The Care Working Group of Elevate Children Funders Group is a network of philanthropic organizations that fund initiatives to improve children’s care. The working group facilitates donor learning on pressing and complex issues affecting children, encourages collaboration for greater impact, and promotes impactful and durable grantmaking. The members have many years of experience working in close partnership with local organizations, governments, and global institutions. Their philanthropic investments seed and spur innovation, pilot new practices, build-up local solutions, facilitate capacity building, support implementation, and enable learning, research and data collection. Leveraging their experience and networks, the donors’ investments complement investments by governments and multi-lateral mechanisms that focus on long-term systemic reforms to improve children’s care and societal outcomes.

Care Working Group participants are motivated by a shared commitment to children and desire to ensure the best possible care for every child so that all children can embrace their human rights and realize their full potential. This statement offers observations, learning, and recommendations based on our experience supporting initiatives globally to strengthen, improve, and prioritize quality children’s care.

**Now More than Ever**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of children were living outside of families and at high risk of abuse. The status for children globally has become even more perilous since the onset of COVID-19.

“Children face a trifecta of threats: direct consequences, of the disease itself, interruption in essential services and increasing poverty and inequality.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Due to the pandemic, millions more children are without a parent or caregiver[[2]](#footnote-2); are exposed to violence, forced labor, early and forced marriage, and multiple forms of exploitation and harm; and are experiencing food insecurity, learning loss, absence of health services, and forced displacement. For a child living with a disability, the threat of abuse, violence, isolation, and neglect has only intensified. An estimated 1.8 billion children live in 104 countries where violence prevention and response services are now disrupted[[3]](#footnote-3) and an estimated 6,000 children under five could die each day due to the direct effects of COVID-19[[4]](#footnote-4). The pandemic’s impact on children is enormous. The consequences of inaction are grave.

Research is clear and abundant regarding the long-term, negative effects on children’s physical, psychological, and social well-being resulting from family separation, abuse, and trauma[[5]](#footnote-5). The harm can last a lifetime and cause ripple effects with potentially severe economic and security consequences for society-at-large. While global institutions and national governments have reallocated funds to meet urgent health and workforce crises, they have neglected to **invest to prevent further harm to the millions of affected children** and avert what UNICEF calls “a lost COVID generation”[[6]](#footnote-6). At this momentous time, the well-being of children should be recognized as a **global crisis requiring an accelerated global response**. Responsibility for an urgent, **robust response** falls on all of us.

**Supporting Children’s Care**

As noted in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), **every child has the right to grow up in a family environment** and live in a community where they are safe, protected, and supported to thrive and realize their full potential. As we examine factors affecting children’s care and their capacity to live with their family, we recognize that the **core issues are interconnected** with those relating to child protection, child development, and the elimination of child sexual abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect.

As donors, we take a multi-tiered approach that involves stakeholders at the local and national level. At the outset, we consult locally to develop tailored models with appropriate practices for the community. We work with **civil society** to understand needs, obstacles, and opportunities, which often focus on social workforce, community services, and government response. As a group and as individual funders, we are directly involved in local and national implementation globally prioritizing family care, including in South and South East Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Africa. Our partnerships help shift the powerbase to local leaders for design, decision-making, and durable change. The Institutionalized Children Explorations and Beyond published an article describing successful donor initiatives centered on local collaboration.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The importance of an **inclusive dialogue** on alternative care cannot be overstated. The best processes enable meaningful participation and ethical engagement with **children and families, including care leavers**. We applaud the CRC actions to ensure the DGD includes myriad voices, especially **individuals who have experience** in alternative care and child protection.

With high-level **national policymakers, UN and other multi-lateral actors, and researchers**, we help build strong national systems based upon context-relevant data and better alignment of government and civil society efforts rooted in good practices and best interests of the child. Our government recommendations are developed at the local level and accompanied by available evidence, learning, and budget requests. Additionally, recommendations often seek proactive actions on root causes that generate family separation.

Our grantmaking frequently is designed to:

* Identify and support what is most needed to strengthen **families, communities,** **and the care environment**, including to prevent family separation in the first place.
* Support **community-based organizations** that understand the realities of children, families, and children’s care and strive to improve community child protection systems for early engagement and rapid response to strains at the family level that place children at risk and could lead to separation.
* Encourage **multi-sectoral approaches** that improve **community-wide conditions** for children to thrive with their families.
* Examine and address **root causes** exacerbating family separation and harmful conditions; connect to sectors like early childhood development, education, equality, health, violence prevention.
* Recognize **intensified strains** from COVID-19, regional conflicts, societal violence, and climate change and the risks to children from economic hardships, displacement, and myriad insecurities.
* Raise awareness and develop contextually relevant, **family-based options** for children without a traceable relative to care for them. Support **foster family** care by providing preparatory and ongoing training to foster parents led by community-based organizations that assist with best practices, and by extending financial support to foster families especially in regions where formal foster care is uncommon.
* **Prepare children** who are leaving care facilities to return to family care or live independently (in the case of care leavers); provide them ongoing support through community-based assistance including counseling, peer groups, and holistic services.
* Enable ethical, meaningful **participation of children** in design and decision-making, especially those experienced with care and protection systems.
* Support efficacious **data collection** enabling extensive disaggregation and exploration of myriad traits like age, gender, disability, race, nationality and ethnicity, kinship relationship, education, and economic status.

We find that **in-country donor collaboratives** facilitate senior-level engagement across bilateral donors, multilateral donors, and private foundations. This approach strengthens donor communication, knowledge sharing, and coordination to enhance each other’s work, prevent duplication of efforts, and encourage consistent messaging to governments and civil society.

**Building a Common Understanding**

Grounded in the knowledge that every child needs a stable and nurturing care environment of a family, the global focus on **alternative care** builds understanding of research and **awareness** of solutions for all socio-economic contexts; and enables bringing to scale alternative care **options** that are family-based and contextually relevant for children who need to be raised outside of their biological family.

A collective set of **definitions and understandings** of what is needed and what works is imperative, including specificity about **quality care** and the conditions and time duration for transitional care. The absence of such definitions and the presence of disagreements deter some donors from investing in solutions and governments from taking action. ECFG commissioned studies to understand key components for advancing a policy agenda[[8]](#footnote-8). The studies affirmed that successful strategies have **common understanding** of **problem definition** including articulation of problem, consequences, solutions, and importance. Clarity facilitates cohesive narrative which strengthens coalition-building, governance structures, and alignment. Subsequent stakeholder consultations confirmed this priority and interest in delineating quality alternative care and increasing **direct participation by affected and marginalized communities**.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In considering the best interests of the child, **concepts** of whole­ child, family­-centered, ages and stages approach and of life development course are often overwhelming and confusing, making it difficult to set objectives and measure success. These approaches also require collaboration across government agencies and non-governmental organizations that frequently lack **synergistic mechanisms** for shared vision, strategy, and complementary resource allocations. Greater understanding of the terms would be beneficial.

Despite the absence of clear definitions, there is growing consensus and evidence about **interventions that work**. Children thrive best when they live with a family and enjoy **community-based** support. **Child protection** remains critical, but a paradigm shift could strengthen **preventative systems** that are inclusive and build on traditions of care. As donors we invest in implementation efforts around the world, working directly with communities and governments to prioritize family care.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Although the dangers of large institutions are abundant, many governments and funders continue to provide them financial support. The process to prioritize family and community-based care requires collaboration with **governments** to accelerate policy implementation and **shift funding priorities** to family- and community-based support. A well-trained social workforce is essential to transition children to families and create local environments where all children thrive.

In recent years, inconsistencies in CRC and CRPD Committees’ affirmation of child rights and protections have surfaced disagreements surrounding placement of children in **residential care**, including quality of care, accountability, and time permissible in transitional facilities. Disability rights advocates caution that placement for the shortest possible time could last a lifetime absent community and family supports.

**Rifts among children’s rights and disability rights advocates** have been amplified in light of well-documented abuses, pervasive impunity, and prevalence of children with disabilities languishing long-term in facilities.

Children with disabilities have been disproportionately present in institutions around the world “presenting substantial concerns about the effect on their development, health, and welfare, their exposure to abuse, and their isolation from their families and communities”[[11]](#footnote-11)

We applaud the **CRPD and CRC Committees’ Working Group** to discuss “new ways and means of reinforcing the coherence of both Committees’ jurisprudence on children with disabilities and to adopt a common position…on empowering children with disabilities for their enjoyment of human rights.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This group could help bridge advocacy communities, clarify care guidelines, and ensure protection of rights consistent with both conventions. Achieving agreement and synergy between rights communities would reduce controversies that deter some investors and policymaking and would strengthen universal rights for all children.

GHR Foundation commissioned a study on improving **inclusion** and services for all children. The study emphasizes the importance of **inclusive design at every stage** of planning to support **children with various abilities**.[[13]](#footnote-13) To enable the greatest impact towards realizing the rights enshrined in both the CRC and CRPD, all initiatives need to begin by considering how best to support **all children**. **Successful universalism** optimizes outcomes for all children and starts with intentional, inclusive design that allows full participation by **the most marginalized**.

“A system that is designed for the needs of children with disabilities will work for all children but a system that is designed for typical children first, is a system that will continue to exclude those with disabilities…When you compartmentalize from the first planning stage, you bring the stigmatization of disability into your work practice.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Related sectors have much to offer to strengthen inclusive approaches; for example, the education sector’s Universal Design for Learning gives all students an equal opportunity to succeed. Building **cross-sectoral partnerships** benefits children’s care by expanding knowledge, synergies, and resource coordination.

As children are **removed from care facilities**, it is critical to know whether they have traceable relatives, links to foster families, and knowledge for accessing ongoing community-based support. Some countries requiring children to leave care facilities at age eighteen have sent children into a world they do not recognize and without critical support to assist them. The effect of removing children without preparation and without family and community support can be equivalent to another abandonment.

When governments invest in care, they invest in vital areas for achieving global priorities including economic growth. The children’s care agenda could highlight more prominently its **relationship to other global priorities**, such as Sustainable Development Goals on education, ending poverty, healthy living, gender equality, peaceful and inclusive society. Like some SDG priorities, the children’s care agenda could adopt **investments targets** as benchmarks and reference points for government action.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Government institutions** have an important role to **fund and improve policy**, oversight, and accountability for social programming. Government actions to **accelerate** policy implementation and **enable transitioning of children out of facilities** are often scarce and overly reliant on international non-governmental organizations. **Governmental institutions need to step up urgently** to strengthen, expand, and invest in family and community-based supports.

**Measurement frameworks** help governments and donors assess return on investment and evaluate future initiatives. Seeking to improve frameworks, GHR Foundation and UBS Optimus Foundation commissioned the International Child Development Initiatives to conduct a review of existing frameworks for children’s care[[16]](#footnote-16). The findings support creating **country-specific frameworks** with contextualized indicators to enable setting tailored, meaningful measures of progress, rather than creating one set of indicators for global application, which could yield “a framework that is too broad or one that allows for too much contextual nuances, either way leaving the whole thing rather meaningless.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The study found “general **global indicators** are appropriate when **accompanied by global principles and values** applicable everywhere.” For care-related indicators that could apply globally, the authors cite UN frameworks, broader frameworks by Save the Children and others, and country-specific snapshots by Better Care Network.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Although periodic measurement is necessary, **societal transformation takes time** and occurs incrementally “when there are tipping points, moments in which (hopefully) positive trends or movements gain momentum.”[[19]](#footnote-19)  In the short term, measurement frameworks can focus on outputs that strengthen families and community-services, prevent family separation, and enable children to thrive.

**Consistent, multi-year investments** that prioritize care and explore related aspects of child development and protection can afford **learning opportunities from both successes and failures**. Long-term investments enable more meaningful data that reveals incremental progress, cross-sectoral coordination, and root causes. Through a multi-year approach, donors support **grantees as partners** working as “part of a greater effort to change and improve the children’s care system and not simply ‘projects’ to solve certain problems.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This approach facilitates **donor coordination** to fund different stages of reform and helps build an evidence base of local interventions.

We applaud UN efforts to develop common standards for alternative care based on human rights protections for all children. Rights frameworks are critically important. Additionally, we recognize that the **rights-based approach** resonates with some but not all audiences. We encourage collaboration to **highlight the related consequential benefits** of investing in family- and community-based care, including how these investments relate to future **economic, educational, security, and health outcomes**. This approach could resonate more with a broader set of **private and public sector donors** and **policymakers**.

**Thank you**

We are grateful for the opportunity to submit this summary of our learning and recommendations relating to alternative children’s care. We appreciate the commitment of all parties engaged in supporting children through family- and community-based care and look forward to partnering on solutions that ensure the best support and outcomes for all children.

1. ***This statement from the Care Working Group of Elevate Children Funders Group was prepared by Maria Alexandra Arriaga of Strategy for Humanity,*** [***www.strategyforhumanity.org***](http://www.strategyforhumanity.org)***, 2021.***

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