

STRATEGIC SESSION INFORMATION SHEET

Child Protection System Strengthening in Humanitarian Action

Tuesday 9 June 2026, 16:15–17:15 CET/CEST | Annual Meeting for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action 2026

Purpose and framing

This session was co-facilitated by Matthew Dalling and Elspeth Chapman. In her opening remarks, Elspeth framed the current funding crisis as a "stress test" for child protection systems - a moment that exposes real vulnerabilities, but also underscores the value of investing in national and local systems and considers how humanitarian action can reinforce existing system functions rather than create unnecessary parallel humanitarian structures. Matthew then introduced the Alliance's new workstream to develop technical guidance on strengthening child protection systems in humanitarian action, explaining that the session's purpose was to gather initial input to help shape this effort building on existing approaches and frameworks rather than creating a new framework for systems strengthening.

Key discussion points

Live Mentimeter poll

Participants ranked governmental leadership, community engagement, and coordination mechanisms as the top system components sustaining child protection during crises. Funding constraints, weak government capacity, and the humanitarian-development disconnect were named as the leading barriers. When asked to prioritise, community engagement and participation stood out clearly, drawing close to 60 per cent support, with other priorities (strengthening government leadership, sustainable financing, workforce strengthening, localisation) clustered around 30 per cent each.

Rita Neves (UNICEF Syria) — case study

Following the change of government in December 2024, Syria's child protection system has undergone rapid transformation. UNICEF's benchmarking exercise found relatively stronger foundations in the legal and policy framework and existing services, but significant gaps in workforce capacity, data, accountability, oversight and child participation. It identified five interlinked structural weaknesses: no clearly defined national child protection system; limited leadership and ownership; fragmented coordination and service integration; underdeveloped system enablers; and fragmented data and weak evidence generation.

Based on this benchmarking, strategic priorities for Syria were identified as: defining and formalising the national child protection system; strengthening government leadership and coordination; institutionalising and scaling service delivery (with institutionalisation described as urgent, given a narrow funding window); developing workforce capacity and sustainable financing; and establishing accountability, oversight, access-to-justice, and evidence-generation mechanisms. Rita noted the sector is shifting from a service-delivery to a system-strengthening posture - not a wholly new direction, but a shift in emphasis, made harder by donor restrictions that have historically funded civil-society service delivery generously while restricting funding to government.

Dareen Khattab (UNICEF State of Palestine) — case study

Dareen presented on Gaza, where the child protection system has faced near-total collapse. As of October last year, more than 59,000 children had lost at least one parent; the scale makes institutional care financially and practically unsustainable, driving a deliberate shift towards family-based alternative care. Concrete measures

included: an adoption ban issued by the responsible minister to prevent children being moved cross-border into adoption; support for more than 800 children in kinship care, including cash top-ups and mental health and psychosocial support; negotiation to raise the age cap at the existing SOS Children's Village (previously capped at under-tens) so that at-risk adolescents could also be hosted; family reunification during the ceasefire for children displaced from extended family; and restoration of civil documentation, including new birth registrations and reissuance of birth certificates to preserve children's legal identity. *The* case study also highlighted the importance of integrating disability inclusion and specialised MHPSS from the design stage, and of formalising care arrangements through the justice sector so that emergency interventions can contribute to longer-term system strengthening.

Across both case studies, a shared message emerged that **system strengthening is not separate from humanitarian response**. Syria illustrated how services can continue for years while remaining fragmented and insufficiently institutionalised, while Gaza demonstrated how an acute humanitarian intervention can also lay foundations for longer-term system strengthening. The discussion also highlighted the importance of distinguishing service delivery from system strengthening: essential services contribute to stronger systems when they also reinforce the functions, capacities and institutional arrangements needed to sustain protection outcomes over time.

Next steps and recommendations

- Prioritise community engagement and participation in system-strengthening investment, reflecting the clear Mentimeter consensus among participants..
- Engage donors on shifting funding restrictions that currently favour service delivery through civil society over direct investment in government leadership and institutionalisation, where such investment is appropriate to the context, given the narrow windows in which such transitions are politically possible.
- Document and share practical lessons and adaptable measures from humanitarian crises, for example the Gaza case study (adoption bans, kinship care with cash and MHPSS support, flexible age caps in alternative care, restoration of civil documentation) can provide practical insights relevant for other rapid-onset, high-collapse contexts.
- Continue to frame system strengthening as integral to humanitarian response, not a parallel or subsequent development activity, particularly where funding cuts are testing the resilience of existing systems. This includes considering from the outset how humanitarian interventions can reinforce system functions and contribute to longer-term resilience and sustainability.

The full session recording can be accessed in [English](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#) and [Arabic](#).