon has advanced through legal reform, workforce strengthening, and the creation of a national observatory.

These examples show how political will, domestic financing, institutional leadership, and sustained capacity-building drive progress. At the same time, global trends highlight persistent gaps in workforce capacity, financing, and data systems. Many countries remain in the early stages of maturity, with fragmented services and inconsistent

enforcement of standards (UNICEF, 2024).

Achieving maturity requires long-term investment, strong leadership, and the institutionalisation of structures, processes, and accountability mechanisms. Benchmarking helps governments understand where systems are developing and where reform is needed, providing a foundation for sustained system strengthening.

Despite uneven progress, momentum is evident. At the *First Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children* (Government of Colombia & Government of Sweden, 2024), governments presented reforms aligned with the benchmarks. For example, the Philippines established a Presidential Office for Child Protection under Executive Order No. 67 to coordinate and oversee the national agenda (Government of the Philippines, 2024).

### 4. How different child protection system typologies are used in international development

The term *child protection system* is widely used, yet countries interpret it very differently. Approaches vary according to social norms, legal traditions, political context, administrative traditions, and levels of state capacity. These differences shape how child protection is defined, which institutions lead, and how services are organised. The typology below summarises the main models found in international development and highlights their implications for coherence and system-building. This diversity underscores why a clearer normative framework is required: without shared expectations, actors draw from different conceptual traditions even when using the same terminology.

Recent contributions, including *The Oxford Handbook of Child Protection Systems* (Berrick et al., 2023) and *The Development of Child Protection Systems and Practice in Low-to Middle-Income Countries* (Brown et al., 2025), place UNICEF's approach within a wider global discussion. Both works emphasise that system strengthening must be grounded in the legal, social, and institutional context of each country.

Child protection systems draw on several conceptual traditions. Each tradition offers a different way of understanding how societies prevent and respond to violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and harmful practices. Their diversity reflects historical legacies, institutional arrangements, and assumptions about the role of families, communities, the state, and international partners.

Comparing these approaches helps clarify their strengths and limitations and shows how models from the global north continue to influence international development. It supports efforts to design child protection systems that are coherent, contextually grounded, and aligned with children's rights. Although UNICEF's CPSS approach is not a typology in the strict sense, it is included in the table below because of its central role in international development and its influence on national reforms in low- and middle-income countries (see Table 1).

Together, these typologies illustrate the diversity of approaches used to organise child protection and the assumptions that underpin them. Most national systems blend elements from several traditions, shaped by legal frameworks, social norms, political context, and available resources. This comparative perspective clarifies how systems evolve and why coherence can be difficult to achieve. It also reinforces the need for a shared normative framework that provides common expectations across these varied models. The typology therefore serves as a reference point for applying the proposed normative framework and expanded operational definition in different contexts.

### 5. From concept to structure: the 2010 systems framing

UNICEF formally articulated a systems approach to child protection in the 2010 working paper *Adapting a Systems Approach to Child Protection* (Wulczyn et al., 2010). This marked a shift from fragmented, issue-based responses to a more coherent, integrated vision. Developed by Chapin Hall for UNICEF, with support from UNHCR and Save the Children, the paper provided the first clear articulation of what a child

**Table 1**

Major child protection system typologies used in international development.

System typology	Primary focus	Core functions and mechanisms	Distinctive features and assumptions	Key references
<b>Statutory model</b>	Legal response to child abuse, neglect, exploitation	Investigation, substantiation, legal intervention, care orders	Reactive and case-driven, assumes strong institutional and legal infrastructure	Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017); Hesse (2000)
<b>Welfare-led model</b>	Family support, early intervention, prevention	Supportive services, mostly voluntary engagement, universal platforms	Draws on social democratic traditions, emphasises structural risks	Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes (2011); Midgley (2013)
<b>Justice-led model</b>	Legal accountability and judicial decision-making	Custody rulings, offender management, court processes	Adversarial orientation, tends to centre legal culpability rather than prevention	Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes (2011); Hesse (2000)
<b>Public health model</b>	Population-level prevention and risk reduction	Social ecological analysis, data-driven interventions, multi-sector action	Focus on scale and behavioural outcomes; less explicit on institutional structures	WHO, UNICEF et al. (2016); UNICEF (2017)
<b>Community-based model</b>	Community-level mechanisms with external support	Committees, referral pathways, focal points	Local networks shaped by external standards; not fully autonomous	UNICEF (2019); UNHCR (2013)
<b>Community-led model</b>	Locally governed protective practices	Indigenous social regulation, community-led decision-making	High ownership; may reinforce unequal norms without safeguards	Wessells and Kostelný (2025); Korbin (1981)
<b>Civil society-led approaches</b>	NGO-supported system strengthening	Planning tools, participatory approaches, community mobilisation	Strong focus on participation, resilience, and community engagement	Save the Children (2019); World Vision International (n.d.); World Vision International (2019)
<b>UNHCR humanitarian model</b>	Rights-based protection of displaced and stateless children	Legal identity, case management, coordination, durable solutions	Designed for contexts with weak or absent national systems	UNHCR (2012)
<b>IOM migration-sensitive model</b>	Inclusion of migrant and mobile children	Identification, referral, continuity of care, cross-border work	Bridges migration management and child protection systems	IOM (various)
<b>UNICEF CPSS approach</b>	Rights based national systems strengthening and institutionalisation	Legal frameworks, governance, workforce, services, oversight, participation, data, financing	Integrates statutory and preventive approaches; emphasises national ownership and coherence	Wulczyn et al. (2010); UNICEF (2021); Government of Colombia and Sweden (2024)

protection system is and the role it should play within international development.

A central contribution was the concept of nesting: the idea that children are protected through interconnected layers of care, beginning with families and communities and extending through local services to national institutions. The paper emphasised that *child protection systems sit within wider public systems* including welfare, health, education, justice, and social protection and therefore cannot function in isolation. Building on this, the present paper stresses that interdependence does not diminish the system's institutional identity or governance requirements. Child protection may be 'everyone's business,' but it still requires a clear government anchor to provide leadership, coherence, and accountability. Experience across contexts demonstrates that the more actors involved, the more essential robust system design and institutional anchoring become.

The 2010 framing identified key components of a functioning system: a legal framework; defined functions and structures; a continuum of care; a process of care; accountability mechanisms; adequate capacity; and data. These were presented as interdependent elements rather than standalone pillars, a principle that still informs current models.

Although the 2010 paper did not offer operational tools, it established the conceptual foundations for subsequent development of benchmarks, maturity models, and strategic planning frameworks. It remains a foundational reference point for understanding how child protection systems are conceived and organised.

## 6. The Bogotá Call 2024: reaffirming the case for system-wide investment

Building on the 2010 conceptual foundation, recent global initiatives have focused on converting systems thinking into political commitment and coordinated action. The *Bogotá Call to Action* (Government of Colombia & Government of Sweden, 2024) represents a pivotal reaffirmation of global commitment to inclusive, resilient, and results-driven child protection systems. Emerging from the *First Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children*, the Call reflects a shared understanding that stronger, better-resourced systems are essential to reach children facing severe risks, including those affected

by conflict, displacement, poverty, and violence.

The Bogotá Call launched the *Framework for Action on Child Protection Systems*, a global interagency initiative co-led by UNICEF, Save the Children, and World Vision (UNICEF, Save the Children, and World Vision, 2024). As of April 2025, twelve governments from all regions had endorsed the Framework.<sup>2</sup> These endorsements signal the Framework's broad relevance and wide political reach.

The Framework translates political momentum into practical strategies at national, regional, and global levels. It aligns system-building efforts, clarifies expectations for system performance, and supports coordinated investments across sectors. The Bogotá Call places strong emphasis on reaching children in the most challenging circumstances and on ensuring systems are inclusive by design. It highlights the protection needs of children with disabilities, children living in poverty or rural areas, children without parental care, and children on the move, including refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless children. Inclusion is framed not as an aspiration but as a core marker of a functioning system.

Key areas of focus include strengthening child-friendly reporting mechanisms; improving early identification and response to violence; expanding access to justice and reintegration for children recruited or used in armed conflict; and promoting integrated service models that bring together child protection, health, education, justice, and social protection. Coordination with gender-based violence services, particularly for women and girls, is identified as essential. The Call also stresses the need for a well-regulated and adequately supported social service workforce across both development and humanitarian settings. Crucially, it identifies sustainable financing, especially for countries hosting displaced and conflict-affected children, as a non-negotiable requirement for effective system operation.

Since the Ministerial Conference, early signs of follow-through have

<sup>2</sup> These governments include the Republic of the Philippines, Moldova, Türkiye, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Costa Rica. More than twenty global organisations and UN bodies have also endorsed it, including Better Care Network, Child Helpline International, Plan International, Family for Every Child, the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, Red por la Infancia, UNHCR, IOM, WHO, and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children.

emerged. At the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) *Rise Up Policy Forum* in Vilnius, Lithuania, in October 2025, several endorsing governments presented initial progress on aligning national plans with the Bogotá Call, strengthening data and reporting systems, and scaling prevention initiatives. As ISPCAN CEO Pragathi Tummala noted (ISPCAN, 2025):

"Governments have the hardest job of all to manage many priorities and oversee the welfare of a nation. We have to help them be successful by bringing the research, practice, and policy together so how to best care for children is not only on them to figure out. Addressing the challenges, maximising resources and finding solutions is our collective responsibility."

Taken together, the Ministerial Conference, the Bogotá Call, the Framework for Action, and the early signs of progress presented at the *Rise Up Policy Forum* illustrate a coherent global effort to move from rhetoric to results. Collectively, they signal the ongoing shift away from fragmented, project-based responses toward integrated systems that uphold children's rights and respond to the complexity of their lives.

## 7. What's changed: evolving expectations of system components

Global commitments have strengthened momentum for system-wide reform, but expectations of how each component should function have evolved since 2010. The core components remain conceptually consistent, yet their application has shifted, particularly in fragile and humanitarian settings and in response to growing recognition of harmful social norms and gender inequality.

The original UNICEF framework (Wulczyn et al., 2010) outlined the structural foundations of a system: legal frameworks, governance, service provision, oversight, capacity, participation, and information systems. These elements, grounded in the CRC, were designed to operate as interconnected components to prevent and respond to protection risks.

The 2024 Bogotá Call to Action (Government of Colombia & Government of Sweden, 2024) reframes these components through the lens of inclusion, resilience, and results. Legal and policy frameworks are now expected to be enforceable in all contexts, including emergencies. Governance involves not only coordination but also decentralised and adaptive leadership during crises. Standards and oversight have shifted toward outcome-based and participatory accountability. Capacity is understood in terms of workforce regulation, sustainable financing, and surge capacity, meaning the temporary expansion of staffing and resources when needs increase. Child participation now functions as a structural requirement, and information systems are seen as tools for real-time decision-making and equity monitoring.

This represents a move from system design to system effectiveness, with an emphasis on performance in complex, high-risk settings. Table 2 summarises how expectations across the seven components have evolved.

These developments reflect a broader understanding of the complexity of delivering protection across diverse settings. The emphasis has shifted from defining child protection systems to assessing how well they function for those most at risk. The 2024 framing builds on the 2010 foundations and strengthens expectations of inclusion, responsiveness, and equity. It signals wider sectoral ownership and a clearer expectation that systems must deliver measurable results, not only structural alignment.

## 8. Why the whole system matters

A critical but often overlooked principle in child protection system design is that no single component can function effectively on its own. The seven core components: legal and policy frameworks, governance, service delivery, standards and oversight, capacity, participation, and data, must operate together, like parts of an engine, to produce sustained and meaningful results. When these elements develop unevenly or fail to

**Table 2**  
Evolution in the seven core components of a child protection system.

#	Component	2010 Conceptualisation	2024 Bogotá Call Advancement
1	Legal and policy framework	Structural legitimacy and normative grounding	Enforceable protection in all contexts, including emergencies
2	Governance	Integrated oversight and coordination	National and decentralised, adaptive governance in fragile settings
3	Continuum of services	Broad service range from prevention to response	Inclusive, conflict-sensitive and child-centred delivery
4	Standards and oversight	Internal accountability and policy adherence	Results-focused, child-informed accountability
5	Capacity	Resources and workforce alignment	Workforce regulation, sustainable financing, surge capacity
6	Participation and community engagement	Noted, especially informal systems	Structural child agency and survivor participation
7	Information and monitoring	Feedback for adjustment	Real-time, equity-sensitive data and surveillance

Source: UNICEF CPSS; Bogota Call to Action; Author

interact, systems often underperform or break down entirely.

Investing in only one area, such as workforce capacity, without corresponding attention to standards, data systems, or coordination, yields limited and often short-lived gains. One of the most common reasons for stalled system development is inadequate investment in the linkages between components, particularly governance and coordination.

In many countries, weak or absent national coordination mechanisms mean that system progress occurs mainly when external actors, most often development partners, step in through project-based support. This can result in a pattern where donors effectively tow the system from one initiative to the next. While often necessary in the short term, this dynamic produces fragmented progress, weak institutional memory, and limited national ownership. Over time, it undermines both sustainability and effectiveness.

A systems approach requires not only that all seven components exist, but that they are strategically connected, nationally led, and supported through coordinated investment. Coordination is not a technical add-on; it is a core determinant of functionality. UNICEF's benchmarking tools have been used across multiple countries to assess not only the maturity of individual components, but also the quality of how they interact (UNICEF, 2021). These tools help identify where targeted investment is needed and where underperformance is driven not by resource shortages but by weak connections between system elements.

By institutionalising these linkages and using measurement frameworks to monitor system-wide progress, governments and partners can move beyond siloed interventions and toward more coherent, accountable, and sustainable child protection systems.

## 9. Towards a normative framework for child protection systems

Earlier sections introduced the idea of a normative framework; this section provides its full definition and explains how it underpins the design and functioning of child protection systems.

In child protection documents, the term normative framework is often used to describe the legal and policy instruments and international norms that anchor child protection in national law. While this structural dimension is essential, a broader understanding is needed. In this paper, the normative framework refers to the shared expectations and ethical commitments that influence both the purpose and functioning of child

protection systems. As Wulczyn et al. (2010, p. 5) noted in their seminal framing of systems thinking, child protection is not only a set of institutional functions but also a reflection of a society's vision for children and families.

Child protection systems are therefore not only technical or institutional arrangements; they are also normative constructs. *This distinction is central to the argument of this paper.* They reflect societal beliefs about childhood, family, responsibility, and the role of the state. Structural and functional models show how systems operate, but a normative lens clarifies why they exist, who they serve, and what values underpin their design.

This paper proposes a dual-axis normative framework that distinguishes between.

- **Norms of operation** – how the system functions in terms of structure, leadership, integration, and accountability; and
- **Norms of intent** – who the system serves and why, reflecting commitments to equity, gender equality, inclusion, and the best interests of the child.

The framework is not prescriptive. Rather, it draws from international standards to support coherent system design, assess internal alignment, and strengthen value-based decision-making.

#### 9.1. Norms of operation: how systems function

Operational norms refer to the institutional features that enable child protection systems to function effectively and equitably. Across the systems reviewed in this paper, these include.

- **Legal grounding and national ownership:** Systems must be anchored in domestic legislation and led by designated national authorities to ensure legitimacy, continuity, and accountability.
- **Multisectoral integration:** Protection is inherently cross-sectoral, requiring coordination among health, education, justice, social welfare, and civil registration.
- **Professionalisation and workforce investment:** A trained, regulated, and supported workforce, particularly in social services, is essential for consistent, high-quality protection.
- **Evidence-based and preventive focus:** Systems should be guided by data, risk analysis, and early intervention strategies that prevent harm before it escalates.
- **Accountability and oversight:** Clear procedures, independent oversight, and accessible feedback mechanisms ensure that standards are upheld and violations addressed.

Together, these operational norms define the system's operating logic. They support a move away from reactive, project-based responses toward coordinated, predictable, and sustainable protection.

#### 9.2. Norms of intent: who systems serve, and why

Norms of intent clarify the purpose of child protection systems. They reflect broader social values about children's rights, the role of families, and the pursuit of equity. Common normative commitments include.

- **Primacy of the family:** Families are the foundational unit of care, understood broadly to include biological, extended, kinship, and community-based caregiving networks. Systems should support, not replace, these protective relationships through early intervention, case management and social support, while challenging harmful social norms.
- **Inclusion and universality:** All children have the right to protection regardless of legal status, disability, identity, or setting. Systems must actively reach those most at risk of exclusion.

- **Recognition of intentional harm and systemic omission:** Protection must address deliberate acts of violence and failures of duty, such as inaction in the face of known harm or unregulated institutions.
- **The protective role of caregivers:** Whether biological, kinship, or institutional, caregivers are central to children's wellbeing. Strengthening caregiving capacity is essential to long-term outcomes.
- **Gender as a cross-cutting norm:** Systems must challenge gender norms that expose children, especially girls, to violence, marginalisation, and discrimination.
- **Locating child protection within the public sector:** Protection is a public good and a public responsibility. It should be institutionalised within national frameworks alongside similar public goods such as health and education.

At the same time, the operationalisation of intent must reflect an explicitly intersectional understanding of children's lived realities (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). Protection outcomes are shaped not only by gender and age but also by disability, race, ethnicity, migration status, legal identity, and other intersecting factors. Children with disabilities are disproportionately excluded from services, data systems, and legal protections. Migrant, undocumented, and stateless children are often excluded from formal protection systems altogether, despite facing heightened risks of exploitation, violence, and exclusion.

An inclusive conceptualisation of intent therefore requires systems to identify and address these overlapping inequalities, ensuring universality and equity in both design and implementation.

These norms articulate not only what child protection systems are expected to do, but also why they matter (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011). They ground national systems in shared values and provide a basis for coherence, evaluation, and reform.

#### 10. A practical, field-tested expanded definition

Throughout this paper, we have explored the conceptual, normative, and structural dimensions of child protection systems. One persistent challenge in the sector has been the need to simplify complex ideas in order to build consensus among actors. While this has broadened engagement, it has sometimes come at the expense of policy clarity and coherence.

For example, while the 2010 UNICEF framework and current CPSS approach identified accountability as a distinct and essential function, the Framework for Action that emerged from the First Global Ministerial Conference presents six priority areas, with accountability no longer articulated as a standalone component. Although elements of accountability are embedded across the priorities, the shift does not appear to be grounded in published policy analysis, research, or evaluation. Based on informal discussions with participants, it appears the change reflected the need to secure consensus among a broad group of governments and agencies.

A more integrated policy approach anchored in shared principles and a common systems vision is now needed, not further refinement of individual components. In that spirit, this section proposes a practical, field-tested expanded definition of a child protection system. It is not intended as a universal blueprint, but as a shared articulation of the system's core functions and interdependent components. This expanded framing aims to support greater clarity and alignment in policy, programming, and advocacy. It offers a common reference point for action across diverse contexts, grounded in technical rigour. This expanded definition has been applied in multiple field settings since 2011, including in UNICEF-supported system-strengthening initiatives, and has informed policy dialogue and national planning processes. Its application across both development and humanitarian contexts has demonstrated its usefulness in clarifying system functions, supporting

coordination, and strengthening coherence across ministries and partners.

A child protection system refers to the coordinated, harmonised, and systemic arrangements in place to protect all girls, boys, and adolescents from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and harmful practices. The system also reduces the risk of protection violations. It gives particular attention to children facing heightened vulnerability, including those affected by armed conflict, humanitarian crises, poverty, displacement, statelessness, or harmful social norms. It covers children in residential care, detention, or unregulated institutional settings, as well as children separated from, or at risk of separation from, their families. It also includes children in contact with the justice system.

The system recognises intersecting vulnerabilities, including those faced by adolescent girls, children with disabilities, children from marginalised or minority communities, LGBTQ+ children, and those exposed to digital environments. It also applies to children affected by migration, including children on the move or in irregular or precarious circumstances.

The system is underpinned by strong safeguarding measures within institutions and organisations that work with or serve children. Safeguarding refers to the policies, procedures, and behavioural standards designed to prevent abuse, exploitation, or neglect by those in positions of trust, including within schools, NGOs, religious institutions, and health services. As such, safeguarding functions as both a frontline prevention mechanism and a core element of system accountability, ensuring that protective environments do not become sources of harm.

At its foundation, a child protection system operates within a legal, regulatory, and policy framework that prohibits all forms of violence and harmful practices and aligns with international instruments such as the CRC and its Optional Protocols. These frameworks define access to justice and redress and are implemented through procedures that are responsive to age, gender, and disability, recognising the specific protection needs of children as victims, survivors, or those in contact with the law.

Governance structures at national and subnational levels provide leadership, coordination, and accountability. These structures connect actors across sectors, including social welfare, justice, health, education, and civil registration, and create space for decentralised implementation and civil society engagement. As part of this governance function, systems include mechanisms for receiving and investigating reports of alleged maltreatment. Investigation processes enable the formal assessment of risk, inform statutory decisions such as court proceedings or care orders, and support evidence-based prioritisation and resource allocation.

The statutory functions of the child protection system refer to the legally mandated responsibilities typically carried out by government agencies. These functions include receiving and investigating reports of maltreatment, assessing risk, initiating court proceedings, and placing children in alternative care (United Nations General Assembly, 2010), where necessary. Statutory agencies also develop and monitor care plans, make decisions in the best interests of the child, and maintain formal records. These functions distinguish the role of the state from voluntary or community-based responses and form the core of the system's protective mandate.

Service delivery within the system spans a continuum of interventions, ranging from universal (primary) and targeted (secondary) approaches to specialised (tertiary) services. This includes prevention, early identification, case management, family strengthening, alternative care, psychosocial support, reintegration, and protection in emergencies. Services are designed to be accessible, inclusive, child- and gender-sensitive, and responsive to fragile and humanitarian contexts.

Oversight and accountability mechanisms support the consistency, safety, and quality of child protection services. These include regulatory tools, standards of care, complaints and feedback mechanisms, and independent review bodies. Such mechanisms ensure that children and families experience equitable treatment, protection from discrimination or secondary victimisation, and opportunities to seek redress or

challenge decisions.

System capacity ensures the availability and sustainability of human, financial, and material resources that enable the child protection system to function effectively. This includes a well-trained, regulated, and supervised social service workforce, reliable and sustained public financing, and safe, accessible infrastructure such as confidential interview rooms and child-friendly spaces in courts, police stations, and service centres. Capacity also covers surge models for responding to humanitarian emergencies.

Child protection systems are deeply rooted in local contexts and shaped by caregiving practices, social norms, and informal mechanisms of support. Community-level responses play a vital role in identifying and addressing harm, particularly where formal services are limited. These informal systems coexist with formal structures and contribute to protection and recovery. Participation and community engagement are integral features of a functioning system: children, adolescents, caregivers, and communities contribute to the design, delivery, and monitoring of protection efforts.

Information and monitoring systems generate data that inform decision-making, track progress, and expose gaps in protection. These systems collect disaggregated, actionable data by gender, age, disability, migration status, and other identity markers and are often integrated with case management and national surveillance tools. They also gather feedback from service users and frontline workers, enabling continuous learning and adaptation.

A well-functioning child protection system is resilient. It maintains core functions during external shocks such as conflict, natural disasters, pandemics (including COVID-19), displacement, or economic crisis. It evolves over time, adapting to new risks and emerging forms of harm, including those linked to digital environments. Its strength lies in the interdependence of its components: laws are meaningful only when enforced; services require financing and coordination; and community engagement enhances both prevention and accountability. When these components function together, the system delivers sustained, rights-based protection for all children in all contexts.

## 11. From intent to impact

The trajectory from the 2010 systems framing to the 2024 Framework for Action reflects a sector that has moved from defining what a child protection system is toward understanding how systems must function to deliver results for children in high-risk contexts. The agenda has matured. Structural coherence is no longer enough, and systems are now expected to demonstrate effectiveness, equity, and resilience, especially for children facing violence, displacement, poverty, and harmful norms.

Despite notable progress, including system-strengthening efforts in more than 150 countries, most low- and middle-income countries still lack operational child protection systems with the reach or reliability of sectors such as health or education. This reflects both conceptual and structural challenges. Development partners may support a shared systems approach, but government actors often hold different understandings of what a child protection system entails. These differences weaken coherence, slow reform, and complicate prioritisation.

A further challenge is the way child protection is often communicated. Unlike health or education, which draw on everyday language, child protection is frequently described through technical systems terminology. This limits visibility and reduces the political traction needed to secure sustained domestic investment. These implementation challenges cannot be understood without considering political economy factors, including competing institutional interests, budgetary trade-offs, electoral cycles, and the visibility of sectors within national agendas. Legal and policy frameworks often expand more rapidly than political will, which leads to uneven implementation despite shared commitments to children's rights.

Structural weaknesses reinforce these dynamics. Child protection

systems in many countries lack a central institutional anchor, a dedicated financing line, and clear legislative authority. This creates conditions for fragmented investment, where governments and donors support discrete initiatives rather than a unified and nationally led approach. Without agreement on how system components interact to produce protective outcomes, sustained system-level change remains difficult to achieve.

These challenges highlight the need for clearer operational boundaries. Child protection cannot be all things to all people. It requires a coherent architecture that links ambition with functional clarity, coordination, and accountability. The dual-axis normative framework proposed in this paper, which distinguishes between norms of operation and norms of intent, helps clarify how systems should function and why they exist. It reinforces the understanding that child protection is a public good that is grounded in rights, shaped by societal values, and organised through governance, policy, and sustained public investment.

Field experience from both development and humanitarian settings shows that effective child protection systems share several features. They are inclusive by design, resilient in crisis, participatory in structure, and adequately resourced. They are institutionalised through strong legal frameworks, government leadership, intersectoral coordination, and the physical and financial infrastructure required for meaningful protection. This includes safe spaces in police stations, courts, and community settings, as well as a trained and supported workforce.

A functioning child protection system is not a collection of projects. It is an organised and accountable public mechanism that ensures every child is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. It begins in families and communities and is reinforced through law, institutions, and coordinated services.

The expanded working definition presented in this paper supports this vision. It brings together global frameworks, national practice, and practitioner insight to provide a practical and field-tested reference for policy, programming, and advocacy. It is not a fixed standard, but a flexible tool that can guide system development across diverse contexts.

These contributions come at a moment of significant systemic stress. Shifting mandates, reduced aid flows, and political volatility are reshaping the development landscape in ways that place child protection systems at heightened risk. The expanded definition and normative framework aim to support coherence and resilience in this period of uncertainty, offering conceptual and practical tools to help governments and partners maintain a clear focus on children's rights and safety.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Bruce Grant reports a relationship with Child Protection and Practice that includes: board membership. I am on the Editorial Board for Child Protection and Practice. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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